



The Nigerian Army and Challenges of Professionalism in Internal Security Operations, 1964-1999

Ini Etuk, PhD¹; Chinedu Onwe-Ogah²

Department of History and International Studies, University of Uyo, Nigeria

iniehik@uniuyo.edu.ng¹, chineduamaga233@gmail.com²

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Abstract

The Nigerian Army evolved in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Great Britain sought to assert its power and influence along the littoral regions of the Nigerian coastline and to create an enabling environment for the growth and development of trade and commerce in the Nigerian interior. At independence, Nigeria inherited an army that retained the British traditions of conservatism, political aloofness, professionalism, and a high standard of regimentation. Employing chronological, descriptive, thematic, and analytical methods of historical investigation, this study examines the nexus between the Nigerian Army and professionalism in internal security operations. The involvement of the Nigerian Army in internal security operations has been marked by varying degrees of success and challenges. However, due to the vicissitudes of Nigeria's political dynamics from the 1960s onwards, the Nigerian Army appears to have been negatively affected in its ethos, orientation, and general perception as a nationalist institution. The study reveals that professionalism in the army was compromised by several factors, including coups and military rule, issues related to equipment and maintenance, training and logistics, political interference and

leadership, human rights abuses, and operational mandates. It was concluded that the Nigerian Army should continue to be engaged in internal security operations while emphasising the importance of professionalism, Rules of Engagement (ROE), Standing Operational Procedure (SOP), and Operational Control (OPCON) in such operations.

Keywords: Nigerian Army, Professionalism, Internal Security, Operations

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian Army, whose origins predate the formation of Nigeria as a nation, has played a vital role in safeguarding the country's territorial integrity, defending it against external aggression, and maintaining internal security. It was formed from the forces of the Royal Coast Protectorate, the Lagos Colony, and the Niger Coast Protectorate. The colonial army regiment in Nigeria, along with similar units in Ghana, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia, was designated the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) on 28 December 1922 by the British administration. On 7 June 1956, the Nigerian Regiment of the WAFF was renamed the Nigerian Military Forces, Royal West African Frontier Force. At independence in 1960, it became the Royal Nigerian Military Force. Following Nigeria's transition to a republic in 1963, the name 'Nigerian Army' was officially adopted.¹

On attaining independence in 1960, greater impetus was given to the development of the Nigerian Army, whose role shifted from that of a colonial occupation force to one focused on protecting the Nigerian people and defending the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The force strength remained low, primarily due to the absence of threats to Nigeria's territorial integrity. Consequently, the Army was better suited to addressing internal security challenges and undertaking peacekeeping operations as part of Nigeria's defence policy.

Over the years, the Nigerian Army has been involved in various internal security operations, even prior to independence. According to S.C. Ukpabi, the evolution of the Nigerian Army began in the nineteenth century, when Britain sought to assert its power and influence along the littoral areas of the Niger Delta.² The Army

¹S. C. Ukpabi, *The Nigerian Defence Academy in Perspective*, (Zaria: Gaskiya Corporation, 1988), pp. 87-88.

²S. C. Ukpabi, "The Evolution of the Nigerian Army Under Colonial Rule", in J. W. T. Gbor (ed), *Military History from Pre-Colonial Period to Present*, (Lagos: Longman, 2004), p. 114.

can be traced to the forces raised by the colonial government to conquer and establish British hegemony over Nigeria.³ The creation of a military force to advance British interests in the West African campaigns was considered imperative. These operations were crucial for maintaining peace and stability within the British colonies. C. N. Ubah noted that colonialism would not tolerate disobedience, opposition, or resistance. The Army ensured that law and order (as defined by the British) prevailed as far as possible.⁴ Indeed, the colonial regime was, in many respects, a military administration that relied on the use of force. Accordingly, the Nigerian Regiment was employed to protect British trade routes around Lagos and to conduct military expeditions.

At independence, therefore, Nigeria inherited an army that maintained the British system of conservatism, political aloofness, professionalism, and a high standard of regimentation. Explaining this, Ukpabi noted that many Nigerian army officers were trained in British military institutions, where soldiers were encouraged to remain disengaged from political affairs. Hence, some scholars such as Osakwe⁵ and Ukpabi⁶, argue that professionalism in the Nigerian army began to decline or rather took a precipitous fall with the unfortunate military intervention in politics by way of the *coups d' état* of January 15, 1966 and that of July 29, 1966, respectively. They opine that this descent into unprofessionalism continued through the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) and beyond. Moreover, contrary to the views held by some, the apolitical nature of the Nigerian Army, maintained for a considerable period, was gradually eroded by politicians, leading to a situation in which, by 1966, the military had begun to nurture its own political ambitions.⁷ Indeed, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the coup marked the death knell of professionalism in the Nigerian Army.

