MILITARY LEADERSHIP OF GENERAL YAKUBU GOWON DURING THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR, 1967-1970

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ABSTRACT

General Yakubu Gowon's military leadership revealed so much about his personality and leadership qualities. So much has been written on the Nigerian-Biafran war and the military administration of General Yakubu Gowon 1966 to 1975. However, much of what has been written focuses on the civil war and his policies after the war; whiling neglecting the Military leadership style of Gowon during the civil war. Some other authors that have written on Gowon's leadership made certain claims and revelations that are worth reexamining. While some writers of Igbo extractions believes that Gowon was sole reason behind why they could not realize their aspiration of self-determination, others from the Nigerian side hailed Gowon for upholding the unity and oneness of Nigeria. Claims of marginalization and disempowerment of Ndi-Igbo should be critically examined particularly in the light of the 3Rs and No Victor No Vanquished. The paper relies on written and unwritten sources; including published journal articles and article in edited books. Other sources include theses, dissertation, newspapers, magazines and wide range of sources including oral and archival materials obtained from libraries and through oral interviews. The findings of the paper reveal the essence of Gowon's military leadership in the manner he handled the civil war and his post-civil war economic and social policies and national development.

Introduction

It is imperative to begin by examining the assertion that leaders are made that they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price all of us must pay to achieve any worthwhile goal[129] in the light of Gowon's military leadership during the Nigerian civil war. Military leadership is seen as the most basic and fundamental substance in the military profession, without which progressive developmental professionalism will remain elusive and unrealistic. To lead effectively, leaders are expected to provide guidance, innovation, commitment to the objectives and aspirations of their followers. Such leaders must have an above-average intelligence, command respect, possess strength of character and be emotionally stable.

These qualities can be acquired mostly through quality education; this means that leaders are made essentially. Such a person must be humble enough to make mistakes and accept responsibilities for them; he/she must be shrewd, cunning and calculating; adventurous and be willing to experiment and venture into the unknown.[130] Leadership affects everything and everyone. As a fundamental aspect of human existence, leadership is germane to the steady growth and development of any organised human enterprise.[131] Military leadership is highly centralised, and this has made its study grow in leaps and bounds. However, it should be noted that when assessing the root causes of Nigeria's problems, the military leadership cannot be exonerated.

Gowon's Military Leadership

Gowon's military leadership style hinged on decisiveness and action when it became glaring a civil war was imminent.[132] The essence of leadership, especially military leadership is embracing the culture of duty and honour as the core basis for the Armed Forces. The military is a calling with numerous challenges and complex choices which influence leadership development. The basis; that is the bedrock of the military is for leadership to meet with challenges and not lose face; even if it requires death for honour. Gowon earned the trust and respect of Nigerians and the international community due to his experience and competence in handling issues that could have resulted in the disintegration of the country.[133] He had an honest understanding what to do in response to the Biafran agitation and was able to earn the trust and confidence of his followers across the country even in parts

[129]Harry S. Laver and Jeffery J. Matthews, The Art of Command: Military Leadership from George Washington to Colin Power, Kentucky: The University Press, 2008, 2.

[130]Jega, A., "Leadership in Nigeria Trade Union Movement" in Labour Factsheet, Vol.2. No.5September-October, 1997, 17-24.

[131]Okpeh Ochayi Okpeh, Jr. (ed.), "Leadership Development for Trade Union Officials", *Labour Unionism, Leadership and Development in Nigeria*, Kaduna: Nigerian Defence Academy Press, 9.

[132]Adamu Liman Ciroma, *Testing the Grit of the Public Service*, Ibadan: Safari Book Ltd, 2013.

