

**HEROISM IN NIGERIA: THE EXPLOITS OF GENERAL MURTALA
MOHAMMED IN 198 DAYS**

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ABSTRACT

Politics is a universal phenomenon. The universality or ubiquitousness of politics rests on the fact that man is innately and intrinsically a political being, for the Great Aristotle once notes that ‘man is by nature a political animal’. Politics, aside from being part of man, produces leaders. Leaders in turn climb the ladder of heroism via their exploits. In other words, not every leader is a hero. There are special things that make a hero different from any other person. Again, it does not take ages for a hero to be made or for heroic achievement to be made. Age – “the number of years a person has lived” is not a barrier to heroism. Thus, a child as well as an adult can be a hero. Worthy of note, Nigerian politics has produced a number of heroes, of which General Murtala Mohammed was among. He became Nigeria’s Head of State in July 1975 at a young age of thirty-seven (37) and was brutally killed afterwards. The crux of this study, therefore, is to bring to limelight the heroic deeds of late General Murtala Mohammed, who manned the affairs of the Nigerian state in just one hundred and ninety-eight (198) days before his assassination on 13 February 1976. In an attempt to achieve this common research objective, data was sought from secondary sources, mainly newspapers, journals and books.

Keywords: Heroism, Nigeria, exploits, Murtala Mohammed, 198 days

INTRODUCTION

*Great heroes need great sorrows and burdens,
or half their greatness goes unnoticed. It is all
part of the fairly tale....Peter S. Beagle*

The entity called Nigeria has had tons of leaders before and shortly after its independence. The leaders include both aliens and indigenes, men in uniform and civilians, and highly educated, educated and semi-educated. Prior to its independence, aliens such as Sir Frederick Luggard, Sir Hugh Clifford, Sir Arthur Richard, Sir Alan Burns, Sir John Macpherson and so on acted as the political helmsmen of the Nigerian state. At independence in 1960, men like Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Dr. Nnamdi

Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Chief Nwafor Orizu, Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh and so forth controlled the affairs of the nation.

After the coup of January 1966 by Lt. Kaduna Nzeogwu, Major-Gen. J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi emerged the Military Head of State. His assassination on 29 July of the same 1966 paved way for General Yakubu Gowon to become the new head of state. During his stay in office Nigerian ship sailed through a 30-month bloody civil war as Lieutenant-Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu wanted to establish a permanent Republic of Biafra.

The stupendous number of leaders Nigeria had prior to the mid 1970s notwithstanding, the country faced serious issues of corruption, tribalism, electoral malpractice and crises, problematic census, social injustice, unpatriotism, and so forth. In fact, Chinua Achebe in his work titled *The Trouble with Nigeria* notes that “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership” and that “the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership”. He further states, looking at the incompetence of the country’s earliest leaders and/or their inability to transform the nation, that:

Nigeria is not a great country. It is one of the most disorderly nations in the world. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun. It is one of the most expensive countries and one of those that give least value for money. It is dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar. In short, it is among the most unpleasant places on earth! (Achebe, 1983:1,9-10).

Ogbeidi (2012) also confirms what has been stated earlier in this study that “the state of Nigeria’s pitiable socio-economic development has been a direct consequence of the actions and inactions of the leadership class that has managed the affairs and wealth of the country since independence”. He further notes that even in the colonial era and most especially in the first republic, corruption was widespread in the country as ‘government officials looted public funds with impunity and Federal Representative and Ministers flaunted their wealth with reckless abandon’. In short, “there were no men of good character in the political leadership of the First Republic” (pp.4,6).

Nonetheless, when General Murtala Mohammed took over the leadership of the country from Yakubu Gowon in July 1975, he sought to build a formidable, reputable Nigeria. Eluwa et al. (1988) note that Murtala Mohammed set Nigeria “on a new sense of commitment and a new level of performance. It is no wonder that he turned out to be more popular than any Nigeria Head of State before him”. Achebe (1988:1) also had this to write about him:

On the morning after Murtala Muhammed seized power in July 1975 public servants in Lagos were found “on seat” at seven-thirty in the morning. Even the “go-slow” traffic that had defeated every solution and defied every regime vanished overnight from the streets!... That the character of one man could establish that quantum change in a people’s social behaviour was nothing less than miraculous. But it shows that social miracles can happen.

THE MAN GENERAL MURTALA MOHAMMED

Murtala Rufai Mohammed, birthed on Tuesday, 08 November 1938 in Kano City, Northern Nigeria, was a Fulani (Africa Confidential, 2020; Akinbode, 2019). He came from an aristocratic family. Mohammed, a Muslim by birth, was the second child of his parents, Risqua Mohammed and Uwani Ramatu. He had the privilege of schooling at Cikin Gida Elementary School within the territory of the emir's palace and later at Gidan Makama Primary School [both in Kano] between the period of 1944 and 1952. The little Mohammed also attended evening Koranic school, where he was trained and armed with the knowledge of Islam and of the teachings of the Holy Prophet Mohammad (Akinbode, 2019; Wikipedia, 2020).

