

Obasanjo

John Iliffe

NIGERIA & THE WORLD



Obasanjo,
Nigeria
and the World

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	x
<i>Maps</i>	xii, xiii
1	
<i>A man of controversy</i>	1
Part I Making a Career (1937–70)	
2	
<i>Yoruba boy</i>	7
3	
<i>Nigerian soldier</i>	12
4	
<i>Coups and civil war</i>	20
Part II Military Rule (1970–9)	
5	
<i>Chance and power</i>	39
6	
<i>State-directed development</i>	56

7	
<i>African liberation</i>	73

8	
<i>Return to civilian rule</i>	88

Part III Private Citizen (1979–99)

9	
<i>The farmer</i>	99

10	
<i>The author</i>	108

11	
<i>The statesman</i>	120

12	
<i>The politician</i>	136

13	
<i>The prisoner</i>	152

14	
<i>The candidate</i>	164

Part IV The First Presidential Term (1999–2003)

15	
<i>Containing conflict</i>	183

16	
<i>Salvaging the economy</i>	200

17	
<i>Restoring international relationships</i>	217

18	
<i>President and politicians</i>	225
19	
<i>Re-election</i>	238
 Part V The Second Presidential Term (2003–7)	
20	
<i>The imperious presidency</i>	253
21	
<i>Economic reform</i>	268
22	
<i>Africa's elder statesman</i>	281
23	
<i>Managing the succession</i>	287
24	
<i>Retirement</i>	304
<i>Appendix: Exchange rates</i>	308
<i>Bibliography</i>	311
<i>Index</i>	321

Preface

Adekeye Adebajo, Adewale Adebani, David Easterbrook, Marilyn Glanfield, Simon Stevens, Megan Vaughan, and Ruth Watson have helped me in preparing this book. I am grateful to the staff of the National Archives, Kew; University Library, African Studies Centre Library, and St John's College Library, Cambridge; Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London; Commonwealth Secretariat, London; Library of Congress; Herskovits Memorial Africana Library, Northwestern University; and Bayero University Library, Kano. The book draws heavily on Nigeria's lively political press. I am especially indebted to the work of Reuben Abati, Olusegun Adeniyi, Dare Babarinsa, Ray Ekpu, and Stanley Macebuh, both for political analysis and for the pleasure of reading good journalism.

In this book I have tried to understand General Obasanjo, which I believe to be the chief task of a biographer. Although I spent a period in Nigeria during his tenure as military head of state, I have not approached him in writing the book. My African travelling days are over and he is a busy man who has never been slow to tell his own story in print. I hope, however, that it will be clear to him and others that I write with respect.

John Iliffe
May 2010

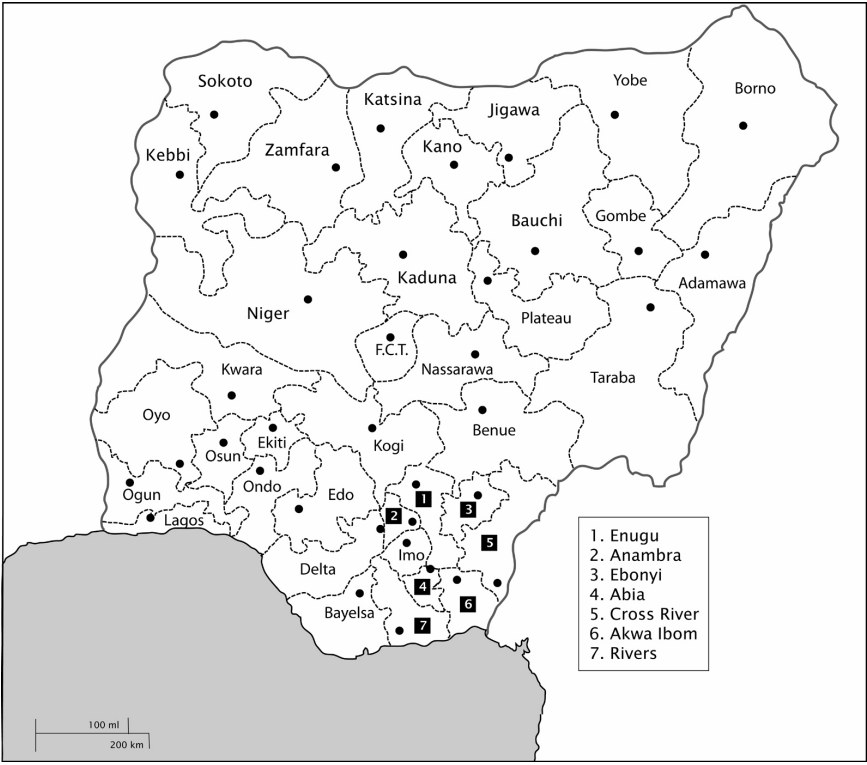
Abbreviations

ABU	Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
AC	Action Congress
AD	Alliance for Democracy
AG	Action Group
AIDS	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
ANC	African National Congress (of South Africa)
ANPP	All Nigeria People's Party
APGA	All Progressive Grand Alliance
APP	All People's Party
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAB	Cabinet (records in TNA)
CRO	Commonwealth Relations Office (records in TNA)
DO	Dominions Office (records in TNA)
DTA	Democratic Turnhalle Alliance
ECOMOG	ECOWAS Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EPG	Eminent Persons Group
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office (records in TNA)
FESTAC	Festival of Arts and Culture
FNLA	Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNPP	Great Nigerian People's Party
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
IDA	International Development Agency
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INEC	Independent National Electoral Commission
LNG	liquefied natural gas
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change
MPLA	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola
MW	megawatt
N	naira
NADECO	National Democratic Coalition
NCNC	National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons
NEEDS	National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy

NEPA	Nigerian Electrical Power Authority
NEPAD	New Partnership for African Development
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NIPP	National Integrated Power Project
NITEL	Nigerian Telecommunications Corporation
NLC	Nigerian Labour Congress
NNOC	Nigerian National Oil Corporation
NNPC	Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation
NPC	Northern People's Congress
NPN	National Party of Nigeria
NPP	Nigerian People's Party
NRC	National Republican Convention
NUON	National Unity Organisation of Nigeria
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OFN	Operation Feed the Nation
OPEC	Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PDP	People's Democratic Party
PFN	Patriotic Front of Nigeria
PREM	Prime Minister's Office (records in TNA)
PRP	People's Redemption Party
RH	Rhodes House, Oxford
RUF	Revolutionary United Front (of Sierra Leone)
SAP	structural adjustment programme
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SWAPO	South-West African People's Organisation
TNA	The National Archives, Kew, London
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UAC	United Africa Company
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	United Nations AIDS Organisation
UNAMSIL	United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UNITA	União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola
UPE	universal primary education
UPN	Unity Party of Nigeria
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union