[133]Robert Kiyosaki, *8 Lessons in Military Leadership for Entrepreneurs*, Scottsdale: Plata Publishing LLC, 64.

of the purported Biafran region. He was able to convince his troops that he was worthy of their followership. His personality and the persuasive skills inspired and convinced the troops to fight relentlessly in defence of one Nigeria. Gowon responded to every situation in its merit, using his judgment to decide the best course of action and the style of leadership appropriate for the situation of the time.[134]

It was General Douglas MacArthur who once said that "it is fatal to enter a war without the will to win and without the resolve of a leader to sustain a battle.[135] In addition to this, the will to win by any army is traceable to leadership and its resolve. The decisive leadership qualities of Gowon prove the assertion that military power wins battles, but the spiritual power wins wars and this flows from above down.[136] Although Gowon did not envisage a war of the magnitude that took place during the period under consideration, his leadership had the driving spirit to ensure that Nigeria remained united insoluble under God. Therefore, one of the qualities that is worthy of note is the fact that leadership is hard work, preparation and learning from failure.[137]

General Gowon's first response to the secessionists' agitation by declaring a police action instead of outright war developed a kind of trust and confidence on him, by which he was able to acquire integrity, become determined and adapt to the changing situation. His ability to exhibit these leadership qualities enabled him to deliver on the promises made or demands put forward by the followers that Nigeria must be one and united. Gowon acquired leadership skills and qualities through the process of organising the people. Therefore, good leadership requires education, self-examination, experience, training and struggles. As a leader, one must continuously work on their performance, do self-criticism and learn from others' errors to improve upon the practice of leadership based on self-understanding and self-criticism[138].

Effective and efficient leadership is far from just office-holding because an office-holder can attain the peak on the privileges of the office, with some form of power and authority, and still fail to be a good leader. Leadership is not gotten through imposition; therefore, Gowon's leadership was on the basis of the acceptance by the people, which was the basis of wide followership his administration enjoyed. An essential element of Gowon's successful military leadership includes his innovative

[134]Kwasau A. Ayuba, "Military Leadership and Complex Military Operations", in CCC Osakwe, OE Tangban, AO Ahmed and LO Udeagbala (eds.), *War, Society and Leadership in Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Brigadier General Shuaibu Ibrahim,* NDA Press, Kaduna, 2020, 263.

[135]Robert Kiyosaki, 8 Lessons in Military Leadership for Entrepreneurs.

[136]Robert Kiyosaki, 8 Lessons in Military Leadership for Entrepreneurs.

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[138]Fashina, O., "Principles, Framework, Attitude and Models of Leadership" Paper Presented at a Leadership Workshop Organized by the Academic Staff of Universities (ASUU), Hill Station Hotel Jos, October 13th-15th, 2005.

approaches to problem solving, unshakable determination to succeed, high standards for performance and accountability. His military leadership was tenacious in adapting various means of operation in uncertain and complex environment. As the commander in chief, he was able to evolve strategies for adaptability because of the fluid nature of the military tasks and situations. In line with McMaster's assertion, the success of Gowon's military leadership was on the basis of his thoroughness, preparation for command, along with creative intellect, physical courage, and sheer resolve to keep Nigeria one. One of the characteristics of Gowon's leadership was his rapid and accurate appraisal of the officers under his command and control. His diligence in defending the sovereignty of Nigeria motivated his men to strive harder in serving the nation. He was diligent, thorough, and thoughtful of them; this constantly provided opportunities to do something for the nation.[139]

In Nigeria, as the war raged on, Gowon was always committed to the sanctity of the Nigerian union and serially maintained that the war was not for the extermination of the Igbo tribe but to "crush Ojukwu rebellion" and to 'preserve the territorial integrity and unity of Nigeria' among other reasons. He was clear-minded and vigorously pursued it to a logical conclusion. Gowon stressed that 'small successor states' which 'would be victims of perpetual war and misery and neo-colonialism. Our duty was clear. And we are, today, vindicated'.[140]Gowon typified the exemplary officer and gentleman in posturing and action all through the war period. He was able to instill confidence, skill and pride by his personal leadership style. He fully understood that he had to model appropriate behaviour and promote high standards of conduct, including personal integrity and compassion even in battle. His personal reputation among soldiers (troops) and officer's corps was crucial for the army that had little to celebrate when the tide was not in their favour. There were moments of uncertainties and moments of craze incompetence but in all, Gowon stayed the course, maintained that in the final analysis, victory was sure. His commitment to the unity of the country was his greatest motivation and his sense and devotion to duty held him through the darkest period.[141]

