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When the garrison state deploys: Reassessing Nigeria‟s ECOMOG interventions, 1990-1999

Abstract

Nigeria played an outsized role in multilateral peacekeeping-turned-combat missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s. This article seeks to interrogate how the politicization of the Nigerian armed forces in the post-colonial era influenced these missions. This article makes the argument that, among other considerations, the military rulers Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha initiated interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, respectively, to ―coup-proof‖ their regimes by keeping the military occupied in distant countries. With their focus on regime security, neither Babangida nor Abacha developed a coherent strategy for the interventions, which undermined the operational effectiveness and morale of Nigerian forces in the theatre. This study traces the politicization of the Nigerian military and its struggles in ECOMOG to the nature of the colonial garrison state and the incomplete transition from colonial-era security forces to a post-colonial ―national‖ military in Nigeria, a challenge that still bedevils the country to this day.

Key words: The garrison state, ECOMOG, security, Nigeria

Lorsque l'État de garnison se déploie: réévaluation des interventions de l'ECOMOG au Nigeria, 1990-1999

Résumé

Le Nigéria a joué un rôle énorme dans les missions multilatérales de maintien de la paix transformées en combat au Libéria et en Sierra Leone dans les années 1990. Cet article cherche à interroger comment la politisation des forces armées nigérianes à l'époque postcoloniale a influencé ces missions. Cet article fait valoir que, entre autres considérations, les dirigeants

militaires Ibrahim Babangida et Sani Abacha ont lancé respectivement des interventions au Libéria et en Sierra Leone pour « protéger » leurs régimes en maintenant l'armée occupée dans des pays lointains. En mettant l'accent sur la sécurité du régime, ni Babangida ni Abacha n'ont développé une stratégiecohérente pour les interventions, ce qui a sapél'efficacité opérationnelle et le moral des forces nigérianes sur le terrain. Cette étude retrace la politisation de l'armée nigériane et ses luttes au sein del'ECOMOG à la nature de l'État colonial de garnison et à la transition incomplète des forces de sécurité de l'ère coloniale à une armée «nationale» postcoloniale au Nigéria, un défi qui tourmente encore le pays jusqu''à ce jour.
Mots-clés: *Etat-garnison, ECOMOG, Sécurité, Nigeria*

Introduction

As Nigeria‘s internal security has deteriorated significantly over the past decade, the Nigerian military has become an ever-more important institution (or, perhaps more accurately, a set of institutions with unique cultures among the services) for both academics and ordinary Nigerian citizens alike to understand. Of course, the Nigerian military has *always* been an important institution to study to gain an understanding of Nigeria for the simple reason that perhaps no other institution has been as central to Nigeria‘s history as an independent state as the military. Indeed, for the better part of three decades (1966 to 1999, withtwo brief interludes of civilian rule), the military *was* the state.

Much of the existing historiography on the Nigerian military, as well as analyses and commentary on the military‘s activities in the present-day, focuses on the military‘s domestic roles within Nigeria, and for good reason. The military‘s first major taste of war in the independence era was the civil war that pitted the federal government against the self-proclaimed Igbo-majority

state of Biafra between 1967 and 1970; for nearly three decades after the war‘s conclusion, successive military regimes ensured that the armed forces concerned themselves primarily with matters of internal security and maintaining the military- dominated political order; and in the present day, Nigeria‘s primary national security challenges stem not from foreign nation-state adversaries but from internal threats in the forms of insurgency, terrorism, criminal violence, and various forms of secessionist or ethnonationalist agitation.

Nigeria‘s interventions in the Liberian and subsequently the Sierra Leonean civil war in the 1990s therefore offer a fascinatingcase study through which to examine the capabilities and limitations of the Nigerian military for a simple reason: They mark the only time that a Nigerian government, military or civilian, deployed the military far from Nigeria‘s borders in a largely unilateral manner to intervene in conflicts which posed no immediate threat to the Nigerian political regime.

In August 1990, the government of the military leader Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) sent forces into a chaotic civil war in Liberia (which manifested in different stages between 1989 and 1997) while his successor, General Sani Abacha (1993-1998), similarly intervened in Liberia‘s troubled neighbour, Sierra Leone, in February 1998. On paper, these were multilateral peacekeeping missions conducted under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a regional body initiated by Nigeria in 1975 to promote West Africa‘s economic and political integration. Yet Nigeria provided the overwhelming majority of funding and forces to the ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) missions(Siollun, 2013, p. 128), and Nigeria‘s contingents unilaterallyengaged in operations that went well beyond peacekeeping and into the realm of ―peace enforcement,‖ a euphemism for combat operations. Nigeria was ultimately less of a peacekeeper than a party to both conflicts.

ECOMOG represents an anomaly in Nigerian history that remains poorly understood: When Nigerian forces landed in the Liberian capital, Monrovia, in 1990 it marked only the second time that Nigeria had initiated an expeditionary mission effectively on its own accord. But unlike the first such mission, a short-lived peacekeeping mission in Chad conducted under the auspices of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) between 1981 and 1982, Nigeria‘s ECOMOG mission was far removed from Nigerian borders, involved intense combat, and lasted for nearly adecade. Then, in February 1998, Nigeria again launched an effectively unilateral intervention in Sierra Leone, where Nigerian forces deployed—amid protest from other ECOWAS members— to unseat the country‘s ruling junta and wage war against a rebel group under the auspices of ‒ECOMOG II‖ (Kabia, 2009, p. 111). Nigeria had participated in UN peacekeeping missions prior to ECOMOG and would continue to do so in the 2000s, notably in Darfur – but, as this study will show, the ECOMOG interventions were quite distinct from conventional UN peacekeeping missions. Within Nigerian history, ECOMOG thus represents an unprecedented, and to date unmatched, deployment of military force abroad.

The central argument of this study runs contrary to the much of the existing literature on ECOMOG, which suggests that the interventions were the more-or-less benign initiative of a regional hegemon that sought to stabilise its distant neighbours and professionalize its military through peacekeeping. Rather, this author argues that ECOMOG was the product of the paranoia and cynicism of Nigerian military regimes that had neglected to build a professional fighting force in favour of accruing political power and wealth. As a consequence, the military‘s performance in Liberia and Sierra Leone was, for lack of a better word, mixed. Even as Nigerian units often performed effectively in combat on the tactical and operational levels of war (especially when compared to the performance of other ECOMOG contingents), Nigeria‘s military-political leadership failed to develop an

overarching strategy or even a coherent set of objectives to guide troops in the theatre and channel resources towards achievable ends, thus repeatedly leaving Nigerian forces aimless, confused, and under-resourced.

This study begins with a review of the existing literature on ECOMOG as well as a brief review of the literature the post-colonial garrison state, which serves as the conceptual framework for this study. The article then proceeds to an examination of the colonial roots of the Nigerian Armed Forces and an overview of military rule up to 1990. It then reassesses the rationale for launching ECOMOG, arguing, contra most of the existing literature, that Babangida and especially Abacha used ECOMOG to ―coup-proof‖ their regimes by keeping the military occupied and appointing or removing field commanders based on political considerations. The penultimate section of this study examines the battlefield performance of Nigerian ECOMOG forces. The author argues that while the military performed effectively in certain regards, years of politicization and corruption coupled with a lack of combat experience since Nigeria‘s civil war (1967-70)ultimately left the military unprepared and poorly resourced for confronting intense insurgencies in Liberia and Sierra Leone, as detailed later in this article. This study concludes with some thoughts about the lessons that the Nigerian military has learned from ECOMOG as well as some of the enduring challenges that Nigeria‘s military institutions face as a result of their colonial roots.