Map 1. The three regions (in 1960) and places mentioned



Map 2. The 36 states (from 1996)

1

A Man of Controversy

When Olusegun Obasanjo left office as President of Nigeria in May 2007, at the age of seventy, he suffered a torrent of abuse. The country's leading constitutional lawyer described the departing regime as 'a bad dream, a nightmare for the Nigerian people and a disaster for the Rule of Law, democracy and good governance'.¹ The playwright and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka dubbed the retiring president a Master of Hypocrisy.² A formerly close colleague called him 'the most toxic leader that Nigeria has produced'.³ A political enemy recommended 'that Obasanjo should go back to jail. I think he belongs there and should die there'.⁴ The president's first wife published a memoir of their marriage alleging violence and neglect.⁵ His second son accused him publicly of adultery with the son's wife.⁶

If this were the truth about Obasanjo, he would surely find a biographer. Yet the truth was more complicated and interesting. He had led a life of extraordinary activity and achievement. Born in an obscure Yoruba village in south-western Nigeria, too poor to go to university, he rose by ability, hard work, and sheer luck to lead the most populous black country on earth. As a soldier, he secured the victory in a civil war. Appointed military head of state at the age of 39, he returned Nigeria to democratic rule and retired to his farm, emerging to contribute to the destruction of apartheid, to contest election as Secretary-General of the United Nations, to challenge a military dictator, and to spend three years in prison, where a religious experience transformed his life. Head of a large polygynous family and author or editor of a dozen books, he also travelled and befriended leading men in every continent. In his sixties, as elected president for eight years, he dominated one of the most ungovernable countries in the world and was a principal architect of the African Union.

To unravel the contradiction between Obasanjo's life of achievement and the obloquy that surrounded his retirement is one purpose of this book. The contradiction reveals much about the first half-century of Nigerian and African independence. It also reveals much about the contradictions in Obasanjo himself. Perhaps four themes run through his contentious life.

First, despite the diversity of his experience, Obasanjo remained rooted in his Yoruba culture, one of Africa's richest and most embracing. In speech and manner, tastes and dress, he remained a Yoruba farmer and a Yoruba chief. His notions of proper gender and generational relationships remained those of his village origins. The sense of honour that he cultivated as a youth and the sense of destiny that he felt

as an elder both appear to have drawn deeply on Yoruba beliefs. His determination to succeed through personal enterprise grew out of a fiercely competitive culture, as did his political ruthlessness and his thirst for education and enlightenment, which opened his mind to many intellectual currents of his time. For with his Yoruba inheritance Obasanjo blended ideas and innovations from the larger world: from his restless travels, his training as a military engineer, his taste for books and intellectual debate, his long experience of public life, and his deepening commitment to Christianity. The resulting synthesis was not perfect, so that conflict between Yoruba instincts and derived ideas contributed to the complexity and unpredictability that many acquaintances remarked in his character. Nevertheless, this personal synthesis forms the core of his biography, as it must of any twentieth-century African.

Ironically, given his commitment to Yoruba culture, the second theme of Obasanjo's life was his distinctively Nigerian patriotism. Too young to have taken a significant part in the nationalist movement, he came to maturity at the moment of Nigerian independence and was marked for ever by its optimism and dedication. For Obasanjo, Nigeria was a given. 'We have no choice', he insisted, 'but to make this country work and that is the responsibility of all Nigerians.'⁷ There was no choice because there was no way of unscrambling Nigeria without intolerable violence and chaos. 'Assuming that the larger ethnic groups can go it alone, can the smaller ethnic groups do so?' he asked. 'If not what will be their fate? Many Bosnias will be created in many parts of Nigeria if the country breaks up. This is too frightening a possibility to contemplate.'⁸ This commitment to Nigeria set Obasanjo at odds with many Nigerians – especially the Yoruba elite from whom his birth and limited education distanced him – who saw their country as a colonial agglomeration of the ethnic groups to which their first loyalties lay. Soyinka, for example, speaking from a Yoruba perspective, denounced the 'demagogic' and 'ridiculous' notion 'which says there's an entity called Nigeria and that entity is sacrosanct.'⁹ Instead he quoted Obafemi Awolowo, the dominant figure in twentieth-century Yoruba politics: 'I've always insisted to myself that my first duty is to the Yoruba nation. We are a nation, you know. And I put that nation first, then the one called Nigeria.'¹⁰ By contrast, Obasanjo's long-term goal, as he declared in 2001, was 'the nullification of all forms of identification except Nigerian citizenship'.¹¹ In the shorter term, he strove to make Nigeria work, both economically and politically, an immensely difficult task when state-building must take place democratically in a context of popular loyalties to component ethnic groups. Politics in Nigeria, as elsewhere in Africa, is often dismissed as being purely about personal advantage, but that is untrue; it is chiefly about political structures, as in most new countries, the early history of the United States being a good example. At times, especially early in his civilian presidency, Obasanjo seemed to be fighting the battle for Nigerian unity almost on his own. As he said at the age of 67, with full justification, 'I have always put Nigeria above everything else in my life.'¹² It is as the outstanding member of the second generation of independent African leaders who dedicated themselves to the consolidation of their postcolonial states that Obasanjo merits his place in history.

This dedication to 'the Nigerian project' made Obasanjo willing to accept the responsibilities, constraints, and compromises of power from which elite sceptics like Soyinka shrank. As the journalist Reuben Abati wrote, 'Obasanjo is effectively a man of power. He radiates it. He looks it.'¹³ In the Yoruba manner, he flaunted it. Power, his use of it, and its effects upon him form the third theme of his life. Endowed with great authority as a military commander in his early thirties, he became exceptionally

sensitive to the location of power, whether in international affairs or the streets of Nigerian cities. His decisions were invariably based on political calculations, rather than the legal and constitutional principles that concerned his elite critics. A man of great physical and intellectual energy, he exercised power with skill and ruthlessness, sometimes unscrupulously but seldom cruelly. To study his career is to gain some sense of the immense demands that the government of a large African state places on those who undertake it. His critics believed that power corrupted him, that an 'inordinate desire for absolute, unfettered power'¹⁴ became the driving principle of his administration, especially during his second term as president, when he flouted democratic procedures and attempted, as they believed, to entrench himself permanently in office. This issue is essential to an assessment of the man and will dominate the penultimate chapter of this book. Power, age, self-righteousness, lack of scruple, the relentless hostility of his critics, and an obsessive sense of responsibility did indeed warp his judgment, but behind the actions at the end of his career, it will be argued, any thirst for personal power was subordinate to his anxiety to retain sufficient command of the political process to ensure a successful transfer of authority to his successor. Paradoxically, Obasanjo was corrupted chiefly by the strength of his own patriotism.

