

# The Vatsa Conspiracy of 1985

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In Nigeria, beginning in the wee hours of December 17th, 1985 and extending for the next two weeks, over one hundred airforce, army and naval officers were arrested *en masse* for allegedly plotting to overthrow the 4 month old government of Major General Ibrahim Babangida who had himself come to power on August 27, 1985 in a palace coup against Major General Buhari.

After a Preliminary Special Investigation Panel chaired by Brigadier Sani Sami, selected cases were forwarded for court martial. Beginning on Monday 27th January 1986, 17 officers were tried at the Brigade of Guards HQ in Victoria Island, Lagos, by a Special Military Tribunal.

The Tribunal was convened by Major General DY Bali, then Minister of Defence and Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, under the Treason and other offences (Special Military Tribunal) Decree No.1 of 1986 with reference to Section 37(2) of the Criminal code. Separately, Brigadier Malami Nassarawa, Wing Commander J Uku, and Lt. Peter Odoaba were also tried on different charges.

Squadron Leader Effanga and Wing Commander Ekanem were discharged and acquitted in a no-case submission. The Tribunal comprised Major General Charles B. Ndiomu (Chairman), Brigadier Yerima Y Kure, Commodore Murtala A. Nyako, Colonel Rufus Kupolati, Group Captain Anthony Ikhazobor (later replaced by Colonel Opaleye when Lt. Col Bitiyong objected to his presence), Lt. Col. D. Mohammed and Alhaji Mamman Nassarawa (Commissioner of Police).

There were two waiting members, namely Col. E. B. Opaleye (until he replaced Ikhazobor), and Lt. Col. M M Bukar. The Judge Advocate was Major A. Kejawa.

The prosecution team comprised Colonel Lawrence Uwumarogie, Major N N Mazda, Major B Makanju, and Captain Y. A. Ahmadu. The trial was conducted under the watchful eyes of the military intelligence directorate headed at that time by **Colonel Akilu**.

The following were accused: Major-Gen Mamman Vatsa, Lt. Col. Musa Bitiyong, Lt. Col. Christian A. Oche, Lt. Col. Michael A. Iyorshe, Lt. Col. M. Effiong, Major D. I. Bamidele, Major D. E. West, Major J. O. Onyeke, Major Tobias G. Akwashiki, Captain G.I.L. Sese, Lt. K.G. Dapka, Commodore A. A. Ogwiji, Wing Commander B. E. N. Ekele, Wing Commander Adamu C. Sakaba, Squadron Leader Martin Olufolorunsho Luther, Squadron Leader C. Ode and Squadron Leader A. Ahura. It was alleged that the plot was financed by General Vatsa using the cover of a farming loan to Lt. Col Musa Bitiyong.

General Vatsa denied any intent that monies he had given to Bitiyong were meant for that purpose, but Bitiyong allegedly shared some of it for travel expenses with two other accused officers and was said (at a meeting in Makurdi, which Vatsa did not attend) to have promised to get more from the source when it became obvious that funding a coup in Nigeria would require much more than the 10,000 naira he allegedly had at his disposal (As of 1985, it was said that a coup would require no less than 50-100,000 naira to implement).

However, at no point in time did Vatsa actually meet with or discuss coup plotting or financing with anyone-else. Indeed, other than Bitiyong, who had a close relationship with the General, the other alleged key conspirators, I am told, never viewed themselves as working for or on behalf of Vatsa, although for lack of funds, two of them reluctantly accepted using part of the "farm money" for odds and ends.

Sources say, however, that Vatsa maintained to the very end that the money was for farming. Others allege, however, that after being tortured for two days, Bitiyong implicated Vatsa by making reference to certain private political conversations they had,

which Vatsa denied. But Vatsa was accused of harboring "bad blood" against his friend and classmate Babangida, dating back to the Buhari regime and possibly earlier. He was also obliquely accused of reporting Babangida's coup plot to Buhari before he left the country for pilgrimage along with Major General Tunde Idiagbon in August.

