

The Inside Story of Nigeria's First Military Coup (Part 1)

By

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We all know that Nigeria's first military coup took place on January 15 1966. However the actions and motivation of the principal actors has been the subject of misintepretation over the years. In this article (the first of a two part series), my intention is to accurately describe the sequence of the events that guided and led to that tragic event, and to correct some of the misconceptions about that coup. This article is part one of a two article series on the coup. Part two will follow in a few weeks time. A special branch "police report" on the coup was commissioned by Maj-Gen Ironsi. The report was compiled by Lt-Col Yakubu Gowon, Captain Baba Usman of Military Intelligence and Alhaji Yusuf. Copies of this report were leaked and although the report is extremely detailed, it contains errors in some places.

The coup was so complex that one needs to understand the political situation at the time to appreciate the reasons for the coup. After Nigeria gained independence from the UK, its domestic politics TRIED to emulate those of its former colonial master by adopting a Westminster style parliamentary democracy. There the similarities ended. Instead of the cultured debate and sophisticated party political culture of the UK, Nigeria's politics fragmented on regional and ethnic lines. Due to the splitting of the country into three geo-political regions, party politics (and political parties) took on the identity and ideology of each of the three regions. The northern region was represented by the Northern People's Congress (NPC) whose motto of "one north, one people" gave a realistic and accurate assessment of its objectives. Southerners viewed the NPC as the party of the Hausa-Fulani. The western region's dominant party was the Yoruba led Action Group (AG) and the east's the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) which was controlled by the Igbos. These regional based parties assured two things: firstly that none of the parties could govern Nigeria on its own, and secondly that ethnic conflict was only a matter of time away.

The NPC took control of the Federal Government with the NCNC as the junior partner in a shaky coalition (the NPC's deputy head Tafewa Balewa became the Prime Minister and the NCNC's leader Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe took the ceremonial role of President). The AG led the opposition. The make up of the Government was odd. The NPC's leader Sir Ahmadu Bello could have become Prime Minister but chose to instead become leader of the northern region, and handed over the Prime Minister's chair to his deputy Tafewa Balewa. Rightly or wrongly, many southern politicians viewed Balewa as Bello's puppet and resented the fact that (in their opinion) the government was being ruled by proxy by a regional ruler and viewed Bello as the real power beyond the throne. This may have led southern politicians to have a disrespectful attitude toward Balewa. This perception was not helped when Bello referred to Balewa as "my lieutenant in Lagos".

At independence the northern region was given more seats in parliament than the two southern regions put together. This meant that no meaningful governmental decision affecting Nigeria could be taken without the consent of the north. Southern rulers belatedly began to appreciate that northern politicians were not as naïve as they thought and that the lopsided parliament meant that the north

would politically control Nigeria forever. The only way to alter the north's control of the country was via a constitutional amendment (unlikely since the north controlled the parliament)...or violence. The conviction and imprisonment of the AG leader and western region premier Chief Obafemi Awolowo for treason seemed to suggest that some southerners had chosen the latter option. In a controversial trial Awolowo was convicted of hatching a plot to overthrow the government by force of arms. Awolowo's incarceration was followed by the installation an unpopular government led by Chief Samuel Akintola of the NNDP. The NNDP has very close links to the ruling NPC and was regarded by many as a local western "branch" of the NPC. Akintola was elected as premier of the western region in a bitterly controversial election that was widely regarded as massively rigged. Popular resentment against the NNDP spilled over into wide scale violence, protests arson and murders that placed many parts of the western region into a state of near anarchy which earned the region the nickname of the "wild west". The Ibadan based 4th battalion of the army (commanded by Lt-Col Abogo Largema) was deployed to restore order. Most of the soldiers in the 4th battalion were of northern origin and the battalion itself was perceived as being pro-NPC and highly politicised. One of the officers who carried out the January coup accused Lt-Col Largema of giving training to Akintola in the use of firearms. If this allegation is true, then getting firearms training was probably a wise move on the part of Akintola given how many enemies he had.

The NPC government decided to authorise a massive security crackdown to curb the lawlessness in the west. To carry out the crackdown, the government first had to reshuffle the upper echelons of the security establishment. The Inspector-General of police Louis Edet was sent on leave and replaced by Kam Salem. The army's General Officer Commanding: Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi was also to be sent on indefinite leave and replaced by Brigadier Maimalari. These reshuffles (by fault or design) would result in the replacement of two eastern officers (both of whom may have been suspected of having NCNC sympathies) from the NCNC power base of the east by northerners. Additionally the corruption of certain government ministers drew public condemnation. The ostentatious lifestyle of government ministers such as Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh raised eyebrows to say the least.

It became clear that a violent conflict was inevitable. Despairing at the lack of political of a political horizon, many openly began to call for the army to intervene to break the political deadlock. The army responded in deadly fashion. A group of radical army officers had decided that the only means of breaking the political logjam in the country was to execute a coup d'état to overthrow the government. Their plan was to overthrow the government, release opposition leader Obafemi Awolowo from prison and install him as the Prime Minister.