This paper draws on primary sources such as contemporaneous media and NGO reports regarding ECOMOG as well asinterviews conducted in 2021 with eight individuals who were either veterans of ECOMOG or military officers who were serving in the military governments of the time (these individuals‘identities have been anonymised). Documents were also sourced from the ECOWAS Commission in Abuja, Nigeria‘s National Defence College (previously the National War College), and other

Nigerian military sources. By taking advantage of primary sources, this study seeks to highlight some of the perspectives of the soldiers who were at the forefront of these dangerous and ill- defined missions.

ECOMOG and African Military Interventions: A Review

Despite constituting a unique period in Nigeria‘ military history, academic literature on ECOMOG has largely overlooked the specifically Nigerian characteristics of these interventions. Most of the literature has examined ECOMOG as a case study of the potential for African-led peacekeeping missions or examined the interventions under the framework of international law and collective security mechanisms (see for example Abbas, 2000; Obi, 2009; and Amaraegbu, 2013). John Kabia‘s book, *Humanitarian Intervention and Conflict Resolution in West Africa*, aptly analyses ECOWAS‘s diplomatic efforts in Liberia and Sierra Leone but offers fewer details regarding ECOMOG‘s military campaigns (see Kabia, 2009). There are numerous works on the history of Nigeria‘s military regimes, with Akintunde Akinkunmi‘s *Hubris* (see Akinkunmi, 2018) and Max Siollun‘s two-volume *Soldiers of Fortune* standing out for their insights. However, these studies have focused on the internal political dynamics of military rule rather than on Nigeria‘s foreign policy, overlooking ECOMOG in the process.

Works that synthesize these two approaches—an analysis of regional political and security dynamics alongside an examination of Nigeria‘s military regimes—are few and far between. Adekeye Adebajo‘s book, *Liberia"s Civil War* (2002), and his chapter on ECOMOG in his co-edited volume on Nigeria‘s post-Cold War foreign policy, *Gulliver"s Troubles* (2008), offer the best attempts to answer the critical question of *why* Nigeria intervened in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Adebajo argues that regional stability was in Nigeria‘s national interest and that Babangida and subsequently Abacha may have also personally sought to improvetheir global standing as leaders. Adebajo is quick to dismiss

concerns over regime security, however, as a factor that might have influenced the decisions of Babangida and later Abacha to intervene. Meanwhile, there are limited works dedicated to the strategic and operational dimensions—that is to say, the battlefield performance—of Nigeria's ECOMOG forces. The best sources for such insights are contemporaneous reports from media and international NGOs and the memoirs of Nigerian ECOMOG veterans, most of which are out of print or in limited circulation within Nigeria.

The post-colonial garrison state: A conceptual framework for understanding Nigerian military histor(ies)

This study seeks to contribute to the existing understanding of ECOMOG by studying the missions within the *longue durée* of Nigeria's military history stretching back to the colonial era. In doing so, the study employs a theoretical framing of the post-colonial garrison state in Africa. This theoretical framing is primarily influenced by two bodies of literature.

First, there are a number of valuable works that examine the relationship between warfare and state development (or lack thereof) in Africa such as *Warfare in African History*, in which Richard Reid suggests that the geography and climate of Sub-Saharan Africa have historically prevented the use of cavalry and pack animals, precluding pre-colonial states from projecting power over long distances (see Reid, 2012, pp. 1-17); JeffreyHerbst's *States and Power in Africa*, which draws on the work of Charles Tilly (―War made the state and the state made war‖) to argue that a lack of inter-state warfare in Africa has impeded state development (Herbst, 2000, pp. 11-31); and Jean-François Bayart's *The State in Africa* (1993) and Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject* (2018), two classic works of post-colonial studies that each show, in their own ways, how colonial rulecreated African regimes that are not dependent on their citizensfor legitimacy.

A separate but related body of literature examines the phenomenon of the post-colonial garrison state in which military officers dominate the civilian bureaucracy, creating a state that appears strong on the surface but is actually quite brittle due to the security architecture being focused on political rather than national security objectives. Martin Thomas's *Violence and Colonial Order* (which features Nigeria as a case study) offers perhaps the best examination of how the groundwork for such garrison states was laid in the colonial era. Per Thomas, the purpose of colonial police forces was not to defend the colony against external attack but to assist the colonizing government and their business partners in extracting resource rents through the exploitation of indigenous labour. Given the pressures to reduce colonial administrative budgets, police forces were concentratedin the core commercial regions of the colony, weakening thestate's capacity to monopolize violence in the periphery (Thomas,2012, pp. 1-14). The best works on the post-colonial garrisonstate, however, do not focus on Sub-Saharan Africa. Rather, these works, such as Ayesha Jalal's *The State of Martial Rule* as well asTan Tai Yong's *The Garrison State* and Khan et al.'s article (see Khan et al., 2021), explore the different aspects of the post- colonial garrison state in Pakistan and Egypt, which are held up astwo quintessential case studies of the phenomena.

As this study argues, Nigeria has been a garrison state of one form or another throughout its history. However, there is a crucial difference between Nigeria on the one hand and Pakistan and Egypt on the other. Pakistan has faced a potentially existential threat from India throughout its history, while Egypt spent decades in near-constant conflict with Israel. Nigeria, by contrast, has historically lacked any external adversaries that would incentivize it to maintain a high degree of military competence (unsurprisingly, Nigeria features as a prominent case study in Herbst's work). ECOMOG could have conceivably served as a substitute for inter-state warfare in terms of spurring the military'sprofessionalization, but this was not to be the case.

A History of the Nigerian Army, c. 1861 to 1990: From Glover‟s Hausas to the "army of anything goes"

The Nigerian military‘s inception was inorganic insofar as the British authorities cobbled together an array of forces on an ad hoc basis throughout their imperial conquests of Nigeria rather than entering the lands that would become Nigeria with a comprehensive plan for raising an indigenous army. As the British began their incursions into southern Nigeria in the 1860s, they recruited motely militias drawn from ethnic groups that had reputations for martial prowess. Most famous were ―Glover‘s Hausas,‖ escaped Muslim slaves from the north who were employed by Lagos Colony governor John Hawley Glover to protect the Royal Niger Company‘s palm oil plantations along the coast (see Siollun, 2021, pp. 103-118). After the company lost its charter in 1900, the militia came under the auspices of colonial authorities who continued employing Hausas for internal policing roles and conscripted them into the newly established West African Frontier Force, the first ―organized‖ Nigerian army unit, whose purpose was to guard against French expansion in West Africa (Ukpabi, 1966). The Hausa would thus become the ethnic group most associated with combat arms, a tradition thatcontinues to this day (author interview, army veteran #5) and has contributed to ethno-regional tensions throughout Nigeria‘s history.

Nigeria‘s colonial security architecture was driven by thecolonists‘ economic interests, as Thomas notes. The British conscripted local paramilitaries to squash anti-colonial resistance during the gradual conquest of Nigeria between 1862 and 1903 and subsequently used these forces to suppress indigenous labour strikes in the 20th century. The British adopted a system of indirect rule—co-opting local elites to police the colony—in order to minimize administrative costs. Consequently, security forces did little to protect ordinary Nigerians—indeed, such forces were absent in most communities—and were occasionally overwhelmed by popular strikes or riots (Martin, 2012, pp. 10-

12). Colonial economic priorities and austerity measures handicapped the further development of Nigerian security institutions in the post-WWII period, when the British began managing the transition to independence. The British scrapped plans to develop a regional navy in 1949, opting instead to bolster army and police forces to suppress a wave of nationalistic miners' strikes that year (African Navies Research Network, 2022). Consequently, Nigeria became an independent nation in 1960with a powerful army and a weak navy. (The Nigerian Air Force was likewise not created until 1964 as the British had neither had the need for Nigerian pilots nor seen Nigerians as capable of such technical roles.)

