

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DYNAMICS OF WAR: WEAPONS OF ENGAGEMENT DURING THE 1968/69 PEASANT UPRISING IN SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA

Abiodun S. Afolabi & Rasheed Onagun

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

Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed a transformation in the conceptualization of war. Unlike in previous centuries where war was seen majorly as a tool of aggression, the twentieth century epitomised the idea of Carl von Clausewitz (Carl Von Clausewitz, 1943, p.280) that war is a continuation of politics, but through other means. When diplomacy as the heart of politics fails, there is tendency for nations to resort to war as an ultimate alternative to enforce the will of the state or express the concern of a section of society. This understanding reflected across several incidence of warfare across the world. The use of weapons and the aftermath of war is the major concern of this study. Many researches have focused on the engagements in modern warfare with conventional weapons, which include chemical, nuclear and atomic weapons. For instance, the detonation of chemical bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 swiftly led to the end of Second World War. Also, in the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbour in 1941, the under belly of the USA Air Force was laid bare. The 1991 USA invasion of Iraq also signalled the pursuit of interests with forceful means.

Unlike the Western context where wars are fought with various war arsenals and chemical weapons, the African experience in warfare have always revealed a combination of conventional and unconventional weapons. Warriors in traditional African societies had generally depended on the use of black magic, which is also known as *juju* in prosecuting wars. The traditional African soldiers never relied exclusively on procuring and deploying conventional weapons in warfare. The African fighter still finds it a necessity to be fortified and armed with locally designed weapons beyond the use of guns and other conventional arsenals. The MajiMaji war in Tanganyika epitomise an instance of the extent African warriors' relied on *juju* for the prosecution of a war against German oppression. The uprising, which began in 1905 and lasted till 1907, was the most famous military confrontation against the German colonial authorities that bred discontent among Africans, and the resentment reached fever pitch in 1905 when drought hit the region. The indigenous people, armed with arrow and spear, doused themselves with sacred water which they believed could repel German bullets (blackpast.org, 2019). The Adubi war of 1914 in Yorubaland was another clear instance of Africans' reliance on magical power to fight against the invasion of their territories by engaging the invaders in a bitter struggle over taxation, forced labour and daily indignation of colonial rule. The incident ultimately led to the abrogation of Egba independence in 1918 (Wikipedia, 2019).

The philosophy of African warfare which is mirrored in the philosophy of warfare in Yorubaland and which is the focus in this study, is straightforward. The Yoruba art of war is simply built on using everything in one's power to win the war and ensure victory over the enemy. Total extermination of the opposition is the ultimate goal in Yoruba warfare and there are series of encounters that have proven this point. In the post-colonial period, many individuals in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, were reputed to have possessed great supernatural powers that made it difficult, if not impossible, for their assailants to subdue them. Those who knew Benjamin Adekunle during the Nigerian civil war would always paint a picture of a man who possessed supernatural powers, which rendered ineffectual the sophisticated weaponry that were deployed by the enemy against him. There are recorded events, oral testimonies and incidences, which still serve as testimonials to his magical prowess. The causes, course and consequences of the Agbekoya uprising are examined from various perspectives.

The Origin of the Agbekoya Peasant Farmers Riots

As it was in the British Colonial Western Nigeria, taxation in post-colonial Yorubaland was not characterised by consultation between the people and the government, and the non-consulting characteristic did not help to avert a serious confrontation that was experienced in the heartland of the old Western Nigeria, which was engulfed in chaos, pandemonium and disorderliness from October 1968 until November 1969. This period was characterized by anarchy arising from the conflict between the State and a broad section of the peasantry who rejected and violently resisted the imposition of some economic measures put in place by both the state and the Federal Military Government. These obnoxious measures were intended to assist the Federal Military Government of Nigeria in the prosecution of the Nigerian Civil War and cover up a severe financial scandal in the Western State (Beer 1976, pp.162-168).

Whether among societies, groups, neighbours, nations or individuals, economic considerations usually constitute a huge reason for altercations. The theory of economic determinism also finds support in the Agbekoya crisis. Therefore, ambition, fear, acrimony, resentment and suspicion were not the motives which impelled the peasants to what proved to be a severe struggle. The peasant farmer's war was also not a mere protest movement; it was, indeed, a spontaneous response to distress that was occasioned by economic policies and suppression by an insensitive government. Although, one cannot concentrate solely on the ostensible causes of the Agbekoya riots, it suffices to say that whatever may be the obvious cause of any riot, the real motive is always want of happiness (Paine 1937, p. 137). The farmers were apparently not a happy people on the eve of the riots. The reasons for the peasant's unhappiness at the time of the disturbances were multifarious; there were direct and indirect causes as there were also some causes, not expressed, but inferred from events. There were also some indirect causes, which were actually peculiar to localities. Therefore, generalizations regarding the causes of the peasants' riots may be misleading. Indeed, the real causes of the peasants' disenchantment on the eve of the disturbances were diverse.