Actions he later took as a Minister to accelerate many military applications for certificates of occupancy for land in Abuja, came to be viewed as efforts to buy support among one or two of the plotters. Then rumors that a civilian had introduced him at a party as Nigeria's next President were even aired. All of this is of course circumstantial. But they took him to the stake, which was quite an anti-climax to the career of a brilliant man who (until then, if the government is to be believed) never took part in any coup in Nigeria.

Indeed, Mamman Vatsa was the first to go on air in Calabar to denounce the Dimka coup and was later the Secretary of the Obada panel that tried Dimka and others in 1976. This little detail may have earned him some latent enmity in certain circles of the Army which later contributed to his death. Very briefly, the basic outlines of the alleged Vatsa conspiracy of 1985, as one can glean from publications and interviews is as follows: Lt. Col. Musa Bitiyong, based in Lagos, held a discussion [about the removal of Buhari] when General Vatsa came back from Mecca in August 1985.

Bitiyong urgently sent for Lt. Col Iyorshe to come down from Kaduna in September 1985. The young Captain who acted as an innocent go-between was later charged but acquitted. Bitiyong then presented Iyorshe with documents alleging serious acts of impropriety against certain personalities in the new régime with regards to army and defence equipment maintenance contracts.

Being the puritanical, very professional and highly moralistic officer he was, the usually unflappable Iyorshe got upset. In October he discussed the matter further with Lt. Col Oche of military intelligence who also allegedly revealed other allegedly incriminating

documents related to trafficking, particularly as it affected the release of some persons who had previously been detained by the Buhari regime.

Concerns then emerged about the long-term threat of the new regime to the military as a disciplined professional fighting organization and the country as a whole, through the legitimization of serial coups in which the same characters always featured. It was felt that Nigeria deserved better and that the armed forces should be saved from corruption and professional decay. This basic concern for professional ethos was amplified by concerns that the new regime intended to take the IMF loan and plunge the country into poverty. As Lt. Col Iyorshe, reportedly put it:

"What I personally feel is that the nation itself needed a better deal. There have always been people whose only ambition is to lead, not serving any national interest. There has always been individual, tribal or business rights, never the rights of this nation to a better image; social, economic, political and military programs and plans. Nigeria deserves a group of people or leaders transparently honest enough to publish all their assets and liabilities on the pages of newspapers for the world to see. Not a nation where anybody will be allowed to have a foreign bank account let alone the millions stored away. The nation should be such that any Nigerian regardless of his tribe or religion will have the right to aspire to the leadership or rulership of the country".

"Nigeria was fast sinking to a state of despondency and anarchy. They never and still never trust their leaders. The anarchy at our airports characterises the state of the nation. Corruption is rife in this country and transcends all spheres of life. It is something the nation has to solve. Professional incompetence and mediocrity are rewarded whereas hard work is mocked. Within the military, the situation was and still is very tense. The welfare of soldiers is totally neglected such that soldiers still live in barracks over ten years after the civil war; no uniforms, no drugs in the hospitals; soldiers are being subjected to too much guard duties, little or no chance to themselves and their families. The discipline in the army in particular was deteriorating rapidly as exemplified by the report of what

happened in Lagos on August 27th, 1985. The question of leadership was not discussed quite seriously, but it was with one exception, felt that the army had always dominated leadership. This was not an issue anyway as there were no solid plans regarding such things, the method of operation and the question of finance. I never considered myself for any higher military or political appointments. In fact, at first, all of us believed that if we succeeded, some senior officers of honesty would be called to rule. Personally up till quite recently, I never believed that coups solve any problem or else Bolivia would be paradise on earth. But then things seemed to get worse and worse."

What Col. Iyorshe was referring to by "the report of what happened in Lagos on August 27th, 1985" is the fact that soldiers who took part in the coup that brought General Babangida to power looted the personal property and possessions of General Buhari in Lagos. What he did not mention, however, was that a similar thing took place when President Shagari was overthrown by Buhari and others in December 1983. Many of his life long priceless records and possessions have never been found to this day.

