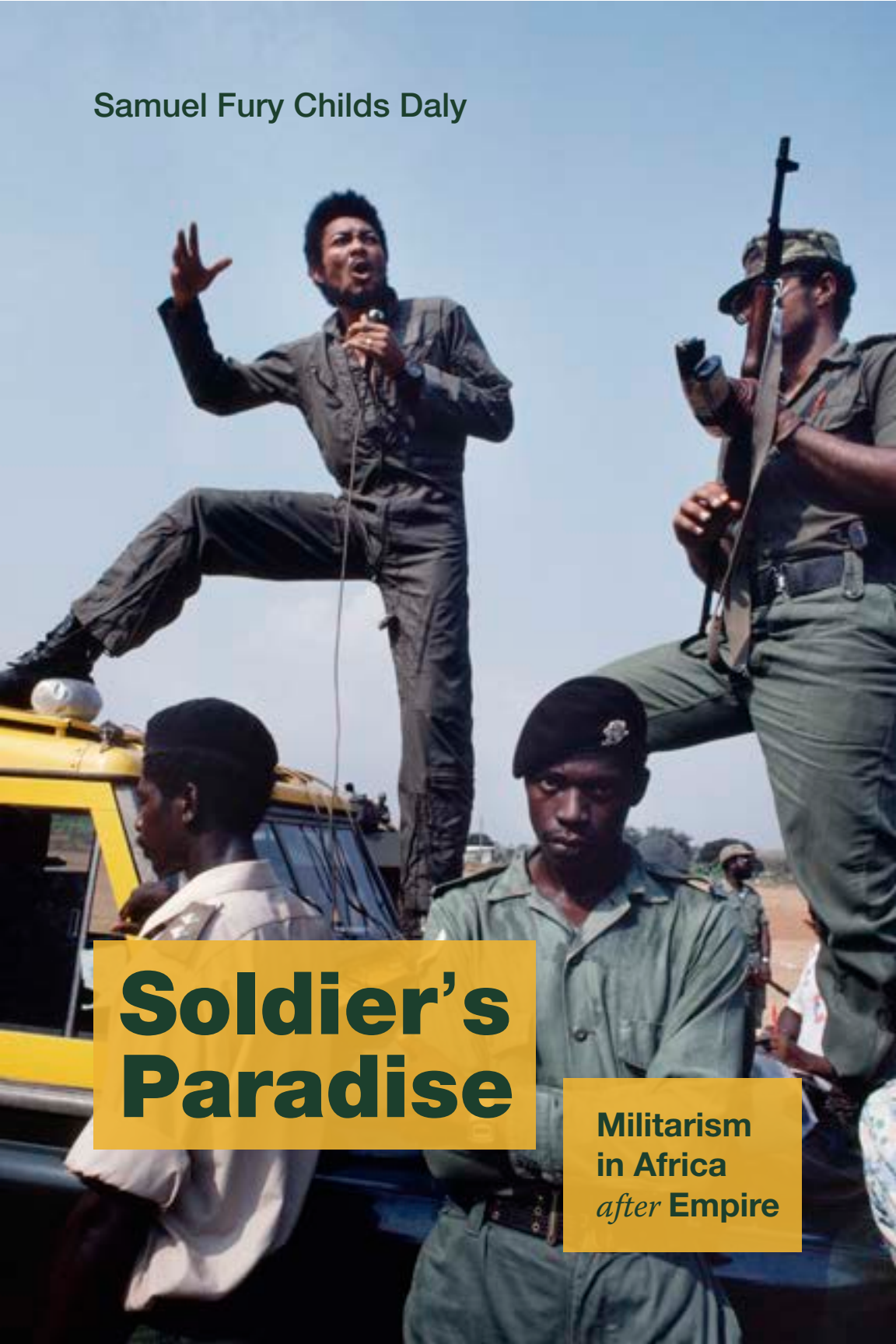




Samuel Fury Childs Daly

Soldier's Paradise

Militarism
in Africa
after Empire

Soldier's Paradise

BUY

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

Samuel Fury Childs Daly

Soldier's Paradise

Militarism
in Africa
after Empire

DUKE

Duke University Press — Durham and London — 2024

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

© 2024 Duke University Press

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project Editor: Ihsan Taylor

Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson

Typeset in Warnock Pro and Helvetica Neue

by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Daly, Samuel Fury Childs, [date] author.

Title: Soldier's paradise : militarism in Africa after empire / Samuel Fury Childs Daly.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023050704 (print)

LCCN 2023050705 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478030836 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478026594 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478059820 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478094180 (ebook/other)

Subjects: LCSH: Postcolonialism—Nigeria. | Dictatorship—Africa—History—20th century. | Military government—Africa—History—20th century. | Postcolonialism—Africa. | Nigeria—History—1960- | Nigeria—History, Military—20th century. | Nigeria—Politics and government—1960- | BISAC: POLITICAL SCIENCE / Colonialism & Post-Colonialism | LAW / Legal History

Classification: LCC DT515.8 .D24 2024 (print) | LCC DT515.8 (ebook) | DDC 320.966909/04—dc23/eng/20240405

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023050704>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023050705>

Cover art: Ghana, 1982. Courtesy A. Abbas/Magnum Photos.

DUKE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

THE MOST EXQUISITE PLEASURE IS
DOMINATION. NOTHING CAN COMPARE
WITH THE FEELING. THE MENTAL
SENSATIONS ARE EVEN BETTER THAN
THE PHYSICAL ONES. KNOWING YOU
HAVE POWER HAS TO BE THE BIGGEST
HIGH, THE GREATEST COMFORT.
IT IS COMPLETE SECURITY,
PROTECTION FROM HURT. WHEN
YOU DOMINATE SOMEBODY YOU'RE
DOING HIM A FAVOR. HE PRAYS
SOMEONE WILL CONTROL HIM, TAKE
HIS MIND OFF HIS TROUBLES. YOU'RE
HELPING HIM WHILE HELPING
YOURSELF. EVEN WHEN YOU GET
MEAN HE LIKES IT. SOMETIMES
HE'S ANGRY AND FIGHTS BACK BUT
YOU CAN HANDLE IT. HE ALWAYS
REMEMBERS WHAT HE NEEDS. YOU
ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT.

—Jenny Holzer, untitled
(*Inflammatory Essays*), 1979–1982

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

Acknowledgments ■ ix

Introduction ■ 1

PART I—

**Militarism as
a Civilization**

- 1 THE MASTER'S TOOLS
The Inheritance of Colonialism ■ 37
- 2 THE SOLDIER'S CREED
Discipline as an Ideology ■ 65
- 3 THE PORTABLE COUP
The Jurisprudence of Military "Revolution" ■ 101

PART II—

**Militarism's
Legal Forms**

- 4 ORACLES AND AUTOCRATS
The Uses of Customary Law ■ 123
 - 5 FELA KUTI GOES TO COURT
The Spectacle of Inquiry ■ 143
 - 6 THE GIFT OF MARTIAL LAW
Military Tribunals for Civilians ■ 167
- CODA: Militarism's Denouement ■ 189

Notes ■ 209

Bibliography ■ 249

Index ■ 275

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Why have you come here?” a law professor asked me over a beer. We were sitting on a patio at the faculty club of the University of Lagos, overlooking the lagoon that is slowly but surely eroding the spit of land the campus stands on. The vast Third Mainland Bridge crossed the water in the distance, choked with traffic even though it was late at night. I had been telling him about a document I found earlier that day in a library across town. It was an account of a public execution on a Lagos beach from the early 1970s, full of fire and brimstone: “When the military vehicle arrived,” a spectator described, “I expected a ragged, brutish man to appear for execution. Instead, I saw a handsome, swishy young man, impeccably clad in a pink shirt and trousers. It was almost unbelievable that that day was going to be his last.”¹ Finding a document like this is like striking gold. The suspense, the pathos, the “swishy” bandit dressed in pink—these are things I know I can polish into a good story. I handed a photocopy to my drinking partner, and he looked at it for a while. He held his hands in front of him in a gesture that was both inquiring and supplicating.

“Why do you worry about these old things?” he asked, sounding exasperated but not wanting to offend me. I replayed his question over and over, each time putting the accent on a different word until I no longer remembered where he had actually put it. Why do *you* worry? Why *these* things? I didn’t have an answer for him then, and I still don’t. But I have an inkling why this grim story of lost freedoms and thwarted plans is the one I chose to tell. Acknowledgments are typically about the people and institutions that give a book form, but the past few years have taught me that context matters too. I wrote *Soldier’s Paradise* at a time of intense personal turmoil. What did my unraveling life let me see in this history? What did it *keep* me from seeing? These are vain questions—ones that put the historian too close to the action for my taste. But this is a book about vanity (one raconteur called soldiers “narcissuses in uniform”), so perhaps it’s fair to ask them.²

Historians bring people back to a shadowy kind of life by digging them out of archives and putting them in our books. I suspect the wraiths we create

often look more like *ourselves* than the people we base them on. When we're happy, we make them happy too. When the world around us seems crooked, we tell a crooked tale about them. This book was shaped, I admit, by what was happening in my own life. When my marriage ended, every document that passed through my hands seemed like evidence of failure, as if the only kind of historical change I could register was *decline*. The isolation of the pandemic showed me how the army's camaraderie appealed to loners—I knew because I craved it myself. When, later, I was jilted by a charismatic musician, I could suddenly see why so many people hated Fela Kuti (see chapter 5). I suspect other historians have these solipsistic streaks too, but propriety discourages us from owning up to them. We're more introspective than we used to be about how race, sex, and nationality shape the study of the past. We're less attuned to how other factors—psychology, circumstances—might also be in play. I acknowledge the fury and solitude that helped me write this book. You can probably see it peeking between the lines.

None of this is to say that people and institutions aren't important. An army of friends helped me through this hard time, and many colleagues have contributed to this book through reading, talking, and arguing (and to be clear, no one has agreed with all of it). Whatever interpretive crimes committed here were my work alone, but Neil Agarwal, Nima Bassiri, Nishant Batsha, Mark Drury, James Clinton Francis, Sara Katz, Vivian Chenxue Lu, Gregory Mann, Elizabeth Jacqueline Marcus, Nana Osei-Opore, Mairi Shepherd, Nicholas W. Stephenson Smith, Titilola Halimat Somotan, Luise White, and Thomas Wilson Williams left fingerprints at the scene. At the University of Chicago, my new academic home, I'm grateful to Adom Getachew, Adrian Johns, Kenneth Moss, Emily Osborn, Steve Pincus, Danielle Roper, Amy Dru Stanley, Thuto Thipe, and others for making my transition to Chicago so seamless. I look forward to many years of working together. At Duke, where I started this book, I'm grateful to my beloved colleagues in the Department of African and African American Studies (AAAS). Mark Anthony Neal gave me the kind of freedom our department was built for. Adriane Lentz-Smith, Anne-Maria Makhulu, and Charles Piot have been constant sources of inspiration, and they gave me more of their time than I had any right to ask them for. So did Lee Baker, Jasmine Cobb, Michaeline Crichlow, Sandy Darity, Kerry Haynie, Tsitsi Jaji, Wahneema Lubiano, Rick Powell, Charmaine Royal, Karin Shapiro, Stephen Smith, Javier Wallace, and Joseph Winters. I also thank Heather Martin, Tyra Dixon, Wilhelmina Green, and Mian Wu. Beyond AAAS, I'm grateful to Anne Allison, Sarah Balakrishnan, Siobhan Barco, Juliana Barr, Nathaniel Berndt, James Chappel, Leo Ching, Prasenjit

Duara, Janet Ewald, John French, Thavolia Glymph, Michael Hardt, Ranjana Khanna, Mbaye Lo, Justin Leroy, Jehangir Malegam, John Martin, Kathryn Mathers, Cecilia Márquez, Adam Mestyan, Eric Mvukiyehe, Barbara Ofosu-Somuah, Jolie Olcott, Simon Partner, Sumathi Ramaswamy, Renée Ragin Randall, Carlos Rojas, Adam Rosenblatt, Giulia Riccò, Felwine Sarr, Orin Starn, Dubie Toa-Kwarpong, Ellie Vilakazi, Yun Emily Wang, Kathi Weeks, Kelsey Zavelo, and the much missed Diane Nelson. I look forward to many more transcendent Sundays with Gabriel Rosenberg and Harris Solomon. Ben Grunwald, Jessica Namakkal, Eli Meyerhoff, Mike Blank, and Tara Hopkins made Durham home, and Nima Bassiri made its gyms and dive bars the center of my intellectual life. At Duke University Press, Elizabeth Ault has been a peerless editor and a prized friend, and I'm grateful to her in more ways than I can count. I also thank the three anonymous readers who prepared thoughtful, constructive reports on this manuscript, and Ben Kossak, Ihsan Taylor, Christopher Hellwig, and Matthew John Phillips.