One such reason that triggered the riots was the newly introduced State Development Levy, which ignited discontent among the low-income group, most of

whom were petty traders/market women who were taxed on the same basis as their male counterparts. Farmers were being fleeced to pay for titled dignitaries and pen pushers (Beer, 1976). Although tax was the central issue in the conflict, several farmers admitted that it was not so much the tax that led the farmers to resort to fighting, but the tax collectors, town planning officials and sanitary inspectors who carried out their duties with excessive high handedness. Naturally, increase in taxation, occasioned by the civil war, was bound to affect the peasantry most devastatingly, and their reaction was spontaneous and violent. But then, research findings indicated that the scattered riots, which broke out in some parts of Western State such as Ijebu Remo, Ibarapa, Egba, Ibadan rural and urban, Osun and Oyo. There were also riots, for instance, in Ibadan rural districts in March 1958 following the sudden death of Adelabu Adegoke, aka *Penkelemes*, which was adulterated from the English words, 'peculiar mess' by his rural supporters. from late 1968 were mainly against increased taxation, rates, levies, the arbitrary nature of tax assessment and the often brutal manner of its collection by tax officials (Beer, 1976). One could assert that the agitation against exploitation and oppression was mainly responsible for sporadic guerrilla actions and foray into urban areas by the peasants.

The 'Agbekoya', which literally translates to 'farmers rejected suffering' was an economic cum political peasant movement, which began in Ibadan towards the beginning of December 1968 when a mammoth crowd of tax agitators marched towards Mapo Hall, singing a war song: *Oke mefa Ia o san. Bi o ba gbakumo, yio gbori bibe. Oke mefa lao san*, which refers to 'farmer's insistence on paying only Thirty Shillings' (30s) tax, and not a penny more'. The farmers protest was occasioned by the increase in Income Tax in the State from £1. 17s. 6d to £3 including a State fund of 7s.6d. In addition, they were expected to pay 10/- water rate, all adding up to £8 in certain parts of the Region, an amount that was considered outrageous by the peasants (Awonor Gordon, 1982). The farmers vehemently opposed the government tax policy because it was not peasant friendly.

The *Agbekoya* 'war' can also be understood from the point of view of a class struggle, essentially between the rich and the poor who were commonly referred to as *Mekunnu* (William 1980). The methods used by the state government to extract tax from the resource poor peasants were generally harsh and it consequently led to political unrest and socio-economic hardship for the taxpayers in the society. Interestingly, there was an inexplicable cooperation among the peasants in Western State as they unanimously took decisions in the interest of farmers, a decision that attracted popular supports.

Taxation was actually introduced in Ibadan in 1919 and it was from the generated revenue that the historical Mapo Hall and Cocoa House were built in Ibadan. These structures, among others, were built from the sweat of peasant farmers who were massively short-changed through the activities of the agricultural cooperatives, also known as Western State Marketing Board Commodity/Marketing Board (WSMB) by the bureaucrats in the State (Coker's Commission Report, 1962). The Western Region was then one of the world leading producers of cocoa and the military regional government

was able to increase its tax revenue base through the activities of the Board (Oral Interview with Alhaji Aransi, 2019).

There were public demonstrations in some parts of Western Region in the early days of the crisis. Civil disobedience became the new order of the day, and having been pushed against the wall, the peasant farmers had no choice other than to fight back. They showed their discontent by obstinately refusing to pay taxes (Western Nigeria Digest 1969, p. 6). The riots, however, did not degenerate into mere pilfering and hooliganism. During the public demonstration around Mapo Hall in Ibadan, a combined team of police and army opened fire on the agitators, killing nineteen people. On December 20, tax agitators were killed at Idi-Ayunre, a village some fifteen miles away from Ibadan. At Akanran village, also in Ibadan District, a Customary Court President was beaten up and the thigh bone of a tax officer was broken in a scuffle between tax officials and demonstrators (Ayoola Commission Report 1968, pp.12-20).

The peasant farmer's protest graduated from a mere spontaneous rejection of increased taxes and corrupt local government officials into organised peasant movements, which demanded important social reforms in the State. The open confrontation between the 'little people' (Beer, 1976, p.162; William 1980) and the Western State military administration continued unabated for several months. The riots were widespread and apparently well-co-ordinated, and the farmers in Ibadan villages soon began to see themselves as peasants opposed to an alien and oppressive system (Beer, 1976). They intended to replace the State, which they considered a negative quantity, with their own home-made social order.