After independence, the newly created Nigerian Army prioritized internal policing on behalf of the post-colonial regime (Akinkunmi, 2018, p. 23). Nigeria's political elites did not fear external attack and instead envisioned a military that would hold ceremonial functions, provide internal order, and later, amid the oil boom of the 1970s, protect energy infrastructure (Adebajo, 2008b, pp. 98-101).

The 1966 coup and ‗counter-coup' and the subsequent civil war between 1967 and 1970 had a profound impact on the trajectory of the Nigerian military. The military would rule from 1966 to 1999 with only two brief interludes of civilian rule: the first after military leader Olusegun Obasanjo held elections and handed over power to Chief Ernest Shonekan's government in 1979 (a government that was overthrown in 1983, with General Muhammadu Buhari taking power) and the second, for an even shorter stint of just a few months, after the government of IbrahimBabangida organised and then promptly annulled elections in 1993, with Babangida's Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Abacha, overthrowing the caretaker civilian government pickedby Babangida during this chaotic ―transition‖ period that was not to be. This period between 1966 and 1993 saw six successful coups, three of them against military regimes (there were several

failed coups against the military regimes as well in this period) that, remarkably, involved largely the same set of actors, a cadre of overtly political soldiers who got a taste for regime change as junior officers and continued toppling governments as they climbed the ranks (Siollun, 2013, p. 6).

As the military became increasingly politicized from 1966 onwards, its professionalism waned. The Army's performance in the civil war was far from exemplary, with numerous examples of insubordination, ineffective command-and-control, and corruption (Barua, 2013, pp. 9-24). The civil war sparked a massive recruitment drive that saw the military's ranks grow from 7,000 to 250,000 men while the handful of Majors and Lieutenant Colonels in the Army (no Nigerian had held a higher rank at independence) were rapidly promoted. For years after the war the officer class felt entitled to similarly rapid promotions, such that one magazine referred to the problem of Nigeria's ―Baby Generals‖ in 1989 (*New African*, July 1989, p. 58). The military never fully demobilized after the civil war. It maintained an excessive force of no fewer than 130,000 soldiers in order to justify high defence budgets. As one general quipped, ―We are about the only army in the world where serving soldiers die of old age‖ (Akinkunmi, 2018, p. 114).

As the era of military rule progressed and coup-plotters climbed the ranks of government, military careers became highly sought after by politically ambitious individuals who had no interest in being professional soldiers. One graduate of the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA) from the mid-1980s stated that there existed a clear divide between those cadets who sought a military career and ―pass over‖ candidates who were only interested in political office and whose family connections allowed them to ―fly through‖ their course (author interview, army veteran #4). In a report sent to Abacha on the eve of his takeover in 1993, a group of senior officers lamented how ―officers and young men [see] the military as a shortcut to power and wealth… This resulted in

officers scrambling for political appointments‖ (see Alli, 2001, pp. 261-262). The clearest example of this was the phenomenonof ―IBB Boys,‖ mid-level officers who had helped Babangida (full name Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida or IBB) take power in 1985 and were subsequently rewarded with plum governmentpositions and informal access to the Commander-in-Chief (Akinkunmi, 2018, p. 170). (Indeed, Babangida had succeeded easily in overthrowing Buhari in part because Buhari had failed toreward those who had helped him stage the 1983 coup; Babangidawas careful to avoid making the same mistake in 1985.) This cohort constituted ―an army of anything goes,‖ as one general noted, ―where subordinate officers would not only be contemptuous of their superiors but would exhibit total disregard to legitimate instructions by such superiors‖ (Siollun, 2013, 140).

The military suppressed various riots and protest movements throughout the 1980s but did not conduct combat operations between 1970 and 1990, brief border clashes with Chad and Cameroon notwithstanding. The armed forces had benefitted from new procurements under the civilian government of Shehu Shagari (1979-1983), who had sought to rally patriotic sentiment and appease the generals with high defence budgets (hisunprecedented build-up of the Navy and Air Force might have also been an attempt to avert a coup by bolstering the Army‘s rivals). Funds for equipment maintenance or training were not forthcoming, however. Per the aforementioned 1993 reportaddressed to General Abacha:

> *The Air Force has been largely grounded for lack of spares and maintenances and the Navy is largely on dry dock. The NA has not carried out any meaningful Field Exercise for some time now, while for 1992 and 1993 training years, NASAC [Nigerian Army Small Arms Championship] has been cancelled due to lack of funds… As a result of lack of funding, many courses in our training institutions had to be cancelled in1992/93. (Quoted in Alli, 2001, pp. 262-263)*

The reasons behind this sorry state of affairs were both incidental and intentional: incidental insofar as they were a consequence of immense graft within the Babangida regime; and intentional insofar as Babangida consciously sought to undermine potential rivals. He refused to allow Army training exercises for fear they could provide cover for a coup (author interview, navy veteran #1), and he starved the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) of resources— and executed or dismissed its best pilots—following a 1985 coup plot that allegedly involved NAF officers. As a consequence, the NAF had fewer than 10 serviceable fighter jets by the time Babangida left office in 1993 (Siollun, 2013, pp. 91-92).

In short, Nigeria‘s military was unprepared to launch ambitious intervention far from its borders. By 1990, the military had virtually no experience in conducting operations outside its own borders apart from UN peacekeeping missions and one abortive peacekeeping mission in Chad conducted between 1981 and 1982. To understand why Nigeria took the risk of launching an ambitious intervention in Liberia—and later in Sierra Leone—it isnecessary to consider not only the geopolitical dynamics of West Africa, the topic that has received the most focus within the ECOMOG literature, but also the internal politics of military rule. As the subsequent two sections will show, Ibrahim Babangida, who ordered the intervention in Liberia, and Sani Abacha, who prolonged this mission and subsequently intervened in Sierra Leone, both sought similar things: a positive international image and regime security.

Regime Politics and the Liberia Intervention: Surmising Babangida‟s Motives

Liberia‘s civil war began in December 1989 when Charles Taylor‘s National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) invaded from neighbouring Côte d‘Ivoire with the goal of ousting President Samuel Doe, himself a former putschist. At the time, ECOWAS had no experience in peacekeeping and lacked any mechanism to approve such missions. In May 1990, ECOWAS established a

committee to find a resolution to the conflict. After failed talks with President Doe and rebel factions, Babangida‘s government pushed ECOWAS to establish the ECOMOG peacekeeping force in July 1990. The ECOMOG mission lacked unanimous support as several ECOWAS countries saw it as a vehicle for Nigeria‘s hegemonic ambitions. All but two Francophone ECOWAS members, Guinea and Senegal, opposed the intervention, reflecting longstanding divides between Anglophone and Francophone states in West Africa (several Francophone states in fact supported Taylor). Consequently, the ECOMOG force mostly comprised Nigerians.

The force landed in Monrovia on August 24, 1990 with a vague mandate of ―keeping the peace, restoring law and order and ensuring that the cease fire is respected‖ despite the fact that no ceasefire existed (Kabia, 2009, p. 74). When an NPFL splinter group led by Prince Johnson captured Doe at the ECOMOG compound on September 9 and dragged the president off to be gruesomely tortured and executed, Babangida shifted gears: The Nigerian leader unilaterally removed the Ghanaian ECOMOG commander, placed one of his right-hand men, Brigadier General Joshua Dogonyaro, in charge of the mission, and changed ECOMOG‘s mandate to ―peace-enforcement.‖ ECOMOG was now, for all intents and purposes, at war with Charles Taylor (even though it was in fact Taylor‘s rival, Prince Johnson, whohad killed Doe).

In his assessment of the ECOMOG interventions, Adebajo proposes three reasons for Babangida‘s interest in the Liberian conflict. Adebajo argues that Babangida felt the need to sustain a ―*Pax Nigeriana*‖ in West Africa; that Babangida wished to cement his legacy as the man who made Nigeria a regional power; and that Nigeria‘s generals were eager to have a ―proving ground‖ for their forces (Adebajo, 2008c). These explanations are each plausible to varying degrees.

