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## More echoes from the civil war

(**The Guardian**, October 17, 2002)

Until the intervention of *A break in silence: Lt. Col. Victor Adebukunola Banjo*, the 127-page re-appraisal of late Victor Banjo, written by the subject's sister, Professor (Mrs) Felicia Adetoun Ogunsheye, my understanding of the segment of the Nigerian crisis and Civil War from January 1966 up to the execution of Victor Banjo in September 1967 can be summarised as follows: On January 15, 1966, a group of junior officers in the Nigerian Army attempted to overthrow the civilian government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Although the attempt was very bloody, it failed to achieve its stated objective: the installation of a radical nationalist regime. What happened was that both the federal government and the military rebellion collapsed and the army high command installed itself as new government.

The rebels were arrested and detained in several prisons across the country. Two days later, Lt. Col. Victor Banjo who, apparently, was not involved in the coup attempt, came to see the new military Head of State, but was arrested and detained. He was accused of bearing arms while seeking audience with the Head of State, his Commander-in-Chief. That was construed as an assassination attempt. On July 29, 1966, a bloody counter-coup took place. The operation was successful at the federal level, where a new military government was installed, and in three regions — West, Mid-West and North — but failed in the East. For 10 months various attempts were made, within and outside the country, to reconcile the East with the federal

authorities. All the attempts failed, and on May 30, 1967, the East was proclaimed an independent and sovereign state: the Republic of Biafra.

Upon the declaration of Biafra, the January 1966 army rebels and Victor Banjo — or rather, those of them who were detained in the East — were released, but were not immediately given any commissions in the new Biafran Armed Forces. They were allowed to move freely in Biafra, but under close watch. War broke out on July 6, 1967 between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Republic of Biafra. Still, the January boys and Victor Banjo were not given commission. But some of them commissioned themselves and moved to the fronts - on the side of Biafra, of course. In the second week of August 1967, as the war was going badly for Biafra, the Biafran military high command decided to extend the war to the Nigeria territory through the Mid-West. A Liberation Army was constituted out of the Biafran Army for the purpose. The plan was that the Liberation Army would cross the River Niger and occupy the Mid-West within 24 hours. From the Mid-West the Liberation Army was to press on to Lagos through Ibadan.

Victor Banjo was commissioned as Brigadier in the Biafran Army and made the Commander of the Liberation Army. Several of the January boys were also commissioned and sent along with Banjo. The Liberation Army took the Mid-West as planned. It set out for Lagos, also as planned. But it suddenly stopped its advance at the militarily strategic town of Ore. The liberation Army troops were still at Ore when the Nigerian forces made contact with them and systematically drove them out of the Mid-West, back to Biafra. In the last week of September 1966, Victor Banjo and three others were tried and executed at Enugu - for treason against the Republic of Biafra. That is the sketch of my previous understanding — a bare sketch made even more sketchy by the deliberate exclusion of names except that of the subject, Victor Banjo. Now, with the appearance of Professor Ogunsheye's book and its presentation in *The Guardian's* issue of September 28, 2002, I have to revisit my earlier conclusions.

I was at Ibadan throughout August and September 1967 and escaped summary execution only because I confused the soldiers that, on information, came to arrest me in a house in Agbowo, a community opposite the University of Ibadan main gate.

I confused them because not only did I speak fluent Ijesha (a Yoruba dialect), but spoke English with Ijesha accent. I went by the name Tony Harrison or Segun George, depending on where I was. Two months before the invasion of the Mid-West I had secretly left Ibadan, passed through the Mid-West, crossed the River Niger, landed in Onitsha and went to Ogidi, a couple of kilometres to the north of the strategic town. Three days later, I returned to Onitsha and moved south to Oba where I again spent three days. From Oba I returned to Ibadan taking the same route, changing my identity as circumstances demanded. Neither my brother, who was at the University of Ibadan with me, nor my mother who was at Ilesha, knew that I left Ibadan, let alone going to Biafra. I was 21 years old then. My mother has since gone to meet her Maker and my brother, if he reads this article, will be knowing this fact for the first time.

I therefore agree with Professor Ogunsheye that in the middle of August 1967 Ibadan was quiet but tense, very tense, I would only add that not only was Ibadan tense, the whole of southern Nigeria was tense and expectant. The Liberation Army was being awaited in Ibadan! Had that army stepped into Ibadan under Victor Banjo, or Emmanuel Ifeajuna, or Wale Ademoyega, or any of the January boys (Major Nzeogwu had been killed by then) its ranks would have been swollen beyond the commanders' expectations. But suddenly, the tide turned. All those who were waiting, including many potential recruits, believed that the revolution must have been betrayed. Of course, I knew then that the civilian leaders in the West had, at they very last moment, opposed the entry of the Liberation Army into the West. But I did not know that this change of mind could influence Victor Banjo; nor did I know, as reported by Ogunsheye in her book, that the Commander of the Liberation Army "did not want to fight my way through (Ibadan)", that he "did not want my homeland, Yorubaland, to become the theatre of war." I had thought that Victor Banjo was determined to fight his way through Ibadan and take Lagos, and was only betrayed by renegade elements in his own army.

When Banjo halted his advance at Ore, he was called back to Enugu for debriefing, detained for a few days and sent back to Benin, the headquarters of the liberation army. He met a demoralised army not only in retreat, but also in disarray,

with the federal troops in hot pursuit. It was the Mid-West tragedy coupled with the rapidly deteriorating military and humanitarian situation in Biafra, that forced Banjo to come to the conclusion which he revealed at his trial, namely, that: "In my opinion, the minimum conditions for the continued successful prosecution of the war have ceased to exist. We are slowly losing grounds on all fronts, and I have been personal witness to the horrible brutality on the local population usually accompanying the presence of Nigerian troops." He therefore decided that Ojukwu, the Head of State of Biafra, should be persuaded to agree to a negotiated settlement within the context of One Nigeria. On a visit to Enugu to discuss this with Ojukwu, he was arrested. His defence, in my view, is in the ranks of revolutionary classic: heroic, courageous, brilliant. But that defence could not save him, and he knew it. He was recording a statement for history.

My reconsideration of this tragedy - in the light of new information - has thrown up some new, necessarily provisional, conclusions; it has also led to the reformulation of some others. Victor Banjo was not trusted by General Aguiyi Ironsi, Nigeria's first military Head of State. His arrest and detention proved this. He was not completely trusted by the January boys, perhaps, because he was a senior officer or was considered too close to Ironsi; he was not trusted by Ojukwu, because he was too radical and was thought to be close to the January boys; he was not trusted by the leaders of the civilian government which was overthrown; even if General Gowon who succeeded Ironsi had trusted him, that trust would have vanished with the letters Banjo wrote to Ironsi from prison and the fact that he played such an important role in checking federal advance into Biafra and humiliating federal forces in the Mid-West; Yoruba officers in the federal army did not trust him because his revolution could eliminate or eclipse them if he marched to the West; most of the civilian leaders in the West did not trust him for the same reasons; Igbo officers and sections of the Igbo people did not trust him because of his Yorubanness.

We can therefore see that Victor Banjo cannot be described as patriot, or saint, or villain, or hero. He was simply a revolutionary officer: brilliant, courageous and nationalist; an idealist officer who was tragically caught up in a tissue of contradictions which could not be resolved and from which it was impossible to

escape. In such circumstance the best option was to choose a line of action and pursue it to the end, often a tragic end. Banjo did precisely that. But I think he made a mistake: Instead of going to Enugu to persuade Ojukwu, he ought to have continued his march to Lagos, via Ibadan.

