

## Settling questions in Nigerian history

(**The Guardian**, April 10, 2005)

Nowadays, almost each time I read a commentary by a Nigerian media commentator on aspects of Nigerian history, I become depressed. Before now, I used to be merely irritated. But now the irritation has transformed into depression. The source of my irritation used to be the confusion of names, places and dates, and, of course, sequence of events. This I used to attribute to impatience, carelessness or laziness on the part of new-generation commentators and analysts. The explanation may be correct. But how do I explain this strong feeling that, going by media commentaries, no question in Nigeria's recent history appears to be settled- in terms of facts. Interpretations can last forever.

True, history is not mathematics where, once a matter is settled by proof (step-by-step logical argument erected on a small number of axioms), it is settled forever. Questions in history, society and law are often settled on the basis of "balance of evidence". The unstated assumption here is that the settled questions may be overturned in the future. Even then, history would be meaningless if at no point in time can we say that certain major questions have been settled, transformed, or

reduced to simpler questions. More concretely, it would be unfortunate if, for instance, key questions on the events of (1966 – 1970) are still being formulated the same way they were formulated in the early 1970s - the passage of time, testimonies of direct partisans, expansion of knowledge and the appearance of hundreds of books and tons of publications notwithstanding.

My thesis here is that most of the key questions still being asked on the (1966 - 1970) crisis have either been answered completely, or transformed, or reduced to simpler questions. The questions include: Was the January 1966 coup an Igbo coup?; Who was the leader of the January coup?; Was the July 1966 coup a revenge coup?; Was General Aguiyi-Ironsi involved in the January coup?; Was Colonel Victor Banjo involved in the January coup? Why was Banjo arrested and detained by Ironsi?; Was General Yakubu Gowon involved in the July coup?; Were the leaders of the January coup in support of Biafra's secession?; Was there a plot to overthrow the Biafran regime in September 1967?

I would like to state that what follows is not an account of the Nigerian crisis (1966-1970). I am also not making any evaluation, or taking positions. This is simply an attempt to answer the questions raised above or reduce them to simpler questions. Let us begin by settling a rather simple question: Should the (1967-1970) armed conflict be called the Nigerian Civil War or the Nigeria-Biafra War? To answer this question you may adopt the legal perspective, or the historical perspective. For the legal perspective: A delegation of the Biafran regime, led by Major-General Phillip Effiong, surrendered to General Gowon in Dodan Barracks, Lagos, on January 15, 1970. The officers asked for "deployment." This was a clear statement that the conflict was a rebellion, a civil war. From here it follows, for instance, that Chukwuemeka Odumegwu – Ojukwu was a dismissed Lieutenant-Colonel of the Nigeria Army until this dismissal was converted to retirement.

If the historical perspective is adopted, the following facts come out and become prominent: The Eastern Region of Nigeria was declared the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967 on the basis of the resolution passed by the joint meeting of the Consultative Assembly and Leaders of Thought on May 26, 1967. At the point of that declaration, the regime in Eastern Region was in total control of the region.

Subsequently, Biafra was recognized by four independent countries - all members of the United Nations. Biafra fought a war with Nigeria for 30 months before the former collapsed. During that war, the Biafran leader, Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, was made a four-star general by the Executive Council of the Republic of Biafra. He retained that title till the end of the conflict, until Biafra ceased to exist. Ojukwu was therefore a General of the Biafran Army. Nothing can wipe out these historical facts.

**January 1966 coup:** The following points have been established: The core of the plotters was made up almost exclusively of Igbo-speaking army officers. The geopolitical coverage of the operations and the pattern of casualties suggest that the coup had Igbo ethnic motivations. But some of the coup leaders denied ethnic motivation and argued that the operation assumed those patterns because of mistakes committed by other leaders. Only an open trial could have begun the process of resolving the matter. But there was no trial. General Ironsi was not part of the plan, but as head of the army, he "collected" power from the confusion that characterized the execution of the coup. Colonel Victor Banjo was not part of the coup. But he was not trusted by Ironsi and the army officers close to him. On account of pressures and counter-pressure to which he was subjected, Ironsi could not put the coup plotters on trial, or otherwise punish them, beyond putting them in detention.