With regards to the question of a ―*Pax Nigeriana*‖ Babangida and his cabinet certainly saw potential for Nigeria to be a superpower, although this had not previously translated into a coherent regional security strategy. (To the extent that Nigeria had previously had a regional strategy under Babangida, it was as benefactor insofar as Nigeria used its oil revenues to fund development projects across West Africa.) Neither the UN nor the United States had shown much interest in Liberia, given the ongoing trouble in the Balkans and Persian Gulf, leading Babangida to conclude it was Nigeria's responsibility to solve the conflict and its attendant refugee flows (Ajonye, 1996, pp. 34-39).

That Babangida was concerned about his legacy is also not in doubt, though he likely had more immediate concerns as well. By 1990, the United States was the undisputed global superpower and its policy towards (non-communist) African dictators had shifted from accommodation on grounds of Cold War realpolitik to democracy promotion (for more see Cheeseman, 2015). Babangida's standing with Washington was poor owing to his suspected links to the drug trade (for more see Uzuegbu-Wilson, 2018), and the fact that he was a military ruler additionally hurt his relations with the West. Consequently, Babangida may have sought to burnish his international image by initiating ECOMOG, which would give him credentials as a regional peacemaker.

Finally, Nigeria's generals do seem to have been eager for action. One officer who served at Defence Headquarters at the time stated that Babangida's generals ―wanted a justification to properly resource their units… which had been left in neglect‖ (author interview, navy veteran #1). This was especially the case within the NAF, whose officers were eager to prove their value and regain some of the capacity, resources, and influence within the regime that they had lost after the 1985 coup plot (*ibid.*).

That said, it was not the service chiefs but Babangida alone who ordered Nigerian forces into Liberia and pushed for a ―peace-

enforcement‖ approach. Given the precariousness of Babangida‘s regime, one should consider whether Babangida also saw ECOMOG as a coup-proofing mechanism, a means of keeping elements of the military occupied abroad in order to prevent them from staging a coup at home. Adebajo dismisses this theory, but it is worth interrogating more closely, even if it requires a degree of speculation.

The prospect of a coup seems to have constantly been on Babangida‘s mind. Later in life he recalled that the day he seized power in 1985 he told his conspirators, ‒Congratulations, we made it, but remember one thing: Just like we took up guns and toppled a government, we also have to watch because somebody would one day want to topple us‖ (Akinkunmi, 2018, p. 172). As leader, Babangida consolidated power more than any of his predecessors, thus becoming the first military ruler to take the title of president and arrogating powers of appointment that had previously been decided by committee (*ibid.*, p. 179). In 1985, he created a new military ‒consultative‖ body as a way to distribute patronage and thus co-opt the potentially troublesome middle ranks of the officer corps (*ibid.*, p. 180). He was known to frequently shuffle officers around to prevent any individual from getting too powerful (*ibid.*, p. 181). Despite these efforts, in April 1990 Babangida and his family nearly died in a coup attempt at the Dodan Barracks in Lagos, seat of the military government. The bloody incident left a mark on Babangida, who subsequently moved the seat of government to the more defensible Aso Rock in Abuja (*Daily Trust*, April 29, 2021).

The memory of Dodan Barracks was presumably still fresh in Babangida‘s mind four months later when the first Nigerian troops landed in Monrovia, which raises the question of whether Babangida saw in ECOMOG an opportunity to keep his Army colleagues distracted from pursuing political ambitions at home. Some in the Army certainly believed this. As one ECOMOG veteran suggested, ‒Babangida did not go to Liberia out of

altruism‖ (author interview, army veteran #3). Another senior ECOMOG veteran claimed that Babangida‘s regime never made clear plans to resupply or reequip the Army to compensate for losses incurred in Liberia, which suggested Babangida‘s ulterior motive was to ‒neuter the Army‖ (author interview, army veteran #2).

It is difficult to discern Babangida‘s personal motivations with any certainty, and the considerations previously mentioned—adesire for regional hegemony and an improved image abroad— could be sufficient explanations. However, Babangida‘s approach towards ECOMOG in the months following Nigerian forces‘ deployment to Liberia adds weight to the theory that regime security was at the forefront of his mind.

Babangida made the unexpected to decision to recall ECOMOG‘s first Nigerian commander, Brigadier General Dogonyaro, just six months into his command. Dogonyaro had just led a successful counterattack against Charles Taylor‘s forces, securing Monrovia and adjacent aid corridors. During that counteroffensive, Babangida had angered Dogonyaro by overruling his plan to pursue Taylor‘s forces deeper into the countryside, granting Taylor a ceasefire instead (author interview, army veteran #1). Max Siollun describes the recalling of Dogonyaro as
‒inexplicable‖ (Siollun, 2013, p. 128) given that ECOMOG had not yet secured all of its mandated objectives. However, one explanation could be that it was precisely due to Dogonyaro‘s battlefield success that Babangida recalled him.

Dogonyaro‘s exploits in the field earned him popularity among the troops, who nicknamed him ‒General I Don‘t Give a Damn‖ (*ibid*., p. 128). While an exceptional field officer, Dogonyaro was also one of the most politically savvy generals. He had been involved in every successful coup since 1966, had sat on Babangida‘s Armed Forces Ruling Council (the highest body in Babangida‘s government) since its formation in 1985, and was

considered a leader among the ―Langtang Mafia‖ of Middle Belt officers (*ibid.*, p. 113). Babangida may have reasonably feared that if Dogonyaro were to continue his battlefield exploits andgain further acclaim within the ranks, he would pose a threat.After all, Babangida's political ascent had itself been facilitated insome part by the popularity he had gained as a battalion commander in the civil war (Akinkunmi, 2018, pp. 167-168).Pulling Dogonyaro back to Nigeria, where he would just be oneof several powerful generals in Babangida's orbit, might have been a way to undercut the rising star. Babangida had, after all, used promotions to undermine rivals on several occasions, most notably when he ―promoted‖ COAS Abacha to Minister of Defence, a political position in which he would lack any direct command over troops. (Abacha continued to act as *de facto* COAS, however, allowing him to eventually take power.) (Akinkunmi, 2018, pp. 143-45).

It is also telling that Babangida never outlined an exit strategy for Liberia. ECOMOG shifted back to a peacekeeping mandate by December 1990 after a tenuous ceasefire around Monrovia took hold, only for ECOMOG forces to be attacked in an NPFL offensive in October 1992 that Taylor dubbed ―Operation Octopus.‖ This sparked another round of intense ―peace-enforcement‖ operations that lasted until July 1993 when Taylor signed a peace agreement (which proved to be short-lived) in Cotonou, Benin. At no point did Babangida ever lay out the conditions for Nigeria to wind down its mission in Liberia. Indeed, Babangida never outlined a rationale for the intervention beyond a vague appeal to Nigeria's responsibilities as a benevolent regional power (Adebajo, 2008c, p. 187). As one Nigerian diplomat lamented, ―the country's involvement [in Liberia] has hardly been determined by any clearly defined national agenda‖ (Ajonye, 1996, p. v).

Perhaps Babangida was trying to keep the military occupied, or perhaps he was himself distracted by the transition to civilian rule

at home that he had promised ever since taking power. In June 1993 he promptly annulled (under pressure from military colleagues) the presidential elections he had long promised, sparking a constitutional crisis. He left office in August 1993 afterhanding power to a handpicked civilian caretaker government of Chief Ernest Shonekan, which General Abacha overthrew just three months later on November 17, 1993. During Abacha's five- year rule, Nigeria's policy towards Liberia would become even more aimless and the country would get dragged into the brutal civil war in neighbouring Sierra Leone without any coherent objective—unless, that is, the objective was to keep Abacha in power.