I'm grateful to Wale Adebani, Saheed Aderinto, Rabiya Akande, Simon Allen, Jean Allman, David Anderson, Victoria Barnes, Taiwo Bello, Lauren Benton, Fahad Bishara, Binyamin Blum, Jane Burbank, Arudra Burra, Erin Braatz, Katherine Bruce-Lockhart, Emily Burrill, Pedro Cantisano, Frederick Cooper, Amy Chazkel, Robyn d'Avignon, Rohit De, Mamadou Diouf, Roy Doron, Laura Fair, Elisabeth Fink, Katherine Franke, Abosede George, Ariela Gross, Bruce Hall, Emily Hamilton, Vincent Hiribarren, Trina Hogg, Irvin Hunt, Stacey Hynd, Anthony Idigbe, Larissa Kopytoff, David Kruger, Egor Lazarev, Dan Lee, Lisa Lindsay, Louisa Lombard, Dan Magaziner, Enrique Martino, Daniel McCracken, Naomi Mezey, Andrew Miller, Ben Miller, Dirk Moses, Michelle Moyd, Kenda Mutongi, Stephanie Newell, Cyril Obi, Toja Okoh, Philip Olayoku, Jimoh Oluwasegun, Mariana Dias Paes, Derek Peterson, Nana Quarshie, Reynolds Richter, Sarah Runcie, Teemu Ruskola, Chetana Sabnis, Paul Sant-Amour, Lynn Schler, Rebecca Scott, Mitra Sharafi, Anoo-radha Iyer Siddiqi, Raquel Sirotti, Daniel Jordan Smith, Nicholas Rush Smith, Jonny Steinberg, Rhiannon Stephens, Scott Straus, Trey Straussberger, Judith Surkis, Matt Swagler, Rob Tendy, Madina Thiam, Lynn Thomas, Elizabeth Thornberry, Geoff Traugh, Egodi Uchendu, Martha Umphreys, Inge Van Hulle, Megan Vaughan, Stefan Vogenauer, Kim Wagner, Charlotte Walker-Said, and Natasha Wheatley. Jonathan Gillard Daly and Gale Fury Childs read every word, and they, along with Emily Fury, are the ones I thank last, and loudest.

Financial support was provided by the University of Chicago, Duke University, the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory, the Columbia

University Seminars, and the Josiah Charles Trent Memorial Foundation. A generous grant from the University of Chicago's Center for International Social Science Research, under the leadership of Jenny Trinitapoli, allowed this book to be published open access. A version of chapter 3 was published as "The Portable Coup: The Jurisprudence of 'Revolution' in Uganda and Nigeria," *Law and History Review* 39, no. 4 (November 2021): 737–64.

* * *

What follows is an allegory about people trying to build a new civilization with broken tools and mismeasured plans. I offer no pieties about what they constructed. Chroniclers of independent Africa are at an impasse about how contentious stories like this one should be told.³ At one extreme, there are cynics who revel in spectacles of decay that they pass off as tell-it-like-it-is empiricism. At the other, there are gatekeepers who police what's said about the continent and who says it, as if a billion people's history is a family secret that shouldn't be talked about in mixed company. What defines the sides is not nationality, race, or generation. Most scholars fall somewhere in the middle, and I have played on both teams. In this book, I take neither side—both inhibit historical understanding. A true-to-life portrait of Africa's military dictatorships can't leave out their ugliness. But it also can't ignore their charisma, connivance, and *splendor*.

DUKE

A group of men crowds around the news anchor's desk looking ready for a fight. They wear full combat gear—camouflage, helmets, bulletproof vests. All of them are young and big, seemingly chosen for this task on the basis of size rather than seniority. Their drab uniforms contrast with the cheerful lighting of the TV station, which is better suited to weather reports than coup announcements. They pose like actors in an action movie, and they've cast themselves in the leading roles. These soldiers have taken over their government, and they're not the first of their kind to do so.

After the end of colonialism, dozens of African countries experienced military coups. Across the continent, societies that had just won their independence from Europe became military dictatorships. Once soldiers were in charge, politics shifted course. Promises of liberty were replaced by a vision of *discipline*, and military principles like rank, readiness, and obedience supplanted the softer political values—equality, nondomination—that civilians had preached.¹ Politics became a war of position between men in uniform, and in some countries that war raged for decades. Eventually most armies returned to the barracks, and for a while it seemed like Africa had left military rule in the twentieth century.

It has not. From 2020 to the time of writing, soldiers have brought an end to civilian government in Guinea, Mali, Sudan, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Gabon. The journalists and diplomats who didn't see them coming have fumbled around for an explanation, usually landing on shortsighted theories involving Russian meddling or foreign mercenaries. But these coups didn't come out of nowhere. The soldiers in the TV studios are building on a deep political tradition: for much of the late twentieth century, Africa's most pervasive ideology was *militarism*.²

From the 1960s to the 1990s, African politics revolved around soldiers' blood feuds and power grabs.³ The men who staged them were intoxicated by their own strength, brimming with ambition and nervous energy. "It has proved infectious, this seizure of government by armed men, and so effortless," wrote the South African sociologist Ruth First in 1970. "Get the keys of



FIGURE 1.1. Soldiers announcing the January 2022 coup in Burkina Faso.

the armoury; turn out the barracks; take the radio station, the post office and the airport; arrest the person of the president, and you arrest the state.”⁴ On the surface, their coups were about corruption, or bad behavior by politicians, or low pay. But militarism was not always reactive, or reactionary. Nearly all militaries wanted to transform their countries, even though they didn’t always spell out exactly what they wanted them to become. Coups also came with *ideas*, and militarism—the ideology of rule by soldiers—aimed to make a new kind of society.

Soldiers run countries like they fight wars. Combat is their metaphor for politics. They approach political problems like battles to be won or lost, even when it isn’t clear what winning or losing would mean. They treat their rivals like enemies—not people who see things differently but adversaries who have to be defeated. They divvy up the population into friends and foes and treat them accordingly. They enforce conformity, and they try to make everyone think like they do. They put up a united front, but behind the scenes they plot against one another—each wants to be the alpha. Not every military regime fits this description, at least not perfectly. But this is what military government often looks like to the governed. To civilians, military rule can be hard to distinguish from an occupation. The difference is that in a homegrown *militocracy*, the commands don’t come from a foreign army. They come from your own sons and brothers.

The years covered by this book are sometimes referred to as Africa’s “lost decades”—a time when the continent’s future was mortgaged and its spirit was smothered under a uniform.⁵ But they didn’t feel “lost” in the

moment. Militarism promised to channel Africa into the flow of modernity, and many civilians rallied to that cause (at least at first). Soldiers offered an attractive vision of the future, and force wasn't the only arrow they had in their quivers. They promised to make a bountiful, orderly world. They would bring a second, deeper, more lasting freedom than the disappointing one formal independence had brought. The army would repair the dignity colonialism had broken, and it would strengthen the nation so foreigners could never conquer it again. Everyone would march to the same cadence, their differences hidden underneath their uniforms. Soldiers would provide for the poor (the class most of them came from), and they would help the weak become strong—something the British and the lackeys they left in charge would never have allowed. Militarism offered Africans a heroic view of themselves: not the “whimpering football of humanity at large,” as a Liberian militarist put it, but a civilization of honorable, upright people who followed no orders but their own.⁶ These promises were appealing to soldiers and civilians alike, and they remained seductive even as military regimes broke them over and over again.

“In Africa since decolonization,” wrote a Nigerian general-*cum*-statesman with a certain pride, “military rule has been the rule of the day rather than the exception.”⁷ Militarism touched states in every part of Africa and from every former empire. Even the two countries that avoided European colonization, Ethiopia and Liberia, didn't sidestep militarism—both became military dictatorships. Militarism was a continent-wide phenomenon, and many new countries came under the spell of their armies in this era. This book doesn't describe them all. I focus on one important subset: the former British colonies (sometimes glossed as Commonwealth Africa).⁸ Militarism also took root in countries that had been colonized by France, Italy, Portugal, and Belgium, but arguably it was in the Commonwealth where it flourished the most. Not every British ex-colony in Africa was taken over by its military, and it was a West African phenomenon most of all. There, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Gambia were ruled by their armed forces for extended periods. Elsewhere on the continent, Uganda, Sudan, and Lesotho were the former British territories that had military regimes.⁹ But even states that weren't taken over by their militaries were touched by militarism. The fear of coups shaped how civilian politicians governed, and autocrats of all stripes took pages from the military playbook.

The argument of this book passes through all these countries, but it lingers in the one with the longest experience of army rule. Nigeria was ruled by soldiers from 1966 to 1999 with only two brief interruptions—over thirty years

in total. Over those years militarism became a mature ideology there, which makes it an obvious place to set this story. Nigeria is also important because of its scale. It has Africa's largest population—more than double the next largest, Ethiopia—and more people reside in Nigeria than in West Africa's fifteen other states *combined*. It's a rich country, but it doesn't feel like it. Nigeria is a major producer of oil, and from the 1960s onward most government revenue came from oil and gas. Oil made Nigeria more economically self-reliant than most other African states, but it also made it more unequal, and more volatile.¹⁰ Thanks to oil, military governments could raise revenue without taxing people much. When oil prices were high in the 1960s and 1970s (and stratospheric during the OPEC oil embargo), the military could make grand plans without worrying about how to pay for them. When they were low in the 1980s and 1990s, soldiers' ambitions shrunk accordingly.¹¹ Those soldiers made up the largest and most domineering military in this part of the world, and they exported some aspects of their martial culture to the rest of Africa. Nigeria was closely tied to other former British colonies in this era, and it went from being a model for them to a cautionary tale.

For all these reasons Nigeria looms large in this book. I admit to a certain amount of chauvinism here. Foreign historians like me can be just as prideful about a place as patriots—I know other fellow travelers who describe the small island or obscure corner of a vanished empire they study as if it were the center of the universe. Writing about a country, one becomes a sort of ambassador for it. When that country is a backwater, an ex-colony, or a “shithole,” as Donald Trump described Nigeria, it's hard not to overcorrect.¹² So be it. Histories from Africa can offer as much insight into human behavior as those from anywhere else. This one is a parable about the visions and vanities of soldiers.

Freedom Comes Dressed in a Uniform

On 1 October 1960 the British left Nigeria under cover of night. At a midnight ceremony, the Union Jack that flew over the Lagos Racecourse was lowered. “In that darkness, the Nigerian Flag was unfurled over our country,” a witness described.¹³ “The dark tropical sky was at once set ablaze by the spontaneous detonation of thousands of fireworks, which turned the sky into a fantastic riot of glorious rainbow colours,” recalled another. “Thus was born amidst this glittering spectacle the country containing the largest concentration of black peoples the world has ever known.”¹⁴ Within a few years, that

racecourse had been converted into a parade ground, and the country had become a military dictatorship. How did this happen?

African militaries were not popular at independence. Armies were the most English-accented parts of the state. They were tainted by the memory of colonial conquest, which everyone knew couldn't have been done without them. At Ghana's independence ceremony, Ralph Bunche, there representing the United Nations, took notice of how people reacted to the soldiers marching in the procession. Two units with British officers were greeted with silence. The third, commanded by a Ghanaian, received applause, but even the most "indigenised" armies were not fully trusted by the public.¹⁵ Soldiers were aloof from politics. In the runup to independence they stayed "in their barracks," as the political scientist Claude Welch observed, "cut off from direct participation in nationalist activities, and occasionally [fighting] against guerilla groups favoring self-government."¹⁶ They sharply contrasted with civilian politicians, who got the credit for independence while promising huge improvements in public welfare. Soldiers, with their pith helmets and defense pacts with Europeans, seemed like the dregs of imperialism.¹⁷

Almost immediately after independence, the stock of civilian politicians began to fall. It was hard to implement the transformations they had promised, and the legacy of colonial underdevelopment proved more intractable than anyone had hoped. Once they were in power, the nationalists seemed frustratingly similar to the British administrators they had replaced. They were corrupt and acquisitive, and there was a large gap between them and the farmers and traders who had voted them into office. Malcontents began to grumble that the "independence" Africa had won was meaningless. This false decolonization had kept the structures of imperialism in place, merely replacing the Europeans at the top of the heap with local "compradors," as social critics of the time called the Africans who managed the continent's dealings with the wider world. African elites carried on the extraction that had defined colonialism, only now they did it to serve themselves. Ordinary people, who saw their lives improve less than the politicians had promised, started to feel like they'd been sold a bill of goods. True decolonization, radicals like Walter Rodney and Samir Amin argued, was yet to come.¹⁸

Soldiers saw an opportunity. No longer the stooges of the British, they would be the saviors of their new countries. They presented themselves as the *true* bearers of decolonization—the ones who would deliver a second, more authentic independence that actually broke with the British way of doing things. They contrasted themselves to the civilian elite, beguiled by

Europe, who had lost touch with the common people. As men of humble birth, soldiers would bring freedom to everyone, not just the rich. For some this was just rhetoric, but most of them genuinely believed themselves to be liberators.