The Akanran peasant farmers invaded the Government House, Agodi, but prior to that invasion, Akanran had become a high-risk terrain for anti-riot policemen. Militant individuals such as *Sokoro*, *Raaji Kolobo* and *Supo*, who represented the no-nonsense group of the Agbekoya warriors, ensured that this was so (Oral interview with Pa Lasisi 2017). The militant leaders included Tafa Adeoye, Adegoke Agekuejo, Folarin Idowu, Mudasiru Adeniran and Tafa Popoola (Wikivisually 2019). During the daring encounter, Tafa Adeoye and each of the five other men who constituted the militant leadership of the peasants, that invaded Agodi Federal Prison in Ibadan, set four hundred inmates free on the 16th of September, 1969. These Akanran farmers, in their attempt to mob and bully the government security agents, reduced the Agodi Prison to ruins (Oral interview with Alhaji Laiwola 2018). The event in the West was indeed 'a war within a war' (*Nigeria Tribune*, 1969) because the Nigerian civil war was being prosecuted by the Federal Government at the same time. The farmers and the released prisoners then moved back into the districts from where they successfully defended their position against police troops (Beer 1976) for the next six weeks, though with severe loss of human lives, particularly among civilians living in Akanran (Oral Interview with Chief Remi, 2019). The extent of casualties among the civilians in Akanran was really significant as policemen were deployed in large numbers to fight a battle against the recalcitrant farmers that were bent on bringing down the government (Oral interview with Pa Lasisi, 2017). Gradually, what was initially regarded as a mere show of *juju*/magical prowess by a few disgruntled illiterate farmers gradually degenerated into a crisis of national dimension (*Headlines* 1974, p. 8).

Dynamics in the Agbekoya War: The ‘Unscientific’ Weapons of Altercations

The peasants of Western Nigeria applied violence to compel the Governor Adebayo-led administration to review its unjust tax policy. They used the structures that were available to press for their demand, especially when the government resorted to coercion to extract full compliance with its unfriendly taxation policies. They acted in alliance with the local farmer leaders, with defined goals. The peasants’ violence was based on well-coordinated tactics that were largely successful, perhaps the most successful single collective action against government’s unjust policies in the history of Nigeria. It was successful to the extent that the military government of the region was left with no choice but to acquiesce to some of the demands of the adamant peasant farmers.

The *Agbekoya* ‘war’, properly identified as a class struggle, epitomised the reactions of the indigenous Yoruba peasants against the predatory and parasitic exactions by the bureaucratic bourgeoisie classes. Scholars have attested to the existence of classes among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria (William, 1980). The resource poor *Agbekoya* peasant farmers, therefore, represented their class interests as opposed to communal interests. As the disorderliness and pandemonium raged on, the traditional ruler of Ishara, *Oba* Samuel Akinsaya, was stoned by an angry mob of tax agitators in his town. The king’s palace and his Mercedes Benz car, the washing and cleaning of which the *Kabiesi* personally supervised, were completely burnt down, and his library, whose cost was conservatively estimated at \$5,000, was razed down. Following the bitter clash between the irate mob and traditional rulers, about five hundred men, armed with Dane guns and indigenous *juju*, stormed the charred ruins of the palace demanding the release of twenty-one men that were arrested and detained earlier in the day for rioting. During a 30-minutes fire exchange between the demonstrators and the police, six men were killed and several others were injured. Before the crowd reappeared the second time, *Oba* Akinsanya had fled to Lagos (Ayoola Commission Report, 1968, p. 12).

On the 15th of December, 1968, the palace of fifty-eight year-old *Oba* Adebayo Sámi, the Orimolusi of Ijebu Igbo, was besieged by demonstrators armed with cudgels and Dane guns daring their ruler to come out (Ayoola Commission Report 1968, pp.12-15). The *Oba* also cocked and dared his attackers to come closer, but before the detachment of the police could reach the scene, his palace had been badly damaged and his cars burnt to ashes. In a radio announcement shortly after the incident, the whereabouts of king Sámi was declared unknown. Barely three days later, demonstrators again invaded his palace when they heard that the traditional ruler had been smuggled back into it (Ayoola Commission Report, 1968, p.12).

Also, in early August 1969 at Akanran in Ibadan, rioters led by a leading Akanran hunter, ambushed and murdered policemen as well as soldiers. They also razed down council offices (Ayoola Commission Report, 1968, p.22). During the pandemonium that ensued, policemen reportedly had their uniform stuck to their bodies on contact with the fierce-looking and disenchanted peasant farmers (Oral interview with Mrs Mary, 2017), while some, who dared shot at the farmers ended up catching the

bullets as a result of *atidijo*, an indigenous *juju* that enables bullets to be released only from the rear of the gun, thereby killing the person who pulled the trigger (Oral interview with Gov. Adebayo 2017). *Okigbe*, which made it impossible for cutlass to penetrate the body, was also commonly used by the peasant farmers during the melee.

At Idi-Ayunre, the Commissioner of Police and one Mr Borisade, narrowly escaped from an untimely death when they were confronted by a crowd of 2,000 protesters who had charms and other dangerous weapons in their possession. The two men were grossly outnumbered by the mob. Thanks to the timely intervention of Colonel Olusegun Obasanjo of the Nigerian army who prevented that situation from snowballing into a full-blown altercation as the marauding crowd was dispersed (Ayoola Commission Report, 1968, p. 18). A senior *Akoda*, Mr. Elekuru, who had reported for duty before the arrival of police reinforcement, was declared missing. His dead body was later recovered. Significantly, from December 1968, council offices were forced to remain closed as officials were unwilling to report for duty without the provision of adequate police protection (Ayoola Commission Report, 1968, p.23).