Nevertheless, most scholars note that Nigeria, prior to independence, inherited an army comprising both professional and non-professional elements and, to some extent, one not adequately equipped or trained for internal security operations. Also, it

³*ibid*

⁴C. N. Ubah, *Colonial Army and Society in Northern Nigeria*, (Kaduna: Nigerian Defence Academy, 1998), p.152

⁵C. C. C. Osakwe, "Professionalism in the Nigerian Army, 1960 - 1965", in Tragbam, O. E. and Osakwe, C. C. C. *Perspectives in African Historical Studies: Essays in Honour of Prof. Chinedu Nwafor Ubah*, (Kaduna: Nigerian Defence Academy Press, 2013), pp. 70 -81.

⁶S. C. Ukpabi, *Strands in Nigerian Military History*, (Zaria: Gaskiya Corporation Ltd., 1986), p. 117.

⁷*Ibid*, p. 119.

appears the colonial administration failed to develop a national officer corps upon which military training and professionalism could have been built.

As the Army entrenched itself in power through successive coups and military rule, it not only attracted public attention but also became a subject of public interest. More significantly, military dictatorship emerged—not merely as a consequence of the Army’s seizure of power—but as an alternative political ideology to democracy.⁸ It should be pointed out that the Army had exploited and oppressed the people, marginalised and traumatised them. However, this is not surprising, since the army was a critical element in the ‘success’ of colonial administration in Nigeria.

Nigeria has faced numerous security threats which the Nigerian Army, alongside other security agencies, has had to address as part of its national defence and internal security responsibilities. These threats are often rooted in socio-political, economic, ethno-religious, and cultural tensions, which have manifested in civil disturbances and continue to undermine national unity and security. As an institution, the Nigerian Army bears a significant responsibility for maintaining internal security while also contributing to global peace and stability.⁹ The Nigerian army’s role in internal security operations is therefore, guided by the constitution, which authorised it to intervene in situation where there is a breakdown of law and order, insurgency, terrorism and other threats to internal security.

Generally, internal security operations involve ensuring safety from danger, along with the wellbeing and prosperity of individuals, groups, or society as a whole. It is important to note that the Nigerian Army has consistently been involved in maintaining internal security during periods of crisis, particularly when the police are unable to manage the situation. In such circumstances, the Army intervenes only upon formal directive from the President. And for the Army to function effectively, it must uphold the highest standards of discipline, commitment to service, and respect for lawful authority. Indeed, professionalism is essential to sustaining peace and protecting the lives and property of citizens.

Contemporary Nigerian history reveals that, beginning in 1964, the Nigerian Army has increasingly become a significant factor in the country's political, economic,

⁸I. O. Ewa, “A History of the Nigerian Army, 1863 – 1966”, (A Doctorate Degree Thesis, Department of History and International Studies, University of Calabar, 2010), p. 32

⁹Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, (As amended), No. 24, Section 217 (1) – (3), (Lagos: Apapa, 2011).

and social development— “... suppressing insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so.”¹⁰

By 1999, when the army relinquished power to the civilians, it had ruled for about 29 out of 39 years of Nigeria independence. After years of political involvement, there are indications that the Army has not only lost its professionalism but has suffered from a weak relationship with the Nigerian public. This study, however, argues that, while it is true to say that the Nigerian Army played a critical role in maintaining internal security and stability; it is also true that the Army faced significant challenges in upholding professionalism in its internal security operations.

The Concept of Professionalism in the Nigerian Army

Conceptually, J. T. Gbor considers the essence of professionalism in the army as embodying “expertise and a guiding body of ethic acquired through prolonged and advanced training in a specialized field”¹¹. According to Nwolise, a professional military officer is expected to possess and exhibit the following qualities: patriotism, corporateness, expertise, responsibility, accountability, respect for the policies of constituted authority, devotion to training and technical skills, bureaucratic competence, knowledge of both grand and military strategies, bravery, courage, obedience to higher authority, loyalty to the state, commitment to the provision of defence and security, respect for civilians whom the soldier has undertaken to defend (even at the risk of life) subordination to civil authority, discipline, devotion to the profession, and the courage to resist the temptation to deviate from the professional path in pursuit of political power or personal gain.¹²

A professional soldier views himself as rendering public service to the nation. He continually strives to improve his capabilities as a defender of national territorial integrity. He is trained to take pride in his regiment and to avoid any conduct that could tarnish its reputation. Military professionalism can, therefore, be predicated on two key components: continuous training and operational experience.¹³ It is a process through which military personnel acquire knowledge or develop new skills for managing

¹⁰For more information about the roles of the Nigerian army in Internal Security Operations; see Section 217, Sub-section 2 (c) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (As amended 2011), (Lagos: Apapa, 2011).

