



LURCHING TOWARD UNITY

by *Pauline H. Baker*

"Mammy-wagon" slogans—the West African equivalent of bumper stickers—are painted on the ramshackle wooden trucks, owned mostly by women, that provide Nigeria's chief means of mass transportation. One of the favorites: "No condition is permanent," a suitable motto for a people that has experienced the heights of optimism and the depths of despair over two turbulent decades.

When sub-Sahara Africa's richest and most populous state achieved its independence from Great Britain on October 1, 1960, it was widely hailed as a "showcase of democracy" with a bright economic future. *The Times* of London waxed euphoric:

Rarely, if ever, can the relationship of master and servant have been transformed into partnership with so much understanding, sincerity, and humility; rarely, in the evanescent world of politics and diplomacy, has one felt so profound an emotion as at those moments when, at midnight on Friday, the Union Jack fell from the masthead at Lagos race course to be replaced for the first time by the green and white flag of Nigeria.

The applause died down with the collapse of the first civilian government in 1966. For the next decade and a half, Nigerians staggered from one political nightmare to another: coup d'états, assassinations, tribal pogroms, secession, and civil war.

Yet, the nation described by one of its architects, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, as "a mere geographical expression," has somehow held together. With the return to civilian rule in October 1979, Nigeria seems once again ready to try to fulfill its early promise. The outgoing head of state, Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, whose ambition, unusual among his peers, was to relinquish the Army's monopoly on power to a democratically elected government, told his people last summer: "Let our past experience enrich and enlighten our future. We cannot afford to disappoint Nigeria, Africa, and the world."

Nigeria represents the classic African political dilemma writ large: how to create unity out of a mosaic of conflicting cultural legacies. The country's 80 million people speak some 250 languages or dialects; it is the most linguistically diverse state on the continent. There are divisive religious heritages—Islam and Christianity, as well as various African faiths—and competing traditions of government (emirates, monarchies, and village councils), with representative democracy a latecomer.

The origins of most of Nigeria's peoples remain obscure. The Nok agricultural society flourished 2,000 years ago near the present-day city of Jos; its striking terra cotta sculpture represents the earliest contribution to Nigeria's rich artistic heritage.

During the 7th and 8th centuries A.D., scholars believe, in the first of several invasions by Arab nomads, rugged Berber tribesmen from North Africa swept into the semi-desert and savanna regions of northern Nigeria. (The ancestors of Nigeria's Muslim Hausa tribe, the largest in the country, probably migrated from what is now Chad.) The caravan trade with Tripoli and Egypt was brisk, and Nigerian Muslims exchanged local cloth and skins for European textiles, metals, and glass. Government in the north was based on Koranic law, and the region's numerous emirates from time to time coalesced into empires. The last of these was the great 19th-century Fulani domain, centered around the powerful Sultan of Sokoto in northwest Nigeria.

The Slave Coast

The history of the non-Muslim peoples of the southern rain forest and coastal swamps is also murky. The Yoruba states of Ife and Oyo and the Kingdom of Benin were once the most powerful societies in the area, but there were many other tribes, including the Ibo, Ibibio, Efik, Ijaw, and Tiv. These self-sufficient communities of farmers and hunters were variously led by chiefs with limited authority or councils of elders.

For more than a millennium, then, what is now Nigeria has been like a divided cell, its peoples grouped into two broad cultural clusters, Muslim and non-Muslim, Arab and Negro, with the clusters themselves divided and subdivided. This is the central fact in the country's political history.

The first white men arrived in Nigeria during the winter of 1472-73, when Portuguese seafarers, from bases in Senegal and Sierra Leone, ventured into the Bight of Benin. Initially, the Portuguese sought gold and peppers, but by 1500, they were interested in a single resource: human beings. Feuding tribes were happy to oblige. The Kingdom of Benin, wrote Portuguese

explorer Duarte Pacheco Pereira at the end of the 15th century, "is usually at war with its neighbors, and takes many captives, whom we buy at 12 or 15 brass bracelets each."

For 350 years, trade in Nigeria meant slave trade, and by the 18th century, some 20,000 Nigerians were being shipped each year to plantation owners in Brazil, the West Indies, and North America. The area around Lagos became known as the "Slave Coast," to distinguish it from the "Gold Coast" (Ghana) and the "Ivory Coast" (which has retained its name).

Europe's Christian powers contended bitterly for control of this appallingly lucrative traffic. Bit by bit, Dutch, French, and British entrepreneurs chipped away at the Portuguese monopoly. By the early 1700s, France and Britain had cornered the market; Liverpool and Bristol grew fat on the proceeds. In 1807, however, in the face of mounting abolitionist pressures and changing economic conditions, Britain declared the slave trade illegal. By the mid-1840s, "legitimate" trade in ivory, gold, kola nuts, and palm oil (a lubricant widely used in England's new factories) had replaced human cargo.