Soldiers disdained how nonsoldiers governed. They saw British civilians as pale shadows of the decisive officers who had trained them, and the African civilians who took over from them at independence were just as bad. They squandered money left and right. They violated the old ways—patriarchy, tradition—in the name of their own trivial “freedom” to do what they wanted. Soldiers saw civilian government as a pathetic mimicry of colonialism, and they weren’t the only ones. The same critique came from the left. The civilian elite “adored [the] image of itself in the shape of its colonial predecessor, and worked avidly to enhance it,” Ruth First wrote. “The imitation was a parody not of twentieth century society but of the nineteenth, the age of colonialism.”¹⁹ The South African communist shared soldiers’ contempt for the politicians who had taken over from the British, even though she didn’t agree that the solution was to let the army run things.

Soldiers invariably spoke of their coups as “revolutions,” and in some respects militarism really was revolutionary. It turned things upside down. “This is a military regime, and *every* soldier has power,” testified a teenaged critic of the Nigerian Army in 1977.²⁰ He put his finger on one of military rule’s most radical characteristics: coups upended the class order. When the military was in charge, the lowest soldier outranked the highest civilian. The military’s hierarchy became the only one that really mattered, and powerful civilians who were usually insulated from the state’s violence might find themselves harassed by a soldier at a checkpoint or hauled before a military tribunal. The poor, who were never shielded from those humiliations, welcomed military coups because they offered a different way of ordering rank: you might still be at the bottom, but at least the rich are down there with you. Those who had something to lose saw it differently. To the middle classes, military rule felt more like dragging everyone down to the level of the army—an institution that most civilians with degrees or savings accounts saw as a reservoir for the talentless. Military rule worked by “idiotizing” society, the Nigerian intellectual Wole Soyinka argued. “It is the dregs who, against all natural laws, appear to rise to the top.”²¹

Military coups often came from below. Their leaders were usually young, and few of them took the helm naturally. A military president was not a “head of state” but a “*foot* of state,” as witty Sierra Leoneans called Major Johnny Paul Koroma, who clawed his way to power for one tumultuous year

in the 1990s.²² Writing in the wake of General Idi Amin's coup in Uganda, the Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui argued that the putsch constituted a real revolution. It marked the ascendance of a new class—a "lumpen militariat" who came from a much lower social position than the civilians they overthrew. They were "semi-organized, rugged, and semi-literate" men, whose authority came not from merit but from physical strength and access to guns.²³ Amin, like most soldiers, came from "the womb of the countryside," not the city, corrupted by capital. The political awakening of the soldier class would be something to celebrate if they could break the stranglehold Western-educated elites had over politics.²⁴ Most observers followed Mazrui's lead in seeing soldiers as lumpen—plebeian, tinged with backwardness, and, in the Marxian sense, ideologically unsophisticated. In fact, soldiers did have an ideology. It just wasn't one Mazrui was looking for.

* * *

Militarism is the most neglected of the modern era's isms, but we ignore it at our peril. Like communism or capitalism, wars were fought in its name and societies were made in its image. Nigeria was one of them. So were Brazil, Pakistan, Indonesia, and wide swaths of southern Europe, Latin America, and the South Pacific. A large share of the world's population lived under the jackboot in the late twentieth century, and for this reason alone soldiers' political philosophies are worth our attention. So too are their psychologies. "One function of authoritarianism is to lock an entire people in a single man's mind," Patricia Lockwood writes.²⁵ In this era, millions of people were locked in the "military mind," as Samuel P. Huntington called soldiers' mentality—a mind that was cynical, nationalistic, and obsessed with discipline.²⁶ In Africa, the conservative realism of the *military* mind met the liberatory spirit of the *decolonizing* mind, and some strange ideas were born.

Many military leaders wanted to remake their societies in their own image—as colossal armies, real or figurative. Some believed that making their countries into vast open-air barracks was what would make them truly *free*. This wasn't a contradiction to them. Soldiers equated freedom with self-control, and they argued that true freedom came only from the mastery of one's own instincts. They saw civilians as a chaotic rabble who needed to be brought to heel. They valued discipline as an end in itself, and they saw no reason why this principle, which structured *their* lives, might not serve as a philosophy for everyone. With the reckless confidence of young men, they believed they could bend Africa into a shape resembling themselves.

Officers had total faith in the military way of doing things. If a factory owner ran his business more like an army, he would produce more and waste

less. If a woman selling produce on the roadside could be made to think like a warrior, then she would become free—no longer a slave to her own impulses, discipline would allow her to “self-actualize” (officers swore by pop psychology). If everyone did this, they argued, Africa would become a well-ordered Arcadia. To be clear from the outset: they were wrong, and my description of their martial philosophy is not an endorsement of it. The idea that *discipline is freedom*, beloved of drill sergeants and self-help books for men, makes for a very illiberal kind of politics. The “freedom” of rigorous discipline feels like no freedom at all.

Militarism’s true believers hoped to make military values *public* values. Rules would be followed, authority figures would command universal respect, and everyone would be ready when the battle came—which was the telos that all soldiers trained for and many of them longed for. They were vague about exactly what that battle would be, but that wasn’t the point. Militarism was a way of life, an ethos, and a design for living. Its champions called it a “revolution.” It had a procreative logic. The army would pluck promising young men from the countryside and induct them into the ranks. Those men would marry wives who would be partners in the military revolution. Their children would be raised to be good soldiers or good wives to soldiers, and the cycle would continue until the revolution was complete. If the colonizers came knocking again, this time Africa would be ready for them. To militarists, building a strong army and building a strong society were one and the same. Making the state into a war machine was what would make it *work*.²⁷

Soldiers believed they were building a paradise, and that belief is critical to Africa’s modern history. But this was a *soldier’s* vision of paradise, which was not a place most civilians wanted to live. “Everyone looks to government to lead the country into the paradise that was promised during the period of agitation for Independence,” wrote the Ghanaian coup-plotter General Albert Kwesi Ocran. But paradise meant more than one thing in independent Africa. To the poor, “the promised paradise is more and cheaper food to eat, cheap clothes, . . . shelter, soap, kerosene, drink.” To the rich, “paradise means more high offices and better pay for themselves, improved living conditions, higher education (if possible free), improved roads, more industries, more imports of foreign goods.”²⁸ In public, military officers insisted they were creating a paradise for the downtrodden.²⁹ Behind closed doors, they reassured the bourgeoisie that they were building a different kind of society—one designed for them, where contracts would be juicy and capital would flow freely. But what they ended up creating was a paradise for neither the rich nor the poor. They built a ramshackle utopia *for themselves*, at the expense of everyone else.

As one military regime gave way to another, the distance between soldiers and civilians grew. Officers began to see themselves as a caste apart, cut off from the public they ostensibly served. They were different from the ordinary people who milled around outside their parade grounds, ill-mannered and unwashed. Soldiers had their own rituals and values, their own lingo and dress. They lived together in barracks or on bases with their families, and they saw those bases as islands of order in seas of chaos. The military depended on civilians for less and less as time went on, and officers began to speak of “taming” people, as if they were wild animals.³⁰

During militarism’s bloody denouement in the 1990s, Nigeria’s military would abandon its goal of transforming society. Under the dictatorship of General Sani Abacha, soldiers no longer spoke of military rule as a mission; it was an opportunity to loot the state, which they did brazenly. They still compared civilians to animals, only now the goal wasn’t to “tame” them—it was to *cage* them. A Lagos businesswoman looked back on these final years of dictatorship with undiminished fury. The “jackboots” who ran the country into the ground were “hot-blooded young lions with no respect for human life,” Nkem Liliwhite-Nwosu wrote. “Blue-blooded aristocrats who spoke with authority through the nozzle of the gun; ignorant greenhorns who claimed to have the solution to problems which their refined, erudite, old fathers could not solve, and who ended up compounding the problems for us all.”³¹ Many civilians shared her rage about what soldiers had done to their own countries.

* * *

The global history of military rule in the late twentieth century might lead one to believe Africa’s coups were driven by forces from abroad, and it’s true that some military rulers threw in their lots with Europeans.³² Even the ones who didn’t seemed suspiciously colonial, with their stiff-upper-lip mannerisms and their imperious attitudes. Many observers of the coups that swept the continent saw them as neocolonial in one way or another. Coups certainly had that quality elsewhere. In Latin America, the United States was often behind military takeovers from the right. In eastern Europe and Asia, Soviet interference had the same effect from the other ideological direction. Across the postcolonial world, European diplomats quietly encouraged coups when populist movements threatened their interests.

The most infamous meddling in the affairs of an African country was in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where Belgium and the United States conspired to kill Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and put General Mobutu Sese Seko in his place. France also orchestrated politics in its former colonies

in Africa. The Élysée was notorious for supporting dictators (many of them soldiers) if they aided French political or commercial interests—a dynamic cleverly captured by the term *Françafric*, *fric* being French slang for money. French mercenaries meddled in African politics to benefit both France and themselves. The most outrageous of them was Bob Denard, who staged no fewer than four coup attempts in the Comoros. There, he fancied himself “a warrior king out of Homer,” as a toady admirer called him.³³ Across Africa, coup-plotters who had good intentions were painted as “placeholders” or “custodians” who would clean things up and hand power back to civilians. When they didn’t relinquish the reins they were called other things—“big men” if you found them tolerable, “tyrants” if you didn’t. Some were the “running dogs of imperialism,” as a Maoist epithet of the time went, exemplified by Jean-Bédél Bokassa’s Napoleonic affectations or Idi Amin’s embarrassing love of Scotland.

But military rule was not just an extension of colonial rule—look closely and you’ll see breaks in the line that connects them. Soldiers had mixed feelings about the Europeans who had trained them, and they tarred *civilians* as the ones in the pocket of the British. Most Commonwealth armies used English as their language of command, but this didn’t mean they were English in character. Quite a few military regimes were explicitly anticolonial, both in rhetoric and in practice. Nigeria’s coups were not planned by outsiders, and no one was pulling the strings from abroad. To be sure, soldiers had friends and enemies in foreign capitals. American diplomats disliked General Murtala Muhammed, for example, and they quietly celebrated when General Olusegun Obasanjo replaced him. But Nigeria’s coups were not obviously Cold War maneuvers. Like most conspiracy theories, whispers of foreign plots often said more about the whisperer’s fears (or hopes) than the reality of the situation.

The world powers watched what was going on in Nigeria, but they seldom dirtied their hands in the coups and countercoups that constituted national politics. British and American diplomats occasionally bragged in their memoirs about one soldier or another being “his man,” but this reflected vanity more than wire pulling. They exaggerated how much sway they had, and to conclude that foreign ambassadors were the kingmakers of *all* African politics buys into their mythmaking—this is exactly what they wanted people to believe. Unlike in Congo or the Comoros, in Nigeria foreign governments kept their distance from national politics. They did so not out of any respect for Nigeria’s sovereignty, but because they saw no reason to risk much there. Both the military and the government at large leaned to the

right ideologically, and there was no communist threat that might have worried the United States. The absence of a viable left meant the Soviet Union didn't see much point in getting involved either. The oil kept flowing whether soldiers or civilians were in charge, and so Nigeria was mostly left to its own devices. It may be tempting to say that military rule was orchestrated somewhere else, or imposed from afar, but the truth is more complicated.

Law and Decolonization

On a visit to West Africa's jazz clubs in the mid-1980s, the American music critic Stanley Crouch kept getting distracted by men in uniform. Soldiers "walked about with the vicious arrogance of pit bulls," he wrote, and dressed him down whenever he tried to talk to them. "The Reign of Terror is almost always a few seconds away in Africa, the distance only as far as the gathering of enough guns to wrest control."³⁴ Many shared Crouch's belief that guns were the only thing that mattered in African politics, but he was wrong. Laws mattered too, and for that reason this book takes the form of a legal history. One of the driving forces of Africa's postcolonial politics was the struggle between soldiers and judges—the executive and the judiciary—about who made the rules and what they should be. Military regimes venerated "law and order," and many soldiers thought law could be a bridge between the army and society at large. Criminal codes rhymed with their culture of obedience, and rules-based structures spoke to their love of discipline. They treated judges like their deputies, and they put law at the center of their political strategies. But soldiers and judges were not natural allies.

Law didn't work the way the military thought it did. As a disciplinary tool, the courts were unreliable. A judge might acquit someone the army wanted to make an example of, or a decision might limit what kinds of punishment it could mete out.³⁵ Military governments found that civilians could turn law back on them, just as they had turned it against Europeans in the days before independence. It was hard to avoid getting tripped up by doctrinal complexities (including ones of their own making). Military dictators thought law was all stick, no carrot, and they were disappointed when they realized it wasn't always punitive. Nonetheless, they needed law, even though they grew wary of it as they learned more about how it worked. They had no problem dissolving legislatures or disemboweling bureaucracies when they thought they were working against them. It was much harder to do without a judiciary. Without the courts, Nigeria's Major General Ibrahim Haruna admitted, "we would be in a hell of anarchy with nobody to piece us together."³⁶

Society couldn't function without law, and officers couldn't implement their disciplinary "revolutions" without magistrates, courts, and jails. For this reason, judges had the ear of the military. They could criticize executive power, or shape it to their own ends, when no other civilians could.