Moreover, Obasanjo's behaviour at the end of his career must be understood in the light of the rapid changes taking place in the global and national context within which he worked, a pace of change accentuated by his unique experience of exercising national leadership on two occasions separated by a full twenty years.¹⁵ On the international scene, the liberation of southern Africa, which dominated his first tenure of power in the late 1970s, gave way to the consequences of the end of the Cold War and the marginalisation of Africa that led him to share in the creation of the African Union twenty years later. At the national level, he had to come to terms with the enormous changes in Nigerian society taking place around him, especially the growth of the country's population during his adult lifetime from something over 30 million in 1952–3 (the census figure) to 140 million in 2006,¹⁶ which posed immense problems for the governments he headed. He had, also, to adapt his thinking to changing strategies of Third World development, moving in the course of his career across the entire spectrum from faith in state investment in heavy industry, the orthodoxy of the 1970s, to overt commitment to the private enterprise and market liberalism that dominated the 1990s, although he never lost his real enthusiasm for the most modern, large-scale projects. Similarly, it was the failure of the civilian regime to which he had transferred power in 1979 that dominated his political strategy when he became civilian president in 1999, shaping especially his determination to control the choice of his successor. In this respect, however, Obasanjo failed to adapt to the changing expectations of Nigeria's increasingly educated and sophisticated population, for whom democratic procedures were becoming a priority alongside the unity and development to which the aging Obasanjo was dedicated. This failure to adapt explained much of the bitterness surrounding his retirement.

Many sources needed for a definitive biography of Obasanjo are not yet available to a historian and may not become available for many years to come. This provisional account may nevertheless be justified by his importance to the modern history of Nigeria and by Nigeria's importance to the world.

NOTES

1. Ben Nwabueze, *How President Obasanjo subverted the rule of law and democracy* (Ibadan, 2007), p. xxiii.
2. Wole Soyinka, 'Between nation space and nationhood', *Guardian*, 5 March 2009.
3. Danjuma in *Guardian*, 17 February 2008.
4. Abubakar Rimi in *Newswatch*, 14 April 2008.
5. Oluremi Obasanjo, *Bitter-sweet: my life with Obasanjo* (Lagos, 2008).
6. *This Day*, 16 January 2008; below, p. 305.
7. Broadcast quoted in *Guardian*, 28 October 2001.
8. Olusegun Obasanjo, 'A dangerous diversion', *African Concord*, 14 February 1994.
9. Wole Soyinka, 'The shape of things to come', *Index on Censorship*, 22, 8 (1993), 33.
10. Quoted in Wole Soyinka, *You must set forth at dawn: a memoir* (London, 2007), pp. 129–30.
11. Broadcast quoted in *Guardian*, 28 October 2001.
12. Olusegun Obasanjo, *Standing tall* (Lagos, 2005), p. 11.
13. *Guardian*, 24 November 2004.
14. Nwabueze, *How Obasanjo subverted law*, p. 90.
15. The closest parallel is perhaps with General de Gaulle, whose two periods of power were separated by twelve years (1946–58).
16. James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: background to nationalism* (Berkeley, 1960), p. 15; *News-watch*, 15 March 2009.

Part I

Making a Career (1937–70)

2

Yoruba Boy

Matthew Olusegun Aremu Obasanjo was born at Ibogun-Olaogun, a village in south-western Nigeria about half-way between Lagos and Abeokuta. His passport later showed his date of birth as 5 March 1937, but there was no written record and the date was estimated from other family events. He was the first of his parents' nine children and the only one to survive childhood except a younger sister.¹ There are several interpretations of the baby's names, all suggesting his parents' joy and hope. By one account, Olusegun meant 'God conquers', Aremu was a praise name with royal connotations, and Obasanjo – his father's first name – signified 'the king rewards'. He abandoned Matthew at secondary school as an act of cultural nationalism.²

Linguistic evidence suggests that ancestors of Obasanjo's Yoruba people had lived in this broad region of West Africa for several thousand years. By about A.D. 1000 they were forming kingdoms with capital towns.³ Obasanjo's ancestors came from one of the oldest, Owu, which was defeated and destroyed by its rivals during the 1820s in a war initiating an Age of Confusion that engulfed Yorubaland for the remainder of the nineteenth century.⁴ During the 1830s many Owu refugees settled at Abeokuta, a new town built by the similarly uprooted Egba branch of the Yoruba. Occupying a distinct southern quarter of the town, Owu people gained a reputation for industry, pride, truculence, and military valour.⁵

Ancestral kingdoms and their capital cities largely determined Yoruba identities. Especially during the Age of Confusion, when much of a kingdom's population might seek security within the city wall, life in the capital and participation in its competitive and colourful public arena were the essence of civilisation. Social honour, long sought through the display of authority, esteem, courage, wealth, decency, moderation, and generosity, was now gained especially by military prowess.⁶ Abeokuta, like other nineteenth-century Yoruba cities, was dominated by warchiefs and swarmed with military slaves and 'warboys'. Watching one warchief enter his city in triumph, a young man declared, 'If I enjoy such a glory for only one day and I die the next, I shall be content.'⁷

Most townsmen were agriculturalists with fields and temporary houses in surrounding farm settlements. Obasanjo's Owu ancestors carved out a chain of settlements south-west of Abeokuta along the trade route through Ota to the coast at Lagos. His birthplace, Ibogun, was a late and relatively distant village founded in the early 1920s by settlers who included his father, remembered as a hard-working

Making a Career (1937–70)

farmer and proud bicycle owner.⁸ Until he was eleven years old, the young Obasanjo helped his father in the fields. Doubtless he experienced the severe upbringing traditional among the Yoruba, who demanded extreme deference to seniority⁹ – a principle on which Obasanjo would insist throughout his life. Ibogun was small and remote, but it enjoyed a community life. Obasanjo's village church was Baptist, a branch of the Southern Baptist mission from the United States that had reached Abeokuta in 1850. Yet, as he recalled, 'I grew up in a village where Muslims and Christians lived together. As a kid, I partook in the Rammadan fast with my Muslim cousins and relations; we celebrated all Muslim festivals together, in addition, we prayed in mosques during the fasting and on Fridays and we all went to the church on Sundays and during the Christian festivals.' His sister, through her marriage, was to become a Muslim.¹⁰

Ibogun's remoteness was to shape Obasanjo's entire career. The village was a farm settlement of Abeokuta, but Obasanjo probably did not visit the town until he was at least nine years old.¹¹ He had no part in the intellectual vitality that Western education had brought to Abeokuta, where Anglican missionaries had established their main base in Yorubaland in 1846. Once supported and protected by British rule, from 1893, a Christian elite took control of the town from its former warchiefs and made it a centre of enlightenment for Yorubaland and Nigeria as a whole. Among Obasanjo's contemporaries growing up there in the 1940s, for example, were Wole Soyinka and his Ransome-Kuti cousins – Olikoye (future Minister of Health), Femi (civil rights activist), and Fela (musician) – all four the sons of headmasters, all socialised in the complex households characteristic of Yoruba towns, all enjoying the vivid childhoods that Soyinka would describe so brilliantly.¹² To this urban elite, Obasanjo was a farm boy. He lacked even an elite patron, an invaluable aid to advancement in Yoruba society. He was, quite literally, on his own and would remain so for the rest of his life.

