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A Historical and Sociological Study of the Nigerian Air Force (1962 – 1970): Politics, Ethnicism and Army Influence

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ABSTRACT

The Air Force in Nigeria is a compelling subject for sociological enquiry, with an entirely different formative process to the Army. At its inception in 1964, Army officers, not career airmen, commanded the force until 1975. However, whereas the Army cast a long shadow over NAF identity, the Air Force had other institutional pathologies. The “Quota System” of ethnicized recruitment within the military, introduced to balance out ethnic representation, was one such issue. The paper examines how this system, along with the tumultuous politics of 1960s Nigeria, ethnicism and Army influence, shaped the NAF’s formative years.

KEYWORDS

Nigerian Air Force; West Germany; Nigerian Army; ethnic politics

A brief historiography of studies on the “military” and politics in Nigeria

On 15 January 1966, mutinous elements of the Nigerian Army planned and executed an abortive coup that altered Nigeria’s political landscape. The coupists, led by Major Chukwuma “Kaduna” Nzeogwu, were largely Igbo officers from the country’s South. Their targets were mostly Hausa-Fulani from the country’s North. This was far from a bloodless place coup, however. By the time Nzeogwu and the coup plotters were done, they had murdered 22 people, including Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa, the Premier of the Western Regional, Samuel Ladoke Akintola, the Northern Nigeria premier and the Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello, several of Nigeria’s most senior politicians and also a number of senior Army officers (as well as some wives), police and military guards.¹

The murders would later cast “all the Ibo officers [...] in sinister conspiratorial roles.”² Not even Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, the Head of the Army, and an Igbo, was spared a role in the supposed Igbo plot that underpinned Northern discontent after the January coup.³ Indeed, these suspicions by Northerners against the Igbo officers cast a long shadow over a military institution already stratified along ethnic lines.

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Just six months later, the so-called “July rematch” took place: a violent counter-coup by Northern officers that saw a shifting of power within the Army. Hundreds of Igbo officers, subalterns, Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs), Warrant Officers and soldiers were murdered in retaliation. The extent of bloodshed – and the highly ethnicized nature of both coups – form part of the narrative of why Nigeria eventually spiraled into civil war one year later, in July 1967.⁴

With the military in power within an interregnum that lasted decades, politics in Nigeria since the 1960s mainly became a combination of ethnic and military politics.⁵ For example, insofar as the Nigerian military after independence came to resemble a “system of competitive-ethnic monopolies,” so did politics and the political environment of the period.⁶ Therefore, it is apropos that an examination of the Nigerian military institution in the 1960s pays particular attention to the politics of ethnicization and ethnic identity within the military institution. Moreover, from a research standpoint, “the military sphere is the first area with enough accumulated materials for research into, testing, or assessing the problems of ‘Federal Character’ recruitment and their impact on public administrative organization.”⁷

Furthermore, of the four primary organs of the Nigerian state – the military, the police, the judiciary and the civil service – by far, the most politically intrusive has been the military. With its role in bringing an abrupt and violent end to Nigeria’s First Republic (1960–1966) and then fighting and defeating rebellious elements during the Civil War of Nigeria (1967–1970), the Nigerian military has played the conflicting roles of a political master, national defender and disruptor of the democratic rule of law.⁸

Within such roles, which sometimes were simultaneous (such as during the military interregnum), the question of ethnicity and the extent to which the military reflects “Federal Character” often emerges. The ensuing discourse is one where observations around ethnic politics within the military establishment mirror the broader Nigerian society.⁹ Indeed, as J. Bayo Adekanye observes, the debate on the military in Nigeria since independence approximates that on Nigeria itself.¹⁰ This is insofar as the decades-long debate on “Federal Character” indicates that “the military has long been recognized as an important factor in determining the questions of political domination and revolt.”¹¹

Much of the historiological discourse on the Nigerian military primarily focuses on the Army. Indeed, there seems to be an assumption that “military history” in Nigeria refers to the Army for the most part.¹² After all, the Army has been the principal political actor and architect of the coups behind the military rule. Consequently, scholarly analyses of the impact of politics on the military tend almost exclusively to examine the intercourse between politics and the Army.¹³