¹¹J.W.T Gbor, “The Development of the Nigerian Armed Forces since Independence”, in J.W.T Gbor, (ed), *Military History: Nigeria from Pre-colonial Era to the Present*, Ibadan, Longman, 2003, p.169.

¹²O.B.C. Nwolise, “Nigerian Military in Nation Building”, in, Uma Eleazu (ed), *Nigeria: The First 25 years*, (Ibadan: Heinemann Education Books Nigeria Limited, 1988), p. 38.

¹³Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil Military Relations*, p. 289.

violence and enhancing discipline within the service. A professional military officer is, by implication, an expert in the management of violence. As S. Huntington noted, “the expertise is acquired by prolonged education and experience.”¹⁴ And this remains true whether the soldier is American, Nigeria or South African.

The colonial army, as earlier mentioned, which Nigeria inherited at independence, was not imbued with professionalism. It must be recognised that it owed allegiance to a foreign power and served as the instrument through which the British conquered Nigeria and maintained political authority. Composed largely of illiterate infantry, the army became excessively brutal during the conquest period and later employed such brutality to intimidate the citizenry. Consequently, after independence, transforming this force into a truly professional army with the appropriate orientation proved a daunting task. It remained an institution whose members could revert to primordial loyalties under pressure.¹⁵

Professionalism in the Nigerian Army, however, suffered a serious setback during the era of military intervention in politics and governance. Key elements of military professionalism such as training, discipline, and esprit de corps, were neglected by personnel in pursuit of extra-regimental appointments, to the detriment of military service.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative historical approach, employing chronological, descriptive, thematic, and analytical methods to examine the nexus between the Nigerian Army and professionalism in internal security operations. This methodological framework enables a critical interrogation of military conduct, institutional development, and the evolving relationship between the Army and the Nigerian state from 1960 to 1999. The chronological method is used to organise the analysis of major events—such as the January and July 1966 coups, the Civil War (1967–1970), and subsequent military interventions—in temporal sequence. This facilitates an understanding of causality, institutional change, and the persistence of patterns within the Army’s internal security engagements. The descriptive method supports the reconstruction of military practices, organisational structures, and operational behaviour, thereby providing necessary context for interpreting the Army’s actions within the broader socio-political environment of post-independence Nigeria.

¹⁴Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil Military Relations*, p. 290.

¹⁵J. P. Dada, *The Federal Armed Forces in the Nigeria Civil War, 1967-1970*, (Jos: Midland Press, 2000), p.162.

The thematic method enables the identification and analysis of core issues affecting military professionalism, including regionalism, politicisation, recruitment standards, training inconsistencies, and breaches of the chain of command, all of which are traced across different regimes to assess their institutional impact.

The analytical method underpins the interpretation of evidence drawn from a diverse range of sources. Primary materials—including official government publications, military communiqués, archival records, press reports, and memoirs of military personnel—are examined alongside relevant secondary literature. Emphasis is placed on triangulating these sources to enhance historical accuracy and address potential bias or contradictions. Sources were selected for their relevance, credibility, and temporal proximity to the events under study, with particular attention given to documents that shed light on internal military deliberations and public responses to military actions. Where available, oral testimonies and retrospective accounts further illuminate the institutional culture and professional challenges faced by the Nigerian Army during the period. By integrating these methods, the study offers a nuanced and empirically grounded account of how military professionalism was conceived, contested, and redefined within the context of internal security operations. In doing so, it contributes to the broader historiography on civil–military relations in post-colonial Africa, with particular reference to Nigeria’s turbulent military era.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges of Internal Security Operations

The Nigerian Army faces several challenges in the conduct of internal security operations. Among the most critical of these were the social and political unrests of 1964 and early 1965, during which the Army was deployed to quell civil disturbances in the Tiv Division (*Operation Adam III*) and in the former Western Region (*Operation Wetie*). Between 1967 and 1970, the Army also fought to end the secession of the defunct Republic of Biafra and restore national unity. Nigerians, therefore, owe a debt of gratitude to the Armed Forces, whose commitment to preserving the nation-state ensured that Nigeria, as it exists today, did not disintegrate.

Following the civil war, the subsequent decades saw the Nigerian Army continue to serve—perhaps—as the “court of ultimate jurisdiction”¹⁶ in managing religious and ethnic conflicts, civil unrest, and communal clashes that threatened to push the country to the brink.” The Army, in particular, continued to deploy troops to

¹⁶S.C Ukpabi, *Strands in Nigerian Military History*, (Kaduna: Gaskiya Corporation, 1986), p. 119.

suppress violence, conflicts, and riots throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Notable examples include the Maitatsine religious riots of 1980 and 1984 in Kano and Jimeta respectively; the anti-SAP (Structural Adjustment Programme) riots of 1989; the Zangon Kataf crisis in 1992; and the socio-economic unrest in the Niger Delta, especially the Ogoni crisis in 1999.

