

## Colonial and Military Rules in Nigeria: A Symmetrical Relationship

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**Abstract:** The Nigerian state has been fundamentally affected by two historical phenomena, colonial rule and military rule. Whereas colonial rule ended about forty-five years ago at the attainment of independence, military rule as a post-colonial instrument of conquest does not seem to have a perceivable abatement. This is in spite of the return to another civil rule since 1999. Indeed, the military conquest has reemerged in the involvement of ex-military rulers in politics. This study presents the dilemma of a post-colonial state coping with contradictory factors of development and democracy.

**Key words:** Colonial rule, Military rule, Symmetry, Asymmetry, Democracy

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### INTRODUCTION

It may, on a first reaction, sound too far-fetched to attempt to draw a symmetry between colonial rule and military rule in Nigeria. Such a reaction is understandable even if not justifiable. This is because, there are some common ingredients of colonial and military rules. For example, Britain, which colonized Nigeria, administered the country like a conquered territory making Nigerians, British subjects without concealing its perceived feeling of superiority. It was a feeling that grew from and nurtured in, the misconception of Africans as bearded monsters and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders<sup>[1]</sup>. The indigenous military conquerors are not more charitable. The civil society is held in contempt. It is derisively and pejoratively perceived as being made up of bloody civilians. In both instances, there is an elemental sense of paternalism erected on a spectrum of master/servant relationship.

The truth is that Nigeria has been stamped with two unforgettable experiences. The irony though, is that while the nation has in a way survived British colonial rule, the same cannot be said of military rule. Military rule is a contemporary phenomenon which remains destructive of the essence of the Nigerian nation. In the Nigerian polity, the fear of military intervention remains the beginning of wisdom. This is in spite of return to civil rule in 1999.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assess the symmetrical relationship between colonial rule and military rule. The underlying motive is to bring into focus the effects of these two phenomena on Nigeria's political development. Comparison tends to be invidious, yet, it illuminates analysis. It was common at a point, even in scholarly works, to see colonialism as the sole bane of

Nigerian developmental efforts. The intrusion of the military into politics and its strangle-hold on the civil society for over three decades, must have re-directed such thoughts. The exploration of the character of colonial and military rules is necessary to illuminate our analysis.

### The Character of Colonial and Military Rules

**The Nature of Colonial Rule:** The European exploratory and explorative expedition to Africa in the nineteenth century was an historical watershed. It redirected and redefined the socio-political history of the continent. As it affected the continent, so also it did to its component units.

The 1884/85 Berlin Conference presented a forum for the carving of the continent into spheres of influence, beyond the hitherto uncoordinated scramble. Emile Banning<sup>[2]</sup> has submitted that The Berlin Conference fulfilled a double task; it endorsed the creation, of a great interior state, commercially open to all nations, but politically shielded from their competition. It also set up the bases for economic legislation which was immediately applicable to the central zone of the continent but which virtually demanded more extensive application.

Be it as it may, it was an attempt at peaceful possession and occupation of shared spheres of interest. Ben Nwabueze has stated that under international law, there are four ways by which a country may acquire a jurisdiction outside of its own territory namely by occupation, conquest, cession and prescription. It is reasonable for our purpose to acknowledge that the European occupation or usurpation of African territories, was not predicated on the finesse of international law. Rather, it was influenced by mutuality of desire for

exploitation by the European powers. Yet, there was a pretension to legality.

In the case of Nigeria, the first British penetration of the Niger Delta was by Sir George Goldie in 1885 under the Royal Niger Company. Suspicion in Britain as to the real intention of Sir George, led to the withdrawal of the Charter in 1897 and Lord Fredrick Lugard was sent to protect British interests against French encroachment. Lugard, efficiently and effectively carried out the assignment such that Ursula Hicks <sup>[2]</sup> notes that He (Lugard) was effectively the first governor and founder of the British influence in Nigeria. Lugard's success in relation to his mandate was undisguisedly visible as Nwabueze (1982) credits him with acute political wisdom and foresight. Lugard introduced the indirect rule system which virtually preserved the existing traditional political system and therefore, guaranteed him acceptance by the traditional elite.

On January 1, 1914, the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria and the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria were amalgamated which was apparently the first attempt at creating the modern Nigeria. From then onwards, the evolution of Nigeria was encapsulated in various constitutional reviews; the 1922 Clifford Constitution, the 1946 Richards Constitution, the 1951 Macpherson Constitution and the 1954 Lyttleton Constitution. The Constitutional reviews were to serve two related purposes. One, was to maintain British hold on Nigeria. Two, was an acknowledgement of a reality, especially after the end of the Second World War, of an eventual decolonisation of Nigeria. This invariably happened with the attainment of independence in 1960.