There were rumblings of possible military coup as early as 1964. Then President Azikiwe (in his position of commander in chief of the country's armed forces) had openly called on the army to intervene to break the political deadlock in the country after Azikiwe refused to call Balewa to form a new government following scandalous elections that were marred by massive rigging, thuggery, intimidation and murder. The heads of the army, navy and air force all met with Azikiwe and made it clear that they would not intervene. Azikiwe also obtained legal advice from the Attorney-General which indicated that the service chiefs were right to disobey his call to intervene. Azikiwe

therefore eventually called on Balewa to form a new government after the nation tottered perilously in uncertainty. In 1964 some of the same group of soldiers that eventually carried out the 1966 military coup had planned to take advantage by using the distraction of a senior officers' course to stage a coup. However the plan was cancelled when rumours of the plot leaked.

THE WAY THINGS WERE

The table below shows the rank and background of the Nigerian army's high command as at January 14 1966.

| NAME | POSITION | BACKGROUND |
|---|--|--|
| Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi | GOC - Nigerian Army | East: Igbo |
| Commodore Joseph Wey | Commanding Officer - Nigerian Navy | Mixed Yoruba/eastern minority heritage |
| <i>Brigadier Samuel Ademulegun</i> | <i>CO - 2nd Brigade - Kaduna</i> | <i>West: Yoruba</i> |
| <i>Brigadier Zakariya Maimalari</i> | <i>CO - 1st Brigade - Lagos</i> | <i>North: Kanuri</i> |
| Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe | Nigerian military attaché in London | West: Yoruba |
| Colonel Thimming | CO - Nigerian Air Force | German expatriate officer |
| Brigadier Varma | CO - Nigerian Military Training College - Kaduna | Indian expatriate officer |
| <i>Colonel Mohammed Kur</i> | <i>(Acting) Chief of Staff at Army HQ - Lagos (in place of Colonel Robert Adebayo)</i> | <i>North: Kanuri</i> |
| <i>Colonel Shodeinde Ralph</i> | <i>Deputy-Commander, Nigerian Military Training College: Kaduna</i> | <i>West: Yoruba</i> |
| Colonel Robert Adebayo | Attending a course in London | West: Yoruba |
| Lt-Colonel Yakubu Gowon | Preparing to take over command of the 2 nd battalion from Hilary Njoku | North: Angas |
| Lt-Colonel Francis Fajuyi (was on leave in his home town of Abeokuta during the coup) | CO - 1 st Battalion - Enugu | West: Yoruba |
| Lt-Colonel Hilary Njoku | CO - 2 nd Battalion - | East: Igbo |

| | | Lagos | |
|--|---------------|---|--|
| Lt-Colonel Kurubo | George | CO - 3 rd Battalion - Kaduna | East: Rivers |
| <i>Lt-Colonel Largema</i> | <i>Abogo</i> | <i>CO - 4th Battalion - Ibadan</i> | <i>North: Kanuri</i> |
| Lt-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu | | CO - 5 th Battalion - Kano | East: Igbo |
| <i>Lt-Colonel James Pam</i> | | <i>Adjutant-General of the Nigerian Army</i> | <i>North: Birom (his father was the Chief of Jos and his brother was in the air force)</i> |
| <i>Lt-Colonel Unegbe</i> | <i>Arthur</i> | <i>Quartermaster- General of the Nigerian Army</i> | <i>Mid-West: Igbo</i> |
| Lt-Colonel Ime Imo | | CO - Lagos Garrison | East: Igbo |
| Major Hassan Usman Katsina | | CO - 2 nd Reconnaissance squadron - Kaduna | North: Fulani |
| Major John Obienu | | CO - 1 st Reconnaissance squadron - Abeokuta | East: Igbo |

Those whose names are italicised in the above table were killed in the coup of January 1966. May their souls rest in peace.

Before indigenous soldiers took control of Nigeria's army, the four most senior officers of Nigerian origin were Brigadiers Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, Samuel Ademulegun, Babafemi Ogundipe, and Zakariya Maimalari (in that order). When it was announced that the British soldiers would soon depart, it became obvious that the veteran trio of Ironsi, Ademulegun, and Ogundipe were favourites to land the job of GOC.

Ironsi was the most decorated of the three. A tall and physically imposing man - he *looked* like a soldier (a stark contrast to the pot bellied Generals of later generations) yet was easy going and spoke in a slow, measured tone. His father was from Sierra Leone and his mother an Igbo. He had been the premier soldier of his generation and was considered good enough to command a United Nations peacekeeping force (the first African to do so) in the Congo - twice. While Ironsi was in the Congo, he took on the rank of Major-General, but reverted to Brigadier when he returned to Nigeria. During the Congo peacekeeping mission, Ironsi sent Maimalari (who was then two ranks below him) home to Nigeria after a disagreement over military tactics. The words of retired Maj-Gen Ike Nwachukwu (then a second lieutenant) give an indication of Ironsi's stature at the time. Nwachukwu said that the first time he saw Ironsi "it was like seeing a God....he was the God of all us soldiers". To gauge the integrity of army officers back then, Ironsi had debts of 18,500 Naira (after almost twenty five years of service), having risen to the rank of Major-General, having commanded a UN peacekeeping force, and having become Head of State with access to the nation's treasury.