In part because of the concern that the Army's armored corps was packed with officers loyal to the new regime, certain air force officers were then contacted (Martin Luther/Ben Ekele) and two meetings held, one informal meet in late November at the Sheraton Hotel Lobby in Lagos (Luther, Oche, Ogwiji, Bitiyong) and the other at a guest house in Makurdi (Iyorshe, Bitiyong, Oche, Ekele, Sakaba, Bamidele).

Aside this, Iyorshe and Bitiyong are said to have met a few times either in Lagos or Kaduna but there (reportedly) were no other meetings involving others. Ogwiji, who was a Naval Officer, was invited (without prior knowledge) to the Sheraton meeting by his friend Oche. However, no operational role was defined or envisaged for the Navy. According to sources, the meeting was focused on political criticisms of the regime. Although conceivably seditious, no operational coup plans were discussed. Ogwiji made no further contacts with anyone.

At the Makurdi meeting, the potential role of the airforce was discussed. The technical limitations preventing the use of either the MiG 21 or the Sepecat Jaguar in a ground

attack role to neutralize pro-regime armored vehicles at the Ikeja Cantonment in Lagos were made clear by Ben Ekele (and supported by Adamu Sakaba) who advised the army boys that the air force could not play any useful role. This discussion was, however, taken out of context and the public told that the conspirators planned to destroy Lagos. Before the meeting ended, Sakaba, who had supposedly been invited by his friend Ekele, even floated a totally fake competing coup plot (using the names of a group of officers) to which he said he belonged, as a decoy to dissuade the others in the group from proceeding. Aside this, it was obvious that the group had no troops on the ground in Lagos, although the theoretical possibility existed that Iyorshe could use demonstration troops at the Command and Staff College in Jaji.

Hence the meeting broke up with no concrete operational plan nor was there any agreement to use force although some key elements (notably Iyorshe, Bitiyong and Oche) continued to monitor the national situation as well as investigate the so called "Group of Brigade Commanders" Sakaba had told them about.

The Army at that time was awash with rumors of coup plots by different groups. Everyone was watching everyone. The bragadaccio and 'compensation' of the "boys" who carried out the August 27 operation did not help the morale of serious minded officers.

Separately, other isolated discussions were held between certain officers. Wing Commander Uku, for example, potentially attractive on account of his command of the Alpha Jets at Kainji, repeatedly refused to be drawn in and strongly advised against air force participation. This fine officer was later charged with and jailed for concealment because he did not report the attempt to recruit him.

Ideas such as the diversion of the Presidential jet to a pre-arranged location by Pilots in the Executive Fleet (like Luther and Ahura) were floated in other isolated conversations between some officers in Lagos. This scenario posited arresting the C-in-C and

confronting him with allegations after which he would be asked to resign. But, again, no actual plans were made.

Oche allegedly met with Majors Akwashiki and Onyeke after a game of squash in Lagos and discussed national issues like the IMF loan, possibly to evaluate their suitability for recruitment. But he never actually mentioned planning a coup with either officer. Akwashiki was still sentenced to death anyway, only to have his sentence commuted by the ruling council. Some people claim incredulously that he was punished for not knowing he was being recruited by those who felt he owed them his sensitive position as the Commander of the 6th Battalion, Bonny Camp. He was later pardoned and released back to private life almost ten years later by a successor regime.

Oche allegedly mentioned the existence of a conspiracy to his nephew, Peter Odoba, a young lieutenant at the Guards Brigade who then reported to a colleague of his, then **Lt. (later Major) Al Mustapha**, then Intelligence officer to the Chief of Army Staff. Oche's nephew was, however, later charged with concealment and recommended for dismissal and a long jail term.

Conflicting accounts abound about the precise nature of links between Iyorshe, Bamidele, West and Effiong, all based in the Kaduna/Zaria area. Iyorshe and Bamidele were executed. Effiong's death sentence was commuted. Bamidele's case raised an interesting side dilemma of how an officer (Bamidele) reported a coup plot in 1983 to his boss (Buhari) only to get arrested and charged for plotting.