Sani Abacha, Saviour of Democracy? Scrutinising the Pretexts for ECOMOG II

The first and perhaps last time that General Sani Abacha showed any interest in Liberia was when he was looking to exile a politically ambitious opponent within the Army. In September 1993, Abacha used his position as acting COAS to reshuffle the Army's leadership ahead of his coup. That month, he postedMajor General John Shagaya, one of the politically savvy ―Langtang Mafia‖ officers who had previously been Babangida's Minister of Internal Affairs (i.e., the lynchpin of Babangida's internal security apparatus), from his command of the 1st Division in Kaduna, Nigeria to the command of ECOMOG in Monrovia (Omoigui, 2011; Nigerian Army 1 Division). History had shown that controlling the 1st Division was crucial to a successful coup, given the division's size and its location in one of the largest northern cities (which also housed the NDA). Given Shagaya's status as one the most powerful ―IBB Boys,‖ it is hard to conceive of any non-political explanation for posting him to ECOMOG. Indeed, immediately after the November 17, 1993 coup, Abacha recalled Shagaya from Monrovia, where he had spent less than two month, and demoted him to Brigadier General before unceremoniously retiring him from the Army at the end of the

year (Asante, 2018). Shagaya later attributed this humiliation to his refusal to support Abacha‘s coup (Asante, 2010).

At no point after taking power in November 1993 did the Liberia mission appear to be a priority for Abacha or his government. Upon being appointed Abacha‘s COAS, Lieutenant General M. Chris Alli (whom Abacha had placed in command of the 1st Division after removing Shagaya) drafted up a list of priorities forthe Army, of which ECOMOG fell below new training proposals despite being the military‘s only active combat mission (Alli,2001, p. 280).

Nigerian forces remained in Liberia throughout Abacha‘s tenure without any clear mission. As one officer who served as a Brigadier General in a senior position within ECOMOG duringthe Abacha era recounts, Abacha showed no interest in either stabilizing Liberia nor in withdrawing Nigerian forces. This officer submitted a plan to Abuja in this period to create and train a modest new army for the interim Liberian government (since the remnants of Doe‘s army had devolved into another warlord faction) at a cost of just five million US dollars, a fraction of the overall cost of the ECOMOG mission. The plan was never implemented because, per this general, ―Abacha was not serious about rebuilding Liberia‖ (author interview, army veteran #2).The major development in Liberia during Abacha‘s tenure, the 1997 presidential elections heralded by the ―international community‖ as a pathway to peace, were treated with similar ambivalence. The aforementioned Brigadier General was tasked with providing security for the elections but, given the interim Liberian government‘s limited capacity to hold elections, ECOMOG assumed a major logistical role by default, a role for which ECOMOG had not planned but in which it nevertheless succeeded. ―[We were] building the airplane as we flew it,‖ the retired officer recalled, ―but no help came from those in Abuja. I would ask what our objectives were with the elections, who is
‗our guy‘? I was expecting that [Charles] Taylor could win, so I

would ask my superiors, are we pro- or against [him]? No one had the slightest clue‖ (*ibid.*).

Abacha was, by all accounts, even more paranoid and reclusive than Babangida – his own COAS noted, ‒For San Abacha security was a religion and Aso Rock his temple‖ (Alli, 2001, p. 295). It is likely that Abacha's interest in Liberia did not extend beyond keeping potentially dangerous generals far from Abuja and, in turn, keeping his closest military and civilian associates happy by allowing them to siphon funds from operational accounts (described more in the subsequent section).

If Abacha was indifferent to Liberia, he did not hesitate to intervene in Sierra Leone when presented with the opportunity. Liberia's civil war had spilled into neighbouring Sierra Leone in 1991 when Charles Taylor began backing Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels against Sierra Leone's government, which hadcontributed a troop contingent to ECOMOG. Nigeria maintained close relations with Sierra Leone even as the latter experienced three changes of government between 1992 and 1996 (two military coups followed by an election) and in March 1997, Nigerian soldiers deployed to Sierra Leone under the auspices of ECOMOG to train the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) (ECOWAS Commission, 1999). Only two months later, a group of SLA officers led by Major Johnny Paul Koroma overthrew the democratically elected president, Ahmed Terjan Kabbah, to much international condemnation. Whereas Nigeria had never previously shown concern over coups in Sierra Leone, Abacha now took a hawkish stance: Nigerian forces attempted to capture Freetown from the Junta on June 2, a unilateral move that unnerved other ECOWAS members and backfired when the junta took Nigerian soldiers hostage (Kabia, 2009, pp. 110-111). After months of talks, ECOWAS and the junta agreed in October 1997 to the Conakry Accord, which provided for a six-month timetable to restore civilian rule. Before these six months passed, however, Nigerian forces launched *Operation Sand Storm* on February 6,

1998, capturing Freetown in less than a week with the support of the city‘s residents, who largely opposed the junta.

Abacha had justification for intervening in Sierra Leone. Junta forces had clearly been negotiating in bad faith, using the Conakry Accord as a cover to rearm while occasionally attacking Nigerian forces. Nigeria was not technically operating outside of ECOMOG‘s mandate per the Conakry Accord, either. Still, the other ECOWAS members—including Ghana, which had been Nigeria‘s closest partner in Liberia—saw Nigeria‘s intervention as unilateral, aggressive, and premature given that the timetable for the junta to hand over power had not elapsed (*ibid.*, p. 111). Also, given that Abacha had shown no interest in democracy or stability in Liberia, it is likely that he had ulterior motives for intervening in Sierra Leone.

For starters, Abacha had even greater need than Babangida to repair his reputation internationally. His regime became internationally isolated in 1995 following the execution of prominent environmental activists in the oil-rich Niger Delta (see Anderson and Binstein, 1996). The hypocrisy of a military dictator intervening in another country to restore democracy was obvious – indeed, the original ECOMOG mission in Liberia had involved a good deal of hypocrisy, as international media was quick to point out (see for example, Henry, 1990) – but Abacha nonetheless sensed that the Western concern regarding the Koroma coup in Sierra Leone was sufficient such that he wouldbe regarded as an indispensable Western partner should he succeed in restoring Kabbah to power. As Human Rights Watch noted at the time, ―Nigeria has repeatedly reminded the international community of its commitment to peacekeeping in itsneighbourhood in the face of the reluctance of the U.N. to make the same investment, using this commitment as an argument to deflect criticism both of its domestic performance and of theperformance of its troops in the field‖ (Human Rights Watch, 1997).

If his only concern was his international image, Abacha could have limited Nigeria‘s intervention to restoring President Kabbah to power in Freetown, which was quickly accomplished. Instead, Abacha ordered 7,000 troops to Sierra Leone by shifting the majority of forces from Liberia while dispatching additional units from Nigeria (Adebajo, 2008c, pp. 189-191). Nigerian forces took on the de facto role of an occupying army and initiated a series of risky offensives deep into the RUF‘s jungle strongholds. At no point did the Abacha government explain the purpose of these offensives or articulate any broader strategy. In fact, commanders received no substantive briefing from Defence Headquarters prior to their deployments. The rumours within the Army at the time suggested that Defence Headquarters could not even reach Abacha to discuss the operations (Adeshina, 2002, p. 29).

Considering the nature of these offensives—simultaneously incoherent and dangerously ambitious—and considering that Nigeria had intervened in Sierra Leone before the six-month transition period stipulated in the Conakry Accord had elapsed, it seems likely that Abacha was looking for an excuse to keep the military deployed in the ECOMOG theatre of operations, especially since the mission in Liberia had begun to wind down after the 1997 elections. Additionally, as Brigadier General R.A. Adeshina, the commander of one of the main battalions involved in the Sierra Leone intervention, recalled in his memoirs, ‒commanders were appointed and removed inappropriately based on political consideration‖ (*ibid.* pp. 138-139). According to Adeshina, ‒many people, including soldiers, [concluded] that the mission was another attempt to keep the military busy so as to prevent coup back home‖ (*ibid.* p. 173).