Brigadier Maimalari was a notoriously fiery disciplinarian who "would brook no insubordination". For this reason, he "exacted unqualified

discipline from all his subordinates" (See Gbulie: "Nigeria's Five Majors"). He was widely respected in the army and was tipped to become a future GOC. Like his military colleagues from the north: Colonels Mohammed, Pam and Largema, he was an alumni of the famous Government College in Zaria.

Brigadier Ademulegun was another stickler for discipline, and was the most controversial of the Brigadiers. While acknowledged as "a first class soldier" (see Gbulie) he was personally unpopular in the army – especially among junior officers. His open friendship with the Sardauna of Sokoto won him few friends in the military and accepting a gift from the Sardauna (a horse) irritated many junior officers (who ignored the fact that Ademulegun was not really in a position to refuse gifts from the most powerful politician in the land). Ironically, Ademulegun felt that his political links would land him the job of GOC. For this reason, he may have been a little overconfident about his chances of securing the job. Thus when he did not get the job, he became jealous of the new GOC and was not shy about pointing out the inadequacies of the man picked in preference to him.

Brigadier Ogundipe's personality was more sedate than those of Brigadiers Ademulegun and Maimalari. When recommending his successor, the departing British GOC, Major-General Welby-Everard said that Maimalari "was younger and considerably more junior to the others (Ironsi, Ademulegun, Ogundipe) and I also considered him to be militarily immature. He never entered seriously into my considerations". Everard went on to recommend (without success) Brigadier Ogundipe as his successor. Everard regarded Ogundipe as "A very capable and efficient officer...Unlike Ademulegun he was very popular within the Army and greatly respected both as a senior officer and as a man. He was also noticeably non-political" (the quotes of Maj-Gen Welby-Everard are reproduced in Chuks Iloegbunam's "Ironside"). The Federal Government ignored the advice of its GOC and gave the top job to Ironsi.

"THESE BOOKISH PEOPLE"

The *ideological* circle of for the January coup seems to have consisted primarily of officers who had embarked upon military careers after completing university degrees. The late former military governor of the Northern Region: Hassan Katsina once commented on the presence of some "bookish people" who had joined the Army for rather different reasons from the normal military crowd. Katsina was probably referring to the graduates that had begun to join the Army. These graduates may have been exposed to the left wing political doctrine which was sweeping across much of Africa, Asia, and South America at the time. In January 1966, the Nigerian Army had six graduates: Lt-Cols 'Emeka' Ojukwu and Victor Banjo, and Majors Olufemi Olutoye, Adewale Ademoyega, Emmanuel Ifeajuna, and Oluwole Rotimi. Three or four of these graduates were involved conceptually, or physically in the January coup. Of the direct participants, Ademoyega had a degree in History from the University of London, and Ifeajuna was a graduate of the University of Ibadan.

Although not physically involved in the January coup, Lt-Colonels Ojukwu and Banjo had been accused of showing a greater than average interest in political matters. Ironsi also noticed the increasing political sophistication of his men and moaned "I asked for soldiers and am being given politicians dressed in uniform". Security reports concerning coup plotting by Banjo were passed to Prime Minister Balewa, who ignored them. Major Ademoyega claims that the

Majors had at some point in time, floated the idea of a coup to Ojukwu and Banjo, and also to Lt-Colonels Hilary Njoku and Francis Fajuyi. The four Lt-Colonels were not opposed to a military coup, but Njoku and Ojukwu were "unsure" about whether to participate (see *Ademoyega: "Why We Struck"*). None of the four Lt-Colonels got physically involved when the Majors eventually struck and three (Njoku, Ojukwu, Fajuyi) actually played a role (to varying degrees) in crushing the coup, while Fajuyi and Ojukwu became military governors in Ironsi's military administration. Many northern soldiers suspected Fajuyi of at the very least being sympathetic to the Majors' coup, and at worst to have assisted them in the planning of the coup. Katsina once referred to Fajuyi as an "Action Grouper" in sarcastic reference to Fajuyi's perceived support for the AG.

A MAN CALLED KADUNA

Major Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu was a promising, charismatic and slightly rebellious officer that worked as the Chief Instructor at the Nigerian Military Training College in Kaduna (the city of his birth). Nzeogwu was a devout catholic, a teetotaler, a non-smoker, and despite being a bachelor, did not spend much time chasing women like many young men of his age. Yet he was prepared to kill civilians in a military coup that he believed to be just. His charisma was such that even his detractors were prepared to admit that he was "an incorruptible idealist without ambitions of power....in many ways a man born before his time" (see *Muffet : "Let Truth Be Told"*).