The Akanran farmers who attacked Agodi prison only had Owo, a broom each in their hands when they confronted the state law enforcement officers. The ‘seventh companion of these six men was a dog,’ and that couldn’t have been an ordinary dog (Oral interview with Pa Lasisi, 2017). Of course, gun shots were fired and holes were made on Tafa’s regalia of war, (dotted with cowry shells) during exchanges of fire with law enforcement agents, but police bullets had no effect and did not penetrate his body and those of his entourage that followed him closely during the confrontations (Oral interview with Pa Lasisi, 2017). Tafa’s brand of local *juju* could be compared to that which made Benjamin Adekunle a household name during the Nigeria Civil War when he was popularly referred to as the ‘Black Scorpion’ of the Third Marine Commando. Indeed, those were terrible times. Although, one may not be able to prove the existence of African science as demonstrated by Tafa and his cohorts with empirical evidence, the abracadabra of seeing a broomstick that could sever the human flesh with the precision of a razor sharp cutlass may be inexplicable in the eyes of the uninitiated in Africa. However, most Africans strongly believe in the existence of such science, or if you like, magic!

The popular belief of the time was that the tactics adopted by the peasants were effective to the extent that ‘if they were literate, they would have virtually taken over the administration of Western State’ (Oral interview with Pa Lasisi, 2017). The farmers were very ruthless and unyielding during altercations with policemen, and whenever their Dane guns failed, they resorted to the use of cutlasses on which they were so adept. Indigenous hunters who were forcibly recruited into the Agbekoya militia also used traditional *juju* such as *afeeri*, which rendered them invisible, *Ayeta*, which made bullets miss the targets, and *Areta*, which weakened the velocity of the bullet (Oral interview with Ladele, 2017).

In fact, the then *Olubadan* of Ibadan, *Oba* Salawu Aminu, suddenly became an object of ridicule and derision among farmers who openly pulled him by his *agbada* (flowing gown in front of Mapo Hall (Oral interview with Pa Lasisi, 2017). Indeed, from July 1968, the life of officials and bourgeoisies was rudely interrupted as a result of the

violent activities of the peasants. There was no longer a hiding place for the kings, chiefs, government officials and all those whose interests contrasted with those of the peasants. At Ogbomoso, anti-tax demonstrators also attacked the *Oba* Soun of Ogbomoso, Olajide Olayode, and three of his chiefs with 'broomsticks' (Oral interview with Nojimu, 2019). The *Soun*, however, did not go down without putting up some spirited efforts to save own life. He, indeed, transformed himself into a number of domestic animals such as chicken, (*Adie*) cat, (*Olongbo*) and so on before he was assassinated, his body dismembered with a broomstick (*Gaga owo*) and displayed round the streets (Ayoola Commission Report, 1968, p. 30), which validates the claim that the Agbekoya peasant war was not one fought with the orthodox weapons, but with the non-conventional types (Oral interview with Nojimu, 2019).

Most peasant farmers depended heavily on indigenous weapons of warfare, which they were traditionally accustomed to during wars and hunting expeditions. However, some clergymen would not readily agree that reliance on mythical power was an effective means of prosecuting war. Although, charms, amulets and other mystical objects have always existed and have become part of the socio-cultural lives of the indigenous African people, to rely on such in order to win a war can only amount to self-deceit in modern warfare. The truth is that people may be given to a lot of exaggerations while recanting what they witnessed during the Agbekoya crisis in Western Nigeria. One may, however, not be able to rule out the possibility that the indigenous weapons and charms that the farmers used stood them in good stead, particularly in the early period of the altercations (Oral interview with Pastor Olubamiwa, 2017). At the peak of the uprising, the peasant farmer's movement could not be subdued by the organised fire power of the police in spite of the peasant's almost total reliance on 'indigenous juju' (Oral interview with Dr Omoloye 2017), and they appeared largely successful until their leadership was compromised by the Western State government.

It soon became apparent that the state government was incapable of containing the *Agbekoya* menace and had lost total exercise of legitimate power by relinquishing state power to the peasant farmers. One of those interviewed noted that 'if the resource poor peasant farmers were literate, they would have taken over the government of Western State of Nigeria' (Oral interview with Alhaji Aransi 2019), who started mounting roadblocks and collecting 'tax' on some roads. The peasantry knew that they had won a major victory by creating panic in the psyche of the top echelon of Western State administration. At Igbo-Ora, farmers mounted roadblocks, demanding money from policemen as 'protection' taxes (*Nigeria Tribune*, 1969). A crowd of about a thousand attended a meeting of *Agbekoya* leaders with the *Olubadan*, king Salawu. This was sequel to the earlier promise made by Chief Agbaje, a prominent Ibadan lawyer, to the effect that he would work a total reconciliation between Tafa Adeoye and the *Olubadan* (*Daily Sketch*, 1969). The hands of the 'great folks' were forced by the revolting peasants, but coordinated actions could, however, not be sustained after the peasants' initial success.