**The Character of Military Rule:** The Nigerian military overthrew the elected federal and regional governments on January 15, 1966 barely five years after the attainment of independence. The military which intervened with messianic fervour only opened the Pandora box for instability, ethnic rivalry, abuse of human rights and societal mistrust between the military establishment and the civil society. Examples abound to support this observation. Five examples will illuminate our analysis.

One, since 1966, Nigeria has been a military coup-prone zone. In July 1966, there was a vengeance coup to redress the injustice of the January 1966 coup. On July 29, 1975 there was another coup followed by the coups of December 1983, August 1985 and November 1993. Beside those coups were other rumblings within the military. Some of them secret and some of them made open like the February 1976 attempted coup that resulted in the death of the then Head of State, General Murtala Muhammed.

Other coups were the attempted Vatsa coup of 1986, the Orkar coup of 1990 and the alleged, attempted coups under the Abacha regime in 1995 and 1997. All what this reveals, is that the Nigerian military institution lacks the cohesiveness often attributed to it. Indeed, it seems more divided than the civil society. The Nigerian military can be said to be a victim of its own internal contradictions. Yet, it likes to give an outward image of internal and group cohesion and solidarity.

Two, the military as a result of uncontrollable power rivalry within it, took the nation through a civil war from 1967-70 when Col. Ojukwu proclaimed the Eastern region, a Republic of Biafra and made himself the Head of State. General Gowon reacted by breaking the nation into twelve states structure. The costs of the war in human and material resources were colossal. Indeed, nearly thirty years after the war, its effects still manifest on the Nigerian nation.

Three, is the retardation of democracy by the military. On independence in 1960, Nigeria was seen as the model of statehood in Africa. This led Pendleton Herring <sup>[3]</sup> to exaggeratively assert that as Nigeria goes, so goes Africa. But the international hope on Nigeria was shattered such that she is no more seen as a model of democracy in Africa but rather as a country of incessant and unending military initiated transition programmes to democracy <sup>[4]</sup>. The unending transitory projects have led a respected Nigerian historian, Tekena Tamuno <sup>[4]</sup> to lament that the difference in one constant (repeated and repeatable) product called Transition lies in its packaging rather than its substance.

Four, is the elevation of corruption to unimaginable pedestal in the society. A military regime is expected to be a corrective regime. Correction in this respect, presupposes an elemental moral superiority. But events have since revealed that the Nigerian military has successfully infested the nation with virus of corruption. General Abdulsalami Abubakar who succeeded Abacha after his death in 1997, subtly acknowledged the financial profligacy of the Abacha regime when he stated that routine audit and investigation of the various accounts in the office of the National Security Adviser and other government departments and agencies are ongoing and that all those that have been questioned have cooperated and voluntarily refunded some monies <sup>[6]</sup>. As far as the public is concerned, this is just the tip of the iceberg as it is a public knowledge that military political leaders both at the state and federal levels, cannot draw any line of difference between public funds and private funds. The situation is so bad such that the principle of public accountability and probity, is observed more in disobedience than in observance.

Five, is the dichotomy resulting in group antagonism between the military society and civil society. The class antagonism is promoted more by the contempt with which the military holds the civil society. It assumes an air of superior patriotism that imbues it with a sense of paternalism over the civil society. Yet, the civil society sees it as a hollow patriotism erected on enlivened self-interest of state exploitation. But the civil society is driven to a level of helplessness as a result of the military's monopoly of the coercive weapons of state.

Nordlinger<sup>[7]</sup> identifies three models of civil-military relations. There is the traditional model in which there is usually no conflict in relationship between the military and the civil society. This is characteristic of the monarchical and aristocratic systems of the past. The second is the liberal model in which civil control of the military is the acceptable norm. The military in this respect, is confined to security roles only, while politicians administer the state. In this respect, the emphasis is on the supremacy of the civil society over the military like in Britain, U.S.A and France. The third is the penetration model in which the military holds political power like civilian leaders as it usually was the case in the communist countries. The variant of this holds true in the developing countries like Nigeria where the military has made itself the locus and focus of political power.

The fact is that the military has made itself a political institution. Hague and Harrow<sup>[7]</sup> situate graphically the problem by stating that The military presents special problems of political control in virtually every society. Not only are the armed forces specialists in the use of violence but their organisational qualities of firm discipline, good communication and substantial esprit de corps make the military at least as important a political institution as the bureaucracy.