As an example, Robin Luckham's seminal work, *The Nigerian Military*, despite the name, is a sociological analysis of the Army and the Army alone. Jimi Peters, meanwhile, notes that many Nigerians viewed the military as "a tool of the colonial government," which maintained colonialist tendencies even after independence.¹⁴ However, the Air Force only emerged within Nigeria's First Republic – after independence – which suggests that it could not possibly have been a colonialist tool *per se*; and yet, by association with the Army and Navy as colonial-era institutions, it is implied to be. In seeking to examine the military's role in Nigeria's conflict management, Adedeji and Amos likewise refer almost exclusively to troops and action on *terra firma* – solid earth – with minimal comparative mention, much less substantive discussion, of airpower and the NAF role.¹⁵ Furthermore, in his classic work, *Strands in Nigerian Military History*, S.C. Ukpabi likewise focuses on the Army without discussing how the other service branches, and, in this case, the Air Force, features within this thesis on military history in Nigeria.¹⁶ Furthermore, in *The Military and the State in Nigeria*, Ajayi focuses again on the Nigerian Army, with relatively little reference – and no substantive discussion – on the Navy's role in Nigeria's political history.¹⁷

Due to the robust body of work on the Nigerian Army, the debate has matured, and discussions have branched off in different areas. Some of these include contributions to the Army's "coup culture,"¹⁸ on its colonialist origins,¹⁹ sociology,²⁰ and role during the Civil War of Nigeria (as told by notable Nigerian Army commanders of the period).²¹ More recently, the discourses on the Nigerian military have seen an increased emphasis on the Army's counter-insurgency operations against Boko Haram, as a new generation of writers seeks to carve out academic terrain for themselves within the field.²² In the ensuing debate within Nigerian military studies, the origins of the Air Force, and its peculiar background, seem overshadowed. Nevertheless, as this article argues, the history and political features of the military in Nigeria require an examination beyond the Army-centric discourse. In particular, the Air Force, being the newest of the tri-services and not having colonialist origins, has a unique history. This, in part, is due to the institution's emergence during the Cold War and midway through Nigeria's short-lived First Republic (1960–1966).

This paper seeks to expand on the limited discourse around the origins of the NAF,²³ with particular emphasis on the Cold War and domestic politics of the era, which eventually led to the West German Mission that established an air force in Nigeria in 1962. The paper continues with a discussion of in-country developments and tactical-level changes that underpinned the NAF formation. Over time, institutions change in character. In the case of the NAF, ethnicity and ethnic politics inform the discourse of the military's "quota system," which in turn shaped Air Force identity and influenced its function in its formative years. The next part of the paper critically examines

this role within the ethnicized political environment of Nigeria during the 1960s, including how ethnicism influenced NAF identity throughout the politically tumultuous 1960s. Next, the paper examines the Nigerian Army's influence during the NAF's formative years. Until 1975, the most senior "airmen" within the air force institution were not airmen but were seconded Army officers. Over a decade of Army command and control of the air force engendered institutional pathologies within the Air Force. However, as the paper argues, appointing Army officers on secondment as NAF Chiefs was pragmatic and perhaps the only workable solution. After examining the rationale behind the Army's influence within the NAF during the latter's formative years, the paper concludes with a summary of the overall findings.

"From scratch": the challenge of creating a new service branch

The Nigerian Air Force²⁴ was founded in 1964, two years after Nigeria signed a defense agreement with West Germany for the latter to provide aircraft, technical assistance, and training to establish an air force.²⁵ Between 1962 when the defense agreement was signed, and 1964 when the NAF became marginally operational and moved beyond a drawing board concept, the force had two major requirements: air assets (platforms) and a local workforce to pilot and service them.²⁶ The former could be purchased, branded and displayed as part of the new air force; the latter required new personnel to be trained – preferably *in situ*.

Part of the issue in creating a new air force "from scratch" was that neither the training expertise nor the relevant infrastructure was available in Nigeria.²⁷ Moreover, Nigerian politicians were aware of the Ghanaian Air Force's success in employing external military assistance in practically every area of its creation. Therefore, Nigeria sought to adopt a similar approach in establishing an air force service branch for the military.²⁸

Between 1961 and 1962, various countries, including the UK, the US, Sweden, Canada and India, were approached for technical assistance, with West Germany eventually selected to establish an air force in Nigeria.²⁹ While discussions for the in-country establishment of an airforce were ongoing, "the first batch of 10 cadets was enlisted in 1962 to undergo training with the Ethiopian Air Force." Shortly afterward, the second set of 16 cadets was enlisted in February 1963 to undergo training with the Royal Canadian Air Force. A third batch of six cadets was sent to the Indian Air Force for training.³⁰

Nigeria also gradually formed a fleet for its fledgling air force. These "first generation" air assets acquired included the *Aérospatiale* Allouette helicopter and fixed-wing light aircraft such as the 20 Dornier DO27 and 14 Piaggio 149D.³¹ In addition, the Air Force acquired some *Nord Noratlas* platforms for

transport.³² The pioneer pilots of the NAF undertook their training and essentially “cut their teeth” flying these light aircraft.³³