It was often said in some quarters that the people of South-western Nigeria preferred mob rule to constituted government. This could not have been true, and it is saddening that the government of the time did not apply caution in dealing with the

festering disturbances. Nowhere in the world would a government impose such astronomic increase in taxes and rates without explaining the rationale and simultaneously seeking consultation and co-operation. It is a truism that the State military government impugned the rights of the citizens, perhaps, in its erroneous impression that the Yoruba of the late 1960s would have preferred not to be guided by constitutionalism (*Nigeria Tribune*, 1969).

There was even an attempt to introduce the conspiracy theory into the Agbekoya upheaval. Indeed, insinuations arose from certain quarters that the riots were indeed a political cum economic crisis, which was championed by Adegoke Adelabu and fuelled by Salami Agbaje. The military governor of the Western State, Brigadier Adeyinka Adebayo, had even claimed that 'a few disgruntled elements were behind the agitation' since the riots were 'unprovoked' (*West Africa*, 1969; *Daily Sketch*, 1969). Agbaje was alleged to have instigated the violence in Ibadan.

Apparently, agitated by the unpleasant trend, Governor Adebayo quickly announced a cut of five shillings on every item under taxation in the state, but this was not sufficient to pacify the rampaging peasants. Shortly after the governor's announcement, one soldier was killed by angry mob at Ede near Oshogbo. They had earlier attacked the palace of the Timi of Ede, *Oba* Adetoyese Laoye II, who subsequently escaped to Oshogbo while the angry demonstrators descended on his palace (Ayoola Commission Report, 1968, p.18). But this did not translate to a quick resolution of the crisis as anticipated by the beleaguered Governor. By July, 1968, a state of emergency had already been declared in the Western Region.

The Agbekoya had become a thorn on the flesh of Western State government. These were groups that saw themselves as being outside the purview of the law, and as the expression went, had no civil status. These were people who had everything to gain and nothing to lose from an upheaval and who inspired fear all around. It was, indeed, the failure of government to listen to the demands of a relatively well organized group that led to the rise of the populist movement, using non-constitutional methods to secure redress, and, in so doing, undermined the stability of the entire state. They simply challenged the authority of the state in village affairs (Beer, 1976, pp.381 & 394), and they fought the state to a stand-still using indigenous tools and tactics within their disposal as objects of war. More importantly, they adopted the use of home-made *juju* and got the better of the state's law enforcement agents, for a relatively significant period.

It was also during the crisis that a traditional chief, Elemono of Ila-Orangun and a tax collector, were clubbed to death while several others, including a police officer, were seriously injured during an outbreak of fresh riots in the West. The palace of *Orangun* of Ila was set ablaze and many other houses were damaged. This time around, a police report from Oshogbo revealed that there was a changed atmosphere over tax, which erupted into riots when a group of collectors tried to raid defaulters (*Nigeria Tribune*, 1969). The policemen were, however, always come out worst whenever there was an altercation between them and the fiercely violent peasant farmers. In fact, law enforcement agents usually flee whenever they saw a band of marauding peasants.

The police authorities described as ‘subversive activities’ the actions of twenty-four policemen who allegedly ‘retreated’ during one of the operations in which some of their colleagues lost their lives. The twenty-four officers were consequently slated for summary dismissal from the force (*Daily Times*, 1969). Apparently, these officers were terrified by what they witnessed happening to their colleagues; they saw how it became impossible for policemen who encountered the Agbekoya warriors to have their uniforms removed from their bodies, and attempts to forcefully pull off these uniforms resulted in the painful removal of their skins (Oral interview with Mrs Mary).

It is significant to note here that, only those warriors who protected themselves with the ‘real’ *juju* were actually shielded from injury or death from police bullets, and at times, these charms failed them (Oral interview with Alhaji Aransi, 2019). Truth be told that anti-riot policemen and peasant farmers died in their numbers. By and large, the peasant farmers were able to fight the military government of Western Nigeria to a standstill through the adoption of indigenous weapons of war such as *Areta*, *Ayeta*, and *Atidijoto* against perceived injustice against their members. They also used cudgel, broom stick, etc. and held their own against the government’s law enforcement agencies that enjoyed the benefit of superior weaponry.

One may also mention that traditional rulers (*Obas* and Chiefs) as well as the council officials became objects of the farmers’ hostility as the crisis unfolded and, caught in the classic predicament of the colonial African chiefs, the *Obas*, *Baales* and chiefs appealed for conciliation, but also asked the farmers to pay their taxes and eschew violence’ (William 1980, p. 215). Several *Obas* and numerous *Baales* such as Ajayi, the *Baale* of Akufu, fled for their lives while one *Oba* and several chiefs were murdered. The links between the peasantry and their rulers, which Moore and Wolf regarded as a crucial constraint on rebellion had snapped, and like the industrial worker described by Adrian Peace (Adrian Peace, 1980), the farmers organized themselves under their own leadership to enforce their interests collectively. Thus, one could assert that the historic Agbekoya uprising was, to all intent and purposes, informed by the rise of agrarian populism. The principal actors were able to demonstrate that they had the consciousness and determination to resist oppressive and forcible exactions. They, like cornered leopards, were determined, no matter the means, on self-preservation and were completely purged of fear of government and its superstructures.