Both colonial and military experiences have left the Nigerian nation with attitudes, values and political behaviour that cannot easily be dispensed with. They are experiences that have become part of the Nigerian history. It is pertinent to examine their similarities.

**The Symmetry of Colonial and Military Rules:** The colonialists invaded Africa on a belief of bringing civilization to a dark continent while the Nigeria military operates from misconceived notion of what patriotism and responsibility require of them. In both instances, there is an assumed historical mission albeit, self-imposed. It is our task here to identify five parameters of similarities in colonial and military rules.

One, both rules were predicated on coercion, force and lack of the consent of the governed. By their nature,

both British and Military colonialisms were a form of imposition. They were a form of conquest. In this respect, the conquered people, are administered at the mercy of the conquerors. We have deliberately referred to military usurpation of power as a form of colonialism since, some prominent Nigerian Military rulers have been known to compare themselves with colonial rulers with pride<sup>[9]</sup>.

So in a way, the Nigerian military in a tinge of mental confusion not only sees itself as distinct from the civil society but as a foreigner in its own land. Peter Ekeh (Ibid) expands the argument further by stating that In the three decades of military rule; the separation between the military and civilians has grown deep and nasty. It painfully recalls the invidious distinction between colonizers and the colonized in colonial times.

Two, both rules used constitutional reviews as instruments of regime continuation and survival. The colonialists embarked on constitutional reviews with gradual piece-meal reforms in 1922, 1946, 1951 and 1954 while the military unnecessarily engaged in constitutional making in 1979, 1989, 1995 and 1999. The situation was so ridiculous that the 1989 constitution and 1995 constitution were never made operational.

Three, governance under the two systems was for the sole purpose of the governors. The colonial rulers administered Nigeria within the overall framework of promoting and protecting British interests. On the other hand, their Nigerian successors practised the doctrine of ruling in and for the interest of only those in power<sup>[5]</sup>.

Four, the colonialists utilized indirect rule at the local level of administration and had Lieutenant-Governors who were not Nigerian, at the regional level. Their military imitators allowed indigenous governments at the local administration level. However, military governors or administrators at state levels, are usually non-indigenes of the states they govern so as to enhance their foreignness. It is needless to state that such foreignness allows them to carry out any atrocity without the fear of a post-service repercussion.

Five, when it became inevitable that independence would need to be granted to the colonized territories, the colonialists embarked on gradual decolonisation programmes. Military rules also have democratization programmes intended to give the impression of a determination to invariably return power to the civil society. Ironically and this is instructive, in the Nigerian society, except for the Muhammed/Obasanjo regime, 1975-1979 and the Abubakar regime, 1997-1999, all other democratization programmes have been aborted by those who initiated them. Two recent experiences bring sorrowful memories.

General Ibrahim Babangida from 1985-1993, dribbled and cajoled Nigerians under the guise of designed-to-fail democratization programmes. In an election considered very free and fair, the late Chief Moshood Abiola emerged as President only for Babangida to annul the election. And, when Abiola insisted on reclaiming his mandate, he was clamped into detention where he died on July 7, 1998 after four years. General Abacha was more imperial than Babangida. He assumed power in 1993. He instituted another democratization project and positioned himself for self-succession. In the process, he destroyed the fabrics of the civil society and brought the military into disrepute.

When he died suddenly on June 8, 1998 the scathing obituary of the Times of London in 1830 on the death of George IV could have been intended for Abacha. There never was an individual less regretted by his fellow countrymen than this deceased king. What eye has wept for him? What heart has heaved one sob of unmercenary sorrow<sup>[10]</sup>.

It was a classical manifestation of the degeneration of the Nigerian military. The Nigerian public brought into fore their anger and frustration which were repressed during his iron-fisted rule.

**The Asymmetry of a Symmetry:** In spite of the areas of similarity between colonial and military rules, there are still discernible differences. Rene Descartes (1596-1650) the French philosopher, had long observed the inherent danger in seeking the similarity of two issues. He opines that When men observed two things to be in some respect similar, they are wont to ascribe to each what they have found to be true of the other, to the neglect of that in which they differ.

It is therefore necessary to identify areas of differences.

The first is that colonial rule was far more humane than military rule. There were attempt to cloak colonial actions in legality. For example, journalists who were accused of sedition were tried in open courts. But military rule is predicated on arbitrariness and total contempt for the rule of law. Detention without trial, disobedience of court orders and indeed outright assassination have become unfortunately, the hall-mark of military rule in Nigeria. This must have informed the observation of Julius Ihonvbere that the colonial authorities did not treat Nigerians as badly as the Nigerian military has done (Quoted in Ekeh, Op. cit.).