Yet that had advantages. Obasanjo lacked the family and community ties that bound most Yoruba (and other Nigerians) to champion localities and ethnic groups. As a man from the rural periphery, he could, if he chose, belong solely to Nigeria. His upbringing gave him a lasting preference for rural life and a rapport with village people. He learned to work hard, to get his hands dirty, and to live simply. 'Very early in life,' he later wrote, 'I had to know that in terms of experience, poverty has greater purchasing power than wealth.'¹³ His social attitudes, especially towards women and youth, remained essentially rural. 'It takes a village to raise a child,' he observed in old age.¹⁴ As a child, his ambitions were limited and practical. He said later that he had wanted to become either a motor mechanic, like one of his cousins, or a barman. His father, however, wanted the boy to have an education. 'If you want me to', Obasanjo acquiesced, knowing little about it. He was already nine years old and another two years elapsed before a place could be found at the village school in Ibogun.¹⁵ To start so late was not unique at that time – his contemporary Frederick Fasehun entered primary school at twelve and secondary school at twenty¹⁶ – but it marked him out. Together with his evident intelligence, it may have helped him to jump classes and make rapid progress. In 1951, after only three years, he gained a place at the Baptist Day School in the Owu quarter of Abeokuta.¹⁷

It was an exciting moment to enter the town. In 1951, seeking to bring the western, eastern, and northern regions of Nigeria together, the British government created a federal structure in which each region enjoyed much self-government. Yoruba Christian professionals and businessmen launched the Action Group to

control their Western Region. Its leader, Obafemi Awolowo, was a brilliant political organiser and administrator determined to unite the Yoruba, preserve their identity within Nigeria, and ensure that their advantages in education and wealth made them its leaders. Funded by high world prices for the local cocoa crop, the Action Group operated the most efficient administration in tropical Africa, with an ambitious programme of economic development, institutional modernisation, and, above all, education.¹⁸

Obasanjo was a beneficiary, for in 1952, aged fifteen, he transferred to the Baptist Boys' High School in Abeokuta, partly financed by state grants. Founded in 1923 for 'youths of above average and average ability and little means, including those with no means at all', it was known as the Penny School to Canon Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, the headmaster of the Abeokuta Grammar School that the town's Anglican elite attended.¹⁹ Yet the Baptist School, with stern discipline and compulsory daily worship, had a high reputation and produced many distinguished Nigerians. Obasanjo, somewhat older than the average, stood out in several ways. His father had failed as a farmer and had abandoned his family, leaving his wife to support her children as best she could by trading.²⁰ Obasanjo was now poor in a culture that despised poverty. His future wife, Oluremi, then a younger schoolgirl, remembered their first encounter: 'I looked him over.... He wore no shoes, not even the cheap tennis shoes sold for 7 shilling and 6 pence students wore then. He introduced himself and started to talk to me about beginning a friendship. I didn't take him seriously.'²¹ The school allowed Obasanjo to earn part of his fees by cutting grass, washing plates, and cleaning the premises during holidays. He worked on cocoa and kola farms, fished, collected firewood, and gathered baskets of sand to sell to building contractors.²² A somewhat clumsy youth, never athletic, he made no mark at games but was an enthusiastic boy scout. A teacher remembered him as jealous of his status, 'very self-assertive, a stickler for procedure and would not brook cheating'. He added that Obasanjo was 'a very brilliant student', a judgement echoed by other accounts and confirmed in 1956 by success in the school certificate examination.²³

Although he remembered Awolowo lecturing to the school on 'The sky is the limit', there is no evidence that Obasanjo took any part in Nigerian national politics either as a schoolboy or for several years thereafter. Of the 30 million Nigerians counted in the census of 1952–3, some 5 million were Yoruba, who predominated among the 6 million people of the Western Region. In the Eastern Region, the 7.7 million included 5.5 million listed as Igbo, a linguistic group divided, like the Yoruba, into many smaller units. Over half Nigeria's population (16.1 million) lived in the vast and less developed Northern Region, where the 8.6 million Hausa-Fulani people had been amalgamated in the early nineteenth century into a single Islamic caliphate, subdivided into numerous emirates. Thus the three major ethnic groups – Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa-Fulani – each dominated a region and together composed 63 % of the total population. The remaining 'minority' peoples, particularly numerous in the southern part of the Northern Region (known as the Middle Belt), were divided into many (some said about 250) linguistic and ethnic groups.²⁴ Just as British constitutional engineering stimulated the Yoruba to form the Action Group (AG), so the Igbo-dominated National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), led by Nnamdi Azikiwe, controlled the Eastern Region, while the Northern People's Congress (NPC) represented the caliphate and was led by a member of its ruling family, the Sardauna of Sokoto. To win support, these leaders had to satisfy voters whose concerns were overwhelmingly parochial. Nationalism in

Making a Career (1937–70)

Nigeria during the 1950s was less about ousting the British than about competing to succeed them and devising a mutually acceptable constitution for the successor state, a competition fought out at elections that grew increasingly frenetic, corrupt, and expensive. The final federal election in 1959 was a victory for the NPC, whose larger regional constituency gave it 134 of the 312 seats in the federal assembly, against 89 for the NCNC and only 73 for the AG. Awolowo was not only denied the victory he expected, but his attempt to challenge the 'feudal' NPC's control of the North bred a bitterness on both sides that left him in opposition to the NPC/NCNC coalition formed to govern the new state, a coalition headed by the NPC's federal leader, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, as Prime Minister. Not only did this party rivalry endanger stability, but so did the constitutional structure, which left most internal functions to the three regions but enabled the North, with over half the population, to dominate the federal centre.²⁵ On Independence Day (1 October 1960) the Prime Minister himself confessed privately that 'he was apprehensive of the high hopes built in the world for Nigeria.'²⁶

For younger Nigerians, however, the new world was full of hope and opportunity. Obasanjo was one of them. In 1956, already nineteen years old, he refused to delay his school certificate examination until the school chose to enter him. Instead he borrowed a guinea (£1.1s., or £1.05) from a local bookseller, entered privately, and passed all the papers. The school refused him a testimonial, so he left for the bustling city of Ibadan, eventually finding a teaching job, giving him time to study for the entrance examination to the University College there, the apex of Nigeria's educational system. Although successful, he could not afford the fees and did not know how to obtain a scholarship. Instead, hoping now to become a civil engineer and seeking access to training without the expense of a university, he answered in 1958 an advertisement by the Nigerian army for applicants with a background in science to be trained as officer cadets.²⁷ He was 21 years old and it was the most important decision of his life.

