

Chapter 3

Exodus Out of Port Harcourt

On January 15 1967, exactly one year after the first military coup, Ude left for Port Harcourt, where he hoped to start afresh. In the rickety mammy wagon he boarded for the trip were several other passengers bound for the Garden City, as Port Harcourt was then famously known for its beauty and well kept streets. The city was built in 1913 by the British as a port city. Several years later, it was connected by rail to Enugu, 150 miles away, from where coal was evacuated and sent forth to Port Harcourt for shipment to English power plants. By 1967, Port Harcourt had grown into a major town of thousands of buildings, elite housing estates and industries. Port Harcourt also had a large Igbo community, which owned businesses and much of the housing in the city.

Ude had some left over cash from Lagos and his inventory of clothes when he arrived in Port Harcourt. The journey had taken about 3 hours along paved and unpaved roadways. He left the village at 6 in the morning and was in Port Harcourt before 10AM. In

the city, he sought out his kinsmen. He planned to stay with one of them for about a week while he looked around for a room to rent.

The Umuoji Progressive Union (UPU) of Port Harcourt was a socio-cultural organization of folks from his village. The chairman was a friend of Ude's father, Simeon. Whenever he came home for brief holidays, he visited with Simeon, whose sweet fine he loved to drink. They would chat into the night while drinking cup after cup of the wine. On his last visit, about a couple of months back, he had written his address on a piece of paper and given it to Simeon, inviting him to visit with him in Port Harcourt sometime. Simeon had kept the piece of paper and had given it to Ude on the morning of his departure for Port Harcourt. Using the information on the paper, Ude traced the UPU Port Harcourt Branch, chairman's home.

By the end of January, Ude had rented a room in the Diobu area of the city and rented a stall in a nearby market where he recommenced his trading activity. At the market he made new friends. They were both Igbo and non Igbo. He was surprised that northerners lived in Port Harcourt, for he had thought they did not travel beyond Lagos. But here they were in Port

Harcourt, engaged in occupations traditionally associated with people from the north—the livestock trade, security work, and the kebab and roasted meat business.

Ude gradually built up a customer base. Within 2 months, he had restocked twice, although the process of restocking (essentially obtaining supplies from wholesalers) was slow as a consequence of the national crisis, which had taken an economic dimension due to disagreements between Gowon and Ojukwu about the correct interpretation of the Aburi Accords. The dispute affected commerce, as businessmen pulled back on investments and large purchases of both retail and wholesale merchandise, in view of uncertainties and the uncharted territory the nation was headed in. No sane businessman would secure a loan for investment in an unstable environment. This calculation by those at the top of the business chain affected Ude and thousands of junior level traders relative to the growth of their retail business and how much money they made.

There was a northerner from Kaduna named Musa. He was a tall and thin man with brooding eyes. He was thirtyish and the slight jowls on his cheeks gave him a frowning countenance. Musa had a spot by the

roadway a few walking steps from Ude's stall in the market. He sold hot brewed tea, ovaltine, milo and bournvita. He came to work at night, at about 7pm, and worked through the night into the wee hours of the morning.

On this spot, Musa set up a couple of wooden benches across from each other, about 4 feet or so apart. In the center, he made hot water from burning charcoal. There was a small table next to one of the benches on which was placed sugar, bread of various sizes and additional items for making hot tea and ovaltine. Customers, often workers of the night—taxi drivers, security men, law enforcement personnel—and night owls out and about at night, patronized Musa's tea and ovaltine joint. They trickled to the spot continually until about 3am when customers fizzled out. Then Musa would pack up and close up.

Ude typically called it a day and gathered up his stuff by 7pm. He would then hop into a mammy wagon which took him home. At times, he went over to Musa's tea and ovaltine joint for a cup of extra sweetened ovaltine and heavily buttered bread. He would dip the bread into the ovaltine, bite off the soggy portion then slowly sip the drink from the cup. He could spend a couple of hours enjoying his ovaltine

and watching humanity go by on the road. At times during stretches of time when business was slow he engaged Musa in conversation. These chats were initially about mundane matters—how long Musa had been selling hot tea and ovaltine, whether he was married, how long both men had lived in Port Harcourt, and what religion each adhered to. Later, the conversations shifted to politics and the national crisis. Musa’s revelations of the northern perspective blew Ude’s mind.