The second area of difference is that British colonialism was a foreign imposition and a product of its time. Military rule is an indigenous subjugation of the citizenry and this makes it more repulsive. There is no reason to substitute domestic subjugation for foreign domination. The third is that in spite of its evilness,

colonialism left some legacies that are beneficial to the Nigerian nation. These include; modern form of government and administration, exposure to and advancement in western education. Military rule is not only leaving the society worst than it met it, but, is unrepentantly ruining it.

The fourth is that Nigerian nationalists were prepared for the responsibility that would devolve on them by the colonialists since it was obvious that decolonisation was following a gradual but certain procedure. But the Nigerian military only pays lip-services to democratization as shown in the broken promises of General Gowon, General Babangida and General Abacha. This loss of faith in the military and the fear of the future has led Ekeh (Ibid) to observe rather sadly that;

Nigerians were much better prepared to assume powers from the British than we are to take over rulership from our domestic dictators who seem to be scheming to maintain firm control in non-military guises. The military has installed structures and processes that are inimical to civil and democratic politics.

Sam Oyovbaire, a former minister and one of the architects of the democratization programme of the Babangida regime is even more fatalistic in his assessment of the military as an agent of democracy. He argues that; dictatorship will not produce democracy. Colonial rule cannot produce democracy. Military rule is like colonial rule... There is no way a dictatorship can midwife democracy<sup>[11]</sup>.

It is not necessary for this purpose to question when Oyovbaire started having this belief and whether it flows from the 1993 annulment of the presidential election. But it reflects the dilemma of the Nigerian nation where the military constantly assumes responsibility for institutionalizing democracy in spite of its obvious deficiencies. Interestingly, military leaders who had constrained the emergence of democratic culture often leave power only to become advocates of democracy. General Ibrahim Babangida represents this group when he postulates albeit incredibly that; the future stability of African states rests on the establishment of democratic policies. Military regimes are essentially authoritarian and have thus lost their appeal<sup>[12]</sup>. This came barely five years after he stopped the nation's advancement to democracy.

**Interrogating the Future:** The return to civil rule in May 1999 and the election of May 2003, have not allayed the fears of possible military re-emergence into Nigerian politics. The reason is simple, six years of civil rule are too short a period to put behind one, over three decades of military rule. Besides, the behavioural orientation of civilian rulers since 1999, has not presented an image of a group that has learnt any lesson.

The other dimension is the emergence of retired military officers in politics. There is a palpable fear that they may constitute themselves into a cog in the consolidation of democracy. The irrepressible Nigerian Nobel Laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka situates the problem: It is time for Nigerians to wake up. How can we be talking about democracy when all we are witnessing is a battle of ex-military generals Is democracy for those who have accumulated wealth through occupying illegal and undemocratic positions in this country...? These military generals can even bankroll single-handedly, political parties and even manipulate the whole electoral process (Vanguard, 2003).

The implication of this is that the Nigerian military whether in service or out of it, still remains a potent, strong and fearful factor on the consolidation of democracy unlike colonial rulers who had left after the 1960 independence. Indeed, why one can state assertively that Nigeria cannot be colonized again by outside forces, the same cannot be said of the military conquerors.

The only consolation for democracy is in the determination of the African Union to resist any new military incursion into African politics. President Olusegun Obasanjo recently at the International Conference of Federalism at Brussels, Belgium re-affirmed the African Union's position:

I am pleased to note that Africa is turning the corner on all fronts by gradually moving away from the decay, distortion and dislocation of the past. In well over 90 percent of the countries on the continent, there is a renewed commitment to democracy, peace, unity and progress (The Comet, 2005).

The extent to which the African Union can sustain this faith in democracy would determine the future of the continent.

## CONCLUSIONS

The attempt in this study was to draw a symmetrical relationship between colonial and military rules. The study reveals that while the nation was able to dispense with colonial rule and attain independence in 1960 on a platter of gold, the same cannot be said of military rule. It presents an image of a monster that needs to be tamed. This dilemma brings alive, the immoral question of Juvenal, Quis Custodiet ipso custodies, who guards the guardians themselves? The Nigerian civil society is a timid one that waits for divine intervention for the solution to its problems. As the nation copes with its timocracy which Adekanye <sup>[12]</sup> calls rulership based on fear, the problematic remains as to how to seek and obtain independence from our present colonizers; the military.

The fact is that, if colonial rule was an ulcer on the Nigerian nation, military rule has become a malignant cancer.

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