At first glance, courts in a dictatorship might seem merely ornamental. In many single-party states, whatever happens in a courtroom—in a show trial, for example—endorses the party's dictates. In absolute monarchies, the judge and the king might be fused, making any kind of separation of powers unthinkable. But not all authoritarian governments are like this. Many twentieth-century dictatorships, from Pakistan to Chile, had vigorous and combative legal cultures.³⁷ Even the sternest legal orders could be turned against those who made them. If you make a rope to tie someone's hands, you have to be prepared that *your* hands might get tied with it, as many dictators learn. There are judges who push back against the army's vision for society, legal decisions that undermine its decrees, and lawyers who scheme quietly in the background. Legal institutions can be tools of repression, but it would be wrong to think this is *all* they are, even in a dictatorship.

The lesson of this is not that Africa's military dictatorships were softer than we thought they were, or more bound by law. Rather, it is that *judicial independence does not foreclose repression*. The rule of law is not necessarily antithetical to authoritarianism, and a government can delicately hold out legalism with one hand while it cracks a whip with the other. Legal scholars who work in the democratic vein have been slow to see this—to appreciate the fact that lawyers can be just as irksome to an authoritarian state as to an "open" one. Military regimes had many reasons for maintaining some semblance of judicial independence.³⁸ Legalism helped them perform accountability at home, and it placated meddling do-gooders from abroad. It painted a gloss on their dictates, and it gave them a scapegoat to blame when things didn't go according to plan. Law can cast a "legitimizing glow" over authoritarian institutions, as Mark Fathi Massoud writes.³⁹ Soldiers relied on the courts to make their visions stick, and as law-and-order ideologues they saw judges as partners in discipline even when they disagreed with them.

Soldiers needed public accountability, which law could give them. But they wanted that accountability to be on their own terms, so the laws they made were looser and more pliable than the rigid ones the British had left behind. Africa's legal systems had been created by Europeans, soldiers pointed out, so they called their attempts to change them "decolonization." In practice, decolonizing law often meant gutting the rules that might limit the military's powers and replacing them with something more pliable—all

done in the name of freedom. Some version of this played out all over the postcolonial world, and the legal history of how it happened—dry and technical as it sometimes is—shows us something broader: Decolonization had a thick militaristic streak, even in countries where independence hadn't required an armed struggle.

This isn't the liberation story most people want to hear. The end of empire was not a morality play of doomed revolutionaries and the scheming elites who sold them out—this was a time of strange bedfellows and surprising ideological commitments. Law reveals its ironies starkly, if not always clearly. In courtrooms, unexpected stands were taken and puzzling alliances were made. We find British-trained military strongmen borrowing radical language from Frantz Fanon or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and committed anticolonialists arguing that English law was the only thing that could hold off tyranny.⁴⁰ Judges and soldiers shared a rhetorical commitment to "freedom," but they seldom agreed about what it meant. Bright moral lines became hazy in court.

In this history, we find a long debate over what law fundamentally *was*. Was it a weapon or a shield? Was it a remnant of colonialism, or a tool that could *dismantle* what colonialism had left behind? As legal historians are fond of pointing out, law could be all these things at once, and it would be wrong to conclude that militarism and its legal contrivances only worked one way, or only did one thing. I don't celebrate the soldiers who ruled in the late twentieth century, but I don't vilify them either. Not every military regime was led by a power-hungry madman, and not every civilian president was a saint. The same goes for judges, who sometimes reined tyrants in and at other times egged them on. The heroes had a dark streak, and the villains sometimes spoke the truth. Look elsewhere for moral clarity.

* * *

Militarism had a maverick side that looked radical from some angles. Soldiers pledged to rid their countries of colonialism's remnants, starting with the ones they found most inconvenient. The constitutional model hastily foisted on them by the British at independence was their first target, followed by the rowdy legislatures those constitutions had created. The English common law, with its fusty traditions and powdered wigs, was next on the chopping block. Soldiers were perplexed by law's jargon, and they found the civilian legal system's hierarchy baffling—not least because it ran counter to their own system of rank. Even though they liked the order that law offered, they agreed with the more radical factions of the nationalist movement that there was something shameful about still using the colonizers' laws after they had packed up and left.

“Colonization,” General Ibrahim Babangida of Nigeria would proclaim, “brought with it a legal twist. The indigenous legal system became traumatised, following the importation of foreign legal concepts and experiences. [The fact] that our indigenous concepts of justice were supplanted not only by foreign laws but also by alien notions of justice is sad.”⁴¹ What irked Babangida about law was not really that it was foreign or colonial. After all, militaries owed their structure to colonialism too, and soldiers weren’t in a position to criticize anyone for being too attached to British things. Babangida, like General Idi Amin of Uganda before him and Colonel Yahya Jammeh of Gambia after, condemned neocolonialism while revering Britain’s military culture. What actually perturbed Babangida about colonial law was that it could undermine him. To keep that from happening, he turned a powerful rhetorical weapon against it—“decolonization.”

It wasn’t a paradox that soldiers pitched themselves as decolonizers, and Babangida’s words were not just doublespeak (though he was known for his silver tongue). There was an affinity between militarism and more seemingly radical forms of anticolonialism; they were two ends of a horseshoe, closer to one another than they were to the points in between them. As an example of this, we might look to Nigeria’s first president, Nnamdi Azikiwe. Zik, as he is known, was the paradigmatic radical-turned-militarist—an anticolonial freedom fighter who came to embrace the army’s vision for society. Nigerians remember Zik as a father of the nation, not a military apologist, and his portrait adorns the thousand-naira banknote.⁴² Zik never wore a uniform—he was a muckraking activist who rose to fame as a newspaper impresario. He was elected president in 1960, and he remained in office until he was ousted in Nigeria’s first military coup six years later. During the civil war he initially sided with the Biafran secessionists but then returned to the Nigerian fold midway through (the army garlanded him with honors for switching sides). As military rule continued, he became one of its most respectable defenders. Zik argued that civilians had squandered independence, which meant something coming from the country’s first, and for a long time only, civilian president. “I, for one, know that I did not stick out my neck opposing the mighty British lion,” he admonished, “only to have the independence that we paid dearly for subjected to ridicule and contempt by the shameless method adopted by some politicians.”⁴³

Zik was a lifelong civilian whose time in power was cut short by a military coup. It may seem strange that he would ever endorse military rule—and yet he did, heartily. “Military leadership, anywhere in the civilised world, is a highly educated and skilled caste of human beings,” he declared in 1974,



FIGURE 1.2. Ibrahim Babangida in his office, 1986.

eight years into the military dictatorship. “It would be imprudent to overlook the constructive role the armed forces can play in stabilising a nation that has just emerged from colonialism and a bloody civil war.” The idea that militaries should answer to civilians was a foreign concept, he argued, and the principle that soldiers should stay out of politics was a holdover from colonialism. “We have imitated Europe long enough.”⁴⁴ Military rule would allow Nigeria to beat its own path to the future.

Zik’s embrace of militarism wouldn’t have surprised anyone who had followed the evolution of his thought. Long before independence, Zik espoused a radical anticolonial philosophy that came to be known as “Zikism.”⁴⁵ It was an ideology of renaissance, and it was national, rather than ethnic, in scope. It was also decidedly militant. Zik parted ways with more moderate nationalists to argue that some measure of violence was necessary to kick the British out.⁴⁶ In Zik, we can see what anticolonialism and militarism shared. Soldiers and anticolonial radicals shared a conviction that violence

could blast through political problems. Both believed that emancipation required *discipline*—tellingly, Zik's rallies began with marches and drills, as if he was training his followers for battle. Like the military regimes that would come later, Zik wanted to make civilians more like soldiers. Anticolonialism and militarism could live in one person's mind, and sometimes it was hard to tell them apart.

* * *

For those unfamiliar with Nigeria's political history, here is a breakneck summary. After independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria had six years of democracy under President Nnamdi Azikiwe and Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. These were years of growth and optimism, but they were also years of political rancor. In January 1966 a group of five army majors staged a coup, allegedly over the nepotism and dysfunction of the Nigerian First Republic. Their coup failed, but not before they assassinated Balewa and several other prominent politicians. Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, who had not participated in the coup, became head of state as the highest-ranking surviving officer (though his rank was disputed). Six months later he was assassinated, and General Yakubu Gowon became head of state. The Eastern Region of Nigeria seceded nine months into Gowon's administration, claiming that the federal government's failure to protect Igbos in a series of pogroms in northern Nigeria was tantamount to genocide. A civil war followed, pitting the Nigerian military government against the secessionist Republic of Biafra.⁴⁷ Biafra lost the war and was reintegrated into Nigeria in January 1970, and Gowon remained in office for another five years. On 29 July 1975 he was deposed by General Murtala Muhammed, who accused Gowon of corruption. Muhammed was assassinated seven months later, on 13 February 1976, by Lieutenant Colonel Buka Suka Dimka, who had accused Muhammed of corruption. Dimka failed to take the statehouse and was captured by a group of loyalists, who executed him. Lieutenant General Olusegun Obasanjo became head of state. Obasanjo ruled for the next three and a half years, and in 1979 he made the unprecedented decision to hand over power to civilians.

Elections were held, a new constitution was written (Nigeria had gone without one since the first military coup), and a teacher-turned-politician named Shehu Shagari was elected president of the so-called Second Republic. Shagari was reelected in 1983 (both elections were disputed), but on 31 December 1983 Major General Muhammadu Buhari staged a coup overthrowing Shagari's democratically elected government. Buhari was in power for an eventful year and a half, although many suspected that his powerful

deputy, Tunde Idiagbon, was really in charge. On 27 August 1985, General Ibrahim Babangida overthrew Buhari. Babangida ruled Nigeria for the next eight years, during which he fought off several coup attempts. After much pressure from the rest of the world and many false starts, Babangida agreed to hold an election, which took place on 12 June 1993. A businessman named Moshood Abiola won the election, which international observers deemed free and fair. Abiola would have led the Third Republic, but he was never allowed to take office. Babangida annulled the results, claiming electoral irregularities. The international community turned against Babangida over the annulment, as did some of his fellow officers. In August 1993 he resigned from office, handing over power to an interim civilian government led by Ernest Shonekan, who had weak support from everyone except Babangida's faction of the military. Less than three months later, on 17 November 1993, Shonekan was deposed by General Sani Abacha. Abacha pitilessly looted the country for the next four and a half years, making it into a prison as he did so. Many dissidents were killed or jailed, and Nigeria became a pariah state. On 8 June 1998 Abacha died suddenly of a heart attack, though some believe he was poisoned. After his death, General Abdulsalami Abubakar came to power. Abubakar had no appetite to continue military rule, and he initiated an electoral process to transfer power to civilians. A presidential election was held on 27 February 1999, and the winner was Olusegun Obasanjo of the People's Democratic Party, now retired from his military career and standing for election as a civilian. When Obasanjo took office later that year, the Fourth Republic began. This one stuck, and Nigeria has been governed by civilians ever since.

Nigerian history turned on the minute-to-minute drama of this pageant of coups, assassinations, and double crosses. Who ruled the country was determined less by ideology or geopolitics than by tiny contingencies—how many guns were in the arsenal, who was in the barracks when the coup started, who could get to the radio station first to broadcast a victory message. These were the factors that decided which *specific* officer came to power, but militarism can't be boiled down to the rivalries of trifling generals. When this story is told, it usually looks like a bloody family feud among the army's commanders.⁴⁸ Here, I try to take a wider view of military rule and its spirit. Once each coup was finished, the officers who were still standing mopped up the blood in the barracks and set about *governing*. How? What did they believe about human nature, and how did they try to change it? Plenty of the civilians they ruled liked them. Why?

The Promise of Militarism

The National Museum of Nigeria is disappointing in most respects. Dusty ethnographic displays fill its sprawling building, which sits in a quiet corner of Lagos Island.⁴⁹ There are some bronzes from the archaeological site at Igbo-Ukwu, and a few ancient Nok figurines sit in a small room cooled by a rattling air conditioner (the only one consistently guarded). One hall shows work by Nigeria's twentieth-century modernist painters, but it's usually empty. The most popular gallery is a low-ceilinged room dominated by a black Mercedes-Benz limousine, pockmarked with bullet holes. This was the car that General Murtala Muhammed was riding in when he was assassinated in the failed coup of 1976. Muhammed was a popular dictator who became a martyr after his death, and the gallery feels like a shrine to him even when it's full of rambunctious school groups.

This is the Hall of Nigerian Government. On its walls hang portraits of Nigeria's heads of state, each apparently chosen to illustrate his reputation. Hand-some Gowon smiles beatifically. Buhari rigidly stands at attention. Babangida looks slyly to the side like he has a secret. A blurry photograph of Abacha looks more like a mugshot than an official portrait. I've visited many times, but I'm still not sure whether the portraits are supposed to be an indictment of the military's role in Nigerian politics or a celebration of it. The hall is the closest thing the country has to a political pantheon: a parade of men, most of them in uniform, marching around a bloodstained status symbol.