NOTES

1. Onukaba Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time: a biography of Olusegun Obasanjo* (New York, 1997), pp. 31–5. My account of Obasanjo's early life relies heavily on this book, which uses extensive interviews but ends in 1976.
2. Dapo Olaosebikan, *Olusegun Obasanjo: father of new Nigeria* (Lagos, 2002), pp. 3–5; Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, p. 33.
3. Christopher Ehret and Merrick Posnansky (eds), *The archaeological and linguistic reconstruction of African history* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 242; Bassey W. Andah, 'Early urban societies and settlement of the Guinea and savannah regions of West Africa', *West African Journal of Archaeology*, 25, 1 (1995), 139–40.
4. Akin Mabogunje and J.D. Omer-Cooper, *Owu in Yoruba history* (Ibadan, 1971), pp. 30, 51–6; J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious encounter and the making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington, 2000), Ch.3.
5. Saburi O. Biobaku, *The Egba and their neighbours 1842–1872* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 13–18, 24, 54, and map 3; Mabogunje and Omer-Cooper, *Owu*, pp. 44, 94–6.
6. John Iliffe, *Honour in African history* (Cambridge, 2005), Ch.5.
7. Samuel Johnson, *The history of the Yorubas* (London, 1921), p. 395.
8. Mabogunje and Omer-Cooper, *Owu*, p. 100; Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, pp. 31–5.

9. N.A. Fadipe, *The sociology of the Yoruba* (reprinted, Ibadan, 1970), pp. 108–9, 129.
10. Olusegun Obasanjo, *Not my will* (Ibadan, 1990), p. 62.
11. Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, p. 36.
12. Wole Soyinka, *Ake: the years of childhood* (London, 1981).
13. Olusegun Obasanjo, *This animal called man* (Abeokuta [c.1998]), p. 270.
14. Olusegun Obasanjo, 'Obama's election and the needed change', *Guardian*, 6 November 2008.
15. Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, pp. 34–7; *Nigerian Tribune*, 29 October 2006.
16. Frederick Isiotan Fasehun, *Frederick Fasehun: the son of Oodua* (Lagos, 2002), pp. 25, 38.
17. Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, pp. 36, 43.
18. Richard L. Sklar, *Nigerian political parties: power in an emergent African nation* (Princeton, 1963), Chs. 6 and 7.
19. Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, p. 50.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 43–5.
21. Obasanjo, *Bitter-sweet*, p. 14.
22. Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, pp. 43–5, 50–3; *This Day*, 5 and 29 May 1999.
23. *Sunday Concord*, 24 June 1984; *African Guardian*, 5 June 1986, p. 22.
24. Coleman, *Nigeria*, p. 15.
25. The best account is still Coleman, *Nigeria*, part 4.
26. Alan Lennox-Boyd in A.H.M. Kirk-Greene (ed.), *The transfer of power: the colonial administrator in the age of decolonisation* (Oxford, 1979), p. 63.
27. Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, pp. 56–63; Obasanjo, *Bitter-sweet*, pp. 15–17.

3

Nigerian Soldier

Military service suited many aspects of Obasanjo's personality: his sense of discipline and duty, his compulsive activism, his ambition, perhaps his need for a surrogate family and for a cause, which he was to find in the Nigerian nation. When he retired after twenty years' service, he told his assembled colleagues that 'for the total development of man within his environment physically and intellectually, there is no better ground than military training and full military career.'¹

Not all of this can have been clear to him in March 1958 when he enlisted and was sent to the Regular Officers' Training School at Teshie in Ghana. His main concern then was to find a job that would pay him to acquire further training. Owu people were proud of their military past, but unlike many officer cadets, Obasanjo had neither family connections to the army, fascination with military display, nor athletic prowess. What he shared with many was relatively lowly social origin and a readiness to defy his parents, whom he did not even inform.² 'A message just came to us at Abeokuta that we should come and pick his property because he had gone to Angola [Ghana] to join the army', his sister recalled. 'When he came back and was asked why he did not inform our parents before going, he said he was sure that our parents would not have allowed him if he had told them.'³ Opposition by family and friends to an educated young man joining the army was common. 'I was appalled', Obasanjo's girl-friend Oluremi remembered. 'Images of drunken soldiers, drinking *burukutu* and patronising prostitutes in Sobo area of Abeokuta flooded to my mind.'⁴ Not only had the army been an occupying force, but its men were often brutal and illiterate, poorly paid – much less than policemen – and subject to harsh discipline. 'He who joins the army plunges himself into trouble', ran a Yoruba song.⁵ Few of Nigeria's 7,500 soldiers were Yoruba and most of those were in technical branches, while the bulk of foot-soldiers came from northern 'minorities'.⁶ Obasanjo joined this colonial army at exactly the moment when the Nigerian Government took control of it. Only 32 of its 280 officers were then Nigerians, the highest in rank being a major.⁷ Obasanjo was one of the young men recruited to transform the institution.

The first six months of basic training at Teshie were 'pure unadulterated Hell', according to Benjamin Adekunle, Obasanjo's fellow-cadet.⁸ Doubtless the unathletic Obasanjo suffered equally, but Emmanuel Erskine, who shared a room with him, remembered him as 'an extremely hard working, assiduous cadet who was among the few Nigerian cadets selected at the end of the course in September 1958 for further

training at Mons, Aldershot, U.K'.⁹ Whereas Ghana's recent independence seems to have made little impact on Obasanjo, Mons left a more lasting impression, for he found it class-ridden and racist, giving him a disdain for Britain's fading power that was to colour his later policy. Moreover, his mother died while he was in England, followed a year later by his father. And although Obasanjo gained his commission and a certificate in engineering, he failed, unlike Adekunle, to win selection for further training at the more prestigious Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst.¹⁰ It was his first failure.

