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African Politics is Invisible to the Wider World: How Nigeria Became a ‘Soldier’s Paradise’

by Daniel Falcone

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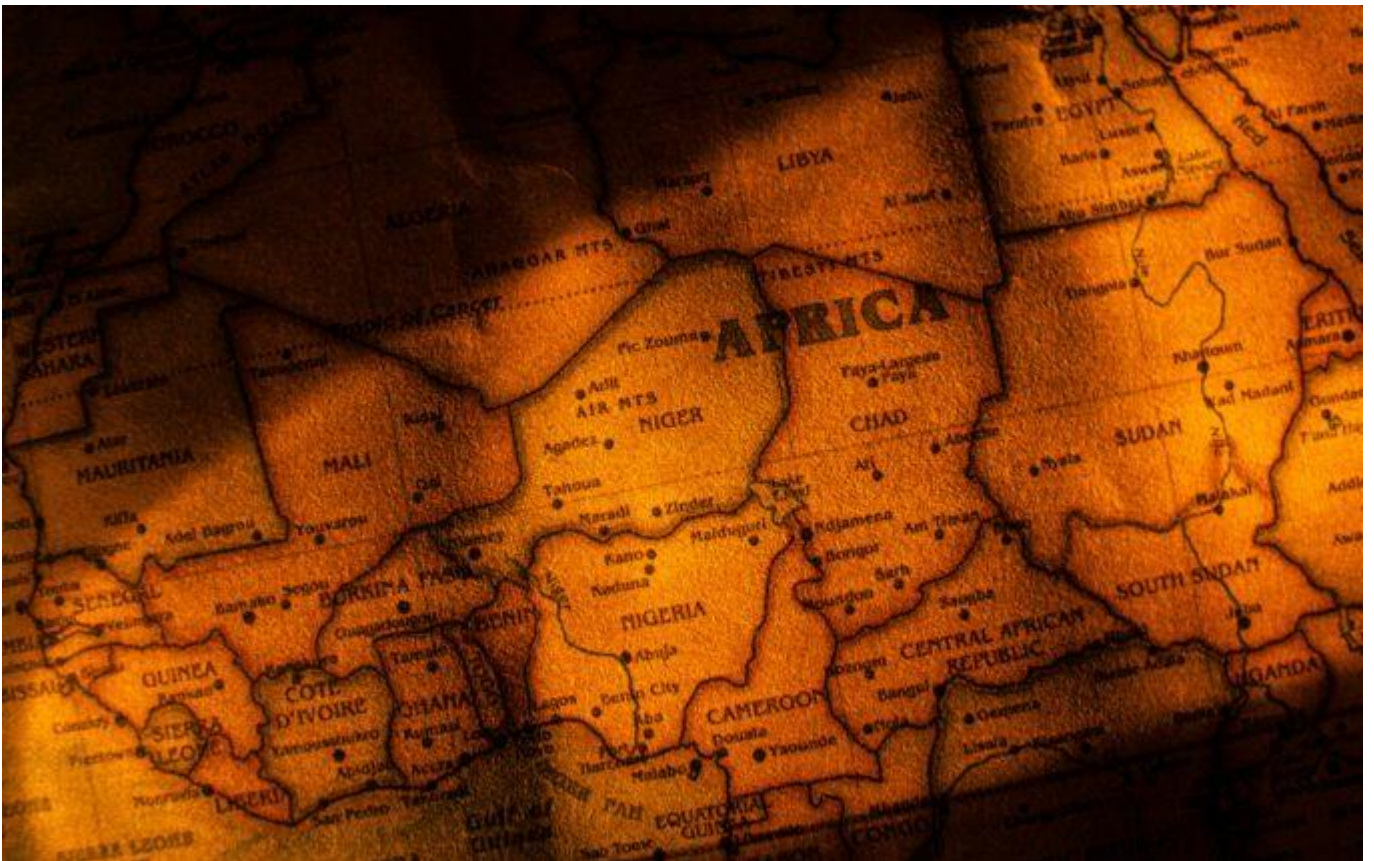


Image by Road Ahead.

“If you want to keep militaries out of civilian politics, you have to offer people some other way,” scholar argues.