Nigeria was ruled by these men for most of the late twentieth century. Many other African countries were ruled by men like them. Some generalizations can be made about them, even though they were a more varied group than their uniforms might suggest. Born in the 1930s or 1940s, they were among the first to be commissioned as officers in their national militaries, usually within a few years on either side of independence. They were the pride of their families—they came from rural backgrounds, and most (though not all) of them grew up poor. They learned their vocation in the West African Frontier Force and other colonial outfits, or, starting in the early 1960s, their national armies.⁵⁰ The best of them went on to officer training in England or India. They were young, at least at the beginning of military rule. Major General Yakubu Gowon was thirty-three when he came to power in 1966. Wole Soyinka, whom Gowon put in prison, called him “the boy scout dictator.”⁵¹ In Ghana, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings was thirty-two when he took the helm, and in Sierra Leone Captain Valentine Strasser was only twenty-five, making him one of the youngest nonhereditary heads of state in modern history.

Officers thought they could train their societies like they themselves had been drilled and molded in boot camp. Their hubris about military training came from the fact that most of them had just finished it—nobody is as confident about a regimen as someone who doesn't know it very well. Africa's military leaders were not staid professionals whose arrogance had been drummed out of them by experience. They were fledgling, impetuous officers who were convinced that their brief military experience let them see the world clearly and their weapons allowed them to change it. "As a soldier, I was taught to dominate a situation either by observation or superior fire," Babangida once remarked.⁵² This was also how he approached politics. Some were wildly optimistic about how much civilians supported their plans to transform their countries, and about human nature in general. Others had the opposite problem, believing that people were irredeemable except through force.

One of the most perceptive observers of Africa's militaries was the American sociologist Morris Janowitz. African soldiers were "puritans," he argued, who saw modesty and self-restraint as political values. "The desire to be strong and unyielding is reinforced by the rigors and routines of daily existence. But the military demands these qualities not only for itself but for society as a whole, and it sets itself up as a standard-bearer of hard work and unflinching dedication."⁵³ They were also collectivists, of a sort. Soldiers were trained to work as a team and to think of themselves as a collective fighting toward a common purpose. This primed them for a distinctly communal approach to governance, even among those who leaned to the right. Babangida had a warm relationship with Margaret Thatcher, for instance, but it would be hard to imagine her famous diktat "there is no such thing as society" coming out of his mouth.⁵⁴

In military regimes, the interests of individuals were subordinate to the well-being of the collectivity, just like in a military unit. This dovetailed with the bread-and-butter ideas of African politics in this era—African socialism, neotraditional collectivism, and certain strands of Pan-Africanism. Militarism didn't always sit easily with these ideas, but it shared their spirit of cooperation. As First Lady Maryam Babangida observed, soldiers were all alike, even across the national borders they defended: "The military have acquired a common corpus of traditions which is practiced from one country to another with minor variations dictated, as in dialectal differences within a language, by individual local circumstances. An amusing irony, considering that the armies of different countries are potential enemies of one another. . . . United by profession, yet divided by cause."⁵⁵ Soldiers worked together in

some circumstances but not others, and the fact that the military elite was a kind of a fraternity (or, in its final years, more of a cult) didn't mean there was solidarity between its members. They fought bitterly among themselves, and they seldom passed up an opportunity to unseat a rival if they got the chance. Officers did not practice the discipline they preached.

In this book, I use the term *soldier* to refer to men at all levels of the military hierarchy. This follows a pattern of West African speech—in everyday parlance, all military personnel, officers and enlisted men alike, were *soja* (“soldiers,” in pidgin). To civilians, *soja* were all more or less the same. This shorthand tells us something about how the public understood militaries, but it doesn't tell us how soldiers saw themselves. It obscures the subtleties of rank that structured military life. Officers and enlisted men were cut from different cloths. They had different origins and self-conceptions. They shared a culture, but those at the top of that culture had total power over those at the bottom. Nonetheless, from privates to generals, *all* men in uniform saw themselves as different from civilians. Those uniforms were a reminder that whatever divided them against one another—rank, religion, ethnicity—they had a common cause.⁵⁶

Most of the men in this book were in the top brass or were vying for it from somewhere in the middle. It was officers who put the ideology of militarism to paper, and I rely heavily on them as sources. They presented militarism as an egalitarian project, but there was an obvious irony there. No one is more obsessed with the pecking order than an ambitious officer, and their insistence that everyone *pull their weight* in no way implied that everyone was *equal*. Nonetheless, the men at the bottom of the military pyramid were indispensable to militarism's mission, and they knew it. Ordinary soldiers were its muscle. They were the ones who modeled discipline to civilians, enforced it, and cracked skulls when necessary. Subalterns were also militarism's objects. This was an ideology *for them*, but their perspective on it—the “worm's eye view,” so to speak—was often less optimistic than the austere, gleaming visions their superiors prophesized.⁵⁷

* * *

Military officers insisted they were the only ones who could transform Africa's made-up, fractious ex-colonies into strong, united countries. They believed themselves to be the most Nigerian of the Nigerians (or the most Gambian of the Gambians, etc.), and there was some merit to this belief. Soldiers had patriotism hammered into them in ways that civilians didn't. They traveled the length and width of their countries, and they fraternized with comrades who spoke other languages and believed in other gods. They

were among the few people for whom allegiances like ethnicity and religion came second to their citizenship. Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu, one of the five junior officers whose 1966 coup started Nigeria down its martial path, was a “fanatical nationalist,” as one of his admirers described. “His hatred of tribalism and corruption was pathological.”⁵⁸ “My loyalty does not go to any government,” proclaimed Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings as he staged his second coup in Ghana. “It goes to the state, the constitution.”⁵⁹ This was more radical than it might sound. In pluralistic countries like Ghana, where chieftaincies competed with the state for people’s allegiances, the loyalty that Rawlings proclaimed was not something everyone felt.⁶⁰ At least in their own minds, soldiers were the heart and soul of their new countries.

Soldiers prescribed militarism as a tonic for ethnic discord. Mozambique’s Samora Machel famously put this promise best: “For the Nation to live, the tribe must die.” Soldiers like Machel believed they could kill it—though others came to appreciate that ethnic divisions could be useful in politics. Even militarism’s critics hoped some charismatic general might succeed at nation building where the civilians had failed. “What we need is a Napoleon Bonaparte,” the dissident Nigerian lawyer Olu Onagoruwa wrote, “who will bring the country together.”⁶¹ In any African society, argued a Liberian fellow traveler to the military cause, “there are the Epicureans, the Bohemians, the hooligans (armed robbers, thieves, roughnecks, etc.), the moralists, the frauds, the zealots, the politicians and the security forces.” The only people who had the “organizational solidarity” to bring all these factions in line were soldiers. The “military ethic,” he wrote, demanded “austerity, valor, chivalry, composure, sharpness of intellect, discipline, physical prowess and patriotism. These are virtues that are indispensable to the struggle against neocolonialism, to the African Renaissance. They are the virtues relevant to the African cultural revolution.”⁶² “The place of the Army in governance is comparable to the place of the engine in a motor car,” declared a Nigerian officer.⁶³ It powered everything else. This self-regard started the day they joined up, and it was reiterated throughout their careers in ways both subtle and overt. It made them think they had a monopoly on honor.⁶⁴

At their best, soldiers were down-to-earth but worldly, righteous but not smug. A Nigerian political scientist begrudgingly admired General Idi Amin of Uganda for his common touch, at once commanding and unpretentious. Amin seemed “messianic, as though he possessed mystical warranty.” His pronouncements were indeed visionary—his decision to expel Uganda’s South Asian minority allegedly came to him in a dream from God.⁶⁵ This kind of vision was unusual. Many soldiers presented themselves as saviors of the



FIGURE 1.3. Soldiers in the streets of Accra, 1982. Photo by A. Abbas.

nation, but few went so far as to say they were divinely ordained. Even in pious Nigeria, military leaders were conspicuously nonsectarian—a fact that has been forgotten by a public that remembers them as more uniformly Muslim than they actually were. Their secularism was part of their mission.⁶⁶ Whether it was religion, ethnicity, or less obvious lines of division like caste or clan, soldiers insisted that they were the only people who could bring everyone together under the same flag. They promised their governments would be efficient and forward-thinking. Everyone would be treated equally. Military regimes wouldn't have elections, but this didn't mean they couldn't be democratic. Soldiers constantly gauged “the feelings and aspirations of the people—even more so than a civilian regime,” Major General David Jemibewon wrote. “While a civilian government can feel complacent because it is elected and therefore representative of the people, a military regime [must] feel the pulse of the people all the time.”⁶⁷

This was what they promised, but it wasn't necessarily what they did. Soldiers grew out of touch with "the people" the longer they stayed in power. They favored their kin just like civilians did, and some spilled blood in the name of putting their friends in power. They weren't perfect mirrors of their countries. The long-standing colonial practice of recruiting from certain "martial races" meant that most armies were lopsided in their composition.⁶⁸ In West Africa, enlisted men were more likely to come from the Sahelian regions of the north than from anywhere else, and in East Africa, Acholi and Kamba men filled the ranks because the British had preferred them over their shorter and allegedly less soldierly neighbors. The colonial decision to tap "warlike" peoples for the army had fundamentally changed how those peoples saw themselves; military service wasn't something you did—it became *who you were* as, for example, a Hausa or Acholi man. In this way, militarism had tightened ethnic loyalties instead of loosening them. Moreover, military rule didn't actually make civilians identify less with their "tribes" or regions. Sometimes it did the opposite; people built walls around themselves, withdrawing into their families or villages while soldiers occupied the public sphere.

Cutting off one sense makes the others sharper. What does African history look like if you bind the sense that social scientists rely on most—ethnicity? Here, I will tell you relatively little about tribalism in the ranks, the balance of ethnic politics in government, and other questions that have long preoccupied Africanists. These questions were not the wrong ones to ask, but they sucked the air out of the room; they obscured the *other* ways African societies were organized, and they reduced the continent's politics to ethnic horse trading and monistic identitarianism. In Nigerian historiography, sidelining ethnicity puts me at odds with many, and writing a history of the armed forces without putting it front and center will seem absurd to some readers. In some places, I admit, African history can't be understood without it. But ethnicity is not a lens that sharpens every image. When it comes to these armies—institutions that consistently described themselves as *nonethnic*—it is more likely to blur the picture.⁶⁹ Fixating on the gritty details of who was what, and how many of them there were, obscures how militarism could transcend all that. It often did. Armies remade people in their own cool, groomed, perfectly uniform image, and officers rose above the grotty mud pit of ethnic politics. Or so they told themselves.

Not all soldiers loved militarism, and not all civilians hated it. Some officers were uncomfortable among civilians, demurring that they should have no place in government. In their humbler moments, they could admit that "the problems of society, especially of the nature and magnitude that

confront us, cannot be commanded away,” as one wrote.⁷⁰ “Military rule is not the answer to Africa’s perennial political and economic problems,” allowed a repentant Ghanaian coup plotter. Moreover, governing civilians was bad for *soldiers*. “Military involvement ruins the military,” he went on. “It creates a politically-orientated force which is not good for war.” It was disheartening to see a promising young officer come back from a stint in a civilian ministry “pot-bellied and shabby, with his military cap resting precariously over his nose.”⁷¹ Too much proximity to civilians made soldiers effeminate and weak-willed, and this alone was reason to keep out of politics. Military officers who “meddled” in government “adopted civilian characteristics,” General Sani Abacha complained, a year before he himself meddled his way right into the statehouse. “This is sad, as the new change of behavior is contrary to military ethics and traditions.”⁷²

Some civilians, on the other hand, were optimistic about military rule. “There is nothing inherently sacred about civilian governments, and there is nothing inherently evil about military governments,” wrote President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania—hardly someone remembered as a militarist.⁷³ It was also possible to dislike military rule in general but appreciate the virtues of one dictator or another. “Military regimes, by their very nature and structure, are generally aggressive to human rights,” contended Niki Tobi, a prominent judge. “But surprisingly, the Nigerian situation under President Ibrahim Babangida is reasonably different.” “The current military regime is the most benevolent that Nigerians have seen and experienced. I salute the regime.”⁷⁴ Tobi didn’t want his country to be a garrison state forever, but he stood by his man.

The Charms of Soldiers

“The leader of men in warfare can show himself to his followers only through a mask,” wrote the military historian John Keegan, “a mask that he must make for himself, but a mask made in such a form as will mark him to men of his time and place as the leader they want and need.”⁷⁵ Even though they generally did not lead *in warfare*, Africa’s military leaders cultivated personalities people wanted to follow. What were the masks they made? Chidi Amuta sketched a portrait of Babangida that would fit many of his comrades: he was “a brave soldier and a gentleman officer, a committed patriot and a friend of the West, a benevolent friend and a ruthless foe, a black godfather who would reward loyalty with abiding solidarity and punish dissidence with precise ferocity, a talented statesman in uniform with an imperial disposition.