Back in Nigeria in 1959, Obasanjo was posted to Kaduna as an infantry subaltern with the Fifth Battalion, generally considered Nigeria's best. There he lived for the first time in the savanna lands and Muslim culture of Northern Nigeria and entered happily into regimental soldiering. Nearly thirty years later he idealised this period:

The army itself was happy, young Nigerians were for the first time, being given the opportunity to command units and even battalions. The officer ranks were still dominated by British officers and the few Nigerian officers knew that in the fullness of time, they would inherit commanding positions within their chosen careers. There was camaraderie within the officers corps and a sense of brotherhood was building up. One's ethnic background was never a subject of discussion, and the tendency of those days was to see one's colleagues as officers and gentlemen. This was the legacy bequeathed to the Nigerian Army by the British, and it was felt that it was a legacy worth keeping and defending.¹¹

Obasanjo's Owu origin and detachment from the Yoruba elite may have predisposed him towards a specifically Nigerian nationalism, but it was probably during this time as a young officer at the cusp of national independence that commitment to Nigeria became the guiding passion of his life. As he was to say frequently later, 'I am a Nigerian who happens to be a Yoruba man. I am not a Yoruba man who happens to be a Nigerian.'¹² Other young officers shared his conviction. 'Only in the army do you get true Nigerianism', claimed his friend Chukwuma Nzeogwu.¹³

The young officers gained, too, a notion of military honour that blended with indigenous notions and distinguished the military from civilians, even those enjoying greater education, wealth, or political power. 'I was trained in the classic military mould as an officer and a gentleman,' Obasanjo later recalled.¹⁴ That phrase, a sociologist observed during the 1960s, was 'one of the most frequently heard expressions in the Nigerian Army':

The notion that officers are gentlemen ... is a device of collective military honour, being in this respect not unlike the practice of duelling in the German officer corps. It affirms the professional identity of the individual officer and the corporate identity of the officer corps as a differentiated status group with its own system of values. There is no clearly defined status of gentleman outside the army.¹⁵

For Obasanjo, this notion became a vital distinction between soldiers and politicians, a moral justification for military power that must not be sullied. And along with these principles of patriotism and honour the young officers imbibed a third: the transcendent importance and duty of leadership, which Obasanjo liked to summarise by the military dictum that 'there are no bad soldiers but bad officers'.¹⁶ Exaggeration of the importance of leadership was a trait he shared with many Nigerians.

Making a Career (1937–70)

These ideals were soon tested in the anarchic conditions of the newly independent Congo. Having failed to prepare its colony for independence, the Belgian government undertook a precipitate decolonisation in June 1960. The frail successor regime of Patrice Lumumba almost immediately faced a mutiny by the 25,000-strong Congolese National Army, accompanied by administrative collapse, Belgian military intervention to protect its citizens, and secession by the mineral-rich Katanga province. When Lumumba sought international aid, the United Nations intervened to prevent the Cold War extending into the Congo. Its peacekeepers concentrated not on supporting Lumumba but on restoring order, especially by curbing the mutinous troops. Shortly after Nigeria gained independence in October 1960, Obasanjo's Fifth Battalion joined the peacekeepers, under the command of Colonel Ironsi. They were posted to the eastern Kivu province, with their headquarters at Bukavu.¹⁷

It was a difficult mission. The Nigerians found themselves defending the civilian population, including Belgian settlers, against mutinous Congolese soldiers. Obasanjo's company initially patrolled the countryside from a base at Kasongo, where 'our military operations ... consisted in confidence building, removal of suspicion and dispelling rumours which came in many and varied forms.... We moved from one tense situation to another.'¹⁸ When they rejoined the main force at Bukavu in January 1961, the political situation had deteriorated further, for Lumumba, escaping from captivity and heading for his power base at Kisangani, had been recaptured and murdered.¹⁹ His followers set up a rival government in Kisangani and sought to extend its control across the region of Nigerian operations. On 2 February, after an incident at a road block, the Fifth Battalion had a major engagement with troops from Kisangani, killing 49 Congolese for the death of one Nigerian.²⁰ Three weeks later, Obasanjo, sent to evacuate Catholic missionaries from a station near Bukavu, was waylaid by Congolese troops and bundled into the boot of a car. His captors sought permission to kill him but were ordered to release him. His Company arrested the soldiers responsible, roughed them up, and secured their dismissal. It was probably the most dangerous moment of his life.²¹

Obasanjo left the Congo with the Fifth Battalion in May 1961 and did not return, although other Nigerian troops served there for another three years. 'As young officers, the Congo operation had tremendous implications and made deep impressions on our lives and military careers', Obasanjo recalled:

We were able to compare at that early stage in our military careers the effects of colonization by two colonial powers.... There were only shades of difference in the methods employed.

By and large, both Britain and Belgium were only interested in exploitation of the colonies for the development of their home countries ...

Our Congo experience, however heightened our Pan-African fervour. We realised that Africa divided by outsiders and within itself, would remain perpetually exploited, suppressed and backward.²²

Perhaps the experience also reinforced the young officers' distaste for politicians, whose squabbles had brought the Congo to such chaos,²³ and it left a profound fear of anarchy – especially the anarchy of undisciplined private soldiers – which many officers saw as a warning to their own country. 'When I remember the situation I

saw in Congo 47 years ago ... and the situation the Republic of Congo faces now,' Obasanjo said on Nigerian Independence Day in 2007, 'we must thank God.'²⁴

There was a brighter side. 'Dag's Dash', as the Congolese service allowance was known,²⁵ enabled Obasanjo to buy his first car. He liked to recall that his superiors immediately demanded proof that the money had not been gained corruptly; when satisfied, they replaced it by a car loan that enabled him to invest the £700 in his first parcels of urban land.²⁶ His returning battalion marched proudly through the streets of Lagos, but the press paid it little attention, for 'progressives' who regarded Lumumba as the legitimate leader of the Congo denounced the use of Nigerian troops to kill Congolese and defend European settlers.²⁷ The controversy added to the hostility between Awolowo's Action Group and Abubakar's conservative coalition government. Awolowo was increasingly frustrated. Powerless in opposition in the federal assembly, his attempt to reassert his authority in Yorubaland led to conflict that Abubakar exploited to declare a state of emergency there, arrest Action Group leaders, and impose federal control. Subsequent enquiries revealed extensive misappropriation of public funds and amateurish preparations for armed insurrection, possibly in association with elements in the army. Awolowo was sentenced to ten years imprisonment (later reduced to seven).²⁸

Although Obasanjo later wrote that at independence, 'No Nigerian army officer, in his wildest dreams, would have imagined the army playing any part in political governance',²⁹ this displayed his own political naivety at the time. Several young officers were alert to the possibility – Emeka Ojukwu, commissioned in 1957, later said that he joined the army because he thought Nigeria 'headed for an upheaval and that the army was the place to be when the time came'³⁰ – as also were some politicians, including Abubakar and Awolowo. The Action Group's preparations were the most serious to date, but until 1964, while up to half the army was engaged in the Congo, it had little opportunity for conspiracy.³¹