Also, at least four Army personnel were seconded to help establish the air force.³⁴ Such practice of secondment of Army personnel within the infancy of an air force was not unusual. For example, Hugh Montague Trenchard, the first Chief of the Air Staff of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and considered an RAF pioneer, was an accomplished British Army officer before his establishment of the RAF. Trenchard incidentally served in Nigeria and, as a Lieutenant Colonel, was primarily responsible for reorganizing and developing the Southern Nigerian Regiment and pacifying the interior of South-East Nigeria, which at the time remained *a terra incognita*.³⁵

In any event, seconding Army officers to help establish the Air Force was, on paper, a sound idea. The Nigerian Army was far more professionalized at this stage and understood military concepts and planning than the new airmen. Moreover, there was precedent to this practice in neighboring Ghana, where the first indigenous Chief of the Air Staff, JES de Graft-Hayford, had an Army background with the Royal West African Frontier Force.³⁶

The diversity debate: ethnicization, recruitment and the “quota system”

The institutional pathologies engendered by having soldiers masquerade as airmen were not the NAF’s only challenge at inception. There also was the separate question of professionalism, or the lack thereof, which a poorly conceived “Quota System” could introduce into the military.³⁷ The system was introduced to balance out participation within the Nigerian military, allowing entrance to the Army, Air Force and Navy based on ethnic extraction instead of competency-based merit.³⁸

Some historians, such as Adiele Eberchukwu Afigbo, contend that this approach to recruitment became necessary as existing federal structures failed to redress competency gaps across various regions and ethnic extractions.³⁹ Both Peter Bodunrin and Godwin Soglo similarly contend that “‘Federal Character’ is a variant of distributive justice.”⁴⁰ This is similar to Eghosa E. Osaghae’s reflections that a “Quota System,” which reflects the “Federal Character” principle, is “[. . .] something which is not only desirable but also inevitable in a severely-divided society such as Nigeria.”⁴¹

However, the “Quota System” as a reflection of “Federal Character” is not a system without pitfalls. Examining Nigeria’s heterogeneity within the military, J. Bayo Adekanye is critical of the system’s impact, suggesting that the system problematizes ethnicization and “Federal Character” in prioritizing the relevance of ethnic representation and competency-based military recruitment.⁴²

Regarding the NAF as a specific military service branch, the West Germans also expressed their disquiet at the “Quota System” and its

ethnicization undermining the fledging NAF's professionalism and function.⁴³ However, the politics of the issue was a contested affair during the First Republic and lay far outside the remit of the Air Force itself. Indeed, the issues of diversity, ethnicity, and the "quota system" cannot be viewed in isolation within the military alone: the political context requires broadening.⁴⁴

The early NAF, not unlike the Army, had institutional issues related to its quota system. For one, the allocation of recruitment opportunities and official appointments based on ethnicity led to ethnicity-based resentment within the institution. As J.' Bayo Adekanye observes, "the fact is that, generally speaking, there are always difficulties in distributing benefits among social groups. Not the least of these problems is [...] that the practice of quota systems runs counter to the considerations of egalitarianism" within institutions.⁴⁵ Diversity, ethnic or otherwise, is desirable for the robust function of a military institution.⁴⁶ Yahaya, for instance, contends that whereas the ethnic question is one the Nigerian Air Force has historically struggled with, one of the institution's strengths, right from its formative years, was the sheer diversification of officer training: in the UK, Canada, Ethiopia, Australia, Pakistan, West Germany and the US.⁴⁷

Clashing views and perspectives around military organization were influenced by returning military officers to Nigeria who, after diverse overseas training, sought "rapid and significant changes in not only the military set-up but also in the entire national life."⁴⁸ So if diversification in all its forms is beneficial within the composition of a military force, some accommodation may need to be made for the possibility that diversification may also bring discontent.

Specific to the "Quota System" as a way of diversifying the military institution to reflect "Federal Character," there was the question of whether the recruits entering the military were competent enough to carry out their roles.⁴⁹ As it related to the Air Force, this particular issue was something the West Germans met and had to contend with, as personnel recruitment was not to be entirely merit-based but partially ethnic "quota-based."