However, what appeared most contentious in the management of crisis and conflict in Nigeria is not if the military should ever be used in internal security, but the timing, the rules of engagement, the calibre of soldiers used and *modus operandi* of such force in quelling internal security.¹⁷ It is no surprise therefore, that Nigeria has always witnessed numerous internal crises and conflicts with their attendant problems for national development and stability. And so, the challenges that confronted the Nigerian Army in accomplishing its internal security mandate are enormous. They include;

Training:

Some scholars such as O. O. Oshita, I. M. Alumona and F. C. Onuoha¹⁸ and Jude A. Momodu¹⁹ believe that the Nigerian Army was inadequately trained to handle internal security situations that require restraint, cultural sensitivity, riot management and crowd control; stating that internal security challenges such as insurgency, terrorism, banditry, and communal violence demand a different skill.²⁰ Indeed, from 1964, the effective management of the officers, men and equipment of the Nigeria Army was challenged, especially in achieving the objective of operative management of the Army. The poor training in riot management and crowd control led to difficulties of troops responding to civil unrests and protests. This sometimes resulted in excessive use of force and thus, undermined public trust on the Nigerian Army. For instance, the Nigerian Army intervention in 1978, during students protest catastrophic

¹⁷Eugene O. Nwabufo, "The Future of Internal Crisis and Conflict Control in Nigeria: With or Without the Military", in A.M. Yakubu, C. N; Ubah, and v B. Dogo, (eds), Crisis and Conflict Management in Nigeria since 1980, (Kaduna: Nigerian Defence Academy, 2005), pp. 766 - 767

¹⁸Oshita O. Oshita, Ikenna Mike Alumona Freedom Chukwudi Onuoha, Internal Security Management in Nigeria: Perspectives, Challenges and lesions, (Sing Gapore: Palgrave, Macuiman 2019) p 83.

¹⁹J. A. Momodu "Internal Security Operations in the Fourth Republic", in Oshita O. Oshita, Ikenna Mike Alumona Freedom Chukwudi Onuoha, Internal Security Management in Nigeria, p. 96.

²⁰The NA before 1964 had limited advanced training opportunities. The Army was influenced by the British military traditions and doctrines, which did not fully prepared the NA for the unique challenges of the Nigeria security environment.

consequences when two students (Amuda Nuhu and Najib Jibrin) of Ahamdu Bello University were gunned down by troops of Army Depot, Zaria.²¹

There is evidence that during the civil war, the Nigerian Army entered the conflict without adequate preparation in terms of human and material resources. “Troops, apart from a negligible few who existed in the pre-Civil War Nigerian Armed Forces, were severely disadvantaged in training. This deficiency forced the Federal Army to involve ex-servicemen in the war.”²² This position is put succinctly by Major General J. Oluleye in his book, *Military Leadership in Nigeria, 1966-1979*; “that, numerical strength, training, experience and armaments of both armies were so disproportionate that the encountered resistance became a mystery to the Federalists”.²³

The lack of sufficient training likely affected several commanders, including Colonels Murtala Mohammed and Benjamin Adekunle, who resorted to large-scale use of unconventional methods (sometimes with disastrous consequences) in prosecuting the civil war. For instance, Murtala Mohammed, as commander of the 2nd Infantry Division of the Nigerian Army, repeatedly attempted a frontal assault river crossing to capture Onitsha from Asaba. These attempts resulted in heavy casualties, with thousands of soldiers lost to drowning. The three failed river crossing operations have been widely attributed to inadequate training.²⁴ The low level of training also affected soldiers, who could not be relied upon to effectively carry out essential battle drills during all phases of war—advance, attack, defence, and withdrawal. This inadequacy contributed to the Army’s struggles in maintaining stability and responding effectively to internal security threats.

Equipment, Maintenance and Logistic:

The Nigerian Army has acquired various types of equipment over the years. However, most of this equipment is in different states of unserviceability. Several reasons have been identified for this situation, including military involvement in politics, inadequate funding, misappropriation of resources, and the premature retirement of personnel

²¹V. A. Elaigwu, *The Military and the Management of Civil Crises in Nigeria, 1960-1993*. (Kaduna: Nigerian Defence Academy Press, 2007), p. 191.

²²Major General H.B Momoh, (ed) *The Nigeria n Civil War, 1967- 1970: History and Reminiscence*, (Ibadan: Sam Bookman, 2000), p. 322.

²³J. J. Oluleye, *Military Leadership in Nigeria, 1966 – 1967*, (Ibadan: University Press Ltd, 1985), p. 87.