Indirect Rule

When the Berlin Conference of 1885 divided Africa into German, French, and British "spheres of influence," a London-backed firm, the Royal Niger Company, was effectively granted exclusive trading rights in the Niger basin. The company set up its own military force, exercised judicial authority, collected taxes, and stamped out pockets of slave trading. In short, it exercised virtually all the powers of an independent state.

Meanwhile, an assortment of plucky Methodist, Baptist, Anglican, and Catholic missionaries penetrated deep into the interior. They braved a torrid climate and deadly malaria to promote "the Bible and the plough" in an area of the tropics reputed to be a "white man's grave." Their efforts opened up the hinterland. "It certainly is an inspiration," wrote Henry Dobinson, Archdeacon of the Niger, in 1894, "in this rather forlorn and

*Pauline H. Baker, 38, is a staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, with principal responsibility for Africa. Born in Jersey City, N.J., she received her B.A. from Douglass College (1962) and a Ph.D. in political science from UCLA (1970). She lived in Nigeria for 11 years, lecturing at the University of Lagos, and is the author of *Urbanization and Political Change: The Politics of Lagos, 1917-1967* (1974). The views expressed in this essay do not necessarily reflect those of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.*

*Sir Frederick Lugard,
Britain's High Commissioner
of Nigeria (1900–06),
Governor General of
Northern and Southern
Nigeria (1912–14), Governor
General of Nigeria (1914–18)*



The Mansell Collection

desolate land, to see in every river and settlement the brave old Union Jack floating in the breeze. Our countrymen are wonderfully energetic and pushing.”

The British Government formally took over the Royal Niger Company’s territory in 1900, then rushed to claim, by gun and treaty, as much additional ground as possible before the French (to the north and west) and Germans (to the east) could take it. In their Whitehall offices, the British drew frontiers that ignored natural barriers and tribal boundaries, and installed Sir Frederick Lugard as the first High Commissioner of “Nigeria.”*

Lugard was the archetypal colonial administrator. He was quick to assure local tribes, particularly in the north, that British rule would bring little noticeable change in their way of life. Thus, in 1903, he pledged to the Sokoto Council of Notables that he would be guided by “the usual laws of succession. . . . Emirs and chiefs . . . will rule over the people as of old time.”

Lugard, in effect, was making a virtue out of a necessity. Rebellion was never a serious threat; as Hillaire Belloc once wrote, “Whatever happens we have got/The Maxim gun and they have not.” But daily administration—tax collecting, maintaining courts, and the petty details involved in governing 15

*The name “Nigeria” was suggested by Lugard’s wife, Flora Shaw, colonial editor of *The Times*, in a letter to that newspaper in 1897. It won out over “Niger Sudan,” “Negretia,” and “Goldesia,” the latter in honor of Sir George Taubman Goldie, who secured the Niger Basin for Britain during the European “scramble for Africa.”

million people spread over 360,000 square miles—was another story. Hence the policy of “indirect rule,” similar to the system the British adopted in India and elsewhere in Africa.

On balance, Lugard’s approach worked smoothly in the north, where the populace was accustomed to obeying authoritarian emirs. Lugard used the Muslim administrative system (and the Muslim administrators) for official purposes. Tactfully, he decided not to interfere with Islam and discouraged Christian missionaries from proselytizing in Muslim strongholds. While it eased the pain of conquest, the ultimate effect of this policy was to isolate the north from European education for half a century.

Peace and Profit

In the south and other non-Muslim areas, indirect rule was a disaster. Wrongly assuming that the Muslim administrative system had its parallels in the rest of Nigeria, the British equated local chiefs with emirs and used them as tax collectors, often in areas whose inhabitants had never paid taxes—to anyone—before. In the southeast, where there were no chiefs, the British appointed local notables as “warrant chiefs.” The system was unpopular. Anti-tax riots were commonplace. In the long run, Lugard’s policy catalyzed anti-colonial sentiment in the south, sowing the seeds of nationalist fervor that would eventually lead to an independent Nigeria.

What exactly were Great Britain’s interests in Nigeria? Whitehall’s injunctions to its colonial governors—in Asia, Africa, the Middle East—were generally two: Keep the peace, and turn a profit. Nigeria, the richest of Britain’s African possessions, responded handsomely. By 1920, London’s total import-export trade with the colony reached \$43 million; revenues to the Crown topped \$13 million. Colonialism was not a charitable exercise.