By the year 1957, Mohammed gained admission into Government College – known today as Barewa College – Zaria and obtained his Senior Secondary School Certificate in 1957. A year later he was enrolled at the Regular Officers Special Training School, Teshie, Ghana where he was, alongside Benjamin Maja Adekunle – known during the Nigerian Civil War as “The Black Scorpion”, taught by Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, who later led the defunct Republic of Biafra. For further trainings, Mohammed attended the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, England where he was, in 1961 – roughly one year after Nigerian independence, commissioned Second-Lieutenant (Nwakunor 2020; Akinbode, 2019).

Picture of Murtala Mohammed



(Source: <https://ng.opera.news/ng/en/society/1dfea407a961bfe84dd90cbf8047466e>)

About six years after when Nigeria was plunged into a Civil War, Mohammed fought on the Nigerian side against his former teacher – Col. Ojukwu and against the people of Eastern Nigeria that seceded from the country and were baptised the Independent Sovereign State of Biafra. Col. Murtala Mohammed, as was his rank during the War, led the troops of the Nigerian Second Division at the beginning of the war. He spearheaded the October 1967 famous Asaba Massacre. At the end of the 30-month Civil War, and by the time he became the Nigerian Head of State in mid 1970s, he had a change of name, from

Rufai to Ramat [his mother's name] and was thus addressed as Gen. Murtala Ramat Mohammed (see Nwakunor, 2020; Wikipedia, 2020; Akinbode, 2019).

THE COUP OF JULY 1975 AND THE COMING OF GENERAL MURTALA MOHAMMED

The coup of 29 July 1975 was a revolutionary attempt in Nigeria, an attempt to *smuggle* in new and more efficient leader. The coup was orchestrated while the then 40-year-old head of state, Gen. Yakubu Gowon was attending an OAU (Organization of African Unity) Heads of Government summit in Kampala, Uganda. It was a bloodless coup as no one was recorded killed in it. In fact, prior to going for the summit, Gowon, who had suspected that a section of the army was plotting to unseat him as the head of state, intelligently and wisely flew his family to London to avoid making them victim of whatever that might happen. On the morning of the coup, Colonel Joseph Nanvan Garba, in a nationwide broadcast, announced:

I, Col. Joseph Garba and my colleagues do hereby declare that, in view of what has been happening in our country in the past few months; the Nigerian armed forces have decided to effect a change of leadership of the federal military Government.

Up to now Gen. Yakubu Gowon used to be the head of the federal military Government and Commander in chief of the armed forces of Nigeria.

However, in view of the specific situation in the Lagos area, all workers other than those in essential services are to observe today, July 29, as a work-free day.

A dusk-to-dawn curfew is hereby imposed until further notice.

Shortly after this, and after due consultations by and among the military, the Lagos radio announced Gen. (then Brig.) Murtala Ramat Mohammed, a former inspector of communications for the armed forces, the head of state of the Nigerian nation. Brig. Olusegun Obasanjo was also announced the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters. In short this was how the 37-year-old Murtala Mohammed became the third military head of state in the country (see the New York Times, 1975; and Aliogo, 2009).

THE CONCEPT OF HEROISM

A hero, according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, is "a person, especially a man, who is admired by many people for doing something brave or good". Large Dictionary of Sociology also defined a hero as a "person who performs significant deeds of bravery, usually with risk to his own life, and therefore he (she) is presented as a role model of behaviour (see Staud and Oborny, 2014:321).

Philip Zimbardo notes that heroes are people who "put their best selves forward in service to humanity". Heroes "take action on behalf of others in need, or in defense of integrity or a moral cause". He went further to note that heroic action is:

- Engaged in voluntarily;
- Conducted in service to one or more people or the community as a whole;
- Involving a risk to physical comfort, social stature, or quality of life; and
- Initiated without expectation of material gain (Zimbardo, 2020).

Very importantly, heroism is the exhibition of uncommon, praiseworthy deeds. It is rooted in prosociality, which has to do with behaviours that are advantageous to or that are geared

towards benefiting others. No wonder Baumard and Boyer (2013) in Kafashan et al. (2016:37) note that heroes are those “who incur cost (e.g. risk of injury or death; or significant sacrifices such as time, money, or other forms of personal loss) to deliver *greater-than-expected* benefits to others”. Becker and Eagly (2004) in Franco et al. (2016:6) add that heroes “are individuals who chose to take physical risks on behalf of one or more people, despite the possibility of suffering serious consequences, including death”. For all this therefore, David Hume (2007) in Franco et al. concludes that “heroism is not only socially useful but also admirable in itself”.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF GENERAL MURTALA MOHAMMED IN 198 DAYS

Gen. Murtala Mohammed was a man of promptitude and of great alacrity. One of the things he was reputed about was his anti-corruption stance. On becoming the head of state he immediately dismissed all of the twelve governors that were serving under Gowon from their posts and also retired them. He even went further to retiring Gowon and some members of the Armed Forces, and also called for a probe into their conduct in office. As if that wasn't enough, he dismissed, with immediate effect, top federal and state officials. He dismissed/fired 10,000 employees of the government on account of age, health, incompetence, malpractice or corruption. This was known as the ‘purge or cleansing of the Civil Service’ (Akintayo, 2016; and Siollun, 2015).