²⁴O. E. Okon, *Biafra War Revisited: Civil War May Not Be a Bad Thing*, (Abuja: National Defence College Printing Press, 2017), p. 232.

responsible for the maintenance and operation of the equipment. At many Formation and Unit locations, most vehicles and equipment were found to be unserviceable.²⁵

Indeed, equipment suffered serious neglect and decay, which in many cases adversely affected internal security operations. One reason for this neglect was the fear that a well-equipped military might pose a threat to political leadership. As a result, the Nigerian Army became ill-equipped and poorly armed. It must be recognised that, “the effectiveness or superiority of a military force does not depend simply on the number of soldiers but to a large extent on its equipment and armaments.”²⁶ This point was aptly illustrated by Hilaire Belloc, who remarked: “Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim gun, and they have not.”²⁷ This underscores the importance of the Nigerian Army possessing superior firepower and equipment, which can significantly influence the outcome of confrontations, especially when the Army is deployed to quell civil unrest. There is, therefore, a need to phase out outdated equipment and procure new, modern systems if the Army is to perform its roles professionally in such operations.

The Nigerian Army has also faced numerous logistical challenges, including a lack of arms and ammunition, communication and medical facilities, operational vehicles, communication gadgets, updated maps and navigation tools, adequate food supplies, and petroleum products. A well-trained armed force must be supported by adequate logistics. During the civil war, there were instances when planned operations were delayed or cancelled altogether due to inadequate logistical support. Such shortcomings undoubtedly compromised battlefield outcomes and troop security.

One would have expected that, following the civil war and considering the difficulties experienced in obtaining arms and ammunition from external sources, the Nigerian government would have prioritised the development of its armament industry. The Defence Industries Corporation of Nigeria (DIC), established in 1964, was intended to serve this purpose. However, as S. C. Ukpabi noted, “for most of the seventies, the DIC was abandoned and it went into the production of furniture as a way of staying in business.”²⁸ These challenges have significantly hindered the Army’s

²⁵Wushishi, “The Nigerian Army- Growth and Development of Combat Readiness” in T.A. Imobighe, (ed), *Nigerian Defence and Security: Issues and Options for Policy*, p.76.

²⁶S.C. Ukpabi, *Strands in Nigerian Military History*, p. 101.

²⁷The statement or quote is from Belloc’s poem titled: *The Modern Traveller*, which was published in 1898. It highlights on the technological and military superiority. In the context of ISO, the NA should be well equipped to respond to civil unrest. www.gutenberg.org, 06/05/2025.

²⁸S. C Ukpabi, “Going Down Memory Lane”, A paper presented during the Heroes of our Time Award by the Delta Book Club. (2011), p.13.

ability to deploy and sustain its forces in remote and conflict-affected areas. It is important to emphasise that preparations for military operations should be made during peacetime, and that self-reliance in weaponry is, to a large extent, a key determinant of success in operations.

Political Interference and Leadership in the Nigerian Army:

A federal government publication in 1967 identified key challenges within the Nigerian Army, including “the dichotomy in social origin between the majority of the rank and file and the majority of officers; political interference with the role of the Army as guardians of legitimacy; and the unanswered question of the peacetime role of young, educated, politically conscious officers.”²⁹ The Nigerian Army has been subject to political interference in its operations, with civilian authorities often influencing military decision-making for political advantage. As noted, “since independence, the Nigerian government had used the army on duties clearly brought about by political considerations,”³⁰ and thus, the “apolitical nature of the army was over a long period gradually destroyed by the politicians”.³¹ Such interference has undermined the Army’s professionalism and independence, leading to inefficiencies and compromises in internal security operations.

This political interference can be traced to Nigeria’s history of military coups and the legacy of military involvement in governance. The Army has continued to supervise elections, particularly as other security agencies have often been deemed inadequate. One key instance that brought the Army into closer interaction with politics was the Western Region election crisis of 1965. The election, held in November of that year, was marked by rigging, abductions, thuggery, and widespread irregularities. It was contested between the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) and the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA).³²

The ensuing conflict led to kidnapping, murder, looting, and general unrest in the Western Region, culminating in a breakdown of law and order. As a last resort, the federal government ordered the occupation of the Western Region by the 4th Battalion of the Nigerian Army, which was tasked with restoring normalcy. However, the battalion, commanded by Col. Abogo Largema, failed to discharge its duty with the impartiality expected of a professional army.

²⁹The Federal Ministry of Information, “The Struggle for One Nigeria”, Lagos, (1967), p. 52.

³⁰Ukpabi, *Strands in Nigerian Military History*. p. 119.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²Elaigwu, *The Military and the Management of Civil Crises in Nigeria, 1960-1993*, p. 261.

Although the 4th Battalion was eventually withdrawn, the Western Region crisis deepened existing political divisions, heightened tensions within the Army, and demonstrated the growing entanglement between the military and partisan politics.