Beneath the surface of detribalised harmony, the army in which Obasanjo served in the mid 1960s was a snake-pit. Its priority was rapid Africanisation of the officer corps. Between 1960 and 1966, the number of Nigerian officers increased from 50 to 517, while expatriates fell from 237 to nil.³² This drew into the army the ethnic rivalries that permeated Nigerian life. In 1960 about two-thirds of Nigerian officers were Igbo, owing to their high levels of education and relative scarcity of employment opportunities. A year later, the Minister of Defence, a tough northern politician, imposed quotas on new appointments, with 50% to come from the North and 25% each from the East and West. Much pressure was put on northern schoolboys to 'show that they were not women' by enlisting. By 1966, 41% of officers were Igbo, 33% from the North, and 27% from the West (mostly from the newly-excised Mid-West region rather than Yorubaland).³³ This policy embittered many eastern officers. 'Anybody in trousers could become an army officer, so long as he was a Northerner', one later complained.³⁴ Yet in 1966 most northerners were still junior officers while easterners filled the middle ranks as majors and lieutenant-colonels.³⁵

To these tensions were added rivalries between officers trained at Sandhurst, Mons, or elsewhere; disputes over seniority between those with or without university degrees; and especially the divisions of age and culture between senior officers who had risen through the ranks, such as Ironsi, and the younger, better-educated, junior officers recruited as cadets. Obasanjo's friend Nzeogwu scarcely concealed his contempt for Ironsi, who 'joined the army as a tally-clerk and was a clerk most of

Making a Career (1937–70)

the time'. Ironsi, in turn, told Obasanjo, 'You are a good officer but I don't like you because you don't drink. You will always be too sober.'³⁶ Ironsi's appointment in 1965 as the first Nigerian Commander in Chief was due chiefly to his seniority and his eastern origin, at a time when his Yoruba rivals were politically unacceptable to the ruling coalition.³⁷

Obasanjo took little part in these cross-cutting rivalries. Although sharing the widespread dissatisfaction with developments in the army, he was no partisan and, as one of the few Yoruba middle-ranking officers, he stood outside the main rivalry between northerners and easterners. Quiet, thoughtful, reliable, a lifelong teetotaler, and already portly in his later twenties, he was a threat to nobody and progressed steadily through the ranks, reaching major in 1965.³⁸ Most important, on returning from the Congo he transferred to the small Army Engineering Corps and, after a long period in hospital with a stomach ulcer, began a series of training courses in his new profession, spending the year 1962–3 in Britain at the Royal College of Military Engineering, where he won distinction as 'the best Commonwealth student ever'.³⁹ He also married.

Oluremi Akinlawon was the daughter of a station master. Obasanjo first noticed her when they sang together in the Owu Baptist church choir. Despite initial rejection, he pursued her with characteristic persistence from 1956, when he was nineteen and she was fourteen. In 1958, when Obasanjo joined the army, Oluremi told her mother that he was her fiancé. Mother was not keen: Obasanjo was poor, soldiers were disreputable, and Oluremi had other suitors. But Obasanjo wrote persistently from Ghana, Britain, and the Congo, returning each time with presents. Mother was persuaded by his helpfulness, father by Obasanjo's blunt declaration that he had even more grounds to encourage Oluremi's education because he wanted an educated wife to bring up his family. When he left for England in 1962 he was in a position to buy her a ticket to follow him and to find her a room and a training course in London, vetoing her wish to train as a nurse because he thought them wayward. They were married at Camberwell Green Registry Office in June 1963, five days after her twenty-first birthday, without informing their families.⁴⁰

He was an assiduous but domineering husband. 'I was in my early teens when we met, just about to begin my secondary education', Oluremi recalled:

He was in the last lap of his and for seven years we courted before marriage. I was a school leaver of barely six months when we married. He is the only man I have known all my life. I had not the luxury of mixing or experimenting like some other women before I married.

He manipulated me at his will, knowing my experience in the world was limited to him. He raised me, so to speak; gave me the books I should read; dictated the course I studied; sent me to England, paid my fees at school there; hired a flat for me, paid my way back. In short, he took control of my life and moulded me.⁴¹

Yet this was only part of the truth. Oluremi was an educated Yoruba woman from a culture in which women enjoyed an unusual degree of economic independence and married couples often lived apart. She showed her independence when he completed his engineering course in 1963 and asked her to return to Nigeria with him. 'I felt devastated,' she wrote. 'I hadn't achieved my purpose in coming to the U.K. and my husband was already asking me to put an end to my dreams ... I told him I couldn't go back home without something to show for it.' Obasanjo acquiesced. He was expecting to return to Britain for another course, but this fell

through. Instead, Oluremi spent most of the next three years alone in London, visited sporadically by Obasanjo's friends but often lonely and unhappy.⁴²

Back in Nigeria in 1963, Obasanjo took command of the Field Engineering Squadron at Kaduna until 1965, when he was sent abroad again, this time to India, visiting Oluremi in London on the way there and back. He studied at the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and the School of Engineering, Poona, where again he earned excellent reports. None of these courses gave him the professional engineering qualification he coveted, but India made a considerable impact on him. While appalled to see people dying of starvation in the streets of Calcutta, he was impressed by the ethos of hard work, austerity, and piety, which led to reading in the field of comparative religion and enlarged the open-mindedness acquired during his childhood.⁴³

His absence in Britain and India meant that Obasanjo escaped much of the escalating tension within the army and Nigeria as a whole between 1963 and 1965.⁴⁴ With the Action Group fragmented, the dominant northern party had little need to humour its NCNC coalition partner. During 1962–4, the two quarrelled over inflated census figures that showed a sufficient northern majority of population to guarantee the NPC control of the federal legislature, provided it monopolised its region. This it did so effectively in the December 1964 election that the NCNC boycotted the polls and began to plan secession, creating a constitutional crisis that brought the military more directly into politics. While the army command supported Prime Minister Abubakar in a power struggle with President Azikiwe, eastern and radical officers contemplated intervention on Azikiwe's behalf. Many soldiers already resented orders to suppress protest by the Tiv people of the Middle Belt against NPC domination. They were further alienated when the rigging of regional elections in Yorubaland in October 1965 provoked popular violence that the army was again ordered to repress. The Premier of the Eastern Region asked the British Government at this time whether he could expect its support in the event of civil war.⁴⁵ With recent models of military intervention in neighbouring Benin and Togo, discussion of coups was so prevalent late in 1965 that some officers avoided parties lest they be suspected of subversion.⁴⁶ 'There was a kind of paranoia everywhere', an acute observer remembered. 'Everybody was feeling somebody was going to kill them. This was when the army came and hit.'⁴⁷ It was exactly the moment when Obasanjo returned from India.

NOTES

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2. Adinoyi-Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, pp. 63–6; Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian military: a sociological analysis of authority and revolt 1960–67* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 111–14.
3. *This Day*, 17 May 1999.
4. Obasanjo, *Bitter-sweet*, p. 18.
5. Rasheed Olaniyi, *Diaspora is not like home: a social and economic history of Yoruba in Kano, 1912–1999* (Munich, 2008), p. 57.
6. N.J. Miners, *The Nigerian army 1956–1966* (London, 1971), pp. 2, 22–32.