Yet, there were positive side-effects, as far as the Nigerian people were concerned. Commerce required good transportation; highways and railroads began to link major towns. Because the colonial administrators needed teachers, doctors, clerks, and lawyers, thousands of Nigerians, particularly southerners, received proper British educations. English became the official language; for the first time, Nigerians had a common means of discourse.

A sophisticated native elite developed. Men like Nnamdi Azikiwe (“Zik”), the American-educated Ibo journalist who became independent Nigeria’s first President, and Obafemi

Awolowo, a British-trained Yoruba lawyer, returned from abroad with radical ideas and visions of freedom from colonial rule. Such people were hardly representative of the great mass of rural Nigerians. But as Awolowo put it: "It must be realized, for now and for all time, that the articulate minority are destined to run the country."

Self-government came to Nigeria in stages. During the early 1920s, to accommodate the first stirrings of nationalist sentiment, the British began allowing a few members of the black elite to serve on local governing bodies. The election in 1922 of three Africans to the Nigerian Legislative Council, for example, provided the first voice in government to the inhabitants of Lagos (males with an annual income of \$240 or more were entitled to vote). Such advances were mostly symbolic. By and large, the early history of Nigerian nationalism is the story of a black urban elite pressing for limited reforms through short-lived native political parties and firebrand newspapers.

World War II changed all that. Within the British government attitudes toward colonialism softened. Indeed, as most hard-headed politicians in London realized, the Empire's post-war days were numbered, if not for reasons of justice, then for sheer expediency as anti-colonialism accelerated.

The "Jews of Africa"

Beginning in 1945, the British experimented with various constitutional formulas to pave the way for self-government. Decolonization was not strictly a British affair. Indeed, in retrospect, probably too much weight was given to competing Nigerian leaders seeking narrow political ends, not enough to building real foundations for national unity.

By the end of colonial rule, there were three distinct administrative regions—the North, West, and East. Each had a separate bureaucracy and a separate budget. Each gave rise to a major political party dominated by a single tribe.* Led by ardent nationalists like Awolowo and "Zik" in the West and East, and by the conservative religious leader, Sir Ahmadu Bello, in the North, these parties struggled for regional prerogatives. The tug-of-war produced, in essence, a tripartite federal system, ratified in 1954 by the last of the colonial constitutions. But "balance" proved elusive. Because parliamentary districts were drawn on the basis of population, the huge Northern Region had

*The Northern Peoples' Congress (Hausa-Fulani) in the North; the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (Ibo) in the East; and the Action Group (Yoruba) in the West.

twice as many seats in the central legislature as the other two regions combined.

Thus, when Nigeria was granted independence in 1960, its internal power structure was skewed in favor of the least developed and most insular part of the country. A Muslim northerner, Abubakar Tafewa Balewa, became the country's first Prime Minister. And for the first six years after independence, the North maintained an iron grip on Nigeria's political life.

Educationally and economically, however, by 1960 the Ibos of the east—geographically mobile, receptive to change—had pushed ahead of the other groups. Whereas 50 years earlier, owing to their fragmented, village-based society, they hardly considered themselves a coherent “people,” great economic strides had reinforced their tribal identity. As the Ibo elder statesman, Nnamdi Azikiwe, put it years before: “It would appear that the God of Africa has created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of ages.”

All over Nigeria, Ibos filled urban jobs at every level far out of proportion to their numbers, as laborers and domestic servants, as bureaucrats, corporate managers, and technicians. Two-thirds of the senior jobs in the Nigerian Railway Corporation were held by Ibos. Three-quarters of Nigeria's diplomats came from the Eastern Region. So did almost half of the 4,500 students graduating from Nigerian universities in 1966. The Ibos became known as the “Jews of Africa,” despised—and envied—for their achievements and acquisitiveness. Inevitably, ethnic tensions mounted. Competition for political offices and job promotions routinely degenerated into tribal rivalry. Nigeria was smoldering.

Mutiny

On January 15, 1966, following controversies over rigged national and regional elections, a military coup toppled Prime Minister Balewa's civilian government. Balewa, his finance minister, and the premiers of the Northern and Western regions were killed. The mutiny, led by five Ibo officers, was quickly suppressed by federal troops, but a military government was formed by Major General J.T.U. Ironsi, the head of the Nigerian Army—and an Ibo. Ironsi, well respected though sometimes maladroit at fitting actions to his good intentions, swiftly suspended the constitution, consolidated the regions, and attempted to impose unity by decree.