Then he saw this same boss who arrested him emerge as Nigeria's new leader a few months later after a coup. The same officer (Bamidele) was then shot for allegedly knowing of and participating in another coup 2 years later without reporting to his boss. These, among many other areas are subject to future research, the memoirs of direct participants or the release of actual investigative, court and AFRC records, not publicly available at this time.

Eventually, Major-Gen Mamman Vatsa, Lt. Col. Musa Bitiyong, Lt. Col. Christian A. Oche, Lt. Col. Michael A. Iyorshe, Major D. I. Bamidele, Commodore A. A. Ogwiji, Wing Commander B. E. N. Ekele, Wing Commander Adamu C. Sakaba, Squadron Leader Martin Olufolorunsho Luther, and Squadron Leader A. Ahura were executed on March 5, 1986.

The late Brigadier Malami Nassarawa's case was very curious and unfortunate. As Commandant of the School of Infantry, he was reportedly arraigned for allegedly plotting a separate coup of his own. When absolutely no evidence was adduced for that charge, he was accused of "insufficient loyalty" and then accused of conduct prejudicial to discipline, and then dismissed from the Army. Then he was retried, and again acquitted. His acquittal was upheld by the AFRC/PRC.

Nevertheless he still languished in jail for many months with deteriorating health until his release was ordered by the Joint Chiefs Chairman. Someday his case definitely will make for an interesting movie.

### **WHY WERE VATSA AND THE OTHERS SHOT?**

In his landmark contribution to Nigerian military literature, titled "The Federal Republic of Nigeria Army", a former Army Chief, Major General MC Alli, wrote:

"The soldier poet and poultry farmer, the peoples' General Mamman Vatsa, a minority of Nupe extraction from Niger State of Nigeria, allegedly masterminded the coup of 1986. It falls into the same category with General Babangida's coup [against Buhari]. It was motivated by an initial resentment immediately after the overthrow of General Buhari. It cannot entirely be divorced from the incipient rivalry that lay latent between Generals Vatsa and Babangida, both from Niger State and of a common alma mater"

"...No major tribe of regional group of political import can be identified. Its conspirators comprised a motley of minorities of diverse background with a

rallying point clubbed around General Vatsa's charisma. Curbed in the embryo and tried in secrecy, their subsequent execution left understandable incredulity and doubt in the nobility of the regime it sought to overthrow".

"...It failed because a mole compromised it. The conspirators did not fall within the mainstream of the Army's stock of professional coup merchants and artisans. Furthermore the regime of General Babangida had consolidated its tentacles on the network of national power through generous patronage and populist posturing. This explains his audacity in executing General Vatsa, notwithstanding national and international appeals for reprieve".

"General Babangida told me he was personally grieved by the insinuation that he executed the plotters because they were largely Christians. The pressure to execute them arose from the Plateau officers' axis. Their officers had been victims of the same military tradition and laws..[i.e. during the Dimka coup of 1976]."

"However, Babangida himself has gone on to make additional comments clarifying why they were shot. During an interview with Eni-B of THIS DAY Newspapers in 2001 shortly after he turned 60, this is how (according to Eni-B) General Babangida justified the execution of General Vatsa and others in 1986:

"...Babangida said it was after Vatsa's coup was foiled that he realised his childhood friend and classmate planned the coup in line with a deep-seated personal rivalry, going back to their days as young officers. He said that unconsciously he and Vatsa had been great competitors; that as a young officer, whatever he did Vatsa equally did and whatever Vatsa achieved, he also went after. He said it was Lt. Gen. T.Y. Danjuma who pointed this out to him from their military records".

"Babangida gave this rationalisation to justify why he could not pardon Vatsa. He said when he first heard his childhood friend was planning a coup, he decided to do nothing but monitor him. He said however that Vatsa came to him to complain thus, "You heard I was planning a coup and couldn't even ask me. What kind of friend are you?" To this Babangida said he replied thus, "I didn't believe it or are you planning a coup?" He said Vatsa replied in the negative and the matter was forgotten until there was evidence of the plot. He said he instructed that Vatsa be arrested and detained so as not to allow him impede investigation".