“Why did the 5 Majors kill Prime Minister Balewa and Ahmadu Bello, the Premier of the North?” Musa asked Ude in one of their spirited chats.

When the first coup occurred, Ude had himself thought that the killings were unnecessary. He did not like it then, and he would not hide his feelings now.

“Alright, the killings were unjustified, but why should innocent Igbo civilians be massacred by northern mobs and northern soldiers because the 5 Majors who did the killing of the Prime Minister were Igbo. These civilians didn’t know who these Majors were, and they did not tell the Majors to do what they did”

“ I agree with you, the killings of the Igbo civilians in the north were terrible, but do you know that I was

almost killed here too in Port Harcourt in August last year?"

Ude was incredulous. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Igbo people on a revenge mission for the killings of their people in the north attacked northerners here in the East."

"That is not true. I've never heard of this. It is not true!"

Musa was adamant about his claim.

"I don't know that anyone was killed because the police and the army people here stepped in to stop the youth who wanted to do it, but they succeeded in beating up some of my friends and giving them black eyes."

"I still don't believe you. I mean you are still here in Port Harcourt, while millions of Igbo people have fled the north."

"Okay, but was the coup by those Majors necessary?"

Musa pressed on.

"I don't know the answer to that. The Majors must have had a reason to do what they did."

“Ude, what else did those Majors want? The Igbo were already controlling everything in the country—The President was Igbo, the Army Commander was Igbo, commerce in the country was controlled by the Igbo, the universities were controlled by the Igbo. Kenneth Dike was the VC at Ibadan, Njoku was VC at the University of Lagos, and another Igbo was the VC at the University of Nigeria Nsukka. So with all this, why would the Igbo stage a coup and kill off the Sardauna and Balewa. They didn’t stop there, but they also killed several northern military officers—Brigadier Maimalari, Abogo Largema and others.”

Ude was surprised that Musa had such a wealth of knowledge about the country. Musa’s trade as a tea seller connoted a semi literate or an illiterate person. But Musa actually had 4 years of elementary school before dropping out and hopping on a train for Port Harcourt in 1964. When the first coup was carried out, he and thousands of northerners resident in Port Harcourt were initially confused. Many who were not attuned to the politics of the country were completely lost as to the weighty national issues. The imams who led prayers in the mosques of Port Harcourt realized this, and they incorporated political speeches into the prayer sessions. Gradually Musa and thousands of northerners came to be familiar with the issues. Ude

did not know it, but Musa was very much up to date about the national political crisis, thanks to the imams at the mosque.

That there would be a revenge coup by the North was also known to Musa and to many of his fellow northerners.

“Musa, I concede that the coup was unnecessary. Right now a northerner is in charge, after a very bloody counter coup by your people, but the killings of the Igbo have not stopped. Why?”

“ Ude, the killings are bad. Gowon has to find a way to stop it. We all should be brothers and sisters in this country. Don’t you agree?”

“ I agree with you.”

From the third week of January 1967 right up to July 6, the gulf between Ojukwu and Gowon on the issues that bedeviled the country widened considerably. Gowon reneged on parts of the Aburi Accords, especially on the creation of states; Ojukwu countered by vowing to do what was necessary to implement the Accords by March 1967; Gowon threatened to use

force to keep the country one; The Supreme Military Council met in March without Ojukwu (he did not attend these meetings which were held in Lagos for fear of his safety) and decided that the votes of 3 governors (Nigeria had 4 military governors at the time) were enough to declare a state of emergency anywhere in the country; Ojukwu, suspecting a plot to declare a state of emergency in the East, took over all federal departments and services and withheld all federal taxes and revenue collected in the East; in April, Gowon countered by suspending Nigerian Airways flights to Eastern Nigeria and further announced his intention to break up the Eastern Region by creating states there; Gowon further imposed a full economic and communications blockade against the East; alarmed at the breakneck speed the crisis hurtled, Awolowo on May 1, declared that the West would secede if the East was allowed to do so; on May 23, Gowon lifted the economic blockade against the East, but the Rubicon had already been crossed (the East had been lost); on May 26, the Eastern Consultative Assembly voted to secede from Nigeria; on May 27, Gowon split Nigeria into 12 states; Ojukwu proclaimed the sovereignty of Biafra on May 30; and on July 6, the first elements of the

Federal Nigerian Army crossed into Biafra. The war had begun and Ude's life would never be the same.