After Abacha‘s unexpected death in June 1998, the flow of money and supplies to the Sierra Leone mission (which had already been irregular) came to a near halt (*ibid.* p. 175). Sierra Leone had clearly been Abacha‘s initiative; his successor, the relatively

apolitical general Abdulsalami Abubakar, seemingly saw the mission as wasteful. As opposed to the situation in 1990, when the generals saw in Liberia an opportunity to resource their units and gain combat experience, by 1998 fatigue and attrition had taken their toll and Nigeria‘s generals showed little enthusiasmfor the missions. Abubakar was intent on the military leaving power, and a costly mission in far-away Sierra Leone that the government had never bothered justifying to the taxpayers (or the soldiers deployed to the theatre) was unlikely to continue under a democratic administration. ECOMOG‘s fate was thus sealed. Shortly after taking office in May 1999, President Olusegun Obasanjo withdrew the majority of Nigeria‘s troops from Sierra Leone as the UN assumed peacekeeping responsibilities fromECOWAS.

Assessing ECOMOG‟s Battlefield Performance

While the previous sections examined how Nigeria‘s interventions in both Liberia and Sierra Leone suffered from a lack of strategic vision on the part of the Babangida and Abacha regimes, it is equally important to consider ECOMOG‘s performance at the lower levels of war. Nigerian forces could claim several successes at the operational and tactical levels during the ECOMOG years. Compared to other West African militaries at the time, the Nigerian Armed Forces possessed noteworthy capabilities that they brought to bear in securing urban centres in Liberia and Sierra Leone. However, Nigeria‘s ECOMOG contingents struggled when fighting shifted to rural areas, a shortcoming rooted to no small extent in the historical evolution of the Nigerian military since the colonial era.Additionally, the lack of a coherent strategy on the part of thehigh command, coupled with the politicization and corruption thatwas characteristic of the military in the Babangida and Abacha eras, caused numerous operational and tactical challenges for Nigerian forces in the field.

In both Liberia in 1990 and Sierra Leone in 1998, Nigerian forces succeeded in quickly clearing rebels from the national capitals. Resistance was initially fierce in Monrovia and required soldiers to fight block-to-block alongside remnants of President Doe's Liberian army. Nigerian forces used air and naval assets as a force multiplier, bombarding NPFL positions around Monrovia, cutting off rebels' supply lines (Noble, 1990). The initial operation in Monrovia brought peace to one of the worst-hit parts of the country and allowed for the creation of a humanitarian sanctuary. Even Human Rights Watch, which criticized Nigerian forces' conduct throughout ECOMOG, acknowledged in 1993 that "One would be hard-pressed to visit Monrovia without hearing, time and again, 'Thank God for ECOMOG'" (Human Rights Watch, 1993).

After securing Monrovia in September 1990, General Dogonyaro tasked the elite 77th Airborne Battalion, supported by two Ghanaian battalions, to outflank the retreating NPFL forces, pushing Taylor to make a ceasefire proposal in November (Howe,1996). Taylor broke this ceasefire in October 1992, launching Operation Octopus to besiege Monrovia. Nigerian forces were able to roll back NPFL forces within two months of gruelling urban and suburban fighting (*ibid.*). After using his connections to Babangida to get reinforcements, ECOMOG Field Commander Brigadier General Tunji Olurin decided to take the fight intoTaylor's territory in order to prevent further assaults on Monrovia (Adebajo, 2002, p. 119). Naval forces blockaded the strategicBuchanan port while NAF jets bombed the adjacent port of Harper, constraining the NPFL's ability to resupply by sea (*ibid.*, pp. 122-124). Olurin then ordered the elite 72nd Battalion to landat a forward airstrip inside NPFL territory, from which the unit proceeded to secure strategic junctures northeast of Monroviauntil they reached Kakata city some 70 kilometres from the capital (author interview, army veteran #1). A second mobileforce moved east from Monrovia and secured a number of positions along the coast, most notably the Firestone rubber

plantation at Harbel, before linking up with forces that had landed by boat in Buchanan (*ibid.*). Thus by April 1993, ECOMOG had seized a significant foothold outside Monrovia from the NPFL, depriving the rebels of two primary revenue bases (Buchanan port and the Firestone plantation). This pushed Taylor to accept the Cotonou peace agreement (Howe, 1996). In both of these offensives (1990 and 1992-93) Nigerian forces cooperated with warlord factions opposed to Taylor, which helped Nigerian forces gain intelligence on NPFL movements. (Nigerian forces would similarly partner with an ethnic hunters' militia, the *Kamajors*, in Sierra Leone in 1998.)

The value of Nigeria's participation in regional peacekeeping became clear in 1999 when ECOWAS approved a third intervention under ECOMOG auspices, this time in Guinea-Bissau. Nigeria's military, fatigued and distracted with the transition at home, did not participate. The mission in Guinea-Bissau ended unsuccessfully after just four months, owing in part to the lack of Nigeria's warfighting resources and capabilities (Adebajo, 2008c, p. 195). Whatever their faults, Nigerian forces were willing to head into battle when ‒peacekeeping‖ was insufficient, something many West African militaries refused to do.

Nigeria's battlefield successes, while notable (particularly in Liberia), were nonetheless overshadowed by a much longer list of operational shortcomings and failures. Even some of Nigeria's operational successes might have been of limited strategic value given their second- and third-order effects. For example, the effective operational partnerships that Nigerian forces formed with warlord factions in Liberia undermined Nigeria's image as an impartial peacekeeping force, further hampering what was already fraught cooperation with the other ECOMOG contingents (Tuck, 2000). This may have also inadvertently helped prolong the war, as Charles Taylor was able to paint Nigeria as an occupying power, a narrative that Nigeria did little to counter

until 1995, when the ECOMOG Field Commander began making overtures to Taylor. In partnering with warlords in Liberia and the *Kamajor* militias in Sierra Leone, Nigeria also overlooked those forces' human rights abuses.

The cooperation between the Nigerian military and Liberian warlords was not by design but was a product of operational necessity. Nigerian commanders partnered with warlords on a largely ad hoc basis, which is reflective of a larger problem the military faced in ECOMOG: Since neither Babangida nor Abacha ever articulated a coherent strategy for ECOMOG, commanders were left to their own devices. As Brig. Gen. Adeshina notes:

> *There was no political control of the [Sierra Leone] operation. The overall operational commander, the [brigade] commanders and to a large extent, the commanding officers were left on their own to do as they wished… This situation encouraged unit commanders to go for soft and lucrative targets. (Adeshina, 2002, pp. 138-139).*

This created a particularly troubling situation in Sierra Leone as units moved around the rebel-infested hinterlands without any objective, leading to the pointless loss of soldiers' lives and a profound morale crisis. The lack of political control had also been troubling in Liberia, since ECOMOG assumed responsibility for a significant degree of ―civilian‖ duties by default. As the head of the strongest fighting force in Liberia (apart from the NPFL), ECOMOG Field Commanders would end up serving as intermediaries in peace talks and overseeing the distribution of humanitarian aid. As one contemporaneous media report put it, ECOMOG forces in Monrovia served as a ―policeman, bodyguard, wet-nurse, social worker and psychiatrist in a city in desperate need of rehabilitation‖ (*West Africa*, 1990). Nigerian officers often performed exceptionally under the circumstances, but the fact that they were tasked with such sundry and ever-

evolving responsibilities without proper training or resources represents a failure of Nigeria‘s leaders.