Making a Career (1937–70)

7. Ibid., pp. 45, 49.
8. Abiodun A. Adekunle (ed.), *The Nigeria Biafra war letters: a soldier's story: volume 1* (Atlanta, 2004), p. 38.
9. Emmanuel A. Erskine, 'My heartiest congratulations', in Hans d'Orville (ed.), *Leadership for Africa: in honour of Olusegun Obasanjo on the occasion of his 60th birthday* (New York, 1995), p. 85.
10. Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, pp. 66–71; Adekunle, *War letters*, pp. 40–2.
11. Olusegun Obasanjo, *Nzeogwu: an intimate portrait of Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu* (Ibadan, 1987), p. 44.
12. *This Day*, 12 September 2000.
13. *New Nigerian*, 18 January 1966, quoted in John Olukayode Fayemi, 'Threats, military expenditure and national security: analysis of trends in Nigeria's defence planning, 1970–1990', Ph.D. thesis, King's College, London, 1994, p. 127.
14. *Tell*, 6 July 1998, p. 32.
15. Luckham, *Nigerian military*, pp. 160, 127–8. A classic statement is Patrick A. Anwanah, *The Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970): my memoirs* (Ibadan, 2007), p. 21.
16. *Tell*, 26 April 1993, p. 19.
17. See Festus Ugboaja Ohaegbulam, *Nigeria and the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: a case study of the formative stages of Nigeria's foreign policy* (Tampa, 1982), Chs. 2–5.
18. Obasanjo, *Nzeogwu*, p. 55.
19. Ludo de Witte, *L'assassinat de Lumumba* (Paris, 2000), p. 236.
20. *RNA* [Royal Nigerian Army] *Magazine*, 2, 3 (May 1962), 78–9.
21. Obasanjo, *Nzeogwu*, pp. 63–7; G. Norton, diary, 22–3 February 1961, Norton papers, RH.
22. Obasanjo, *Nzeogwu*, pp. 67–8. Adejunle, by contrast, thought that 'Nigerians were incomparably better off' than Congolese: Adekunle, *War letters*, p. 45.
23. B.J. Dudley, *Instability and political order: politics and crisis in Nigeria* (Ibadan, 1973), p. 98.
24. *Guardian*, 2 October 2007.
25. After Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN Secretary-General.
26. Obasanjo, *This animal*, pp. 193–4.
27. *Nigerian Tribune*, 19 January and 15 February 1961.
28. See Richard L. Sklar, 'Nigerian politics: the ordeal of Chief Awolowo, 1960–65', in Gwendolen M. Carter (ed.), *Politics in Africa: seven cases* (New York, 1966), Ch. 4.
29. Obasanjo, *Nzeogwu*, p. 43.
30. Quoted in John J. Stremlau, *The international politics of the Nigerian Civil War 1967–1970* (Princeton, 1977), p. 42.
31. Miners, *Nigerian army*, pp. 130, 71.
32. Luckham, *Nigerian military*, p. 163.
33. Miners, *Nigerian army*, pp. 115–19; Luckham, *Nigerian military*, p. 244.
34. Ben Gbulie, *Nigeria's five majors: coup d'état of 15th January 1966: first inside account* (Onitsha, 1981), p. 11.
35. Dudley, *Instability*, p. 91.
36. Dennis D. Ejindu, 'Major Nzeogwu speaks', *Africa and the World*, 3, 31 (May 1967), 16; Obasanjo, *Nzeogwu*, p. 60.
37. Luckham, *Nigerian military*, p. 243.
38. Luckham's meticulous *Nigerian military* mentions Obasanjo only once, in a list of promotions.
39. Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, pp. 79–82.
40. Obasanjo, *Bitter-sweet*, pp. 14–26; Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, pp. 54–63, 82.
41. Obasanjo, *Bitter-sweet*, p. 64.
42. Ibid., p. 26.

43. Adinoyi Ojo, *In the eyes of time*, pp. 82–6; Olusegun Obasanjo, *Africa embattled: selected essays on contemporary African development* (Ibadan, 1988), p. 21; Obasanjo, *Not my will*, p. 63.
44. See John P. Mackintosh, *Nigerian government and politics* (London, 1966), Chs. 12 and 13.
45. Treadwell, 'Record of meeting at Premier's Lodge', 18 October 1965, DO 195/283/239.
46. *Newswatch*, 10 April 1989, p. 42.
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4

Coups and Civil War

When Major Obasanjo landed at Kano airport on 13 January 1966, nobody met him. Surprised, he continued to the Engineers' base at Kaduna. Again nobody met him. He telephoned his closest friend, Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu, who promptly arrived to take him home, then left for his office, explaining that they were conducting night training exercises: 'Operation Leopard'. The acting commander of the engineers had left a note telling Obasanjo that he could not take over until 15 January. Obasanjo decided to catch up on his unit's files. The night of 14–15 January was disturbed by explosions and gunfire, but when he woke, everything was silent. Puzzled, he made for army headquarters. Nzeogwu was there, with a bandaged neck wound and his arm in a sling. He had just assassinated the Premier of Northern Nigeria.¹

The coup d'état had been planned since August 1965, first by young officers in southern Nigeria clustered around Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, then drawing in Nzeogwu and others in the North. Accounts differ, but there were probably five core conspirators: four Igbo and one Yoruba, including several of the best educated, best trained, and most politically conscious middle-ranking officers in the army. They planned to sweep away the political and military leadership by simultaneous strikes in Lagos, Kaduna, and perhaps other regional capitals. 'Our enemies', Nzeogwu proclaimed, 'are the political profiteers, swindlers, the men in the high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten per cent, those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers or VIPs of waste, the tribalists, the nepotists.'² Whether these targets were to be killed or merely arrested remained unclear, as was the regime to replace them.³

When Obasanjo saw him early on 15 January, Nzeogwu was triumphant that he had 'gunned down the bloody tyrant'.⁴ Kaduna, the northern military headquarters, was in his hands. News of events elsewhere came in slowly, by telephone, and it was bad. In Ibadan, Captain Nwobosi had killed the unpopular Western Premier, Akintola, but failed to control the city or its garrison. In Kano, the battalion commander, Lt Col Ojukwu, refused to be involved.⁵ In Lagos, the results were disastrous. Ifeajuna and his men had shot several senior officers and abducted (and later killed) the Federal Prime Minister, but they had not won over the infantry battalion at nearby Ikeja or prevented the Commander-in-Chief, Ironsi, from using it to control the capital. Next day the rump of the civilian government transferred power to Ironsi.⁶