Prior to Murtala dismissing the military governors he, as it's stated earlier, allowed their cases to be investigated. After the investigation whose result proved that ten out of the twelve governors engaged in, at one time or the other, gross corrupt practices. Murtala made it clear that the governors had

*betrayed the trust and confidence reposed in them by the nation...
(and) betrayed the ethics of their professions and they ara a disgrace
to those professions. They are, therefore, all dismissed with ignominy
(see Siollun, 2015).*

Still trying to display his distaste for corruption and malpractice, and his love for transparency, Murtala ‘cancelled’ and ‘nullified’ the result of the 1973 census as many Nigerians, Chief Obafemi Awolowo¹ inclusive, stated that the census was full of irregularities. He did what he did without putting into consideration, as many of our leaders – both past and present – would do, the fact that the census greatly favoured his region – northern Nigeria (see Akande, 2018; and Zhero, 2017).

In addition to the above, the head of state began planning to build a new Federal Capital Territory (FCT) for the whole Nigeria as Lagos was becoming greatly over-crowded and therefore needed to be *decongested*. He also proceeded to creating additional seven states, which brought the total number of states in the country as at that time to nineteen. The seven states that owe their origin to Murtala are: Bauchi, Benue, Imo, Niger, Ogun, Ondo, and Anambra. The essence of the state creation was to “reduce minority problems”, to “accelerate development”, and to “provide for a stronger federal structure” (see Ajibola et al., 2016; and Bamas, 2018).

¹ Awolowo called for the obliteration/cancellation of the 1973 census in his convocation speech at the then University of Ife. He clamored for the adoption of the 1963 census result instead.

In respect to Nigeria's relations with other nations, Murtala promised to give due attention and protection to foreigners and foreign investments within the country. He states:

...we reaffirm this country's friendship with all countries. Foreign nationals living in Nigeria will be protected. Foreign investments will also be protected. The government will honour all obligations entered into by the previous Governments of the Federation. We will also give continued support to the Organization of African Unity, the United Nations organization and the Commonwealth (see Omoigui, 2020).

Still on international affairs, Gen. Murtala Mohammed took a bold, unprecedented step in the Cold War era, for he 'embarked on a more assertive foreign policy, and contrary to the wishes of the USA, his government unilaterally recognized the Marxist MPLA as the legitimate government in Angola. He even went further to rally other African countries to follow suit, and backed up his diplomatic action with massive financial aid to the MPLA' (Siollun, 2015). Bearing this phenomenally bold action in mind Eluwa et al. (1988) note that in the process of taking decisive stance on the Angolan problem, Murtala "gave the outside world, particularly the Western countries, to understand that Nigeria and, in fact all African countries, had come of age and could not be pushed around or dictated to".

Ultimately, Gen. Murtala Mohammed as a person shunned frivolity and ostentatious lifestyle for he chose to live in his house at Ikoyi rather than dwelling in the magnificent and more fortified Dodan Barracks abode. He also declared a 'low profile' policy for public officers (Omoigui, 2020). The highest of his achievements, however, was his intention to hand over power to civilians by 1st October 1979. To show his readiness, his seriousness and his commitment to doing this, he appointed a 50-man Constitution Drafting Committee under the chairmanship of Chief Rotimi Williams. The Committee was to create a new constitution that would govern the country and its inhabitants under civil rule (Akintayo, 2016; and Omoigui, 2020).

CONCLUDING REMARK

Quite undeniable, Gen. Murtala Mohammed was a real, unforgettable Nigerian hero. But heartbreakingly, and as most people believe, good people hardly enjoy longevity due to the wickedness and evil that saturate the world we live in. He was assassinated on 13 February 1976 while going to work in Dodan Barracks. Lt.-Col. Buka Dimka killed him [alongside his Aide-De-Camp (ADC) – Lieutenant Akintunde Akinsehina] in his Black Mercedes Saloon Car. It is true they killed him but he never died, for true heroes live forever. The amazing, applaudable works the hero General performed in just 198 days are [and remain] indelible on the tablets of our hearts, the works have registered themselves in our hearts and that is why Gen. Murtala Mohammed will continue to live unassailably and unkillably in our minds and memories till infinitum. On this note therefore, I call on Nigerian leaders at all levels to honour the memories of the General by emulating his assiduousness, his fearlessness, his straightforwardness, his decisiveness, his sense of impartiality and justice, his unparalleled patriotism, his prudent and unostentatious lifestyle, and his zeal, zest and zing to create a new Nigeria.

Pictures of Gen. Murtala Mohammed's Mercedes Benz, which he was killed in with his ADC



(Source: <https://ng.opera.news/ng/en/society/1dfea407a961bfe84dd90cbf8047466e>)

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