Some claim that Nzeogwu's participation in the January 1966 coup was part of a grand Igbo agenda to "dominate" the country. This argument overlooks the fact that Nzeogwu was an Igbo in name only. Nzeogwu was born in the Northern region's capital of Kaduna to Igbo immigrant parents from the Mid-West Region. Such was his family's affinity to the city of Nzeogwu's birth that they and his military colleagues called him "Kaduna". When not in his army uniform he wore northern mufti and frequently referred to himself as "a northerner". Nzeogwu spoke fluent Hausa (the lingua franca of the Northern Region) "like a native" (Forsyth). In fact Nzeogwu's command of Hausa was better than his command of Igbo. It is a mark of Nzeogwu's popularity that when his body was discovered during the Nigerian civil war by federal soldiers, they took his body away for burial with full military honours (but not before his eyes had been plucked out). Although one account claims that a northern soldier swore at the minister that performed Nzeogwu's burial ceremony (see *Luckham: The Nigerian Military*). So what possessed a puritanical, bible bashing, innocent young man like Nzeogwu to murder the nation's most powerful northern politician in the middle of the night? Nzeogwu's reasoning is chilling in its simplicity: "We wanted to get rid of rotten and corrupt ministers, political parties, trades unions and the whole clumsy apparatus of the federal system. We wanted to gun down all the bigwigs on our way. This was the only way. We could not afford to let them live if this was to work. We got some but not all. General Ironsi was to have been shot, but we were not ruthless enough. As a result he and the other compromisers were able to supplant us".

What is clear is that Nzeogwu had harboured some anti-government sentiment for several years before 1966. Nzeogwu's boss at the Nigerian Military Training College: Colonel Ralph Shodeinde, had in the past reported Nzeogwu to Army Headquarters for allegedly disseminating anti-government rhetoric to junior officers. Shodeinde's report claimed that Nzeogwu had been attempting to poison junior

officers' minds against the Government (see *Obasanjo: "An intimate portrait of Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu"*). Nzeogwu was so disillusioned with the farcical vote rigging that he exclaimed "it is impossible to vote out a Nigerian minister".

Nzeogwu was recruited into the conspiratorial group by the fellow Sandhurst trained Major Chris Anuforo. Nzeogwu in turn tried to recruit others into the plot. Nigeria's former Defence Secretary: Lt-Gen Theophilus Danjuma was aware of Nzeogwu's coup recruitment policy. As a former colleague of Nzeogwu, Danjuma noted that "Nzeogwu was a very charming person. He had his method, he would start by criticizing government and then watch your reaction.....if you joined him in criticising the government.....then he would say well, we would (*sic*) fix them one day. That's how he recruited". Major Tim Onwuatuegwu bought Nzeogwu's anti-government line. Onwuatuegwu was an Igbo from Nnewi and a colleague of Major Nzeogwu at the Nigerian Military Training College, where Onwuatuegwu was also an instructor. Onwuatuegwu was tagged a dull, parade ground "goody two shoes" type by one his own course-mates at Sandhurst but fell under Nzeogwu's spell and was convinced enough to break into the house of, and shoot his own Brigade commander during the coup.

One officer that seems to have been unaffected by Nzeogwu's political rhetoric was a cadet named Salihu Ibrahim. Ibrahim was training at the Nigerian Military Training College while Nzeogwu (chief instructor at the College) and company hatched the coup plot. Despite being close to Nzeogwu, Ibrahim matured into a "vintage professional soldier" (*Chris Alli: The Siege Of a Nation*) who abhorred military participation in Government. Ibrahim retired from the Nigerian Army in 1993 after rising to the rank of Lt-General, and serving as Chief of Army Staff. Strangely for a man who disliked military coups and military governments, he served as a member of firstly Major-General Buhari's Supreme Military Council from 1984-85, and in Ibrahim Babangida's Armed Forces Ruling Council thereafter.

Prior to the coup Nzeogwu gave other cryptic clues about his intentions. On one occasion while discussing Brigadier Ademulegun, Nzeogwu told Major Alex Madiebo to "go easy with the Brigadier, for when the strong wind blows, all the grass bends low to allow it to pass". Madiebo did not immediately appreciate the significance of what Nzeogwu had said to him, but on January 15th 1966, Nzeogwu's made his intentions explicitly clear.

Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna was an Igbo from Onitsha and the Brigade Major in Lagos. He was an international athlete of some repute and held the Commonwealth record for high jumping. He was also a graduate of the University of Ibadan (where he had subversive tendencies). Ifeajuna was the "brains" behind the coup and wrote a manuscript on the reasons why he felt a military coup was necessary. This manuscript has never been published.

THE "FIVE MAJORS"?