A smiling enigma, but above all a visionary and a survivalist.”⁷⁶ The military taught men qualities that made them good political leaders, wrote Major General James Oluleye. Their training gave them decisiveness, courage, intelligence, fitness, tact, honesty, and “personal magnetism.” “It is possible to have a person who can combine both roles of a soldier and a politician,” he insisted, and a smart soldier could “conveniently manage” the tasks of politics if he set his mind to it.⁷⁷ But this didn’t work both ways. No civilian, no matter how capable, could command men in battle. Nearly all soldiers shared this chauvinism about their profession. They used it as license to take power whenever they wanted to.

Guns weren’t the only weapons soldiers had at their disposal. They also had charm. As I bore deeper into the archives of Africa’s military regimes, I realized that part of their appeal lay in their *glamour*, which I mean in the archaic sense: their allure was heavily dosed with deception. They were bumbling administrators and unpopular populists. They weren’t even good at tyranny—a police state requires planning, and most soldiers were not well organized. But what they did have was charisma. Reading through their papers I sometimes found myself nodding along—not because I agreed with what they said, but because I was seduced by how they said it. If I feel this half a century on from when they were in power, it’s fair to assume that people did at the time too. Soldiers may have come to power through force, but they kept it through panache.

Some soldiers were people one wanted to know. There was General Yakubu Gowon, the jaunty war hero who discreetly flexed his biceps whenever he posed for a state photograph, or Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, the Olympic athlete with a flashing smile. There was Colonel Mobolaji Johnson, the jocular governor of Lagos State, who baked chocolate cakes for his rivals to win them over to his side.⁷⁸ Johnson was modest and moderate, and he was known for his generous spirit. “It is only by coming out and seeing how and where other fellow Nigerians live, how they work, how they dress and generally their way of life, that we can truly claim to understand ourselves,” he wrote in a greeting card to the governor of the defeated eastern region after the civil war.⁷⁹ When many Nigerians pictured a soldier, they pictured somebody like Johnson—dashing, conscientious, and upright. This was “military government with a human face,” as an attorney general described it.⁸⁰

To its adherents, militarism was not just powerful—it was *beautiful*. It dazzled the eye with polished brass and billowing flags, straight backs and strong muscles. Many of Africa’s military leaders were young and attractive, and some of their popularity lay in their sex appeal; Babangida’s “rock solid

physique,” Gowon’s boyish charm, Rawlings’s swagger, and of course the famous handsomeness of Captain Thomas Sankara, who ruled Burkina Faso in the 1980s.⁸¹ “I will never forget how crazy in love I fell with a newspaper photograph,” quipped a student, reflecting a continent-wide infatuation with the tall, dashing coup plotter.⁸² First Lady Maryam Babangida described the hold officers had on “the hearts of the ladies.” “There is this strong impression that the life of an Army Officer’s wife is one of glamour, prestige and plenty; the world is at her feet, hers to command with just a snap of her fingers.” “The parades, the uniform, the tough-guy look and smart ‘turn-out’ of officers leave a deep impression in the heart of many a young bride.”⁸³ Soldiers had a vitality that made the elderly civilians they replaced seem like waxworks. Their wives were equally captivating, and the press reported on them as if they were movie stars.

Throughout this book, I use the general pronoun *he* to refer to soldiers in the abstract. This is intentional. It is not an accidental elision of women—it is a reminder about the sex of militaries in this time and place. Not all who have been called “soldiers” in history have been men, but here militaries were overwhelmingly male in their composition, culture, and self-regard.⁸⁴ Military governments were assemblages of men, and this explains certain things about how they worked. Readers who find this essentializing would not be wrong, but militarism cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the overwhelming maleness of African armies. What does an ideology that comes from a determinedly masculine place like a barracks look like? How did soldiers’ sex shape their political visions? Masculinity could have more than one meaning, and it wasn’t always what one might expect—more than one veteran told me that homosexuality was quietly tolerated in the ranks, which hints at something mottled underneath militarism’s macho veneer.⁸⁵ Ideas about gender were themselves a product of militarism. The “war system” produces gender difference in many settings, and Africa is no exception.⁸⁶ War makes men, as the adage goes, but war also makes maleness itself.

In the 1980s the historian Nina Mba reported that, as far as the military was concerned, “women were just not there.”⁸⁷ Mba was right that soldiers had an androcentric view of the world, but African armies didn’t ignore women. Officers realized that women commanded a “reserve army of labor,” as Amina Mama recalled, and the state couldn’t function without them.⁸⁸ Although women’s votes were irrelevant in nondemocratic military regimes, their labor and capital were indispensable. Soldiers had strict ideas about what women should and should not be doing, but they also knew they *needed* women, so they actively courted their support (arguably more than civilians did).⁸⁹

In armies where soldiers were fed by their wives, as had been the colonial convention, women were never seen as unimportant.⁹⁰ Women would also raise the next generation of soldiers, and for this reason a pronatal thread ran through military ideology. “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the nation,” General Murtala Muhammed told an assembly of prominent women. But, he went on, “this does not mean that the Government expects the women only to help in raising families. Surely, we want our women to contribute their quota in *all* aspects of our national activities.”⁹¹ They did indeed contribute, especially to the military’s auxiliary functions. For many years the highest-ranking woman in the Nigerian armed forces was Major General Aderonke Kale, a psychiatrist who commanded the Army Medical Corps. Women’s roles in a military society may have been limited to healing, cooking, and sex, but no soldier thought those things were unimportant.

Wearing a uniform was not the only way to participate in militarism. Civilian women had a prominent place in military administrations, and they had a stake in the coups that shook up national politics every few years. The wives of high-ranking officers were especially powerful, and the first lady became a quasi-official office in Nigeria.⁹² First ladies maneuvered behind the scenes, whispered in their husbands’ ears, and exerted influence through their charities. “Every queen can choose the way she lives,” declared First Lady Maryam Abacha. “She can eat bread and honey and sleep on and on in her palace. Or she can come out and toil with the people. I have chosen to come out and toil with the people.”⁹³ Nigeria’s “queen” shared this sense of noblesse oblige with many military wives, who saw themselves as “visionary mothers” of the nation.⁹⁴ They were the gentle, giving complement to their stern husbands. “The milk of kindness which flows in Hajiya Hauwa Lawal Ningi Haruna knows no bound,” gushed a profile of Borno State’s first lady.⁹⁵ Their good works were often cover for politics—Maryam Babangida’s Better Life for Rural Women program was largely about sanitizing her husband’s reputation abroad, for example.⁹⁶ Women weren’t above barracks intrigue. “Chief (Mrs) Modupe Adebayo was a first class intelligence officer for her husband,” noted a biographer, “a principal vessel used by God to provide the indispensable emotional and political wherewithal with which all obstacles were firmly confronted and surmounted.”⁹⁷ Subtlety wasn’t a military virtue—the army’s propaganda almost always had this overbearing tone. The bluster was a symptom of something larger.

Soldiers believed they had a world-historical mission, and to see it as anything less than that is to sell it short. They were confident they could change their societies, and they had no qualms about using tyranny to make them

“free.” Some had good intentions. But to admit that not all of them were madmen, crooks, or sadists is not to defend militarism. The soldiers who ruled Nigeria failed by virtually every measure. They bungled their revolutionary mission, and they maimed millions of lives in the process. Nonetheless, credit should go where credit is due: It is largely thanks to them that Nigeria survived the twentieth century intact. If the goal of a state is to preserve itself, then the soldiers who shepherded their country through a civil war and maybe a dozen existential challenges *succeeded*. Of course, not everyone agreed that Nigeria’s survival was a good thing. Then as now, this is not a country that endears itself to its citizens. Many Nigerians—dissidents, free thinkers, secessionists—felt incarcerated in its borders. For them, the military’s motto of “One Nigeria” was not a promise, but a *threat*.

Sources and Methods

When I first went to Nigeria, what caught my eye were the uniforms—starched, improbably pristine, in every shade of camouflage, in bright green, electric blue (for a youth brigade called Man o’ War), or hot pink (for a paramilitary group called Àmòtèkùn). Students my age wore the less martial but no less immaculate khaki uniforms of the National Youth Service Corps (a public service draft for civilians). My first lesson in their power came when a policeman tried to confiscate the shirt off my back—a fast-fashion button-down with epaulets, which he deemed too close to a uniform. Over the years that followed I wrote a book about the Biafra War, also known as the Nigerian Civil War, which took place during the military dictatorship. Sometimes, I came across documents from the Nigerian Army. They were striking—plainer than the baroque bureaucratism of civilians but full of saber-rattling and misspelled bombast. Some bore seals of skulls and hand grenades, and once, memorably, an emblem of a menacing red octopus. I made copies and put them in a folder, which grew to a crate, and eventually a hard drive. Those documents became the basis of this book. This was a scattershot way to do research, but it was the approach that scattered archives required.⁹⁸

Military dictatorships aren’t the easiest governments to know about. Soldiers were poor recordkeepers, and it is mostly their fault that Africa’s first decades of independence are so thinly documented. They loved secrets. Their training primed them to think that all information was privileged information, and they thrived on cloak-and-dagger intrigue. When they went into politics, their omertà came with them. Even when they kept records, they seldom handed them over to archivists. This fact makes researching them

difficult, but it is also a piece of historical evidence in and of itself.⁹⁹ Their thin archives reflect how they thought about time. “Soldiering is not a sentimental profession,” remarks an officer in Chinua Achebe’s novel of military rule. “The first thing we learn is: Soja come, soja gwo.”¹⁰⁰ Soldiers didn’t record their activities for the same reason they didn’t make long-term plans: most military regimes believed themselves to be temporary. They acted like this even as their forays into politics stretched from months, to years, to decades. Posterity was not something they worried about. In Nigeria—a country where autobiography is a kind of national pastime—it’s striking that many officers never wrote a word about themselves.¹⁰¹ Those who did seldom showed much self-reflection. “A soldier is never sorry for what he has done,” Major General David Jemibewon wrote in his own impenitent memoir. “He may be wrong or he may be right in his action, but there is no room for regret or expression of sorrow.”¹⁰²

Soldiers could be vain, but their vanity was seldom about their historical legacies. Unlike civilian politicians, who memorialized themselves constantly, soldiers emphasized their modesty. They cared about how they looked in their uniforms, but they wanted to look “ready” and “smart” rather than rich or suave. They saw themselves not as patriarchs who deserved veneration but dutiful elder brothers who would do their jobs humbly, without the need for public recognition (although a few liked the spotlight). The eye they felt judging them was not the eye of the public, but the eye of *other soldiers*. A chest full of medals meant more to them than a shelf full of memoirs. There was also a more basic explanation for their halting paper trail—they were wary about writing. Theirs was a world of shouted commands, and although no officer was illiterate, some struggled to express themselves in print. They mistrusted the written word, preferring the radio or the television when they felt the need to address the public. The ephemeral nature of those broadcasts makes some of postcolonial Africa’s most important figures seem curiously silent. Despite spending years in Nigeria’s archives, the number of documents I’ve seen written in the hand of any of its military dictators wouldn’t fill a single folder.

Conspicuously absent in the bibliography for this book is the National Archives of Nigeria, which has few documents from the period after the first military coup in 1966 (or at least few I’ve ever managed to cajole my way into seeing).¹⁰³ The archives have failed in their mission to preserve Nigeria’s state records, but not all blame lays on the archivists. Soldiers were reluctant to leave behind evidence of what they were doing, and I suspect that most papers only left their barracks as clouds of smoke. I may be proven wrong, and

if someday those records turn up this story might have to be rewritten. But in the meantime, I had to triangulate military rule's plot from other places.

Oral history could have been one of them, but I decided early on that this book would be written from documents rather than interviews. To decline the oral-historical approach is a kind of blasphemy among historians of Africa, but I quickly found that what I wanted to capture—the attributes of militarism as an ideology—couldn't be found in people's partial and often regretful memories of that time.¹⁰⁴ Rather, I found it on paper. This book is about *how militarism worked* more than *how people felt about it*, and that question was best answered with sources from the era. They include decrees, speeches, government gazettes, and court cases.¹⁰⁵ In them, we can see the state talking to itself. Soldiers try out different voices and affects. They fret over their foibles and missteps, and they pump themselves up like a nervous date in front of a bathroom mirror. These are mostly documents of *intent*, not evidence about how things turned out. Taking them seriously widens the scope of political theory to include the people who wrote them—officers who are remembered as men of action, but seldom as men of thought.

* * *

African history's power lies in its capacity to unsettle. When it's at its best it is uncouth and obtuse, probing things that are unseen, unexpected, or uncanny. How colonial liberation slunk into martial tyranny is one of them. Social scientists have given us many accounts of the decline of the state in postcolonial Africa. Few have tried to understand why it's still with us. For a long time, their primary task seemed to be not *interpreting* African states but *cataloging their deterioration*. One didn't have to mentally deconstruct countries like Somalia or Liberia to see how they worked—you could watch them crumble right before your eyes. Something was gained by observing the machinery of state fall apart; with each piece that failed, it became easier to see how it was supposed to work.¹⁰⁶ But there was also something perverse about this entropic method. It made it hard to see that even broken structures can mean something to people. Bacchic revelry and violence drew the eye away from everything else that was going on in Africa's statehouses, and a fixation on corruption blinded observers to any function a state might serve besides channeling money or shielding the powerful.

