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The coup of January 15, 1966: Why it failed*

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As soon as the Nigerian Military Government handed over the political administration of the country on October 1, 1979 to those who were declared winners of the 1979 general elections, books started pouring out on the Nigerian Civil War (1967 – 1970) and the events leading up to it. Most of these books are authored by, or written in the names of retired or discharged Nigerian army officers.

That these military writers waited for a whole decade after the end of the Civil War to publish their accounts can be ordinarily excused on the grounds of political expediency. But then it does throw some light on the political culture of most of those who have held power at various periods in this country since the time of “self-government”. It has been a culture of opportunism, here expressed in the lack of faith in the position one has taken and in what one is doing and hence the lack of courage to justify these positions and actions unequivocally while one is power or when one’s immediate opponent is still in power.

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The above is merely a **general** characterization of a political culture. We must therefore hasten to add that all the military-writers are not immersed in this culture and do not reflect it to the same degree. Nevertheless, it is important to read each one of the books that have so far come out on the 1960-1970 crises with this point at the back of our minds.

The books to which we are referring can be grouped into four, namely:

1. Those written by "objective" military –historians who see their "patriotic" task as that of "setting historical facts straight". Madiebo's **the Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War** is an example of this kind of writing.
2. Those written either for self-glorification or to explain (at times very tenuously) one's personal conduct in the crimes of 1966 – 1970: Obasanjo's **My Command** comes under this category.
3. Those written by **self-professed** participants in the Nzeogwu-led military uprising of 15th January, 1966. There are, as of now, only two in this category: Ben Gbulie's **Nigeria's five majors** and Wale Ademoyega's **Why We struck**.
4. Those written to counter the claims of the "revolutionaries" of January 15. Of these books, we may pick out Mainasara's **Why They Struck as an example**.

Our present brief review will deal mainly with the last two categories because on a broad historical scale, they are the most important.

In writing an account of a historically important event it is important to come to terms with a particular historical fact, namely, that a combination of objectivity and partisanship is a scientific ideal which can be attained to any degree of approximation desired. In other words a historian who sets out to write a true account of a historical conflict need not fear that his objectivity will be put to question on the grounds of his taking a clear position on the conflict. Similarly one would be a bold writer – but certainly not a scientific historian – if he confines himself to explaining and justifying his position in a historical conflict without describing the objective (and material) historical setting which produced the conflict.

Ben Gbulie, in his **Nigeria's Five Majors**, and Wale Ademoyega in his **Why We Struck** did make attempt to describe the historical background the military

uprising which they participated as leaders. But they did not go far enough. Both Gbulie and Ademoyega denounced the ethnic discrimination which they claimed to have been experienced in the armed forces of the First Republic. They also denounced the ethnic domination of the politics of the country. They based their justification of the military uprising and their participation in it on this perceived ethnic domination of the country. Ademoyega however went a little further to give a very general, but not fundamental, critique. He blamed Nigeria's "politics, economy, education, social and foreign affairs" (p. 33). But none of these two authors went beyond the North-South historical framework: the North represented feudal power oppressing the South in all spheres of social life.

Precisely because they saw the North-South contradiction as the only contradiction in Nigeria, they could not, as a scientific historian would have done, examine the social contradictions **within** the "social blocks" called the North and the South. Had they done so, perhaps they would have seen the limitations of their 1966 perception and their programme, strategy and tactics for their "revolution".

Gbulie and Ademoyega seemed not to know that the rulers of the North and rulers of the South were, in fact, factions of the same ruling class, though one faction might be dominant over the others. Since they did not know this, they also could not see that there were social forces committed to the overthrow of the entire ruling class – and not just the replacement of one dominant faction by another or the "democratisation" of the ruling class. Because of their North–South fixation, Gbulie and Ademoyega could not see (or could not believe) that just as there were social forces opposed to all the factions of the ruling class - as a class - so were there ideological tendencies in the Armed Forces opposed to what they articulated as the prevailing social order considered as a whole," that is, neocolonialism.

The Nigerian Armed Forces, as an institution, was not insulated from the inter-ethnic, inter-class-contradictions of the First Republic. No social institution, no historically determined state institution has ever, or will ever be insulated from social struggles. These social struggles vary in degrees of complexity from one country to another and from one period to another. Only a long period of struggle will produce a well-defined political and ideological polarisation. This polarisation has not taken place in Nigeria. The ideological influences of the Nigerian ruling class are still strong within

the ranks of the dominated classes. In particular ethnic-based ideologies and consciousness – which dominated in the ruling class – are still present in the dominated classes, their organizations and their other expressions.

Gbulie and Ademoyega admitted that tribalism and ethnic consciousness were strong in the Armed Forces of the First Republic. But they implicitly denied that ethnic consciousness was present in the ranks of the “revolutionary” soldiers and might have influenced the actions of some of the military fighters of 15th January 1966. But we submit that any assertion that all the participants in the attempted “revolution” were nationalist in perceptions and actions would be fatal to any historical account of what really took place.

Every revolutionary formation which sets out to champion the cause of the oppressed masses must be ready to publicly point out its weaknesses. It must be prepared to admit mistakes. Revolutionary consciousness and purity develop in the course of struggle. They are never given ready-made. Preparedness to admit mistakes is a moral and political principle for revolutionaries. Oppressors and reactionaries do not possess it.

The list of casualties of the Nzeogwu–led military uprising almost suggests an ethnic-based plan of execution. The list of the leaders of the uprising – cited by Gbulie on pp. 50-51 of his book and underscored by Mainasara on pp. 22-23 of his own book – also suggests an ethnic-based plan. If this was not the plan or intention of some of the leaders of the uprising, then it is not enough to say so. They must not only admit that the execution suggests an ethnic-based plan. They must also strive to investigate, analyse and explain why this happened. They must explain how it happened – if not for ethnic reasons – that the ranks of the “revolutionaries” within the Armed Forces were dominated by officers from the Igbo ethnic group. Gbulie must explain why the planners seemed to condemn Northern political leaders in strong terms while almost eulogizing Southern political leaders with the exception of Samuel Akintola (see **Gbulie:** pp 51-53).

The nationalist, patriotic and class-based intentions of some of the leaders of the Nzeogwu-led uprising are not in doubt. But the historical accounts of Gbulie and

Ademoyega are exposed to general and powerful refutations because they fail to admit the weaknesses and mistakes of the "revolutionary" formations. It is not enough to plead that Ironsi, Madiebo and Ojukwu betrayed, hijacked and crushed the revolution. Why they were able to do so –politically and militarily – must also be thoroughly explained. The political and military errors of the "revolutionaries" supplied the "arms" used by the "counter-revolution".

Precisely because Gbulie and Ademoyega failed to admit the weaknesses and mistakes of their group, Mainasara, in his book, **Why They Struck**, was able to use the list of casualties (in his dedication) and the Nigerian Police Special Branch Report (pp. 31 – 35) to "prove" his following thesis: "Redemption of the country was not their aim. Their purpose was to prevent a section of the country, the North, from effective participation in the governance of the country. This was to be accomplished through the physical elimination of the entire political and military elite of the North, beginning with the top leadership; the Sardauna of Sokoto, Premier of the Northern Region of Nigeria, the embodiment of the soul of the North and all that it stood for..." (pp. 9-10)

A scientific and patriotic intervention in the current debate on what actually took place in Nigeria on 15th January 1966 and what led to it is urgently needed. We have seen enough of half omissions, evasion, distortions and chauvinistic interpretations.