British rule had profound effects on Nigeria starting in the late 1800s and largely included economic, political, social, and cultural forms of imperialism. Many of the devastating impacts are still visible in the country today and are especially evident in both the legal and social structures. Legal historian Samuel Fury Childs Daly is the author of *Soldier’s Paradise: Militarism in Africa After Empire* (Duke University Press, to be released in October 2024). “*Soldier’s Paradise* is about militarism as a political philosophy and an ideology,” explains the author. With the implementation of primary data found in court documents and personal papers, Daly demonstrates how “law both enabled militarism and worked against it.” According to Daly, it is the legal framework that provides the optimal vantage point to best observe “decolonization’s tensions and ironies—independence did not always mean liberty, and freedom had a militaristic streak.” Daly’s work arrives at a time when militarism continues its rise on the continent of Africa, as he breaks down its lasting impacts.

Daniel Falcone: I wanted to ask about how you got interested in this topic and then explain how your scholarship and research has brought you to the writing of this book on African Militarism.

Samuel Fury Childs Daly: I’m attracted to questions that I don’t intuitively understand or to things that I find scary or intimidating. And militarism is one of those things. I came of age, politically, during the Iraq War and I watched as American society geared up for a war that people didn’t really understand and that I didn’t agree with. This made me think about how militarism can get a hold of people, and I’ve never stopped thinking about it.

And it’s hard for me to understand what it is exactly that people like about militarism, but a lot of my work is about figuring that out. My first book was about the Nigerian Civil War in the 1960s also known as the Biafran War. It was about the degrading effects of warfare on how people think and act every day. It argued that a lot of the forms of crime that became associated with Nigeria in the late 20th Century, including armed crime, and also this form of fraud known as 419, emerged from the Civil War. I argued that the precarious conditions of the war led people to survive through means that were criminal and the war normalized forms of criminal violence and deceit, and they lasted long after the war ended.

Nigeria seemed like the natural place to set this new book about militarism because the country had an especially long experience of army rule. Nigeria had military dictatorships from 1966 to 1999 with just a couple of brief interruptions — over 30 years in total.

I saw the marks, the scars of that history all around me all the time. My first education in the power of uniforms happened when I went to Nigeria in college. One of the first things that caught my eye was how many people were wearing uniforms. Not just soldiers and policemen but people from all different walks of life. You would see uniforms in every possible shade of camouflage, hot pink or bright blue for militias and youth groups. Even civilian organizations would adopt uniforms. One day I was walking down the street wearing this fast fashion shirt with epaulets on it and a policeman stopped me and made me take it off and tried to confiscate it. He decided that it was too close to a uniform that I wasn’t entitled to wear. This experience got me thinking about the power of a uniform even in a country that didn’t, at that time, have a military regime. It also made me think about my own country – this was a time in the US when Americans were starting to wear Under

Armour and go to CrossFit classes. Since militarism seemed to be seeping into my own country it seemed like Nigeria was a good place to think about the long-term effects of militarized politics.

Daniel Falcone: What are you arguing specifically, in your new book and how does it fit into African history and historiography on similar topics?

Samuel Fury Childs Daly: *Soldier's Paradise* is about militarism as a political philosophy and an ideology. Seldom do we think of militarism as one of the big ideologies of the 20th century, but it was at least as important as both capitalism and communism. In some ways it was more coherent than those ideologies. It had a meaningful structure and a consistent set of principles. A large portion of the world's population labored under the jackboot in the early 20th century and that was especially true in Africa. So, this book is about describing what that ideology of militarism was and what vision soldiers had for their societies once they had taken them over. Coup plotters or the men who staged military coups had a real vision for their societies. It often wasn't a good vision. This book of course is not an endorsement of militarism as a system of politics, but they really did have a plan.

They believed they could make their societies into utopias designed along the lines of an army. This would make them truly free. This may sound counter intuitive, but the idea that freedom can only be won through discipline is something that a lot of soldiers continue to believe — civilians as well.

I'm a legal historian, and I found that one of the things that military regimes believed in across the board was that courts, judges and law enforcement were necessary in transforming their societies. They believed that law could be a tool of discipline. And that it could be useful in remaking their societies as these martial utopias. Now, they were wrong because law is much more complicated than just a tool of discipline, and military regimes very often learned that law wasn't their ally. Nonetheless, the watchword of African politics in this era was not freedom as a lot of people have argued — rather, it was discipline. We can only really understand African history in the era after independence if we think about discipline as a political ideology.

Daniel Falcone: Could you comment on present day Nigeria and how current affairs, economically, socially, and politically are playing out and shaping the region based on the history that you study and write about? Further, I'm interested in how this all impacts the migration patterns of West Africans. How do we learn about the attitudes and perceptions of populations that are undermined, discriminated against, but also at the same time, see their agency coming through discipline?