The Capitulation of Western State Government

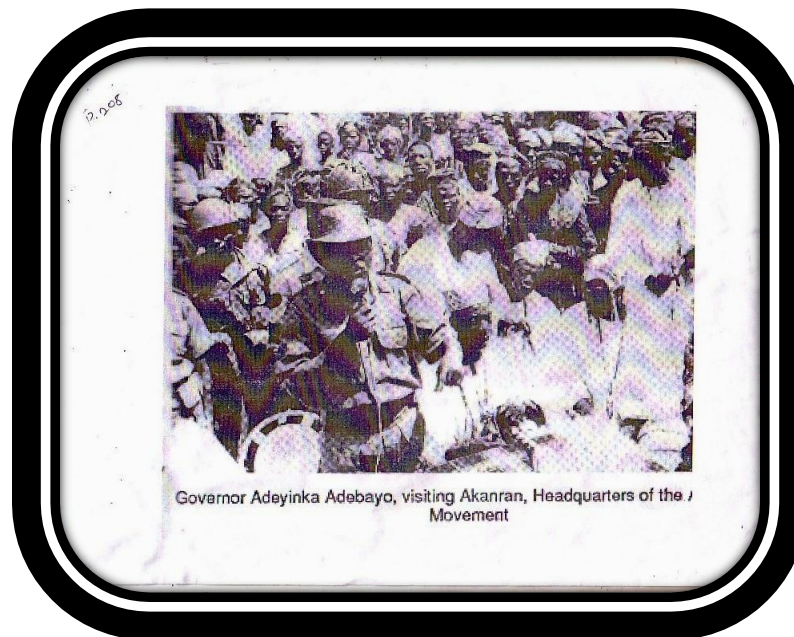
Governor Adebayo’s position seemed threatened by late September 1969 and the *New Nigeria* newspaper urged the Federal Military Government to declare a State of Emergency in order to run the government of the West from Lagos (*New Nigeria*, 1969). A meeting of the Supreme Military Council was also reported to have discussed events in the West at great length (*Nigeria Tribune*, 1969). It soon became necessary for prominent Nigerians to intervene in the ‘festering sore’, and that was when Chief Awolowo, the then Federal Commissioner of Finance, paved the way for the much desired peace. The initiatives of Chief Obafemi Awolowo spurred the Governor and the *Olubadan* of Ibadan into lightning action to get to the roots of the grievances of the people, and steps were taken to redress them. Awolowo published a lengthy article in the

Daily Times, calling for the release of the arrested rioters, slashing of the water rate and abolition of the Western State Development Levy (*Sunday Times*, 1969).

On the 14th of October 1969, the Western State Executive Council capitulated. Thus, the axiom that only the peasants were revolutionary (Ayoola Commission Report, 1968) in a colonial country was once again demonstrated in a post-colonial state. The capitulation of the executive council meant that a tide was sweeping over the Western State, and that kings and chiefs were running against it in terror. One could also argue that but for the moderating counsels of 'Awo' and some other leaders, the Western State government might have been compelled to submit absolutely to the dictates of the peasants. On October 15th 1969, the government announced its plan to reduce the flat rate tax from £3:5 to £2. The suspension of the collection of motor park and market fees were affected and local district councils in Ibadan rural areas were abolished (*Sunday Times*, 1969). The *New Nigerian* congratulated the peasants for successfully bringing their grievances to the attention of the government and forcefully demanding redress.

As it appeared, the *elites* all too readily accepted the victory of the peasants. Tafa Adeoye and his retinue of fierce-looking peasants were received and entertained on the grounds of the Governor's House (*Daily Sketch*, 1969). However, what was really taking place was a change in strategy. The new aim of the government was not to resist the Agbekoya demands by force but to compromise its leadership and neutralize the effectiveness of the movement. It was only when the government began to implement its new strategy with a view to compromising the Agbekoya leadership that the feasibility of military incursion of farmer's villages became plausible. Government not only ensured that money changed hands as some key leaders among the farmers were corruptly enriched, they also neutralized the bond of the Agbekoya movement and planted a woman police volunteer as a mole to seduce and marry Tafa Adeoye in order to divert the attention of the farmers from the riot. Before then, it was virtually impossible to attempt to arrest Tafa. Significantly, the entirely new *modus operandi* in the war against the peasant farmers was what saved the State from the Agbekoya disruptions, which unquestionably menaced the administration of Governor Adeyinka Adebayo. At this point too, unity in the Agbekoya leadership, and even the entire organization was, notably and fatally, absent. It was diplomacy, rather than force that led to the restoration of peace in Western State, and thus, the struggle inevitably entered a new phase.

**GOVERNOR, WESTERN STATE, ADEYINKA ADEBAYO ON A VISIT TO
AKANRAN, HEADQUARTERS OF THE AGBEKOYA MOVEMENT**



Source: Oluranti Afowowe, 1998. *Onward Soldier Marches On: A Biography of General Adeyinka Adebayo*, Nigeria: Evans Brothers Nigeria Ltd.