States are not just protection rackets run by their elites. They contain multitudes, and even the most hollowed-out ones are full of conflicting impulses and countervailing forces. An apt corrective comes from the unlikely source of David Foster Wallace: a state is “not a team or a code, but a sort of sloppy intersection of desires and fears.”¹⁰⁷ This may sound pedantic, but it

isn't obvious from reading social science about postcolonial Africa. Scholars have no problem describing African states, even "the" African state, as if it only works one way, or only does one thing—theft, for example, or punishment, or protecting foreign capital. We have come up with overwrought metaphors of bellies and phalluses to explain African politics, and we have allowed those metaphors to stand in for empirical description.¹⁰⁸ Contingency and causation seem irrelevant when all you can see is *rot*. *Soldier's Paradise* tries to see Africa's militocracies in the fullness of political life—it catalogs their tensions, strengths, and flaws, and it asks what made them that way. It takes seriously their visions of the future. Even the harshest dictatorships had philosophies, and even seemingly reactionary soldiers were trying to create something new.

This is hard to see in African history as it has been written. Intentionally or not, what journalists and scholars like me have produced is a *postcolonial gothic*. The story as we've told it is full of dark magic, surreal cruelties, and crimes committed behind barbed-wire fences. We use the language of haunting constantly, often letting it do the work of explanation. Dead bodies are our objects of study more often than one might imagine, and the most well-traveled concept to come from postcolonial Africa, coined by its most celebrated intellectual—Achille Mbembe—is something called *necropolitics*.¹⁰⁹ There are so many ethnographies of garbage dumps and toilets that one could be forgiven for thinking that *waste* is the defining feature of African life. None of this is inherently a problem. There are good reasons to use a dead body or an overflowing latrine to make a point, and sometimes the gothic style of storytelling is the one that fits the tale.¹¹⁰ The question is whether modern Africa—a place of bright sunshine and deafening noise—is best described using a language of whispers and shadows. This is not just a representational problem. The failure to capture the feel of African life is a symptom of other, larger misapprehensions.

Militarism had a distinct sensibility. Its sounds were martial: Marches on the radio announcing that a coup was underway, orders shouted by drill sergeants commanding the public in displays of physical fitness. Or else silence, which soldiers tried to impose in cities, where itinerant preachers with megaphones, sidewalk stereos, and traffic otherwise made for a constant din. It smelled of diesel fumes (armored vehicles were everywhere), and Kiwi, the Australian shoeshine used by soldiers throughout the Commonwealth. Food didn't taste different when the military was in charge, except that there was somewhat less of it—most military governments imposed high tariffs for imported grain and rice to protect local agriculture.¹¹¹ Men in uniform could be

seen everywhere, especially in cities. The Nigerian journalist Christine Anyanwu described “the bravado of the military boys; the reefer-soaked soldiers dressed in camouflage uniforms, heads clad in green helmets covered with tattered camouflage fabric. It made them look like they were wearing tattered rags on their heads—*jungle men* engaged in *jungle warfare* in the very heart of Lagos. Those red-eyed, stone-faced men hanging atop open trucks, looking menacing as they caressed their sub-machine guns, were something to see.”¹¹²

These sensations are important in understanding military rule as a form of politics. Militarism’s ambience—what it felt like, the emotions it evoked—was part of what made it work. The sun wasn’t dimmer when the army was in charge, and certain quarters of society felt fairly free. Sitting in a combative university seminar or dancing in a raucous Lagos nightclub, one could forget that this was a dictatorship. But a military checkpoint was never far away, and crackdowns were harsh when they came. The press was free, until a journalist mysteriously disappeared. Universities were places of dissent, but a campus might abruptly shut down if student politics got out of line. Even in relatively open periods of military rule, freedoms could only be enjoyed knowing they might vanish at any minute. Nigeria’s domestic intelligence branch, the Security Organization, was no Stasi. It was famously inept, and dissidents had more reason to fear the impulsive soldiers patrolling the streets than the military’s klutzy spies. Even so, one could never be quite sure who was listening.¹¹³ Unpredictability was a strategy, and the element of surprise was useful to military regimes that had neither the reach nor the resources to monitor everyone.

Militarism had many ironies, and looking for consistency in it is a fool’s errand. An officer could be a poetic humanist and a petty martinet at the same time. He could ardently preach “freedom” while locking up scores of people in the name of defending it. He could describe his regime as temporary while also insisting it was a “revolution” that had transformed society permanently. “Each regime intends to stay briefly in power, pilot the democratic experience and hand-over to civilians,” a Nigerian Marxist described. But once soldiers took the statehouse, they almost always wanted to stay there. Each coup “vomits a contagion which courses quietly and slowly through the arteries of the armed forces,” he averred. Few soldiers were immune to the “venom of power.”¹¹⁴ Even as they promised that democracy was right around the corner, they spent fortunes on monuments glorifying themselves. In Lagos, they built the National Theatre in the shape of an enormous officer’s cap, literally hanging their hat on the capital city. It remains there long after they

left. These contradictions aren't something to be explained away—they were immanent to militarism as a system of thought. *Soldier's Paradise* is devoted to describing the most important of them: soldiers ruled by the gun, but they also had a deep, sometimes delusional, faith in the *law*.

Militarism's contradictions didn't mean it was an ideological free-for-all, and its internal flaws didn't make it incoherent. It had an intelligible meaning, especially in its legal form. A legal system is like an ecosystem, and like in nature, the different flora and fauna work together even as they compete. Each organism—courts, judges, bodies of law—has its own traits. Each occupies a distinct niche. In modern Africa, we find common-law courts, customary law, commissions of inquiry, and military tribunals, all growing side by side. They interact in complicated ways, winding their tendrils around one another, sometimes competing and sometimes cooperating. Their seeds may have come from Europe, but they grew differently in African soils. *Soldier's Paradise* describes this intricate ecology. Chapter 1 asks where militarism came from: What parts of it were repurposed from colonialism, and what parts were new? Chapter 2 asks where it was going: What destination were soldiers aiming for, and what moral compass did they use to get there? Chapter 3 describes why military regimes were wedded to the idea of “revolution” and how its jurisprudence moved across the continent. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 show law in action. Each describes a legal form that was important to soldiers—customary law, commissions of inquiry, and martial law, respectively—and how civilians got caught up in it.

* * *

In the criminal courtroom, judges sometimes use the concept *cui bono*—who benefits?—to understand the evidence in front of them. Crimes are usually committed to profit their perpetrators, so in narrowing down the suspects there is some value in asking who gained from, say, the death of a murder victim. Social scientists ask this question too, and it can be useful for understanding history. Repeatedly over the course of this research, I tried to ask it about the documents in front of me: Who benefited from the crimes of Africa's military dictatorships?

The answer is often nobody. Militarism did not work for soldiers, or for civilians, for men, or for women. It didn't work for the rich, who lived in fearful alienation, or the poor, who lived in conditions that were among the most degrading on the planet. It didn't work for people with skill or ambition, who found themselves stymied at every turn (many of them eventually emigrated). Nor did it work for those *without* talent or drive, who found that if they stumbled, there was no safety net to break their fall, and no bottom

they would eventually hit. Perhaps it worked for individual officers when they were in power, but few of them stayed there for long. Every officer who ruled Nigeria, tyrant or moderate, ended his reign in humiliation—or in a coffin.¹¹⁵ Military rule brutalized *all* Nigerians in one way or another. Some managed to profit from it for a while, but no one did forever. A handful of kleptocrats got rich stealing from the government, but most of them met a bad end too. No amount of money or power could insulate you from the state's worst failures: the crime, the chaos of the roads, and the ever-present danger of being smacked around by a teenager in a baggy uniform.

So why did people put up with military rule? It was because it gave them a *plan*—or at least the illusion of one. Militarism offered the promise of security and order, which soldiers tried to deliver through law. Law wasn't actually very useful for making an orderly society, but people learned they could turn the military's law-and-order vision to their own ends. Many saw something appealing in militarism's aggression, austerity, and independent-mindedness. Some found weapons they could turn against their rivals. Another cold truth: some found pleasure in submission. Patrick Wilmot, a Jamaican-Nigerian sociologist who made a career out of needling the military, argued that his adopted country secretly longed to be dominated. "Naïve liberals thought people whose noses you rubbed in shit would rise up and try to fuck you," he addressed soldiers in a thinly fictionalized polemic, "but the truth was they dunked their heads even deeper in it to hide from the source of their pain before lining up to kiss your dick or crawling away to die."¹¹⁶ Wilmot's vulgarity landed him in court constantly, and eventually it got him kicked out of the country. But there was a grain of truth in what he said. Militarism was humiliating, but soldiers' ability to shame and humble people was part of their appeal.

DUKE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- 1 Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (hereafter NIIA), Nigeria-Law General, "Execution of an Armed Robber," 2 May 1971.
- 2 First, *Barrel of a Gun*, chapter 3.
- 3 We've arguably been at this impasse for a long time. In 2003, the historian Luise White argued that the impulse to describe African societies sympathetically led some to make apologies for tyranny or to paper over the ugly things people did to each other in hard times. The flip side of this well-intentioned naivete was *fatalism*. Cynics portrayed Africa as a dystopia, in a style of high dudgeon that came to be known as the "new barbarism." White, review of *Mask of Anarchy*, 632; see also Glassman, *War of Words*, x. For a critique of the "new barbarism" thesis, see Wai, *Epistemologies of African Conflicts*.

INTRODUCTION

- 1 This application of "nondomination" comes by way of Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*.
- 2 Hutchful and Bathily, *Military and Militarism*; Assensoh and Alex-Assensoh, *African Military History and Politics*; Decalo, *Psychoses of Power and Coups and Army Rule in Africa*; Mwakikagile, *Military Coups in West Africa*; Ogueri, *African Nationalism*; Souare, *Civil Wars and Coups d'Etat*; Luckham, *Nigerian Military* and "Military, Militarization and Democratization."
- 3 One study counted 80 successful coups, 108 failed ones, and 139 plots between 1956 and 2001 across forty-eight independent states in Africa (excluding countries north of the Sahara). McGowan, "African Military Coups d'État."
- 4 First was a communist and anti-apartheid activist who was assassinated by the South African police in 1982. First, *Barrel of a Gun*, 4.
- 5 Mahama, *My First Coup d'Etat*.
- 6 Kamil, *Africa Has Come of Age*, 103.
- 7 Jemibewon, *Military, Law and Society*, 241.
- 8 Britain's ex-colonies in Africa include Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, and parts of Cameroon and Togo in West Africa; Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, Somaliland, and Tanzania in East Africa; South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Lesotho, and Eswatini in southern Africa; and parts of

Mauritius and the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean. The map of colonial power shifted constantly, which makes it difficult to define what exactly counts as a former British colony. Back-and-forth conquest between Britain and France, the ambiguities of the League of Nations mandate system, and the recombination of colonial territories after independence makes for complicated legal systems across the continent. In general, Britain's ex-colonies in Africa share the English common law as the basis of their legal systems, but some mix that tradition with civil structures from France, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands depending on the colonial history. Since precedent was portable between common law jurisdictions, a principle that soldiers found useful in one place could turn up on the other side of the continent—or the other side of the world. African jurists were in touch with their counterparts across the former British Empire, especially in South Asia and the Caribbean. They argued, shared expertise, and followed one another's examples regularly. Military officers, who had all trained together in Britain and India, did the same thing.

- 9 I define a military regime as one in which members of the armed forces openly took control of the state. This definition excludes certain places where militarism was nonetheless important. Zimbabwe and apartheid South Africa, for example, both had characteristics of military regimes—the former was a liberation movement that kept its martial character after it won, the latter a bellicose government where the armed forces had a large presence in public life. Neither is typically counted among Africa's military regimes, however.
- 10 For an overview of what inequality looks like in Nigeria, see Archibong, "Historical Origins of Persistent Inequality."
- 11 See Barber, "Popular Reactions to the Petro-Naira"; Adunbi, *Enclaves of Exception*.
- 12 See Smith, "Why Is Donald Trump," 149–61.
- 13 *Daily Times* (Lagos), 19 September 1968, NIIA, Nigeria-Law. The witness was the radical teacher Tai Solarin.
- 14 Quoted in Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (hereafter NIALS), *Why Army Rule?*, 3.
- 15 "Notebook, Gold Coast Trip (Ghana's independence)," March 1957, box 282, Papers of Ralph J. Bunche, UCLA Special Collections.
- 16 Welch, *Soldier and State in Africa*, 12–13.
- 17 I place less importance on these pacts than do other historians, such as Whitaker, *Built on the Ruins*.
- 18 Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*; Amin, *L'Afrique de l'Ouest bloquée*; Shivji, *Class Struggles in Tanzania*.
- 19 First, *Barrel of a Gun*, 65–67.
- 20 "Enquiry," 16 March 1977, Lagos State Research and Archives Board (hereafter LASRAB), LCE.A12c, 12 (emphasis added). All emphases are in the original unless otherwise noted.
- 21 Soyinka, *Open Sore*, 139.
- 22 Kandeh, *Coups from Below*, 143–78.