Accounts of the January 1966 coup so far published implicitly identified Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu as the leader. But in one of the newspaper interviews he granted several years ago (and I think in his book, **Because I am involved**), Ojukwu insisted that Major Ifeajuna was the leader: Nzeogwu took over from Kaduna when he saw that the operation was failing, or had failed, in Lagos. Ifeajuna wrote a long account of the operation, but this has never been published in book form. The coup leaders, in their accounts, maintained that they intended to restructure the country and end corruption, tribalism and nepotism. At least one of them said in an interview that they intended to release Chief Obafemi Awolowo from prison and make him Head of State. It is clear that most of them did not support secession; and when war broke out and they were released from prison, they planned to complete the project they started on January 15, 1966. They failed again.

**July 1966 coup:** General Yakubu Gowon was not part of the plan or execution. As Chief of Army Staff under General Ironsi, he learnt of the operation when it had already started. Presented with a **fait accompli**, he pleaded that the operation should be bloodless. He reminded the coup operators that too much blood had already been shed in the country. Like General Ironsi, General Gowon “collected” power from the confusion that characterized the operation in which General Danjuma played a decisive role. Danjuma arrested Ironsi, neutralised his regime, charged him, and dismissed his plea of innocence. In his February 2008 interview with **The Guardian**, Danjuma confirmed that the July 1966 coup was a “revenge” coup. General Adeyinka Adebayo’s attempt to dispute this characterization is, at best, irritating. The man who arrested and charged Ironsi – an act which according to Lindsay Barrett, signaled the completion of the coup – says it was a revenge coup. And the man who was not even around at the time says it was not!

**Treason trial in Biafra:** As I said earlier, Victor Banjo was not part of the January 1966 coup. But he was nonetheless arrested and detained with the coup leaders. In September 1967, as Nigerian troops advanced on Enugu, capital of Biafra, Victor Banjo, a Brigadier in the Biafran army and Commander of the Biafran expeditionary force that invaded and briefly held the Mid-West Region, was put on trial for treason. He was the first accused. His three co-accused were Emmanuel Ifeajuna, colonel in the Biafran army; Phillip Alale, a Marxist labour leader; and Sam Agbam, a civil servant. They were accused of plotting to overthrow the Biafran regime. They were tried by a three-member special tribunal. They were found guilty and sentenced to death by firing squad. Ojukwu, as Head of State, confirmed the sentences. The sentences were carried out at Enugu on September 24, 1967.

**References:** Of the books written by combatants and published in the late 1970s and early 1980s I single out the following as references for the conclusions stated above: **Nigeria’s five majors**, by Ben Gbulie; **Why we struck**, by Wale Ademoyega; **Reluctant Rebel**, by Fola Oyewole; **Requiem Biafra**, by J. O. G. Achuzia; **No place to hide (Crisis and Conflicts inside Biafra)** by Bernard Odogwu; **The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War**, by Alexander Madiebo; **“Revolution” in Nigeria: Another View**, by Joe Garba; **Danjuma: The making**

**of a general** (written by Lindsay Barrett, but based on extensive interviews with the subject, a combatant).

To this list I add the following accounts by non-combatants: **Let the truth be told (the coups d'état of 1966)**, by D. J. M. Muffett; **Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War**, by Siyan Oyeweso (editor); **The Man Died** and **You must go forth at dawn**, by Wole Soyinka. I also I add the recent two-part interview which **The Guardian** newspaper conducted with General Theophilus Danjuma and the reaction of General Adebayo, also published by the same newspaper. Finally, I refer readers to **Rebels against rebels** written by Nelson Ottah. The book is an account of the treason trial in Biafra. It is based on the verbatim record of the proceedings of the special tribunal. Those who are impressed by the brilliance of Victor Banjo as shown in his recently published prison writings need to read **Rebels against rebels** to confirm their impression.