His military administration paid glowing tribute to the 'gallant' and loyal troops whose labour made it possible to end the rebellion and called on all Nigerians to join the building rebuilding of a greater nation into a proud monument forever. Expectation and prediction of a bloodbath was unfounded as Gowon consciously stirred the nation to the path of genuine reconciliation, peace and harmony. In extending a hand of fellowship to the erstwhile secessionists, Gowon emphasized

[139]Thomas Holcomb, "The Major-General Commandant's Speech to the Graduating Class, Basic School, 1937," Marine Corps Gazette, May 1937, 41.

[140]Broadcast to the Nation on January 15, 1970.

[141]Ambassador John Campbell, Former United States Ambassador to Nigeria.

the urgent need to recommence in greater earnest the task of healing the nation's wounds; noting the repeated desire for reconciliation in full equality once the secessionist regime abandoned secession. He solemnly repeated the guarantees of a general amnesty for those misled into rebellion.

He guaranteed the personal safety of everyone who submits to federal authority and the security of life and property of all citizens in every part of Nigeria, and equality in political rights. In addition, the right of every Nigerian to reside and work wherever he chooses in the Federation as equal citizens of one united country was also guaranteed; and it was only right that we should henceforth respect each other. He urged all Nigerians to exercise civic restraint and use our freedom taking into full account the legitimate rights and needs of the other man. There is no question of second-class citizenship in Nigeria.[142]

Gowon's Leadership and the Civil War

Gowon was cautious in ordering full scale war; he was deliberate in seeking for alternative avenues for the resolution of the crisis even when others within the government wanted an all-out immediate war. Perhaps it was because of that that he ordered the war to be fought with a code of conduct.[143] He justified the restraints exhibited by the FMG by citing the fact that thousands of Igbos had lived and worked in peace during the war particularly in Lagos and elsewhere as proof that they were entitled and has a shared right to the national patrimony. Former American ambassador to Nigeria, John Campbell and Matthew Page wrote that;

The 1967-1970 civil wars often called the Biafran War, was a national tragedy. Its impact on the national psyche is comparable to that of 1861 and 1865 American Civil War. Nigeria's recovery, however, was much faster, thanks to the leadership of chief of state Yakubu Gowon and his policy of national reconciliation, helped along by the postwar oil boom, which provided the funding necessary for reconstruction.[144]

The reconstruction, reconciliation and rehabilitation were faster due to the leadership of Gowon. However, after the Gowon's administration was toppled, the Igbo people since witnessed a level of marginalization and disempowerment which cast questions as to the motive behind the 3Rs policy. It should be noted however, that Gowon had real intentions of reintegrating the Igbo without any form or bias; but those who wanted him to extinguish the Igbo have not forgiven the Igbo. Hence, there is high level mistrust exhibited against them and therefore, some believe that the Igbo should never again be trusted with national leadership. Gowon exhibited a high sense of civility in

[142]Broadcast to the Nation on January 15, 1970

[143]Chido Onumah (Author/Journalist)

[144]John Campbell and Mathew, T. Page, Nigeria: What Everyone Needs to Know, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 31.

handling of the war and the posturing won him a lot of admirers across national frontiers as peace and security are Siamese twins for socio-economic development of Kaduna metropolis.[145] Therefore, the idea that every war has a winner is deeply embedded in the fact that wars or violence does not and cannot impose lasting peace. Therefore, General Gowon's Federal Military Government, while pursuing military option to crushing the Biafran insurrection, maintained his willingness to engage in a peaceful resolution of the conflict to avoid continuing loss in human and material resources.