West German military trainers, faced with this system, were perplexed that they were expected, by the Nigerian government, not to take the best airmen but those who served as the most substantive representation of "Federal Character" across the regions. As West German Colonel Gerhard Kahtz, the first Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), would note in an interview with the Guardian years later,

We were asked to recruit according to the tribal proportion. It was 50% North, 25% each from the West and the East. But when cadets or other ranks failed, we were asked to get the right proportion again immediately. What did this mean? We had to take trainees from the programme. A very big problem.⁵⁰

The NAF quota system meant that the West Germans were effectively placing not the most efficient (despite some failures of cadets and other ranks) but the most ethnically representative of the so-called “Federal Character” in establishing the air force. This also meant that the institution’s pioneers had a higher-than-average proportion of Northerners compared to Southerners. Moreover, this ethnic imbalance would shape the character of the Air Force at the higher levels and rear echelons over the years.⁵¹

Differing views on the “quota system”

In his PhD thesis, “Threats, Military Expenditure and National Security,” John Olukayode Fayemi writes about the “Quota System” and its pitfalls.⁵² Likewise, Adekanye is critical of the system’s value, particularly concerning the impact on the military’s institutional cohesion and homogenous performance as an organ of the state in Nigeria.⁵³ Indeed, Adekanye suggests that “the operation of a peculiar variant” of the quota system may have contributed to the ethnic cleavages within the military. These intra-institutional tensions, Adekanye argues, coupled with the era’s troubled polity, precipitated the fall of the First Republic and “Nigeria’s pre-civil war experience.”⁵⁴

Furthermore, as a feature of Nigerian defense and security, this quota system also extends to and problematizes other sectors (most notably the education sector).⁵⁵ The quota system, over the years, has filtered out meritorious candidates and personnel (what Fayemi calls “positive discrimination”) and has accommodated personnel who otherwise would have been unqualified for the roles.⁵⁶ What is instructive is that the “Quota System” when it was first introduced in the late-1950s, seemed to be favored more by Northern politicians, whereas Southerners tended to be critical of it.⁵⁷

In an April 1960 debate on the House Floor, one Northern member, Abdullahi Magajin Musawa, would urge the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa, that Nigeria be “united in diversity.” For Musawa, it was “a good idea” if the ethnic constitution of the army officers was rebalanced “so that the officers in the Eastern Region, the Northern Region and the Western Region are equalized.”⁵⁸

However, the Prime Minister was not inclined toward further “equalization” of the officer corps ethnicity, outside of the ambits of the “quota system,” already introduced as government policy.⁵⁹ In Balewa’s view, little else could be done at the time, as qualifications were part and parcel of having a competent Army. Indeed, the previous August, Balewa had tried to state as much within a House debate,

I do not like only one section of the Federation to be overwhelmingly dominating the other sections if it is possible, but at the same time, we want to have Nigerian officers in the Army, and certain educational qualifications are required of such officers. Still, if

people who present themselves to the Army are from one section and they have the qualifications, what can government do other than to accept them?⁶⁰

After Balewa's government was deposed via the 15 January 1966 military coup, Major-general Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo Southerner, became Supreme Commander. Unlike the Northern-controlled government he replaced, Ironsi seemed to lean "away from quota towards a merit-based system."⁶¹ Nevertheless, as we shall see, this issue of ethnicity related to recruitment, postings and appointments in the Nigerian military was a delicate balancing act c. 1966. Part of the reason is that "increased emphasis on academic achievement would indirectly discriminate against Northern soldiers."⁶² At a time when there was already much talk of an "Igbo conspiracy," such perceived discrimination could inflame ethnic tensions.⁶³ Indeed, this eventually turned out to be the case.⁶⁴

However, in the early years of its introduction, the "Quota System" minimized educational qualification, preferencing ethnic extraction as the basis of recruitment and posting in the military. In the NAF case, some Northern recruits were so poor that the basis for their inclusion as cadets was questionable.⁶⁵ Max Siollun cites an example of "a group of Northern air force cadets [who] were also dismissed due to their underwhelming educational achievements."⁶⁶ The West Germans, tasked with working with these Air Force cadets, struggled to understand why less educated and qualified Northern candidates were being sent to the Navy when their Southern counterparts were denied access due to the "Quota System." Indeed, as the perplexed West German Chief of the Air Staff, Colonel Kahtz notes, where some airmen failed at their roles, official requests were made for them to be replaced – not by more competent personnel – but by those who were more representative of "Federal Character."⁶⁷ Although convenient to some areas of ethnic extraction, the implications of this approach may have undermined institutional function.⁶⁸ Indeed, as Fayemi writes of this institutional pathology and its discontents,

For instance, policies like "quota system" [and] "federal character" [...] were greeted at inception with suspicion. While there is a sense in which all the policies remain relevant to the body politic, they have also been seen in several circles as attempts at glorifying mediocrity and undermining merit through positive discrimination. In such circles, those policies have achieved the exact opposite of unity and integration by creating further mistrust of the leadership's intentions.⁶⁹

As the analysis indicates, the quota system of recruitment in the Air Force was far from unique to the institution. On the contrary, Adekanye contends that the system is identifiable in the Army and goes back to the military's colonialist roots in Nigeria.⁷⁰