One enduring myth is that Nigeria's first military coup was carried out by "five Igbo Majors". The source of this myth is the "we were five in number" comment, which the coup's most visible, participant: Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, made in an interview with Dennis Ejindu (*Africa and the world - May 1967*) after the coup. The "five Majors" myth was later perpetuated by Captain Ben Gbulie's book on the coup entitled "Nigeria's Five Majors", the title of which he has admitted borrowing from a BBC play of the same name.

When Nzeogwu made his infamous "we were five in number" comment, he made no reference to the *rank* of the "five". He was merely referring to the five designated strategic regional commanders of the coup. In fact, no less than nine Majors were originally billed to take part in the coup. These nine were Majors Nzeogwu, Ifeajuna, Ademoyega, Okafor, Anuforo, Chukwuka, Obienu, Onwuatuegwu and Chude-Sokei. Shortly before the coup, Chude-Sokei was posted overseas. On the coup day itself, Obienu failed to show, leaving seven Majors as participants. When it came to execution, the Majors designated five officers as regional commanders for the coup's execution. Of Nzeogwu's "five", there were "the two of us in the North" (Nzeogwu and Major Tim Onwuatuegwu), and three more in the South.

The head of the Lagos operations was Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna. That makes *three* Majors so far. The squad, which killed Chief Samuel Akintola in Ibadan, was led by CAPTAIN Nwobosi. That makes four (three Majors and one Captain). There was no coup in the Mid-West as no military formation was based in that Region. However, Lieutenant Oguchi was dispatched to the east to arrest the Premier of the Eastern region: Dr Michael Okpara. The identity of the fifth member is the most problematic. Majors Don Okafor and Adewale Ademoyega were given much responsibility for the Lagos branch of the coup, and it is likely that one of these two men was the fifth commander.

WHO WAS THE LEADER?

Major Nzeogwu has since 1966, been touted as the leader of the January 1966 coup. This has been widely presumed due to the visible role which Nzeogwu played during and after the coup. Nzeogwu was the only Major to successfully execute the coup in his designated target region. He then followed up his coup success with his infamous "our enemies are the...." speech. Thus the (false) assumption that he was the coup leader spread. The truth may be somewhat different. It was not until the coup plot reached its logistical stage that Nzeogwu was brought in to the conspiratorial group. The brains behind the coup was probably Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, however Ifeajuna was chased out of Nigeria's then capital city of Lagos by Major-General Ironsi. Realising that Ironsi was rounding up those that took part in the coup, Ifeajuna fled to Ghana, leaving Nzeogwu to hold the fort.

Part two of this article will follow in a few weeks time. In part two I shall describe the execution of the coup itself.

The Inside Story of Nigeria's First Military Coup - Part 2

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see Part I (<http://www.gamji.com/article5000/NEWS5254.htm>)

PART 2

KADUNA

In the weeks leading up to January 15th Nzeogwu carried out reconnaissance on the official Lodge of the Northern Region Premier: the Sardauna of Sokoto Ahmadu Bello. Nzeogwu often took his men on a night-time "training exercise" known as "Exercise Damisa". The men were unaware that the military exercise they were participating in was actually a practice run for a military coup to overthrow the Government. The commander of the 2nd Brigade in Kaduna Brigadier Ademulegun became aware of and was irritated by the night time training (when he became aware that soldiers had been going near the Premier's Lodge). He reprimanded Nzeogwu in a telephone call and warned him to keep his military exercises a safe distance away from the Premier's lodge. Although Ademulegun complained about the commotion, he took no further action as he was unaware of the exercise's real purpose. Ademulegun was a polished soldier that had been Maj-Gen Ironsi's rival for the job of GOC. His control over his troops was such that very few soldiers from his Brigade participated in the coup. Thus Nzeogwu had to conscript young soldiers from the Nigerian Military Training College to carry out the coup in Kaduna. In the early hours of January 15 1966 Nzeogwu decided to turn "Exercise Damisa" into a full blown military coup. Nzeogwu led a group of soldiers into a bush adjacent to the Premier's lodge. Once there Nzeogwu informed the men of their real mission: they were to attack the Premier's lodge. Nzeogwu and his men blew open the gates to the Sardauna's lodge and Nzeogwu personally conducted a search of the residence - hunting for Bello. After losing his temper at his initial failure to locate him, Nzeogwu found Bello hiding with his wives. Bello was shot by Nzeogwu. Bello's faithful bodyguard who came to defend him with a bow and arrows was also shot, as well as one of his wives who tried to shield him with her body. Nzeogwu was fiercely committed to the coup and was the only one of the coupists able to execute his mission. His personal assertion that "it is impossible to vote out a Nigerian minister" showed his own conviction in his actions.