Reconciliation and the Return of Peace into Western State

In December 1968, the Justice Ayoola Commission was appointed by Brig. Adeyinka Adebayo-led Western State government to collect evidence on the civil disturbances that ravaged certain parts of Western Nigeria and make recommendations. The Commission, as part of its recommendations, advocated for social justice and also urged the strengthening of the State's repressive apparatus in order to avoid what was referred to as 'mob rule'. On the whole, Ayoola's recommendations went a long way in addressing the problems that were generated by taxation and tax related considerations that caused the upheavals of 1968/69. The water rate was not only reduced; adequate steps were taken to ensure speedy investigation of losses of council funds while swift prosecution of offenders became operative. Among other positive changes, farmers were paid adequate prices for their cocoa while levies paid by the low income group were staggered in order to facilitate easy payment, etc.

However, when General Adebayo's view on the issue of the potency of the Agbekoya peasant 'farmer's *juju* was later sought, he simply dismissed it with a wave of the hand and asked: 'where is Tafa Adeoye today?' (Oral interview with Governor Adebayo, 2008). It is important to note that Tafa Adeoye was taken into police custody on the 16th of September 1970, and despite efforts to secure his release by Bola Ige, he remained in detention in Jos without trial or charges brought against him until March 1971. It is a measure of how much Tafa had lost the support of the farmers that his arrest, which was politically impossible a year previously, generated little or no protest

within his constituency (the farmers). Even after the conclusion of the catastrophic altercations of the late 1960s, some of those who witnessed the disruptions, while reminiscing over the violence that erupted and pervaded some part of South-western State, still come up with feelings of trepidation and despair. Long after the riots had subsided, the phobia of the warriors and their magical prowess have continued to haunt those who saw how evil was unleashed on the West.

The whole event, as it appears, reveals the military mind-set that has plagued Nigeria since independence. It is rare to find a place where a responsible government treats its citizens the way citizens are treated in Nigeria, as if the people have no right to complain. It can also be overwhelmingly disturbing when any government raises tax from 50 to 100% at a time anywhere in the civilized world and expect things to remain the same. The overarching question remains: was it right to impose debilitating taxes on the Western State farmers in order to prosecute a civil war they were not interested in? Even the civilian governments in post-colonial Nigeria have not fared better in the ways the pump prices of petroleum products are still being indiscriminately raised since 1999, and this has left a bitter taste in the mouths of Nigerians. Today in 2022, the political and economic situation in Nigeria has sadly declined and degenerated to a level of impunity to the extent that the country appears to be dangerously perched on a gunpowder keg.

Conclusion

Firstly, this research found that the peasantry, who generally contributed a large share of their wealth into the Western State coffers during the early post-colonial period, benefited very little because the surplus was appropriated, especially by the local bourgeoisie and the bureaucratic groups. The new taxes, rates and levies, which were levied, did not lead to corresponding improvement in the provision of socio-economic facilities for the people. Riots thus became an inevitable tool used by the peasants to demand for justice and equal rights.

Secondly, the Agbekoya crisis in the West, which started in Ishara on the 25th of November, 1968, and ultimately spread to other parts of Western Nigeria, only abated towards the close of 1969, but not before the peasants had demonstrated their absolute disrespect for the State military government of the day. The peasant farmers, in fact, dealt devastating psychological blows on the psyche of the law enforcement agents through the use of *juju* and other indigenous instruments of war. Cutlasses, clubs, amulets and charms were mostly relied upon by the peasants to prosecute the eventful 'war'. Police guns were rendered impotent against the farmers because bullets shot at some farmers fell off like powder on glass. Apparently, the entire state law enforcement was in total disarray, at least, initially, before they were able to put their acts together against the radicalized onslaughts of the peasant farmers (Oral interview with Chief Remi, 2018).

Thirdly, the 1968-69 tax riots in Western Nigeria was not only devastating in terms of property destroyed, it was also horrendous because many innocent lives were lost. One cannot but agonize when one realises the extreme loss of human lives that

attended the use of force in the avoidable revolt. Perhaps, the same feeling was manifested when one newspaper described the “events” in the West as the ‘war within a war’ (*Nigeria Tribune*, 1969). It was reported that over six thousand (6000) people died, even at a conservative estimate in the uprising (<https://sniggle.net> nd).

This kind of catastrophe could have been averted if Governor Adeyinka Adebayo had put in place meaningful welfare policy for the peasant farmers when he took over power in 1966. Unfortunately, he saw them as people who had to be milked for the benefit of the State. He had no respect for farmers, particularly the Akanran farmers, and saw nothing wrong if they were short-changed for the benefit of the State. As a result, the threat of violence and unlimited anarchy, which are symptomatic of lack of an effective State, became the order of the day. The Western State government obviously had no respect for human rights, and the contending issues of the period were closely associated with poverty and inequality. Thus, the resource poor farmer’s socio-economic development was sacrificed in the interest of the security of the entire nation, and while reflecting over the terror that was, in turn, unleashed on the State by the peasants, the statement of former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, comes to mind, and he said:

humanity will not enjoy security without development, it will not enjoy development without security, and will not enjoy either without respect for human rights.