The Ibo junta insisted that there was no ethnic basis to the regime. But the military takeover was predictably seen by most

Nigerians, especially northern Muslims, as an Ibo *putsch*. In a country that thrived on rumor, horror stories abounded. According to one, the Ibos were flaunting photographs of the coup leaders proudly displaying the corpse of Sir Ahmadu Bello, murdered premier of the Northern Region; atop each picture (so the rumor went) was a crowing rooster, symbol of the Ibo political party. Riots rocked northern cities. Around the country, armed thugs hunted down local Ibo residents. Thousands of innocent people were massacred, and over 1 million Ibos were believed to have fled back to their homes in the east.

No Victors, No Vanquished

In the middle of all this, a detachment of Muslim soldiers heard unconfirmed reports that General Ironsi had drawn up a "hit list" of northern officers. The Muslims decided to strike first. In the early morning hours of July 29, 1966, they found Ironsi at the home of the military governor in Ibadan, the capital of the Western Region. The two men were taken to a remote forest outside of the city, stripped, "interrogated," and shot.

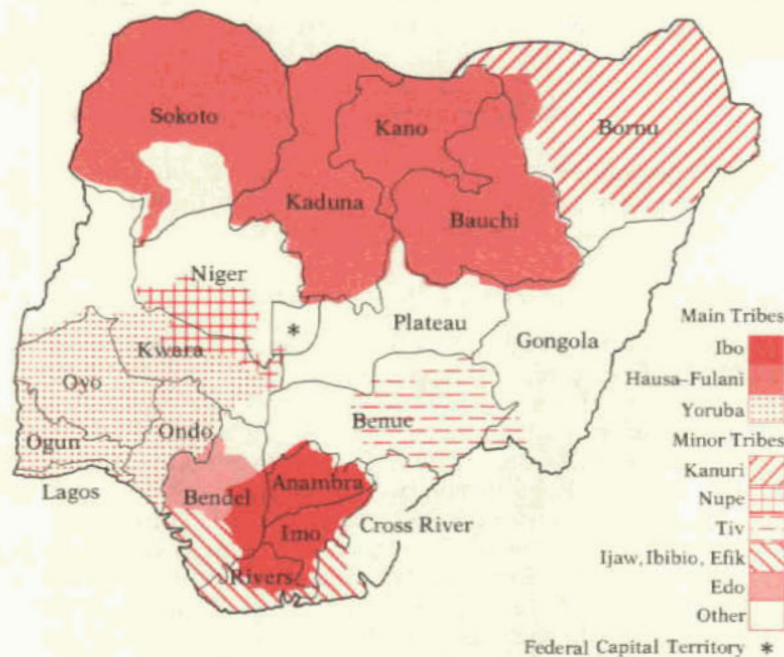
As the next Supreme Commander, the Army chose 31-year-old Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, a compromise candidate. Gowon, then the Army chief of staff, was a Sandhurst alumnus, a Christian, and a northerner, though from a minority (i.e., non-Hausa-Fulani) tribe. He kept his job for nine years.

Gowon immediately faced civil war. The military governor of the Ibo-dominated Eastern Region, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, refused to back the new regime, demanded "autonomy" for his territory, and finally called for outright secession. Arrogant, intelligent, and wealthy, Ojukwu had once told Oxford classmates that he would be "King of Nigeria"; he proclaimed the Republic of Biafra in May 1967.

The Ibos were euphoric. With one-quarter of the country's population and one-twelfth of its territory, Biafra was the richest and most developed region in Nigeria, crisscrossed by railroads and serviced by three large airports. Within its boundaries: the bustling oil rigs near Port Harcourt in the mangrove swamps of the Niger delta. Moreover, Ojukwu had about half of the Nigerian Army on his side, and most of the junior officers. He scored some impressive early victories, at one point even threatening Lagos.

With only 5,000 men, no tanks, no warships, and no combat aircraft, Gowon started at a disadvantage. Then came transfusions of arms and ammunition from Great Britain, artillery and MIG fighters (reportedly with Egyptian and East German pilots)

ETHNIC FEDERALISM: NIGERIA'S TRIBES AND STATES



As Nigeria's many tribes have sought greater political representation, so the number of its states has grown. Out of the original three regions (North, West, and East), a fourth (Mid-West) was created in 1963. The Gowon regime then carved the whole into 12 states (1966). In 1975, the Muhammed government increased the total to the present 19.

from the Soviet Union. The Army mushroomed to 250,000. Time was on the federal side.