BRIGADIER ADEMULEGUN

Nzeogwu's co-conspirator in Kaduna: Major Tim Onwuategwu, personally led a detachment of soldier to Brigadier Ademulegun's house. Onwuategwu made his way up to the Brigadier's bedroom where he was laying beside his wife. Upon seeing Onwuategwu enter the room, Ademulegun shouted at him "Timothy, what the devil do you think you are doing?" (see Gbulie "Nigeria's Five Majors"). Onwuategwu told Ademulegun that he was "under arrest". According to the Majors' version of events, Ademulegun reached for a drawer beside his bed, and as he did so, Onwuategwu shot him dead in his bed, along with Ademulegun's wife who was lying beside him.

COLONEL SHODEINDE

The head of the NMTC Colonel Ralph Shodeinde was also killed. The

manner of his death is unclear. His wife (who was present when he was killed) testified that he was shot by several soldiers including Majors Nzeogwu and Onwuategwu. Other accounts claim that a grenade was tossed at him. It is not clear whether Nzeogwu could possibly have been involved in Shodeinde's death since presumably he was pre-occupied at the time with killing Ahmadu Bello. Most accounts place responsibility for Shodeinde's murder with Onwuategwu. The Majors' bloodlust in some cases and failure to kill others is puzzling. The same Major Onwuategwu who shot his commanding officers and their wives arrested, but did not harm the Governor of the northern region: Sir Kashim Ibrahim. When released Ibrahim vouched that he had been treated with utmost respect by the men who abducted him. The Majors clearly had their "favourites" when it came to sparing or ending lives.

HASSAN KATSINA

The commander of the 2nd Recce squadron in Kaduna was not harmed during the coup. Shortly before the coup, Katsina bumped into Nzeogwu. Nzeogwu exchanged pleasantries with Katsina and inquired about Katsina's children and family. Some have speculated that the conversation between the two men may have saved Katsina's life as Nzeogwu's familiarity with Katsina's personal life may have led to him to exclude Katsina from his calculations out of empathy. Whether that is true or not, when the two men first met again shortly after the coup, Nzeogwu directly asked Katsina "are you with us or against us?". Seeing that Nzeogwu was holding a gun, Katsina wisely replied "you know I am with you". Nzeogwu used the strategy more than once in the days following the coup as a means of testing the loyalty of other officers.

LAGOS

The Lagos branch of the coup was led by Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna. As well as being a degree holder before his military career, Ifeajuna had been an international athlete who held the commonwealth high jumping record. The key officers assisting Ifeajuna in Lagos were Majors Wale Ademoyega, Don Okafor, Chris Anuforo and Humphrey Chukwuka.

At around 2am Ifeajuna and some lieutenants left the 2nd Brigade HQ and made their way to Prime Minister Abubakar Tafewa Balewa's residence. They overpowered (but did not kill) the police officers standing guard there, and Ifeajuna kicked down the door of the Prime Minister's bedroom before leading him out at gunpoint. It appears that while the *arrest* of the Prime Minister was part of the plot, his *murder* may not have been and Ifeajuna and some of his co-conspirators may have exceeded their orders in killing him. In the aftermath of the coup, Nzeogwu rattled off a list of names that were on the Majors hit list. He mentioned the usual unsurprising suspects such as Bello, Azikiwe, and Akintola. Balewa's name was conspicuously absent. Balewa was not killed until it was clear that the coup was doomed to fail. Balewa asked for, and was given time to say his prayers before he was shot by Major Ifeajuna. It was clear that not all arrested persons were to be killed. Some politicians (such as Sir Kashim Ibrahim and Michael Okpara) were arrested but released unharmed.

Many of the army's senior officers were attending a party in honour of the Lagos based first Brigade's commander: Brigadier Maimalari. Some

of the officers attending that party (including Maimalari himself) were to meet the grim reaper less than 24 hours after that party. Ifeajuna's murder of his commanding officer Maimalari was probably the single greatest act of treachery on the night of the coup. In the absence of the vibrant and instant news media of today, an information chasm existed as the Government (for fear of increasing tension in the country) made little or no comment about the events of January. Thus rumours and conspiracy theories about victims' whereabouts, and miraculous manner of death/survival thrived. A riot almost broke out when an attempt was made to replace Brigadier Maimalari's commanding officer nameplate at the 2nd Brigade Headquarters in Lagos. Maimalari was widely regarded as an excellent soldier that was headed for the top. His toughness was such that many northern NCOs refused to accept his death and instead believed that Maimalari had made a miraculous escape from the January Majors and was still alive. This had a tiny semblance of truth, Maimalari managed to escape from the first attempt to arrest him by Major Don Okafor by jumping over a wall behind his house, but as he was escaping on foot, he came across the car of his Brigade Major: Emmanuel Ifeajuna. Maimalari recognised Ifeajuna (who was Maimalari's Brigade Major), and did not realise that Ifeajuna was part of the coup plot. Erroneously believing that Ifeajuna could be trusted, Maimalari waved down the car, and was promptly shot dead by Ifeajuna. Maimalari's murder was a great loss to the northern soldiers who respected him, and to Nigeria as a whole. So famed was Maimalari's toughness that the northern soldiers who murdered Maj-Gen Ironsi and Lt-Col Fajuyi six months later in a revenge coup actually "interrogated" the two men and demanded that they disclose the whereabouts of Brigadier Maimalari (whom they believed was still alive).