Gowon was likened to Abraham Lincoln and hailed as a path finder to lasting peace and stability in Nigeria. His measured strides were also in sync with his political statements and actions; though a young officer by the time of his ascendancy but his matured handling of the events leading to and even the war and post-war integration process established his leadership acumen beyond doubts. He stated, 'Let it be our resolution that all those dead shall have died not in vain. Let the greater nation we shall build be their proud monument forever.'[146] It was reported that some of General Gowon's lieutenants wanted reprisals and trials for the secessionists but Gowon. He maintained that it was needless and hastens the re-integration process. It was courageous of him to have stamped his foot down on this matter. Some have alleged that he is indecisive but Admiral Wey differs. Admiral Wey said of Gowon, 'Gowon is a gentleman and he has a mind of his own. But he was over-considerate'.[147] His seemingly maturity and statesmanship were an intrinsic value in fostering the peace process.

The Daily Times editorial of January 15, 1970 returned a dazzling assessment of the General. It notes that General Gowon was truly moved by Abraham Lincoln's words at a similarly crucial stage in American's history: 'we are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriotic grave and hearth stone all over this broad land, will but swell the chorus of the federation when again touched, assuredly, they will be, by the better angels of our nature'.[148] His fame on the strength of his magnanimity spread both within and beyond Nigeria. The magazine further went on tostate:

Whatever else he might be guilt of, Mr. Gowon will go down in history as the leader who kept the nation together during a bloody Civil War. Ironically, some of his rash colleagues, who lobbied him unsuccessfully to launch a vendetta after

[145]Amiara Solomon Amiara, Uche Henry Jacob and Chiamaka M. Okoye, "Security, Peace and Natinal Development: The Nigerian Question, 1967-2015", in Terhemba Wuam & Philibus Audu Nwamagyi (eds.), *Perspectives in History, Development and International Relations: Festschrift for Professor Ibrahim James,* Department of History, Kaduna State University, Kaduna, 2018, 279.

[146]Broadcast to the Nation on January 15, 1970.

[147]Sunday Punch, Lagos, April 27, 1980, 5.

[148] This Week, July 13, 1987, 9.

the war, are currently parading themselves about the nation as true nationalists.[149]

Many messages of appreciation took cognisance of his leadership handling of both the war and especially of the post-war reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts. The New York Times was effervesced in praise of Gowon too. It wrote, 'Well, a Civil War broke out in 1967 and it was a bloody one. But then there were few people, at the end, who did not agree that the war would have been far bloodier if the temperament of the man at the helm of affairs had been of a different sort. The Civil War ended in 1970, and Gowon practised what he had always preached, viz, his disinterest in executing even the worst offenders in the 'enemy' camp…This singular act won Mr. Gowon lots of friends all over the world,…and above all, he regained the confidence of eight million 'Biafrans' who had been fed with endless stories of Gowon's 'genocidal' tendencies for upwards of thirty months.[150] Throughout the entire period of the war, not once did Gowon goad his troops into senseless or wanton destruction of lives and properties. He encouraged maximum restraint as the watchword, noting that the army must remember that some of the soldiers Lt. Col. Ojukwu has now forced to oppose you were once your old comrades-in-arms and would like to remain so. According to him, they must therefore treat them with respect and dignity, except for anyone hostile to you.[151]

General Gowon was insistent on forging a nation where needless division would fester, even after the series of blood baths and civil war, which had dragged on for thirty months with the attendant sufferings and miseries. This much, he alluded to in his reconciliation speech dubbed "Gowon's Victory Message to the Nation". He said, "Citizens of Nigeria, it is with a heart full of gratitude to God that I announce to you that today marks the formal end of the civil war". In his policy for reconciliation, Gowon boldly and sincerely proclaimed another reconciliatory policy of 3Rs.[152]

No Victor, No Vanquished

In terms of post-civil war peace initiative and integration, Gowon's regime was the first to inaugurate such plans, as a result of the surrender of the Biafran troops on the 12th January 1970. The first initiative was the declaration made by Gowon of the No Victor – No Vanquished speech and pronouncement of the government. The pronouncement was made in a climate that did not support its growth as elites from both

[149]Humphrey Orjiakor, 73Years, Former Nigerian Ambassador, Abuja, October, 2020.

[150]Okon E. Okon, Biafra War Revisited: Civil War May not be a Bad Thing, Abuja: National Defence College Printing Press, 2017, 334.