It is, therefore, not surprising that peace and security became elusive in the Western State as a result of the unfriendly economic policy that was pursued by the governments (Duncan, 2008).

Finally, the revolts forced the military to rescind its harsh tax policies and adopt a milder and more people-friendly option. The flat rate taxation was further reduced to £2 annually while tax defaulters and prisoners were granted amnesty. Although, most of the farmers’ demands, especially in the area of provision of basic social amenities, were met, a landmark feature of the revolt was that civil populace stood up to the military and demanded their fundamental rights. It is to the credit of the peasant farmers that the South-western State experienced prosperity again following the amicable diplomatic resolutions of the crisis. But sadly, it is ironic that even in many parts of the African continent today, some undemocratic civilian leaders still apply military fiat to address constitutional issues, thus aggravating issues of instability, leadership and erosion of basic cultural values.

References

- “The Agbekoya, a Tax Revolt in Nigeria in 1968-69”, Available at: <https://sniggle.net/TPL/index5.php> (nd).
- Adrian, Peace (1980). *Choice Class and Conflict : A Study of Southern Nigerian factory Workers*. Humanities Press.
- Awonor-Gordon, O. R. W. (1982). *Agbekoya: A Study of Peasant Uprising in Western Nigeria, 1968-1969*. M.A. Dissertation in History Department, University of Ibadan.

- Ayoola Ebenezer Olufemi (1968). Report of Commission of Enquiry into the civil disturbances in certain parts of Western Nigeria.
- Beer, C. (1976). *The Politics of Peasant Groups in Western Nigerian*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Coker's Commission Report of Enquiry into the affairs of certain statutory corporations in Western Nigeria. 1962. Vol. 1. Federation of Nigeria.
- Daily Sketch*, 10th December, 1969.
- Daily Sketch*, 31st October, 1969.
- Daily Sketch*, 7th of July, 1969
- Daily Times*, 27th of September, 1969.
- Duncan, G. (2008). *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World*. UK: Oxfam International.
- Headlines*, 10th January, 1974, p. 8.
- <http://en.m.wikipedia.org> Assessed on the 3rd of July 2019.
- <http://www.blackpast.org> Assessed on the 3rd of July 2019.
- <https://wikivisually.com> Assessed on the 7th of July 2019
- New Nigeria*, 24th of September, 1969.
- Nigerian Tribune*, 12th July 1969
- Nigerian Tribune*, 18th of September, 1969.
- Nigerian Tribune*, 25th September, 1969.
- Nigerian Tribune*, 27th November, 1969.
- Nigerian Tribune*, 7th May, 1969.
- Nigerian Tribune*. 18th September, 1969.
- Paine, T. (2937). Right of Man (ed.) H.B. Bonner.
- Sunday Times*, 28th of September, 1969. 'Awolowo Speaks out on West Riots and his Political Future'.
- Sunday Times*, 28th of September, 1969. 'Awolowo speaks....'
- West Africa*, 12th July 1969.
- Western Nigeria Digest Statistics Vol. IV*. (1969) Ibadan Government Printers.
- William, G. (1980). State and Society in Nigeria. Afrografika, Ondo.

Oral Interview

- Oral Interview conducted with Alhaji Aransi Oladoja, (100+) a Cocoa Merchant at Ibadan on 04/07/2019.
- Oral interview conducted with Alhaji Laiwola Jagun, (85 years), Abeokuta, 17/01/2018.
- Oral interview conducted with Chief Remi Akinajo (100+), Cocoa Trader, Akanran village in Ibadan on 16/07/2019.
- Oral Interview conducted with Chief Remi Obisesan (85 years) (Rewire), Akanran Ibadan, 16/07/ 2018.
- Oral Interview conducted with Dr. Omoloye, Department of virology, University of Ibadan, New Covenant Church premises, Alumni Centre, University of Ibadan, 16/07/ 2017.
- Oral Interview conducted with Dr. Pastor Olubamiwa Olaiwola, New Covenant Church premises, Alumni Centre, University of Ibadan on the 16/07/ 2017.

- Oral Interview conducted with Governor Adeyinka Adebayo, former Governor of Western State, was 80+ , Ikeja, Lagos, 01/09/2008.
- Oral Interview conducted with Ladele Obisesan (Ekerin *Baale*) (80+), granted the author at Akanran in Ibadan on 16/07/2017.
- Oral Interview conducted with Mr Nojimu Akinde, (75 Years), Rewire, granted the author at Apete in Ibadan on 16/07/ 2019.
- Oral interview conducted with Mrs Mary Ogu, nee Akinde, (55 Years), at Apete on the 19/07/2017.
- Oral interview conducted with Pa Lasisi Obisesan, (100+), Council Official, granted to the author at Akanran in Ibadan on 16/07/ 2017.
- Oral interview conducted with Professor Adebayo Omoloye, (58 Years), Lecturer, University of Ibadan, 16/07/ 2017.