- 23 Mazrui, "Lumpen Proletariat," 1–12. There were some exceptions to this. A few officers came from wealthy or well-connected families, most notably Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. But more came from humble backgrounds, and nearly all members of the rank and file came from the peasantry. The military was one of few social elevators available to all Nigerian men.
- 24 Though he also predicted that soldiers would become just as extractive as the civilians they replaced—in the lingo of Mazrui's times, a process of "embourgeoisement."
- 25 Patricia Lockwood, "America Is a Baby," *London Review of Books*, 3 December 2020.
- 26 Huntington summarized this mindset as "conservative realism." Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, 59–79.
- 27 A comparison can be made to the early modern Europe of Perry Anderson's description, where absolutist states were "machines built overwhelmingly for the battlefield." Many hallmarks of the modern state—bureaucracy, taxation—were refined for the purpose of building armies. Africa's leaders hoped militarism might give flesh to their new states in a similar way. Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 32. Another useful comparison is to Yugoslavia, where soldiers also believed they could build a martial utopia out of many different peoples. See Petrović, *Utopia of the Uniform*.
- 28 Ocran, *Politics of the Sword*, 94.
- 29 Their commitment to public welfare was usually skin-deep. In Sierra Leone, for example, it took the form of an annual event called the "Pauper's Treat"—a sort of party where soldiers doled out food and household goods to the poor. "The Way Forward—Reflections: Two Years Under the NPRC," Sierra Leone Department of Information, Broadcasting, and Culture, 1994.
- 30 It is telling that Olusegun Obasanjo entitled his memoir-*cum*-political-treatise *This Animal Called Man*.
- 31 Liliwhite-Nwosu, *Divine Restoration of Nigeria*.
- 32 See Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa*; Abrahamsen, "Return of the Generals?"
- 33 Venter, *War Dog*, 15.
- 34 Stanley Crouch, "Into Africa," *Village Voice* (New York), 17 December 1985.
- 35 Some decisions did both at once. In 1971, a cannabis dealer in Nigeria appealed his conviction for drug possession on the grounds that he had been given an excessive sentence. Justice Chukwudifu Oputa agreed with him, ruling that "it will be an absurd law that leaves the maximum sentence on conviction to the unpredictable whims and caprices of a trial Magistrate, or to the state of his digestion." In so doing, he both acquitted the appellant and established a sentencing limit for drug offenses. The military subsequently overturned that limit by decree, but the fact that a judge could take this kind of stand is worth noting. *Cletus Okeke and Commissioner of Police*, High Court of the East Central State, Nnewi, 11 May 1971, Enugu State High Court, uncataloged collection.

The names of defendants in unreported criminal trials have been changed to protect their privacy.

- 36 NIALS, *Why Army Rule?*, 248.
- 37 See Kureshi, *Seeking Supremacy*; Hilbink, *Judges Beyond Politics*; Ghias, "Miscarriage of Chief Justice"; Karekwaivanane, *State Power in Zimbabwe*; Tushnet and Khosla, *Unstable Constitutionalism*.
- 38 Shapiro, "Courts in Authoritarian Regimes."
- 39 Massoud, *Law's Fragile State*, 218.
- 40 Authoritarian leaders found value in the language of radical intellectuals, but this didn't stop them from silencing those intellectuals if they became inconvenient. In Kenya, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was hounded into exile by Daniel arap Moi, only to watch soldiers like Babangida start adopting his language of "decolonising the mind." See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*; "Address by General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida," 1989, NIALS uncataloged collection.
- 41 "Address by General Ibrahim Badamasi [*sic*] Babangida," 1989, NIALS uncataloged collection.
- 42 Not that only civilians are eligible for this honor. General Murtala Muhammed graces the twenty. On Zik's legacy, see Adebani, "Burying 'Zik of Africa.'"
- 43 Azikiwe, *Democracy with Military Vigilance*, 19.
- 44 Azikiwe, *Democracy with Military Vigilance*, 26–27.
- 45 This was a form of "positive action," not unlike the strategy Kwame Nkrumah pursued in Ghana. See Njoku, "Zikism."
- 46 The success of the Zikist movement was mixed. Fewer people took up the cause than he hoped, and a botched assassination attempt of a British official prompted a crackdown that landed him and his followers in jail. Nigeria's independence would ultimately be won by other means—namely tepid negotiation with the British, which Zik helped orchestrate.
- 47 On this war, see Daly, *History of Biafra*.
- 48 On the ins and outs of that drama, see Max Siollun's detailed books on Nigeria since independence, *Oil, Politics and Violence* and *Nigeria's Soldiers of Fortune*.
- 49 Comparatively, see Peterson et al., "Unseen Archive of Idi Amin."
- 50 See generally Stapleton, *West African Soldiers*.
- 51 Soyinka, *Open Sore*, 79.
- 52 Amuta, *Prince of the Niger*, 21.
- 53 Janowitz, *Military in Political Development*, 64.
- 54 General Ibrahim Babangida to Margaret Thatcher, 15 May 1990, National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew (hereafter NAUK), PREM 19/3103.
- 55 Babangida, *Home Front*, 14.
- 56 A further note on terminology: I and many of my sources sometimes use the term *army* as a metonym for the armed forces as a whole. This is slightly misleading. Nigeria, for example, had an army, a navy, and an air force, all of which played a part in military administration. The army dwarfed the

- other service branches, however, and most military rulers were army officers (Ghana's Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings was a notable exception).
- 57 The "worm's eye view of war" is most associated with the journalist Ernie Pyle. See Chrisinger, *Soldier's Truth*. The best example of that view in Nigeria is Ken Saro-Wiwa's classic *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*.
- 58 Enonchong, *I Know Who Killed Major Nzeogwu!*, 29.
- 59 Quoted in Hutchful and Bathily, *Military and Militarism*, xiii.
- 60 On ethnicity and national politics in Ghana, see Allman, *Quills of the Porcupine*.
- 61 NIALS, *Why Army Rule?*, 86.
- 62 Kamil, *Africa Has Come of Age*, 240–42.
- 63 Afowowe, *Onward Soldier*, 14.
- 64 "Honor" has a long and equivocal history in Africa. See Iliffe, *Honour in African History*, 345–49.
- 65 Ogueri, *African Nationalism*, 46.
- 66 *Secular* is an imperfect term to describe their attitude toward religion, and the Nigerian state's official secularism was mostly honored in the breach. Nonetheless, it was an important idea under both colonialism and military rule. See Akande, *Entangled Domains*.
- 67 Jemibewon, *Combatant in Government*, 174.
- 68 Ochonu, *Colonialism by Proxy*; Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire*.
- 69 This beats against the current of much scholarship in political science. See Harkness, *When Soldiers Rebel*; Dwyer, *Soldiers in Revolt*.
- 70 Amuta, *Prince of the Niger*, 98.
- 71 Ocran, *Politics of the Sword*, 126, 128.
- 72 Quoted in Kamil, *Africa Has Come of Age*, 243.
- 73 Quoted in Ocran, *Politics of the Sword*, 124.
- 74 Niki Tobi, "The Rule of Law Under the Current Military Regime in Nigeria: A Trial Judge's View Point," Beijing Conference on the Law of the World, 22–27 April 1990.
- 75 Keegan, *Mask of Command*, 11.
- 76 Amuta, *Prince of the Niger*, xx.
- 77 Oluleye, *Military Leadership*, 11–14, 16.
- 78 Olivia Y. Gaba, "Profile," Special Mails to Mobolaji Johnson, LASRAB.
- 79 Col. Mobolaji O. Johnson to Ukpabi Asika, 10 March 1972, Special Mails to Mobolaji Johnson, LASRAB.
- 80 "Call by Nigerian Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Prince Bola Ajibola on the Attorney General," 31 January 1986, United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office, FCO 58/4582, obtained by Freedom of Information Act 2000 Request, reference 0428–19.
- 81 Amuta, *Prince of the Niger*, 20.
- 82 This is a work of fiction, but Sankara was indeed the object of many crushes. Adichie, "Shivering," 166.
- 83 Babangida, *Home Front*, 34.

- 84 Militaries that enlist women often exclude them from combat, where the greatest risks and the greatest rewards of military service are found. For some rare exceptions to this rule, see Wilson, *Women and Eritrean Revolution*; Ly, "Promise and Betrayal"; and beyond Africa, see Alexievich, *Unwomanly Face of War*. See also Lindsay and Miescher, *Men and Masculinities*.
- 85 I never found archival trace of this, but it was given fictional treatment in David Caute's forgotten novel of decolonization, *At Fever Pitch*.
- 86 This argument was powerfully made in the early 2000s by Goldstein, *War and Gender*, but military historians never meaningfully took it up.
- 87 Mba, *Kaba and Khaki*, 4.
- 88 Mama notes that this labor became especially important in the context of structural adjustment, when formal employment withered away. Mama, "Bridging through Time," 89.
- 89 It was a different matter in bourgeois civilian governments, where the fiction that women exist only in the home could be maintained more easily.
- 90 Making families, making armies, and making states have long been linked processes in African history—arguably more than elsewhere. See Osborn, *Our New Husbands*; Burrill, *States of Marriage*.
- 91 Layonu, *Reflections on Leadership*, 150.
- 92 To some, this seemed to build on forms of influence women had exercised in African politics before colonialism. Jibrin, "First Lady Syndrome."
- 93 Aduku, *Maryam*, 39.
- 94 Aliyu, *Maryam Sani Abacha*.
- 95 Borno State Government, *Milestone*, 46.
- 96 Mama, "Khaki in the Family," 1–17.
- 97 Afowowe, *Onward Soldier*, 62–63.
- 98 On those scattered archives, see Daly, "Archival Research in Africa."
- 99 As Matthew Connelly writes of the United States in its own mute era, "the dark state can no more tell its own story than a man with dementia can write his own memoir." Connelly, *Declassification Engine*, 387.
- 100 "Soldier come, soldier go, but barrack remains" is a common expression in Nigeria. The implication: Militarism had institutional staying power in a way that no individual military regime did. Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, 222.
- 101 In this respect they couldn't be more different from the soldiers of Luise White's *Fighting and Writing*, who chronicled themselves obsessively. Olusegun Obasanjo fully bucks this trend, however, having not only written several memoirs but built a presidential library in his hometown.
- 102 Jemibewon, *Combatant in Government*, 196.
- 103 Nigeria shares this predicament with many states where the military has dominated politics. Comparatively, see Mikhail, *My Egypt Archive*.
- 104 Mann, "Africanist's Apostasy," 117–27. Relatedly, see Hewage, "Event, Archive, Mediation," 186–217.
- 105 The places where these documents are held fly under the radar. They include the NIIA, LASRAB, NIALS, and the archives of various foreign governments

- and international organizations. Some published materials ended up in the libraries of American universities like mine, where government-funded “area studies” programs boomed during the Cold War.
- 106 The best insights born of this approach include Chabal and Daloz, *Africa Works*; Hoffman, *War Machines*.
 - 107 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 83.
 - 108 Respectively, see Bayart, *State in Africa: Politics of the Belly*; Mbembe, “God’s Phallus,” in *On the Postcolony*.
 - 109 Necropolitics is a form of government in which “weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*.” Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 92.
 - 110 Exemplars of this approach include Musila, *Death Retold*; Cohen and Odhi-ambo, *Burying SM*.
 - 111 Eventually structural adjustment policies would force them to end those tariffs, flooding markets with cheap Thai rice and American grain, and undercutting local agriculture.
 - 112 Anyanwu, *Days of Terror*, 64.
 - 113 Maja-Pearce, *In My Father’s Country*, 82.
 - 114 Chikendu, *Military Question*, 59.
 - 115 Even the two who returned to power as civilians, Obasanjo and Buhari, spent years out in the cold before rehabilitating themselves.
 - 116 Wilmot, *Seeing Double*, 15.

CHAPTER 1. THE MASTER’S TOOLS

- 1 See Anene, *International Boundaries of Nigeria*.
- 2 Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the leader of the Biafran secessionist movement, was one of the few who did so explicitly, in *Ahiara Declaration*.
- 3 Amuta, *Prince of the Niger*, 196.
- 4 The novelist Chinua Achebe made this point most forcefully. On the origins of Achebe’s thought, see Ochiagha, *Achebe and Friends*.
- 5 This goes against an increasingly wide consensus that it did. See especially Elkins, *Legacy of Violence*; Wagner, “Savage Warfare.”
- 6 Young, *African Colonial State*; Berry, “Hegemony on a Shoestring.”
- 7 Jasanoff, *Dawn Watch*.
- 8 This was the School of Oriental and African Studies, founded in 1916.
- 9 On these strategies, see Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*; Ibhawoh, “Maxim Gun,” 55–83.
- 10 The Maxim gun is an early machine gun that tipped the scale decisively in Europeans’ favor in the wars of colonial conquest. Belloc, *Modern Traveller*, 41.
- 11 This approach is exemplified by the work of Frederick Cooper, especially *Citizenship between Empire and Nation*. See also Stoler, *Duress*.