The bloody war dragged on for two-and-one-half years, owing in part to massive Western shipments of food and medical supplies (as well as arms and ammunition, which the secessionists demanded be sent on the same planes) to the beleaguered Biafrans. International public opinion generally sided with Biafra, although France was the sole nation openly to provide military assistance.* The suffering of the Ibos was plain, their public relations effort first rate. (Novelist Cyprian Ekwensi was Biafra's Minister of Information.) And, too, the Nigerians whom most Westerners knew were the well-educated Ibos.

* Only five states—Tanzania, Gabon, the Ivory Coast, Zambia, and Haiti—recognized the rebel government.

The United States remained officially aloof, though public opinion was decidedly pro-Biafra. After a 1967 visit to Washington to explain the position of the Nigerian government, Chief Anthony Enaharo, Gowon's emissary, observed that there was "diminishing comprehension of the Nigerian crisis the higher up the hierarchy one went. . . . [The State Department] tended to gauge us by a double standard: What was right for the American federation in 1860 did not hold for the Nigerian federation." The frustration of Nigeria's rulers turned to anger when U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk baldly suggested that the Nigerian crisis was a "British responsibility," implying that, in American eyes, the country was still a colony.

Surrounded, starving, and broke, the Biafrans surrendered on January 15, 1970. Ojukwu fled into exile in the Ivory Coast. With Abraham Lincoln as his avowed model, Gowon adopted a policy of "no victors, no vanquished." Ibos were quickly reintegrated into Nigerian life. Officials of the rebel government were given new posts in the federal bureaucracy; most Ibo officers kept their ranks. "In the history of warfare," wrote John de St. Jorre, who covered the war for the London *Observer*, "there can rarely have been such a bloodless end and such a merciful aftermath."

Nigeria's troubles were not over. Although the country's oil revenues doubled and doubled again after the 1973 OPEC price hikes, for most of Nigeria's people life had not much improved. The great influx of money into the economy also brought massive inflation. Corruption was rampant, and some of Gowon's military governors milked their districts as if they were private estates. In 1975, after reneging on his promise to return the country to civilian rule, Gowon was overthrown. (He retired to private life, enrolling as a freshman political science student at the University of Warwick in Britain.)

The new head of state was Brig. Gen. Murtala Muhammed, a no-nonsense northern Muslim who started to get Nigeria back on its feet. Muhammed dismissed the hated military governors, fixed a date for return to civilian rule, and began firing venal bureaucrats. He also made plans to move Nigeria's capital out of traffic-clogged Lagos. Six months after taking office, however, he was assassinated by disgruntled Army officers while his car was stalled in a Lagos traffic jam. He was succeeded by the next in command, Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, a devout Baptist, a Yoruba, and a career Army man.

Carrying forward Muhammed's program, Obasanjo deftly shepherded the country through an unprecedented three-year-long exercise in grassroots democracy, which included the elec-

tion of hundreds of local governments, public debate on a new, American-style constitution, registration of 47 million voters (most of whom were voting for the first time in their lives), and the overseeing of five elections to fill state and national offices. "Never in the history of Africa," commented the magazine *West Africa* when it was all over, "have so many people been consulted so thoroughly about how they wished to be governed."

A casual observer might be tempted to conclude that Nigeria is merely back where it started in 1960. The new President, Hausa-Fulani nobleman Alhaji Shehu Shagari, is a northerner, as was Nigeria's first Prime Minister, Abubakar Balewa, whom he resembles. The election breakdowns show that tribal loyalties remain a powerful, even decisive, political force.

Yet Nigeria's political prospects may be brighter than would appear on the surface. The new 19-state federal system better reflects the country's cultural pluralism and effectively carves up the old Hausa-Fulani, Ibo, and Yoruba strongholds. Moreover, the new constitution seeks to ensure that elections are truly "national" in character; to be elected President, a candidate must receive not only one-third of the popular vote but also at least one-quarter of the vote in two-thirds of the states. (In the 1979 elections, for example, Shagari needed critical support in the east, beyond his central base in the north.) Finally, the new constitution provides for effective checks and balances. Shagari's party holds only 38 seats in the 95-member Senate and 168 seats in the 449-member House. It is therefore obliged to wheel and deal.

Political reforms alone, of course, cannot guarantee national cohesion. In a country where leaders are as important as institutions, the real test is whether Shagari and his successors can actually govern this complex society—enriched by oil, afflicted by inflation, corruption, and poverty, and fractured by special interests.

Most Nigerians, publicly proud, privately pessimistic, seem determined to make the democratic experiment work. As the most populous state south of the Sahara, Nigeria is one of black Africa's natural leaders, a maverick member of OPEC, a commanding voice in the Organization of African Unity. What happens inside the country, therefore, has a certain importance to the outside world. Brave steps have been taken by the Nigerians; grave risks remain.