By the 1950s, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the leading political party, was concerned about Igbo dominance in the Army.⁷¹ The Prime

Minister himself (a Muslim Northerner) had expressed concern about the Northern politicians being “surrounded” by Igbo Army officers. In 1958, Northern politicians introduced a “quota system” as government policy. Within this system, 50% of all positions across the Army had to come from the North. Correspondingly, 25% of positions were allocated to the South-West and 25% to the South-East. Entry requirements were also lowered to the point where most prospective recruits could enroll as officer cadets.⁷²

Southern politicians argued (within debates at the House of Representatives) that military service should be on merit; not ethnicity – if the Northerners wanted to join the officer corps, they should meet the educational requirements set by the British officers. Educational requirements that the Southerners, far more so than the Northerners, were more likely to meet due to “the backwardness of the Northern Region.”⁷³ The Northerners countered by saying that a warrior should not be conflated with someone who reads books and that the warrior is not talkative [*mai fada ba zai yi surutu ba*].⁷⁴

The outcome of this debate favored Northern recruitment in the military at a period when military recruitment became part of the security discourse. Therefore, it is evident that the same mistakes that were made in ethnicizing the Army for decades⁷⁵ were now being made even as a new opportunity presented itself in an Air Force being formed after independence.

How ethnic politics influenced Nigeria’s wartime foreign policy around the air force

The ethnicization of the military was especially prominent in the Air Force as it was still in its formative period between 1962 and 1967 when the war broke out. The impact of the “Quota System” was thus reinforced. The West German Mission in Nigeria was instructed to keep recruiting from the region with the highest quota allocation (i.e the North) even though its students were failing.⁷⁶ Additionally, “many of the 100 Nigerian pilots who had been trained under the aegis of the West German assistance Group were Ibos who left for the East in 1967 [to fight for the Biafra rebels during the civil war].”⁷⁷ This put Nigeria in a predicament. First, the Air Force was ethnically imbalanced in favor of Northern recruits. Second, not only did Nigeria not have aircraft, but she also now did not have sufficiently skilled airmen even if she were to acquire aircraft.

With the outbreak of war, Nigeria’s military government urgently needed combat aircraft and pilots. Britain was non-committal; France was accused of siding with the rebels via her Francophone proxies.⁷⁸ Other Western countries did not seem willing to provide air force assistance for Nigeria during its war effort. Nigeria was forced to look to the Warsaw Pact, and, as it turned out, “the Soviet Union and its client states in the Middle East proved willing both to sell aircraft and to supply pilots.”⁷⁹ In this sense, it could be said that

ethnicization and ethnic stratification of the military had led to the Air Force being weaker. With the Ibos leaving for the East, it fell to the Northerners, who had failed to meet German standards, nevertheless being put forward to the government via its “quota system.”⁸⁰

The seconded Nigerian army officers

Urgent operational requirements of the Civil War of Nigeria meant that these remaining airmen, by 1967, were not competent or senior enough to organize the force and win the war. So, if Nigerian military personnel were to command the Air Force and fly its aircraft during the civil war, such personnel could not, quite ironically, be career airmen. This might seem unusual considering that West Germany, within its March 1963 agreement with Nigeria, agreed to train some 1,100 Nigerian air force personnel.⁸¹ The answer to this apparent contradiction between the large numbers of airmen trained and the small number available for command and combat deployment is that training takes time. Airmen, starting from scratch, generally need more than four years to fly and maintain aircraft and command units.

If this was the case, how can it be explained that after the West Germans left Nigeria by 1967, the NAF was not left in the hands of amateurs? On the contrary, the force acquired a backbone fleet and flight and technical support competencies in just a few years. Moreover, by 1967, the NAF also had a command and staff structure, with an officer cadre of trained and experienced personnel in command, staff and instruction. Furthermore, these personnel had worked with the Germans and were ready to take over from them when they left.

However, a closer look would reveal that these “airmen” were not, in fact, career airmen. Instead, they were senior military personnel around the rank of Lt Colonel, who had started their careers in the Army, received air training while serving in the Army and were ultimately seconded to the NAF in its formative years. These senior Nigerian Army officers went through air training to enable their secondment to the NAF sequel to the Germans’ departure. In total, there were four army officers “seconded to help the new [air forc] service take-off.”⁸²