Samuel Fury Childs Daly: I can answer this in three parts:

1) One of the chapters is called "The Soldier's Creed." This is the conviction that discipline is essential to politics and to human flourishing. Nigerian soldiers believed that the same forces of discipline that transformed them from unruly teenagers to sharp young soldiers could be made into a political philosophy for everyone. They argued that true freedom was not the freedom to do whatever you wanted. It wasn't liberal freedom as many nationalists had defined the freedom to vote or to express your thoughts freely. To them, true freedom was freedom from the tyranny of your own instincts.

2) Regarding migration: this era saw many people deciding to leave Nigeria altogether. It was in the era of military rule that Nigeria's modern diaspora really emerged. There have been other diasporas in the past, the largest being the diaspora of the trans-Atlantic trade and enslaved people. There had

been a British Colonial diaspora of students and sailors too, and a lot of people who had left West Africa and moved within the circuit of the British Empire. But it was only really under military rule when large numbers of Nigerians left permanently. And the large Nigerian communities in the United States, in places like Atlanta and Houston, really emerged during this era. So, this points to something important, which is that not everyone was onboard with militarism as an ideology. To those who didn't share soldiers' visions there weren't a lot of options – but leaving was one of them. Ultimately, how much of the disciplinary ethos did the people of Nigeria bring with them? I don't think it's easily answered.

3) In terms of contemporary politics – in the last few years there has been a string of military coups across the continent in Guinea, Mali, Sudan, Niger, etc. This comes after a long period when a lot of people thought that the military era was over in Africa. In the first decade of the 2000s most soldiers that went back to the barracks and military administration kind of left African politics. People I think, somewhat too optimistically, believed that it was gone forever, and the last few years have shown that it's not, it's still there in African politics and it's still an important force.

This series of coups blindsided a lot of people. Very few people saw them coming including people who probably should've known better. Usually, observers have landed on Russian meddling or France or other world powers for an explanation. Or they point to problems with pay in militaries, and basically argue that military coups are about working conditions within the armed forces. There is truth to both of those interpretations, but neither is sufficient in and of itself. There's also a deeper history to military rule, which is what this book is all about.

Daniel Falcone: Why doesn't the West engage more thoroughly or understand more completely African militarism, in Nigeria or elsewhere? There are a lot of things happening in the world, both inside and outside of Africa that demand a focus on human rights: the Mideast, Democratic Republic of Congo, Venezuela, and Bangladesh are examples. But is West Africa, in particular Nigeria neglected in your view?

Samuel Fury Childs Daly: That is another great question and it's one that I think that nobody really has a good answer for. African politics is almost always invisible to the wider world. And the only way that outsiders seem to be able to engage with it or understand it is by seeing—is when somebody else seems to be pulling the strings. So back in the 1960s a fair number of observers explained Africa's military coups as basically puppeteering by outside powers, by the US or the USSR or France or, to a lesser extent, Britain. And it's true that powerful foreign countries kept an eye on African politics and were, in some cases, directly involved in it. But a lot of the coups that I'm talking about, especially the ones in Nigeria, were not the result of meddling by foreigners. They emerged from within Nigerian society. They may have occasionally met up with the interests of powerful outsiders but that wasn't really what they were about. This makes Africa's history in this era very different from, for example, Latin America where the US was much more closely involved in orchestrating military politics. It's not quite the same story in Africa.

Military dictatorships have a lot of public support in many cases. And militaries are very good at tapping into the ambitions of ordinary people. Soldiers can have a lot of charisma and that charisma is very often a big part of what people like about them.

Daniel Falcone: Do you think that militarism is something that can be rooted out of West African political thinking and practice?

Samuel Fury Childs Daly: My personal conviction is that militarism is not a good way to organize societies, but I also think it's probably not going anywhere anytime soon. I'm agnostic about what West African societies should or should not do right now, but I watch the Nigerian news with some anxiety. Nigeria hasn't had a coup during this recent wave, but it isn't unthinkable. If you want to keep militaries out of civilian politics, you have to offer people some other way to feel order and discipline – to feel like they're in control of their own lives. We ignore it at our own peril.

Daniel Falcone is a teacher, journalist, and PhD student in the World History program at St. John's University in Jamaica, NY as well as a member of the Democratic Socialists of America. He resides in New York City.