The commanding officer of the Ibadan based 4th battalion, Lt-Col Abogo Largema, was a guest at the Ikoyi hotel on the night of the coup. Ifeajuna arrived at the hotel and forced the desk clerk at gunpoint, to inform Largema that he had a "phone call". When Largema emerged from his room to take the bogus "phone call" call, Major Ifeajuna and a subaltern emerged from their hiding place in the corridor and shot Largema dead.

Other officers who were considered as pro-Government or who could prevent the coup were also killed. The army's GOC Major-General Ironsi was tipped off about the coup by a telephone call from the Army's Adjutant-General: Lt-Col James Pam. Shortly after ending the telephone call with Ironsi, Pam was abducted from his house and shot dead by Major Chris Anuforo. Pam was the son of the chief of Jos and was widely liked within the army, and regarded as a very capable officer. He was also a father of six. The Majors decision to kill him mortified his colleagues. Anuforo was most hasty in the use of his firearm on the night of January 15. He personally shot dead Lt-Cols Pam and Unegbe, Colonel Kur Mohammed and the Finance Minister Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh. Okotie-Eboh was widely disliked during the first republic for his corruption, and the former British colonial officer Sir James Robertson once referred to him as "a cheerful rogue" and "a byword for making money on the side". Okotie-Eboh's arrest was particularly aggressive and eyewitnesses say that the soldiers who arrested him tossed him into their army Land Rover "like a sack". He was shot dead by Major Anuforo despite pleading for his life. Balewa, Kur Mohammed and Okotie-Eboh were initially kidnapped, but killed later when it became clear that the coup was not going to succeed.

IBADAN

The coup caught many of the army's high command by surprise as many of them were away from their posts. Lt-Col Francis Fajuyi was on leave and command of the Lagos battalion was in the process of being transferred from Lt-Col Hilary Njoku to Lt-Col Gowon who was returning from a course overseas. In Ibadan the Premier of the western region Chief Samuel Akintola had been forewarned that soldiers were coming to get him. Akintola had heard rumours of a coup and had travelled to Kaduna to warn the Premier of the northern region Ahmadu Bello. Frustrated that his warnings failed to elicit the required degree of urgency from Bello, Akintola returned to Ibadan and armed himself with a rifle. His deputy Chief Fani-Kayode was first arrested by the coupists. After this arrest, Kayode's wife informed Akintola of what had happened. Shortly afterward a detachment of soldiers led by Captain Emmanuel Nwobosi arrived at Akintola's residence. Upon sighting the soldiers, Akintola opened fire – lightly wounding a few of them including Capt Nwobosi. After bravely fighting for his life and engaging the soldiers in a gunfight, Akintola was shot dead by Nwobosi and his men.

THE ROLE OF NORTHERN SOLDIERS

Not many realize that several officers of northern origin took part in Nigeria's first military coup. The "Igbo coup" tag attached to the Majors' assault ignores the fact that scores of northern officers took part in the Lagos operations, and even assisted Nzeogwu when he stormed the residence of the Northern Region's premier: Ahmadu Bello. Nzeogwu later described the detachment of troops accompanying him to Bello's house as "a truly Nigerian gathering" (*New Nigerian* – 18th January 1966). Nzeogwu pointed out that the northern soldiers accompanying him *"had the chance to drop out. More than that, they had bullets. They had been issued with bullets but I was unarmed. If they disagreed they could have shot me...most of the Other Ranks were Northerners but they followed"*. Among the prominent northern soldiers that helped Nzeogwu to overthrow the Northern Region's government was John Atom Kpera. Kpera later became the military governor of Benue State. Many of the soldiers that accompanied Major Ifeajuna when he abducted the Prime Minister: Tafewa Balewa, were also northerners.

THE ONLY IGBO TO DIE

Many claim that the January 15th 1966 coup was a gigantic Igbo plot to transfer control of the Federal Government from northerners to Igbos. However, one stumbling block in this argument was that the Majors' killed an Igbo officer during the coup. The proponents of the "Igbo coup" argument have tried to rationalize the murder of Lt-Col Arthur Unegbe by arguing that he was not initially a target of the Majors, but was only killed because he refused to surrender the keys of the armoury. This argument displays an ignorance of military postings and procedure. At the time of the January coup, Unegbe was the Quartermaster-General of the Nigerian Army at Army Headquarters in Lagos. Not being in command of a combat unit, he had no access to any armoury keys. As soldiers, the Majors would have known this. Also, the fact that Unegbe was SHOT proves that the Majors were already armed when they got to him. Why kill him to get access to weapons they already had? Additionally, the mutineers in other units outside Lagos managed to get their hands on weapons without resorting to killing the respective Quartermasters of

their various units. What is more probable is that Unegbe was killed because he was known to be close to Brigadier Maimalari. Thus the Majors probably figured that Unegbe had to be silenced in order to prevent him from raising the alarm.