The first of these officers, seconded from the Army to the Air Force, was George T. Kurubo who joined the Nigerian Army as a regular officer on 27 May 1953. In 1964, when Kurobo was already a Lieutenant Colonel, he was seconded to the newly formed NAF. As Commanding Officer of 3rd battalion in Kaduna, Lt-Colonel Kurubo could have played a role, one way or another, in the 15 January 1966 *coup d’état*.⁸³ However, it turned out that on 14 January, just one day before the coup, Kurubo traveled to Lagos as part of the secondment process to replace Thimmig at Headquarters NAF (HQ NAF).⁸⁴ Kurubo would return to his command at 3rd Battalion, Kaduna, the

central location of the coup, which had now become “a beehive of activity” in its aftermath.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, his secondment to the NAF was not interrupted by his Army duties, and his work as an airman had always been in parallel to his duties as an Army officer (i.e. he was never “exclusively” an airman and was always more an Army officer than he was an airman).⁸⁶

Kurubo worked with both Colonel Gerhard Kahtz (the West German founding Chief of the Air Staff) and Wolfgang Thimmig (his successor) within this seconded role. However, he was already experienced as an airman, attending the Young Air Infantry Officers’ School in 1956, the Senior Air Infantry Officers’ School in 1961, and finally, the Command and Staff College, Quetta, Pakistan in 1964. After Thimmig’s departure in 1966, Kurubo became the first indigenous Chief of the Air Staff in Nigeria, the Head of the Air Force.

So, on the one hand, it might have seemed unusual for German Air Force personnel to hand over to an Army Officer. On the other hand, however, his close interactions with German Chiefs of the Air Staff – no senior Nigerian military officer worked more closely with them – along with his training as an airman meant that Kurubo was well-placed to take the lead role as Chief in 1966.⁸⁷ Indeed, a germane question in such a scenario would have been: who was a better choice? Or who was more senior? After all, after the 15 January 1966 *coup d’état*, Kurubo was now one of the more senior officers of the Nigerian military, along with Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi, Commodore Wey, Lt-Colonels Banjo, Fajuyi, Gowon, and Njoku.⁸⁸

After Aguiyi-Ironsi formed the Federal Military Government (FMG) in January 1966, Kurubo’s seniority and the significant shake-up of Army postings saw the latter appointed Commander Nigerian Air Force. Kurubo, within this role, was also one of nine members of the newly-formed Supreme Military Council (SMC).⁸⁹

Nevertheless, Kurubo was more of a Nigerian Army careerist with little interest in seeing through an Air Force career. Kurubo, a Southerner, also had the distinction of being both the Chief of the Air Staff for Nigeria and Biafra, as Ojukwu coopted him to head the Biafra Air Force. However, after just a few days in that role, he defected back to the Federal side.

Did Kurubo defect because he realized Biafra had no operational military aircraft and that the term “Biafra Air Force” was a fiction as of August 1967? Did he defect because he loved the Nigerian Air Force or because he loved Nigeria? These are questions that Kurubo himself, since deceased, might be best positioned to respond to. However, as Nikolai Jeffs, the Slovenian Africanist, writes on this subject, insofar as Kurubo was not Igbo (he was from Bonny, in the South), his “actions could be dismissed as merely an enactment of that treachery towards Biafra, which was understood to be part and parcel of a larger anti-Igbo ethnocentric complex, which was motivating the Federals.”⁹⁰

The nature of Kurubo's defection is also worth at least a mention. As Bernard Odogwu writes, Kurubo attended the ceremony for "the swearing-in of the Commander of the new Biafran Airforce." However, as he promptly defected just days later, "it would have been better if Colonel Kurubo had stayed home and away from the ceremony."⁹¹

Upon his re-defection, it was too late for Kurubo to resume his previous command of the NAF, as the Air Force already had a new Chief, in Colonel Shittu Akanji Alao. On 12 August 1967, Kurubo was appointed Nigeria's Ambassador to the Soviet Union. Kurubo is noteworthy as the first indigenous Commander of the NAF, appointed just days after the 15 January *coup d'état*, on 19 January 1966.⁹² However, he was not the only NAF pioneer. Indeed, he was just one of four Nigerian Army officers seconded to the NAF to assume command from the West Germans eventually.⁹³

The second of the other three Nigerian Army officers (aside from Kurubo), who formed part of the very first set of NAF "pioneers," was Colonel Shittu Akanji Alao, who became the fourth Chief of the Air Staff, and the second indigenous one, taking over the leadership of the NAF from Brigadier Kurubo on 5 August 1967.⁹⁴ Following his secondment to the NAF, Colonel Alao was sent to Germany in 1963 for a one-year indoctrination course on all aspects of air force training. On return from Germany, the German Airforce Assistance Group in Nigeria (GAFAG) had already made much progress in setting up the NAF's administrative and personnel arrangements. As a result, Alao was brought in as Senior Air Operations officer at HQ NAF, located in Lagos.⁹⁵ It was within this role that Alao, along with Musa Usman who also had been seconded to the Air Force, joined the coup plotters of the July 1966, also known informally as the "July Rematch."⁹⁶