The rapidly shifting nature of the conflict also aggravated an unfortunate tendency within the Nigerian military: the excessive use of force. Among international observers, Nigeria‘s ECOMOG contingent had the worst reputation when it came to human rights. This was particularly the case in NPFL-held territory in Liberia, where Nigerian soldiers harassed civilians and caused collateral damage through airstrikes and naval bombardments. During Operation Octopus, for example, the NAF bombed—accidentally, it claimed—a *Médecins Sans Frontières* convoy and a Catholic Relief Services warehouse in NPFL-held territory (Human Rights Watch, 1993, pp. 9-10). This can be attributed in part to the divergent institutional experiences of the ECOMOG contingents. Whereas all of the Ghanaian soldiers in ECOMOG had recently participated in UN peacekeeping missions (Kabia, 2009, p. 88), the Nigerian soldiers who deployed to Liberia were more likely tohave engaged in the repression of protests or domestic insurrections. In fact, Senegal reportedly withdrew its forces from ECOMOG in 1993 because it disapproved of the aggressive and unprofessional behaviour of Nigerian forces, which it deemedinconsistent with peacekeeping best practices (Human Rights Watch, 1993, p. 19). One NAF veteran of ECOMOG attributedthe Nigerian Army‘s poor relations with the Liberian and Sierra Leonean populations to the Army‘s history, dating to the colonial era, of being a garrison force that is confined to barracks and lacks healthy interactions with ordinary civilians (Balogun, 2017, pp. 191-193).

However, it would be unfair to attribute the discrepancy between the behaviour of Nigerian forces and that of other ECOMOG contingents solely to institutional culture. Nigeria‘s units werealso at the forefront of the ―peace enforcement‖ operations while Senegalese and Ghanaian forces were generally restricted to peacekeeping. Nigerian units were often tasked with both ―peace

enforcement‖ *and* peacekeeping during their deployments, switching abruptly from one mission to the other as ECOMOG's mandate changed. These rapid transitions from highly kinetic and dangerous military operations to peacekeeping—with itsrestrictive rules of engagement and emphasis on civilian protection—were not something for which Nigerian forces were prepared. One of the senior-most ECOMOG commanders, who commanded UN peacekeeping forces later in his career, summarized the problem as such:

> *Armies need to stand down or stand up between missions. You don"t send a force on standby for combat into peace operations. You stand them down first. And likewise, you don"t send a PKO [peacekeeping operation] force directly back into a combat mission; they need training and a transition period to stand up to combat. There is a strong psychological dimension to warfare, and the transition period must allow for psychological changes from high-intensity combat to PKO and vice-versa. You"re trying to "change stern looks into smiles" as we say in the UN… We didn"t appreciate these things yet [in the 1990s] … We did not have a dedicated peacekeeping academy (Author interview, army veteran #2).*

One veteran of the elite 72nd Battalion that participated in the counteroffensive against the NPFL northeast of Monrovia in 1992-93 similarly attributed some of his unit's well-documented human rights abuses to the rapid transition between mandates:

> *We were not sent to Liberia to be friendly. We were an elite unit tasked with securing strategic objectives deep behind enemy lines. The fighting was fierce, Taylors" forces killed a lot of our brothers. And then, just a few weeks later, we were told to be peacekeepers, we were tasked with providing escorts for these same rebels that had been shooting at us so that they could travel to Monrovia for peace talks. Many of the men couldn"t process that psychologically… and there was no*

> *institutional support for soldiers with PTSD (Author interview, army veteran #1).*

Human Rights Watch acknowledged that some of the animus that Nigerian forces showed towards the NPFL and suspected civilian collaborators during the 1992-93 counteroffensive could be attributed to the fact that the NPFL had recently held an ECOMOG garrison hostage for a month, beating and humiliating the soldiers in the process (Human Rights Watch, 1993, p. 6).

The military‘s professional image also suffered from widespread reports of Nigerian looting. Some Liberians joked that ECOMOG stood for ‒Every Car or Moving Object Gone‖ (see Tuck, 2000). Nigerian soldiers‘ propensity for looting and, in Sierra Leone, illicit diamond mining can be attributed in part to the fact that rampant corruption within the upper ranks of the Nigerian military meant that many soldiers never received their full salaries, which were a fraction of those of UN peacekeepers inany event. Adebajo in fact estimates that out of the $4 billion reportedly released by the Nigerian treasury for the missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone between 1990 and 1999, only $1 billion was properly spent (Adebajo, 2008c, p. 184). This corruptionundermined all aspects of the mission. One naval intelligence officer based in Defence Headquarters in Abuja discovered on his periodic fact-finding trips to Liberia that ECOMOG soldiers were struggling to get enough food:

> *Very often supplies [from Nigeria] would spoil at sea, because the vendor had cut costs or pocketed the money or paid bribes to other officials. But the vendorswere friends of Babangida who had gotten these lucrative contracts, so the officers in Liberia didn"t want to report that the product was poor-quality. So, we"d get reports from the field saying 50 kg of rice hadreached Monrovia when in fact I would learn when I went [to Liberia] that it was only half that. (Author interview, navy veteran #1)*

The Nigerian military was unprepared for the sorts of rural counterinsurgency that it ended up waging in both Liberia and Sierra Leone. Most Army units had been trained in conventional battle tactics and, to some extent, urban policing (authorinterviews, army veteran #1; army veteran #2). With theexception of a few special operations units, Nigerian soldierswere not specialists in fanning out into the countryside, securing smaller population centres and working with local communities toflush out insurgents and deny them a support base. The last experience that the Army had had with any form of rural combat had been the civil war in the 1960s and by 1990 only the most senior officers had experienced that war – Adebajo indeed estimates that 75% of Nigerian soldiers serving in 1990 had neverseen combat (Adebajo, 2008c, p. 189).

Even after the 1992-93 counteroffensive against the NPFL, ECOMOG forces never controlled much more than 10% of Liberia (Kabia, 2009, p. 81). In Sierra Leone, the military pushed aimlessly into the hinterlands after liberating Freetown but never managed to secure more than a few inland cities such as Makeni and Koidu. The RUF always held the upper hand in the jungle, and even the use of airpower failed to dislodge the RUF from any of its main camps, as NAF lacked reliable intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets in the country (Balogun, 2017, pp. 158-159). ISR was a problem for the Army aswell. Army units first deployed to Sierra Leone with outdated maps (Bello and Hassan, 2015), and some military intelligence detachments only arrived in Sierra Leone nine months after operations had commenced. In Adeshina‘s words, these intelligence officials had been ‒busy in Nigeria trying to pursue potential coup plotters rather than going for military operations‖ (Adeshina, 2002, p. 183).

Additionally, Nigerian units were ill-equipped for rural counterinsurgency. The Army went to Liberia and Sierra Leone with the vehicles of a conventional force (tanks, halftracks, and

armoured fighting vehicles), which gave the truck-mounted rebels a significant mobility advantage in the jungle; the rebels' AK-47s were also lighter than the Army's standard-issue FN rifles (*ibid.* pp. 157-159). The contingent in Sierra Leone only had one attack helicopter to provide close air support (Ekeator, 2007, p. 37), and the few Alpha Jets that could be flown from neighbouring Liberia provided less precise covering fire. ECOMOG forces in Sierra Leone also suffered from poor logistics which left them in dire straits when they deployed beyond the main ECOMOG base at Lungi airfield near Freetown (ECOWAS, 1999). As in Liberia, the force in Sierra Leone lacked sufficient fuel to drive supplies tothe front. This produced critical shortages of ammunition, and soldiers were eventually reduced to wearing rags or walking barefoot due to a lack of spare kit (Ekeator, 2007, pp. 36-37).

UN observers noted that Nigerian forces in Sierra Leone were dangerously overstretched from the start of their mission (United Nations Security Council, August 1998, p. 4). This not only precluded successful counterinsurgency in the countryside butalso left Freetown vulnerable. In December 1998, the RUF recaptured the key cities of Makeni and Koidu from ECOMOG forces in anticipation of a daring assault on Freetown in January 1999. After falling back to just a few districts of the city at the start of the assault, ECOMOG forces recaptured the entire capital within three weeks. The RUF remained in control of the rest ofthe country, however, and ECOMOG would never again attempt to take the war to the rebels, who were only eventually defeated by a British military intervention in 2000.