Wining Hearts and Minds of Local Communities:

In many conflict zones in Nigeria, civilians view the Army with suspicion due to past incidents of abuse and high-handed tactics. Beyond the loss of lives, the Nigerian Army has, in some cases, caused significant damage to property. The burning of homes and destruction of villages often became the norm rather than the exception. Towns and villages that had resisted troops or were deserted upon the Army's approach were frequently razed.

For instance, Asaba, a town in Delta State, was almost entirely destroyed during the civil war. Nigerian troops reportedly killed an estimated 700–1,000 civilians in a massacre that remains one of the most egregious incidents of the war.³³ Similarly, on 4 January 1993, approximately 300,000 Ogoni people staged a mass protest against environmental degradation caused by Shell's oil operations. In response, the military government under General Sani Abacha deployed force to suppress the demonstration. Lt. Col. Dauda Musa (then Military Governor of Rivers State) and Major Paul Okuntimo (head of the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force) were commissioned to "restore law and order in Ogoniland," leading to killings, rape, destruction of property, and mass displacement of the Ogoni people.³⁴ These explain the lack of cooperation and distrust from Local Communities. This distrust hinders cooperation and intelligence-gathering efforts. Furthermore, lack of community engagement and civil – military relations, which limited the Nigerian Army ability to gather intelligence and foster cooperation.³⁵ Indeed, the local communities were not always very helpful in supplying information to the troops during internal security operations.

The Challenges of Military Coup:

Indeed, between 1966 and 1999, Nigeria experienced numerous coups. These events affected discipline, loyalty, and the professional ethos in the Nigerian Army. While the

³³A. M. Yakuba, R. T. Adegboye, C. N. Ubah, B. Dogo, *Crisis and Conflict Management in Nigeria since 1980: Governance and Conflict Management*, (Kaduna: Nigewrian Defence Academy, 2005), p.701.

³⁴Nwinkol, "Mosop and the Internationalization of the Niger Delta Crisis, 1991 – 2015", p. 52.

³⁵Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth (ERA/FOE), "A Blanket of Silence: Images of the Odi Genocide." Abuja, Nigeria, (2002), p. 52. Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Nigeria: The Destruction of Odi and Rape in Choba.", New York: Human Rights Watch, (1999), p.73.

military officers often justified coups as necessary to eliminate political ills such as corruption, bribery and embezzlement;³⁶ they weakened the apolitical nature, discipline, and ethical standards of the Army. Hence, one of the greatest tragic characteristics of these coups was the loss of military personnel, including high-ranking officers and soldiers who were executed either by firing squad or assassinated.

In retaliation for the January coup, northern military officers staged a counter-coup on 29 July 1966, targeting mostly southern officers. In fact, mutiny broke out in Army units in Ikeja and spread to other units in Abeokuta. Around the same time, Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi was on a visit to the West. Troops from the units in Ibadan entered Government House and arrested General Ironsi and his host, Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi. Both lost their lives. As the disturbances persisted, they resulted in the mass killing of Igbo officers across various Nigerian Army formations. The *Daily Times* of 1 August 1966 captured the mood and fears of the time thus:

The men who are trained to guard the sovereignty of this great country ... have been exchanging gun shots since Friday. We are moving towards the brink of anarchy: for the military men of our country have been killing themselves... we enter the fourth day of Army revolt...³⁷

Reports reveal that attempts to restore order and assume control by Brigadier Ogundipe, the next most senior Army officer, were rebuffed. Indeed, this coup worsened ethnic tensions and contributed to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). Therefore, the second coup removed General Ironsi from power and installed General Gowon, who did what he could to restore discipline in an Army that had become fragmented. However, it may be said that, because of the wounds inflicted by the two coups, the Army was already in a serious dilemma and in danger of disintegration.³⁸

By the time the third military coup occurred, Gowon was criticised for being weak and unable to control the corrupt practices of his military governors, ministers, and some senior military officers. On 29 July 1975, the bloodless coup led by General Murtala Mohammed overthrew General Yakubu Gowon. Although no senior military officer was killed, the coup led to the mass retirement of government officials and civil servants. General Murtala, who was said to have compulsorily retired about 11,000

³⁶S. C. Ukpabi, *Strands in Nigerian Military History*, pp. 121 – 122. For instance, in a broadcast which he made on 15 January 1966, Major Nzeogwu called politicians - the political profiteers, that seek bribes and demand ten per cent, those that have corrupted our society.

³⁷*Daily Times*, (1 August 1966), p. 1

³⁸Ukpabi, *Strands in Nigerian Military History*, p. 124.

public servants, was gunned down by Lt Col B. S. Dimka and his fellow conspirators on 13 February 1976.³⁹ The plot was unpopular. Forces rallied round and crushed the rebellion. Indeed, the coup was quickly suppressed.