Colonel Alao headed the NAF in its most trying period, during the civil war. Alao embraced his role as a seconded officer to the air force and was known to lead by example, including personally conducting bombing sorties during the war. On one such solo raid, in an L-29 aircraft in the Southern-western part of the country, he experienced poor weather at Uzebba, about 50 miles northwest of Benin City within what was then known as the Mid-West region. Trying to secure a safe landing zone, Alao subsequently ran out of fuel, at which point he decided to risk an emergency landing but crashed into a tree and died of his injuries.⁹⁷ His replacement, Lt Colonel Emmanuel E Ikwue was announced on 18 December 1969.

Lt Colonel Ikwue was the third of the four senior Army personnel seconded to the NAF in its formative years. Ikwue was the fifth NAF Commander, the third indigenous Commander to hold the post and the first to hold the office designated as the Chief of Air Staff, Nigerian Air Force. Previous Heads of the Nigerian Air Force had simply been known officially as Commander of the Nigerian Air Force.⁹⁸

Brigadier Emmanuel E Ikwue was commissioned as a regular officer of the Nigerian Army in 1961 and posted to 1st Battalion Enugu. In 1962 he served as part of General Aguiyi-Ironsi's Nigerian Army contingent within *Opération des Nations Unies au Congo* (ONUC), the UN Mission to the Congo.⁹⁹ In 1963, he was appointed Staff Captain (A) to Late Brigadier Maimalari, the then Commander of 2 Brigade NA. While serving in this capacity, he was seconded to the NAF.¹⁰⁰ The secondment may well have saved Ikwue's life, as Zakariya Maimalari, whom he would have been shadowing as his adjutant at 2 Brigade, was one of the Army officers murdered during the 15 January 1966 *coup d'état*.¹⁰¹

In 1969, Ikwue, then a Brigadier, was appointed the fifth Commander of the NAF and member of the Supreme Military and Federal Councils.¹⁰² Ikwue led the NAF through the remainder of the civil war (1969–1970), and remained Chief of the Air Staff until 1975, when he retired.¹⁰³ However, perhaps due to his background as an Army Officer instead of an airman, Ikwue struggled with the NAF's reorganization in the post-civil war era.¹⁰⁴

The final seconded officer,¹⁰⁵ who was one of the few Nigerian Army officers to have a Sandhurst, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS) background, was Major John Esio Obada. After receiving his Commission in 1959, Major Obada served at the 3rd Battalion at Abeokuta before joining the Organization of African Unity (OAU) military contingent to Tanganyika (modern-day Tanzania) in 1964.¹⁰⁶

On his return from Tanganyika, Major Obada was appointed as *Aide de Camp* to then Nigeria's President, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and remained so until 1966, when the first military coup took place. Furthermore, Obada, junior to Ikwue, was never Chief of the Air Staff (indeed, Ikwue was the first officer to hold that designation). Instead, Major Obada's brief secondment, between 1967 and 1968, saw him appointed to Kaduna as the Commander of the Air Force Base.¹⁰⁷ Obada returned to the Army afterward, where he saw out his career.¹⁰⁸

Interpretation of the secondments

A primary finding from this examination of the four seconded Army officers emerges concerning the political environment and stratification of the Army institution along ethnic lines within that period (1966–1968). To begin with, all four Army officers, Kurubo (Rivers State), Alao (Plateau), Ikwue (Benue), and Obada (Bendel) were southerners. None of these was Northerners, and even as Southerners, none were Igbo. Part of the reason is identifiable within the factors above (i.e. the politics of military rule and the Army's ethnic stratification). In Kurubo's case, besides being qualified, he – and not a Northern counterpart – was posted to the Air Force for political expedience. This was a time when Aguiyi-Ironsi's government was accused of tribalism

and stacking Southern officers in critical Army appointments. Seconding a senior Northern officer away from an Army posting at such a volatile period (i.e. January 1966), and sending him to the barely-existent Air Force, would likely have ignited ethnic tensions.¹⁰⁹ After all, the senior ranks of Northern Army officers had already been depleted by the bloody January coup: both Brigadier Zakariya Maimalari and Colonel Kur Mohammed, among the most senior Northern officers in the Army (Maimalari was the most senior), were murdered by the Southern Igbo coupists.¹¹⁰