"However, he tried to escape through the air condition hole. I couldn't understand why he was trying to escape if he was not involved in a coup plot," Babangida said. He added with a frown, "But while watching the video of his execution, I turned my eyes away when I saw him remove his watch and ask a soldier to give his wife. I couldn't continue watching." He said he couldn't retire or imprison Vatsa because he believed the guy could still have planned a coup either in retirement or in prison. "Rawlings did it in Ghana and you know Vatsa was very stubborn," he said."

## **THE LONG TERM EFFECTS OF THE VATSA CONSPIRACY TRIALS**

At this juncture, given the paucity of public information, one can only provide a limited perspective. Hopefully someday, all the official records will be released.

**The execution of Mamman Vatsa and others on March 5, 1986 was the first time the charge of 'conspiracy to commit treason' was being punished with the death sentence in Nigeria.**

Until then 'conspiracy' in independent Nigeria had always been classified as a "treasonable felony" rather than "treason". It attracted long prison sentences such as was the case with Chief Awolowo and others in 1962/63 and Bukar Mandara in 1982. Planning or conceptualizing a coup was not regarded as the same as actually carrying it out (as was the case with Dimka and others in 1976).

It may be argued whether the conspiracy proceedings that led to the execution of Banjo, Ifeajuna, Alale and Agbam in 1967 in Biafra fall into this category.

This legal issue needs to be clarified as are related matters regarding the protections of rights of persons undergoing military courts martial as guaranteed under the Nigerian Constitution which is supreme. Too many injustices have been swept under the carpet. Other than the officers executed and jailed, many were retired or dismissed arbitrarily some for merely being neighbors to those convicted, others for being "too serious". Others had their names splashed across TV screens in Nigeria as suspects in a burst of pre-coup trial propaganda, only for their innocence to be later established behind closed doors. The decimation of the principled element of the officer corps was relentless but, thankfully, never really completely succeeded. The fiscal and human resource loss to Nigerian society was also immense.

Many of the officers executed were of the highest caliber in the military, had required years of expensive training to produce, and were looked upon as models of professional military excellence. Like the C-130 crash that occurred some years later, it was a national tragedy. In furtherance of the climate of suspicion between the regime and the core military, some military services were defanged. **The systematic destruction of the Air Force, for example, started with those executions.**

Training and arming were severely curtailed. Even elementary items like jet fuel supplies to Air Force Bases were monitored and became centrally controlled. Until the advent of civil rule 13 years later in 1999, the air force did not get a chance to rebuild and reprofessionalize. What little serious professional activity took place occurred in the setting of Liberian and Sierra Leonean operations.

In the army, officers became increasingly suspicious of one another and esprit de Corps was undermined - just as the military was beginning to emerge from the terrible events of the late sixties and the hiccup of 1976.

"Settlement" became the order of the day. Lt. Col. Mike Iyorshe's worst fears came to pass. The decay was later captured in public comments made by former Army Chief General Saliu Ibrahim, himself initially a suspect in the rash of arrests back in 1985 when he was head of the Army faculty at Jaji . The "Rawlings" rationalization for the executions in spite of pleas for clemency is short sighted. Houphouet Boigny, for example, never one day executed anyone for planning a coup against him.

The regime may have felt the executions sent a message to future conspirators and would deter coups and secure the project. But it did not. A very violent attempt took place in April 1990 and the spokesman for that effort cited the executions of Vatsa and others in 1986 as one of several reasons.

The experience of the Vatsa conspiracy trial and aftermath, among others has led some serious observers, like General MC Alli, to appeal to the government to establish a "coup commission" to look back into the crypts of our national history and exorcise some ghosts.

Lastly, the practice of holding on to corpses of executed servicemen, burying them *en masse*, and denying family burial rites is antithetical to African culture. I, for one, have appealed before and will appeal again that the remains of those shot over the years for real and imagined coups should be returned to their families for proper burial after forensic identification. Then the healing can begin.