The RUF assault on Freetown represented a major failure for ECOMOG in several regards. Nigerian intelligence officials in Sierra Leone failed to detect rebel infiltration of the city prior to the assault (Kabia, 2009, p. 120). The commander in Sierra Leone, Brigadier General Maxwell Khobe, nonetheless expected an offensive but his superiors, both in Monrovia (where ECOMOG was headquartered) and Abuja, did not take his

warnings seriously and refused to send the reinforcements and supplies he requested (Asante, 2000). Consequently, as one journalist on the scene noted, ―Ammunitions were not delivered after they ran out and no food supplies came through‖ (*ibid.*). In a TV interview filmed after ECOMOG forces recaptured Freetown, Khobe says in an exasperated manner that ―If the solution is to clear the rebels militarily, then they should give us what we need,‖ (Reuters News Archive, January 1999) suggesting that Khobe was still operating under vague yet maximalist directionsto compel the RUF into a ceasefire even as Abuja had effectively given up on the mission. The fighting to resecure Freetown in January 1999 was brutal and Khobe's men came under fire from human rights organizations for their excessive employment ofartillery (Human Rights Watch, 1997). But given the mismatch between the mission that Nigerian forces had been assigned and the resources that they had at their disposal, there was little else ECOMOG could do.

The greatest failure of the Nigerian military in Freetown, and indeed Sierra Leone as a whole, was that it had seemingly learned nothing from its failures in Liberia. Nearly all of the problems that Nigerian forces faced in Sierra Leone—poor command-and-control, inefficient supply lines, inadequate equipment andtraining for jungle warfare—the military had experienced before. As Kabia aptly notes in his summary of ECOMOG's failures in Sierra Leone, ―It was Liberia all over again‖ (Kabia, 2009, p. 118). To a large extent, this failure to cultivate and exploit institutional memory comes down to a lack of political will: Abacha and his associates did not ultimately care about the success or failure of the Sierra Leone mission and so they did not attempt to address the dysfunctionality within the military (especially since this dysfunctionality was, in effect, what kept them rich and in power).

Conclusion

This study has examined how the ECOMOG missions were unique within the military history of Nigeria, as they were the first and to date only Nigerian-led combat missions conducted outside of the country's borders. As outlined in the first section, prior to ECOMOG, the Nigerian military had played largely the same role in the post-independence era as its predecessors had in the colonial era: policing the country to protect the core political and economic interests of the regime. The key difference betweenthe colonial and post-colonial eras was that the military spentmost of the latter serving *as* the regime, meaning that the military existed largely to perpetuate its own power. These dynamics influenced how the military performed in the ECOMOG missions and indeed how the military conceived of the missions from the start. As detailed in the sections on Presidents Babangida and Abacha, both men likely saw ECOMOG, at least in part, as a means of securing their respective regimes against international pressure and domestic threats. Their focus on regime securityresulted in the politicized appointment and removal of field commanders and meant that the military deployed to Liberia and later Sierra Leone without a coherent strategy or even a vagueidea of its objectives. This led to mission creep that pushed Nigerian forces into highly attritive ―peace enforcement‖ operations for which they were ill-prepared, since the military's readiness and professionalism had deteriorated significantly in thepreceding years. As detailed in the previous section, the military consequently struggled on the strategic, operational, and tactical levels in both Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In short, while ECOMOG was a unique moment in Nigeria's military history, the ECOMOG interventions were unmistakably the products of a post-colonial garrison state in which every military operation, appointment, and expenditure was politicized (and often monetized for personal gain). However, in contrast to garrison states such as Pakistan or Egypt, Nigeria, like most post-colonial African states, had no serious external adversaries and

therefore little incentive to modernize its military—or other state apparatuses—beyond the daily requirements of providing regime security and a degree of internal order. The Nigerian military at the time of ECOMOG thus suffered from the worst of both worlds: It was a thoroughly politicized institution that additionallylacked a role in any foreign policy that might spur a degree of professionalization.

With the transition to the Fourth Republic in 1999, the Nigerian military stepped back from governing and had more time and resources to devote to modernizing its forces. In some regards, the military has taken ECOMOG‘s lessons to heart and improved its capacity and capabilities in critical areas. Notably there has been no coup, nor serious rumour of one, since the military formally left politics in 1999. Additionally, rivalries between the services are more muted than in the era of military rule (as are ethno- regional rivalries or suspicion among officers within the military, though they have not altogether disappeared) and interoperability of the services as improved, as seen in the growing land-air coordination against jihadist insurgents in the country‘s north- east. (One ECOMOG veteran who went on to teach in the Command and Staff College stated that the experience of ECOMOG‘s landings in Monrovia in August 1990, where Nigerian forces had lacked air cover, had served as an important lesson in the importance of increasing tri-service coordination.) Nigeria also established a specialised peacekeeping school in 2009, which has helped military units manage the transition from combat to peacekeeping missions and vice-versa, i.e., standing up and standing down.

In another sense, however, the failures of ECOMOG still loom large, as does the colonial legacy of Nigeria‘s military. While the military agreed to leave politics in 1999, it did so with guarantees that it would remain a vaunted national institution with significant privileges, as seen in both the high security budgets as well as the sizable landholdings that the different services possess. More

notably, the military remains, to a large extent, a tool for maintaining domestic order, policing dissent, and protecting the government in power rather than defending Nigeria from external attack. The October 2020 massacre at the Lekki toll gate is only the most globally infamous instance in which military personnel abrogated their duties to protect their fellow citizens to instead operate in a heavy-handed, repressive manner eerily reminiscentof colonial police forces.

On a daily basis, the military, and particularly the army, assume many of the internal security and policing roles that would otherwise be the domain of the police. The reasons for this are rooted in the legacy of military rule: For years the military regimes undermined the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), starving them of resources and jurisdiction, in order to maintain the hegemony of the armed forces (Siollun, 2021, June 7). Consequently, today the NPF remains an institution lacking professionalism and capacity and one that is prone to privatization(an absurdly high proportion of active-duty police officers are contracted by wealthy individuals, politicians or businesses for private security). This leads the military to fill the security vacuum by assuming policing responsibilities across the country. As Nigeria‘s security has deteriorated in recent years, the military has been called on to do more and more, yet each new military deployment or operation within the country inevitably results in varying degrees of collateral damage that at best mitigates someof the positive effects of the military deployment and at worst render the mission counterproductive (CDD, 2022). Put differently, the Nigerian military has yet to fully make the transition from a colonial force that sees Nigerians as subjects to be disciplined into a national force that sees them as citizens to bedefended.

None of this is to chastise individual commanders or soldiers. The security environment in Nigeria seems to deteriorate and grow more complex with each day and the military‘s missions are

unenviable. Many commanders are adapting and innovating to new challenges and showing impressive leadership in difficult environments where insurgents and militants blend easily into the local population, creating an atmosphere of confusion and mistrust. Rather, we cannot understand the security crises that Nigeria is experiencing today without considering the fundamentally weak nature of the colonial state – a state that was created to extract resources through local labour while offering little in the way of services to the population – and the years of rapacious military rule that followed. The ECOMOG interventions serve as an important case study, and indeed a cautionary tale, of how the politicisation of the armed forces can undermine their ability to carry out traditional military responsibilities. At a time when the military‘s role in daily life is increasing in tandem with spreading insecurity, Nigerians would do well to take these lessons to heart.

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Author interviews (May-October 2021)

- Army veteran #1
- Army veteran #2

- Army veteran #3
- Army veteran #4
- Army veteran #5
- Army veteran #6
- Navy veteran #1
- Air Force veteran #1