IRONSI

The Majors' failure to arrest or kill the General Officer Commanding (GOC) the Nigerian Army: Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, has led some to believe that he was part of, or was at the very least tipped off about, the coup plot. Ironsi and other senior officers had in the weeks leading up to the coup become concerned by the possibility of a junior officers' coup. These concerns were passed on to the Prime Minister who either did not take them seriously, or chose not to act in response.

Depending on whose story one believes, Ironsi was either: (i) in on the plot and an ally of the Majors (ii) was on the Majors hit list but managed to escape due to being tipped off by Igbo participants within the coup circle. The truth may lie within Nzeogwu's famous "Africa and the World" interview with Dennis Ejindu. Nzeogwu's comments in that interview are instructive. Nzeogwu said of the coup plot: "We got some but not all. GENERAL IRONSI WAS TO HAVE BEEN SHOT. But we were not ruthless enough. As a result he and the other compromisers were able to supplant us" (Daily Telegraph, 22nd January 1966). If Ironsi was part of the coup plot, why would the Majors plan to kill him?

Ironsi's survival in January owed more to good fortune than to him being privy to the coup plot (as well as the Majors tactical mistake in arresting or killing other senior officers before they got hold of Ironsi).. As the GOC, he was tipped off that in the early stages of the coup, and was informed something that unusual was occurring via a telephone call from Lt-Col James Pam.

The commotion caused by the murders of other officers alerted Ironsi to the coup and he was able to rally troops who helped him to put down the Majors' coup. On his way to commence moves to crush the coup, Ironsi actually came across some junior officers that were involved in the coup. It is possible that some of these young officers lost their nerve when confronted by the intimidating presence of their GOC. When he encountered a checkpoint manned by some of the mutineers, Ironsi simply stepped out of his vehicle, and roared "get out of my way!" (an order which was promptly obeyed) before continuing his journey. After the coup was suppressed, Ironsi met with the surviving members of the federal cabinet. Even northern ministers present at that meeting conceded that Ironsi was genuinely upset by, and wept about the death of his military colleagues.

THE AFTERMATH

Maj-Gen Ironsi rallied the bulk of the army and managed to put down the coup. The coup leaders (except Ifeajuna who fled to Ghana) were placed under arrest. Major Nzeogwu handed over control of the northern region to Ironsi's appointed designee: Major Hassan Katsina and was escorted by Lt-Col Conrad Nwawo (an officer whom Nzeogwu trusted) to Lagos where he surrendered to Maj-Gen Ironsi. The surviving members of the Federal cabinet handed over the reigns of Govt to Ironsi who suspended several parts of the constitution (mostly those parts dealing with party politics), banned all political parties and formed a new military government with a Supreme Military

Council consisting of the following:

| NAME | POSITION |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Maj-Gen Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi | Supreme Commander, Nigerian Armed Forces and Head of State |
| Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe | Chief of Staff, Nigerian Defence Forces |
| Commodore Joseph Wey | Commanding Officer - Nigerian Navy |
| Lt-Colonel Yakubu Gowon | Chief of Staff, Army |
| Lt-Colonel George Kurubo | Commanding Officer - Nigerian Air Force |
| Lt-Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu | Military Governor, Eastern Region |
| Lt-Colonel Hassan Usman Katsina | Military Governor, Northern Region |
| Lt-Colonel David Ejoor | Military Governor, Mid-West Region |
| Lt-Colonel Francis Fajuyi | Military Governor, Western Region |

After the January 1966 coup, a succession of military Governments led Nigeria for thirteen years until a military regime headed by General Olusegun Obasanjo (the current democratic president) restored the country to civilian democratic rule in 1979. The army returned to power again in 1984 and did not leave until 1999. The Majors' coup proved to be the catalyst for several military regimes - each one progressively more authoritarian than the one that preceded it. Most of the January Majors are not alive today to tell their stories. Of the conspirators Major Ademoyega and Captain Gbulie have written books on the coup. The following table shows the fate of the key participants.

THE CONSPIRATORS

| NAME | POSITION BEFORE THE COUP | FATE |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna | Brigade Major: 1 st Brigade - Lagos | Executed during the Nigerian civil war after planning a rebellion against Lt-Col Ojukwu. |
| Major Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu | Chief Instructor, Nigerian Military Training College: Kaduna | Killed in the early days of the Nigerian civil war while fighting for Biafra. |
| Major Tim Onwuategwu | Instructor, Nigerian Military Training College: Kaduna | Killed in the days following the Nigerian civil war. |
| Major Don Okafor | CO - Federal Guard | Abducted from Abeokuta prison (where he was detained for his part in the coup) by northern soldiers in July 1966, and killed (several accounts say he was buried alive). |