The northern Biafran towns of Nsukka and Ogoja came under attack in the early stages of the war. The capital city of Enugu fell in October 1967. The shooting and carnage was not felt in Southern Biafra until several months later. Port Harcourt was certainly the largest city in Biafra, and its location in the southern half of Biafra effectively shielded it from the initial onslaught of the Nigerian Army which had punched into Biafra from the north. Port Harcourt operated a wartime economy from the moment of Gowon's economic blockade of April 1967. There were shortages, but the ingenuity of the businessmen there helped to prevent an economic collapse.

Ude's used clothes business hummed along with the city's disrupted economy. Refugees displaced from northern Biafran towns poured into the city. Although this increased Ude's customer base, it got increasingly difficult day by day to fill up depleted inventory stocks, as wholesalers who imported the clothes became affected by Nigeria's economic blockade of Biafra.

Ude had lived in the city for approximately 16 months when the totally unexpected happened. It was on a

quiet dawn in April 1968, as day broke and he was about to get out of bed. Suddenly, crashing explosions of artillery were heard in the distance, in the direction of the city center. There had been rumors about the sightings of Nigerian Navy boats and troops on the high seas several nautical miles from Port Harcourt, but no one really took the rumors seriously. There were Biafran soldiers in town; as such, there was no way the Nigerians could just invade like that, people thought. Radio announcements also informed the civilian population not to panic, as the city was well defended. Biafran soldiers would beat back any attempt to take the city.

The booms were loud, and the artillery shells began to land closer. Ude was initially confused about the shells: who was shooting them, were they Biafran troops or soldiers of Federal Nigeria? The trajectory of the shells—inwards into the town—suggested they were being fired by Nigerian troops. Within a couple of hours, the whole city was in a tizzy as residents packed up to evacuate. Military jeeps meandered between vehicles on choked streets. Fear was etched on the faces of grown adults, many holding the hands of young children and hurriedly walking the streets to some destination. By Midday, the exodus was fully on ahead of advancing Federal troops.

Ude's clothing merchandise was not kept at the stall, which did not have a lock up facility. Rather, he secured them in large bags which he carried to the market daily. What was not sold was brought back home in the same bags. There was thus no danger of him losing his merchandise in the impending carnage. His immediate concern was how to get out of town before transportation became scarce.

Evacuating a major city like Port Harcourt, inhabited by close to a million people, would be a tremendous logistics challenge to the civilian evacuees. Before the logistical challenge became a nightmare, he was going to make his move to leave that very day. But there was one problem, and it was money. It had been 9 months since the war started and he had no idea when it would end. To raise additional funds, he decided to stick it out for a few more days selling his merchandise.

By the end of the month, pressure on the city became unbearable. Naval artillery bombardment of the city from the sea had intensified and several buildings had been hit. A house across the street from where he lived in a rented room took a direct hit which set off a blazing inferno. Fortunately, the occupants of the

house had abandoned the house and left the previous week.

The strike on the house across the street was too close for comfort. It was too much to take. And so, pushed by the natural instinct for self preservation, Ude hailed 2 porters the next morning and engaged them to port his belongings to the lorry park where he would board a lorry bound for Umuoji.

Ude rode his bicycle slowly alongside the porters toward the intercity lorry park. They passed thousands of families on their way out of the city as well. Ude and the porters arrived at the park, but there were no lorries available. The lorries that operated between Port Harcourt and several cities in the Igbo heartland were overwhelmed in the previous couple of days with people fleeing the city. Passenger demand far exceeded the capacities of the available vehicles. There were reports of breakdowns of overloaded vehicles, and thousands of people milled about at the lorry station. Ude could not wait, for he had no idea when the next vehicle would arrive. After paying the porters, he made a decision to ride his bicycle home to Umuoji.

The distance between Port Harcourt and Umuoji was about 60 miles, but he figured he could do it. The only

problem was the weight of his belongings, including the clothing inventory stuffed into 2 large black bags. He had 3 bags in all to carry. He did not want to throw them away, and so he tied the bags on the front and back ends of the bicycle. Having secured the bags tightly, he mounted and rode into the afternoon, the city of Port Harcourt receding gradually until it disappeared from view.