The leader of the coup plot was Major-General Iliyu Bisalla, a member of the Supreme Military Council. Others identified included Col B. S. Dimka, four Lt Colonels, six Majors, seven Captains, five Lieutenants, three Warrant Officers, and four Sergeants. In the end, thirty-two (32) military officers and men, including General Bisalla, were executed on 11 March 1976.⁴⁰ Col Buka Suka Dimka, who was captured at a checkpoint near Abakaliki on 5 March 1976, was executed along with six others by firing squad at Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison on 15 May 1976. Several civilians accused of involvement in the conspiracy were also executed.⁴¹ General Olusegun Obananjo, Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarter became the Head of State.

On 1 January 1984, the usual martial music accompanied the announcement declaring the overthrow of the civilian administration of President Shehu Shagari. Brigadier Sani Abacha announced the coup d'état that removed President Shagari. Although bloodless, it led to a military purge and the imprisonment of many politicians. General Muhammadu Buhari became the new military Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.⁴² Within a short period, the Buhari military government demonstrated an unparalleled disregard for public opinion, ruling by threats and terror rather than by persuasion and cooperation. The military introduced a new dimension of intolerance that provoked public discontent, including detention without trial. For instance, Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor of *The Guardian* newspaper were victims of the infamous Decree No. 4. By various analyses, General Muhammadu Buhari was seen as too rigid and uncompromising. The Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, Major-General Tunde Idiagbon, was similarly inclined.⁴³

However, at dawn on 27 August 1985, the broadcast of Brigadier Joshua Niyel Dogonyaro ended the Buhari administration and brought General Ibrahim Babangida to power. The Babangida coup was mostly bloodless but set the stage for

³⁹E. J. Adache, "Nigerian Military and the Challenges of Democracy Consolidation", *The Nigerian Army Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (2007), pp. 56 – 59.

⁴⁰R. A. Adeshina, *Military and Politics: Comprehensive Strategies for Ending Military Rule in Africa*, (Ibada: Heinemann Education Book, 1999), p 87.

⁴¹Samuel Decalo, "Military Coups and Military Regimes in Africa", *Journal of Modern Africa Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, (1973), p. 33.

⁴²A. B.M. Gana, "The Structure of Military Subordination to the Rule of Law in Nigeria", Vol. 1, No. 4, (2008), pp. 92 -93.

⁴³Adewale Ademoyega, *Why We Struck*, (Ibadan: Evans Bothers, 1981), p. 69.

political instability. General Babangida subsequently became the first military officer to take the title “President of Nigeria.”⁴⁴ With the economy failing to improve, unprecedented inflation, intolerance of criticism and public opinion, intimidation, and arrogant disregard for the views of elder statesmen, the ground became fertile for coups. Two attempts followed, in 1986 and 1990.

By May 1986, the government announced that it had uncovered a plot to overthrow it. Military officers such as Major-General Mamman Vatsa, Lt Col Musa Bitiyong, Lt Col Mike Iyorshe, Major Daniel Bamidele, and Major D. E. West, among others, were arrested, tried, and executed. Nigeria’s seventh coup had been aborted.

Similarly, on 22 April 1990, Dodan Barracks was attacked by coup plotters. Major Gideon Orkar and his conspirators attempted to overthrow General Babangida.⁴⁵ They killed Babangida’s ADC, Lt. Col. U. K. Bello⁴⁶, seized Radio Nigeria in Lagos, and declared a temporary secession of some northern states, but were eventually crushed. By 26 July 1990, the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) met and considered the judgement of the tribunal led by Major-General Ike Nwachukwu, constituted to try the suspects. The condemned men were executed immediately after the meeting ended. Major Gideon Orkar and eleven others were shot at Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison. In total, forty-two officers and men were executed, while thirteen were dismissed from military service.⁴⁷

On the 17 November 1993, General Sani Abacha staged the 8th coup against Chief Ernest Shonekan’s interim government. Though it was bloodless, Abacha’s regime was marked by executions and repression. In fact, Abacha’s government foiled several alleged coup plots, including one involving former military ruler Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, who was jailed for treason.⁴⁸ Others included Lt. Col. Lawan Gwadabe (sentenced to death but later pardoned), and Maj. Gen. Shehu Yar’Adua who later died in prison under suspicious circumstances. Indeed, Abacha’s regime was known for its ruthlessness, including the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the other eight Ogoni activists on the 10 November 1995.⁴⁹ The regime was authoritarian,

⁴⁴Ukpabi, *Strands in Nigerian Military History*, p. 128.

⁴⁵Gana, “The Structure of Military Subordination to the Rule of Law in Nigeria”, p. 31.

⁴⁶Babangida’s ADC Lt Col. U. K. Bello, was of the armoured corp of NA. He was a well-trained armoured tank operator.