As D.J.M. Muffett puts it, Kurobo's secondment to the Air Force was far less "delicate" than Gowon's appointment to Nigerian Army HQ in Dodan Barracks as Chief of Staff of the Army.¹¹¹ Whereas Gowon was junior to Kurubo by rank, his posting as the Army's Chief of Staff was far more powerful and strategic than Kurubo's. In this sense, it seemed as though the senior Northern officers left alive after the 15 January coup had to be placated, however tacitly, to assuage Northern concerns around an "Igbo conspiracy." Such delicate balancing, which saw more attention paid to which Northerners were sent where, was all the more necessary because "the last eight promotions above the rank of Major had all been of Ibos, and this fact did not go unrecorded in the North, where the most senior officer of Northern origin serving with a unit was then a captain, Abba Kyari – a Gunner."¹¹²

There were other reasons for the sensitivity of postings in 1966. For example, during the 15 January coup, for a range of reasons (all of which came down to coincidence rather than planning), all five of the Nigerian Army's battalions, for 24 hours, were commanded by Igbo officers who were either deputizing or de facto commanders. To wit: 1st Battalion, HQ, Enugu (Major Okonweze, deputizing for Lt-Colonel David Ejoor); 2nd Battalion, HQ, Lagos (Lt-Colonel Hilary Njoku); 3rd Battalion, HQ, Kaduna (Major Okoro, deputizing for Lt-Colonel Kurubo); 4th Battalion, HQ, Ibadan (Major Nzeffli, deputizing for Lt-Colonel Abogo Largema), and 5th Battalion, HQ, Kano (Lt-Colonel Emeka Ojukwu). Again, this fueled talk of "Igbo domination" within the Army.¹¹³ Furthermore, after the 15 January coup, which primarily Igbo and entirely Southern officers promoted, there was a deep mistrust of the Ibos by Northerners in the Army.¹¹⁴

There is a counter-argument to this idea that Northerners were discriminated against in the Army promotions of May 1966. At the time, the Nigerian Army officer corps was stratified along ethnic lines.¹¹⁵ For example, most of the officers at the rank of Major (around 65–70%) were Igbo. This being the case, "if any promotion exercise was carried out in that rank, it logically followed that most of those promoted would be Igbo."¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, the Northern officers, NCOs and Northern quarters in the country were said to have been "tainted by the deep conviction of an Igbo conspiracy."¹¹⁷

Consequently, Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo himself and now in charge of the Army and the entire military government, had to play a delicate balancing act

to avoid antagonizing the Northern officers further.¹¹⁸ The more the idea of an “Igbo conspiracy” was allowed to take root in the military, the more likely it was that Northern officers would retaliate – which was precisely what happened.¹¹⁹

With this powder-keg of ethnicized military rule in place, and with the need to constantly play out a careful balancing act concerning the various ethnic groups in the Army, posting out any senior Northern officers for “secondment” to the much weaker NAF may have been interpreted as Igbo consolidation of power in the much-more powerful Army.¹²⁰ However, on the other hand, keeping senior officers such as Gowon (Chief of Staff, Army) and Hassan Katsina (Military Governor, Northern Region) in necessarily strategic positions may well have contributed to the success of the “July Rematch” counter-coup, later in 1966.¹²¹

Conclusion

On the one hand, there does appear to be a rationale behind the appointment of three Army personnel as substantive Chiefs of the Air Staff. The Army, at independence, was one of the country’s most professionalized institutions. Furthermore, being fully “Nigerianized” by the mid-1960s,¹²² the Army institution constituted a functional indigenous military model. Therefore, the Army was in an opportune position to step in and send qualified senior officers on secondment to command the nascent Air Force.

However, an outcome of these Army secondments was that the first three Nigerians to command the Air Force were not “true” airmen. Not until the appointment of Air Vice-Marshal John Nmadu Yisa-Doko as Chief of the Air Staff in 1975 did a “true” airman lead the NAF. Yisa-Doko’s tenure as Chief of the Air Staff was instrumental in restructuring the NAF. As an airman, and without leading the institution in wartime, he could focus on establishing primary schools in key NAF formations and training schools for all NAF primary trade specialties.

Yisa-Doku established NAF Operational Bases in Markudi and Kainji. Furthermore, he founded the NAF Regiment, NAF Junior Command and Staffs School and the Air Faculty at the Command and Staff College, Jaji. In addition, he established the NAF Technical Training School in Kaduna to service the technical training needs of the service. During his tenure, the current NAF rank structure was also introduced.¹²³

With airmen leading the NAF after Yisa-Doku’s retirement in April 1980, further structural changes emerged. These changes, such as those to the NAF’s staff system and the institution’s gradual pivot away from the Army-central command structure, were necessary as the Air Force continued developing its own culture and identity.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, as the paper has shown, the Army’s role within the NAF was far from its only institutional challenge. The “Quota

System” and military stratification along ethnic lines were two critical factors relevant to the dysfunctional air force that emerged by the late-1970s.

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