[151]Michael Omolewa, 76 Years, Professor, Lagos, October, 2020.

[152]Daily Times, January 17, 1970, 3.

sides had great suspicion that impeded on their ability to build consensus.[153]

Gowon's No Victor, No Vanquished was an indication of statesmanship expressed through the spirit of forgiveness and nationalism. However, this declaration must be critically analysed to ascertain how realistic the intention behind this statement has been achieved. This state must be criticized in relation with the relationship between successive Nigerian leadership and the people of the defunct Republic of Biafra. For example, some view the declaration of No Victor No Vanquished as a smokescreen behind acts of injustices and cruelty against the Igbo. The injustices continued till the fourth Republic and is still manifesting in various ways. For example, it has been argued that no Igbo have become President since the civil war even after the so-called reconstruction, rehabilitation and reintegration.[154]

The barrage of atrocities against the Igbo even after the civil war propelled some to argue that the Federal government continued the war through other means and tagged the 3Rs to mean 3S': Strangulation! Strangulation!! Strangulation!!![155] The concept of victory is central in nearly all analyses of warfare and the use of military power. It was apparent by the tail end of 1969, that Biafra was tottering on the brink of collapse and this reality forced the Biafran leadership to embark on a search for peace.[156]

General Gowon promised that there were no plans for "Nuremberg trials" to punish the leadership of Biafra secession instead at a meeting with the diplomatic community in Lagos, he stated, "I wish to reiterate here that there is general amnesty for those who were misled". Gowon went on to quote the war time American president, Abraham Lincoln, he said, 'binding up the nation's wounds.' He further consolidated on his avowed commitment to a peaceful resolution to the conflict by announcing that all civil servants and officials of public corporations in what was known as Biafra were reinstated. Furthermore, General Gowon announced that none shall be awarded any medal for exemplary acts of gallantry in the face of fire nor will the Biafran leadership pay for reparations.[157]

[153]Abutu Freeman Adikwuoyi & Philibus Audu Nwamagyi, "Gowon's Post-Civil Mechanism, National Integration and Development", in Chukwuma CC Osakwe, Adam Okene Ahmed, Lawrence Udeagbala and Philibus Audu Nwamagyi (eds.), *Evolving Trends in Socio-Economic and Military History: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Ojong Echum Tangban*, NDA Publishers, 2020, 207-216.

[154]Larab Tangshak Ayuba, "Disempowerment and Marginalization of the Igbo after the Civil War: An Assessment of the 3 Rs'", in Armstrong Matiu Adejo (ed.), *The Nigerian Civil War: Forty Years After- What Lessons?,* Aboki Publishers, Makurdi-Ibadan-Abuja, 2008, 304.

[155]Ohaneze Ndi-Igbo- "Violation of Human and Civil Rights of Ndi-Igbo in the Federation of Nigeria, 1966-1999: A Call for Reparation and Appropriate Restitution" Submitted to the Oputa Panel, October, 1999, 29.

[156]Second National Development Plan, 1970-1974, Lagos: Federal Ministry,

Sunday Punch, Lagos, April 27, 1980.

[157]Second National Development Plan, 1970-1974.

Conclusion

Leadership is a research area and a practical skill that encompasses the ability of an individual or organisation to lead or guide other individuals, teams, or entire organisations. Leadership is a process of social influence in which a person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task.[158] Leadership is a matter of intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage, and discipline. Yakubu Gowon exhibited these qualities in his leadership style during the Nigerian civil war. Yakubu Gowon exemplified strategic military leadership. During the period of his leadership provided effective strategy for managing civil differences and kept Nigeria one. It was glaring in his task of re-building a country where the bricks of hatred and bitterness will be removed required sound re-engineering and tact to achieve. His government quickly stepped up and provided relief materials for the suffering peoples of the East and Nigerians as whole. Shelter, food and medicines were provided for the war ravaged and affected population in the area of rehabilitation and re-construction, to provide or restore electricity, water, transport and communications. His administration brought the beauty of diversity in national discourse and nation building.

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