⁴⁷A. O. Adejumo, “Unjustifiable Promotions in the Nigerian Army”, *New Nigeria Newspaper*, (20 January 1995), p. 17.

⁴⁸ Nwinkol Barinaadaa, “MOSOP and the Internationalization of the Niger Delta Crisis, 1991 – 2015”, A PhD thesis Department of History and International Studies, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, (2022), 52.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

suppressing the media and violating human rights. Abacha died on 8 June 1998, after which General Abdulsalami Abubakar took over and restored democracy in 1999.⁵⁰

There is evidence to suggest that military coups were the greatest threat to professionalism in the Nigerian Army. From Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi in January 1966 to General Abdulsalami Abubakar's handover to civilian rule on 29 May 1999, the Army ruled Nigeria for approximately 33 years. It is therefore reasonable to argue that military government in Nigeria has been the rule rather than the exception.⁵¹ It also means that the greatest threat to the Nigerian Army was the Army itself. Coups and counter-coups created internal conflicts, pitting soldiers against each other and often accompanied by violence and killings. Instead of providing security, the Nigerian Army became a source of insecurity for its own members.

This shows that coups often involved disobedience to superior officers, undermining the chain of command and discipline in the Army. Having ruled Nigeria for so long, coups created mistrust among officers and men, making it difficult to build a cohesive Army. In fact, repeated coups encouraged disloyalty within the Army, as officers frequently plotted against one another rather than focusing on their professional duties. Coups also contributed to the polarisation of the Army along ethnic, regional, and religious lines, thereby compromising professionalism.

It should be recognised that the deaths during the January and July 1966 coups, as well as the executions of officers involved in later coup attempts—such as the execution of 32 plotters, including Major-General I. D. Bisalla and Lt Col Buka Suka Dimka in 1976, General Mamman Vatsa in 1986, and Major Gideon Orkar in 1990—ultimately undermined professionalism in the Nigerian Army. These actions also led to forced retirements and dismissals, depleting the Army's experienced and expert personnel.⁵²

By intruding into the uncongenial realm of politics, the Nigerian Army departed from its professional role—one for which it was neither suited nor prepared by training or experience—and thus contributed to divisive tendencies within its ranks. The Army became deeply involved in governance, leading to appointments based on political allegiance rather than merit. The military came to realise the enormous power, wealth, and influence that accompanied political authority. For instance, any successful coup brought in a group of Army officers who became military governors, exchanging

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹Ukpabi, *Strands in Nigerian Military History*, p. 129

⁵²O.B.C. Nwolise, "Nigerian Military in Nation Building", in, Uma Eleazu (ed), *Nigeria: The First 25 years*, (Ibadan: Heinemann Education Books Nigeria Limited, 1988), pp. 23-45

their humble barracks for palaces and fleets of cars. It was a situation they were reluctant to abandon in subsequent years. Hence, they came to view politics and governance as their rightful domain, abandoning the doctrine of subordination to civil authority.⁵³

CONCLUSION

Therefore, using a generally accepted standard for a professional army, and assessing the conduct of the Nigerian Army during the Civil War and other internal security operations, it is clear that the Army was less than professional. The essence of a professional army during this period may have been in its formative stages. Ideally, the expectation at independence was that the Nigerian Army would serve as an institution to facilitate the consolidation of parliamentary democracy. A professional army was intended to be a cornerstone of the nation's stability.

A close examination of the unprofessional practices that characterised the Nigerian Army—namely regionalism, corruption, and political affiliation infiltrating the officer cadre—reveals that the much-vaunted level of professionalism did not, in fact, exist. Hence, the entire concept of professionalism, as expected of a relatively modern army, was compromised.

It is evident that the Nigerian Army, from 1960 onwards, cannot be described as 'highly professional'. What the British colonial administration bequeathed may have borne some resemblance to professionalism but, by any reasonable assessment, fell short of professional standards. In many instances, the Army failed to adhere to established principles of internal security operations, was not neutral in its conduct, and often did not protect the civilian population when deployed.

Enlisted men were not professionals, and recruitment into the Nigerian Army was plagued by double standards, mediocrity, and inequity. Divergent training programmes undertaken outside Nigeria, combined with unusually close ties to political actors, also undermined the potential for professional conduct in internal security operations. It is important to note that ceremonial parades and strict regimentation do not equate to professionalism.

If anything, the Nigerian Army during this period was only beginning to lay the foundations of its professional character when the crisis of 1966 and the subsequent civil war interrupted the pursuit of professionalism.

⁵³S.C. Ukpabi, "Lessons of the Civil War", In T.N. Tamuno and S.C. Ukpabi, (eds), *Nigeria Since Independence*, (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Book, 1989), p. 288

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