

## The Role of Propaganda and Personality Cult in Intra-State Conflicts: Glimpses from the Nigerian and Rwandan Civil Wars

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### Abstract

This paper examines personality cult and the use of propaganda in civil wars, with emphasis on Nigeria (1967-1970) and Rwanda (1990-1994). Basically, in conflict situation, belligerents are usually bound to have outstanding and credible figure that inspires the people and also serve as a trusted source of the information they get. During the civil wars in Nigeria and Rwanda, leaders of each warring group projected positive image of themselves into the masses through patriotism, media exposure and propaganda. Therefore, viewing the political leaders as a god-like public image, the masses accepted their propaganda *hook-line and sinker* and this in turn, shaped major events of the civil wars, prolonged the conflicts and established conditions for human catastrophe (Genocide). It is against this background that this paper examines personality cult and the use of propaganda during the Nigerian and Rwandan Civil Wars, with emphasis on the techniques, target audience, efficacies and overall impact on the wars. It interrogates structural conditions and other characteristics which necessitated cult formation around these individuals. The paper argues that personality cult had major influence on the efficacy of propaganda in the Nigerian and Rwandan Civil Wars. It also contends that propaganda was one of the major tools used by the political leaders in Nigeria and Rwanda to mislead and manipulate behaviors and actions of their target audience during the civil wars. This paper, therefore, recommends that, in a conflict situation, all information should be scrutinized, irrespective of the source or the bearer, to avoid establishing conditions for human catastrophe as was evident in Nigeria and Rwanda during the civil wars. The work relies heavily on secondary sources.

**Key Words: Civil War, Heroic Image, Nigeria, Personality Cult, Propaganda and Rwanda**

### Introduction

The Nigerian and Rwandan Civil Wars witnessed extensive propaganda campaigns mounted by the belligerents to the wars. At the head of these propaganda campaigns were leaders who have the charisma, composure, confidence and confidence to lead their people. The people in Nigeria and Rwanda saw these leaders as their saviours. As a result, propaganda from these leaders was accepted *hook-line and sinker* by their followers. It is germane to note that during the civil wars in Nigeria and Rwanda, media propaganda played an instrumental role in forging national leaders' cults of personality. Charismatic leader, especially in politics, has increasingly become the product of media and self-exposure". (Wright, 2013, p.29) This was evident in the two civil wars that ravaged Nigeria and Rwanda, where political leaders of each party to the wars, frequently used the media to project a positive image of themselves unto the masses, while using propaganda to manipulate and sway the opinions and actions of their target audience.

Therefore, in the Nigerian and Rwandan conflicts, the protagonists came to be seen as heroes and god-like public images, whose directives must be obeyed without asking questions. The high level of personality cult around these leaders became so strong that power of life and death was part of their prerogatives. In addition, these leaders came to be treated as benevolent guides for the nation, without whom the transformation to a better future could not be achieved.

In the Nigerian Civil War the protagonists, Generals Odumegwu-Ojukwu and Yakubu Gowon stood out among others as highly respected leaders who commanded respects and obedience from their followers, however, in comparison Ojukwu was more popular than Gowon. As the leader of the secessionist group Odumegwu-Ojukwu

was able to demonstrate his high level of ingenuity in the ways, and manner he led the Biafrans. Ojukwu's intellectual sagacity, oratorical power and ability to proffer jaw breaking solutions to problems all combined to make him the perfect leader the Biafrans needed at the period.

Similarly, in Rwanda, during the civil war, the cult of personality revolved around Juvenal Habyarimana the then president and Paul Kagame, the leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, (RPF), the rebel group. President Habyarimana was able to command respect from the majority Hutu population because of his effective propaganda and his authoritarian nature. On the other hand, Kagame's leadership quality stood out. Even though he made use of propaganda, he only condemned the bad eggs in Rwandan government and operated an open door policy for the Tutsi and Hutu alike. Kagame also commanded significant respects from his Tutsi ethnic group, particularly those in exile.

It must be noted that the leader of each party to the Nigerian and Rwandan Civil Wars employed propaganda effectively to support their war efforts. Habyarimana and his government officials in collaboration with other Hutu extremists mounted atrocity propaganda against the Tutsi, capitalizing on the already established ethnic division in Rwanda (by the colonial government of Germany and Belgium) to propagate hate speech against the Tutsi ethnic group, which subsequently led to the Rwandan genocide that claimed over one million lives of Tutsi in addition to those of the moderate Hutu and the Twa in 1994. Throughout the civil war in Rwanda, the sentiment of the Hutu population was in favour of the ideas and the ideals propounded by Habyarimana. This trust made almost all the entire Hutu population accept in Rwanda Habyarimana's atrocity propaganda against the Tutsi and the moderate Hutus completely.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

Personality cult has been defined differently by Scholars in Humanities and Social Sciences. According to Andrian Teodor Popan, personality cult refers to the "qualitatively exaggerated and qualitatively extravagant public demonstration of praise of the leader". (Teodor, 2015). Another scholar, Thomas A. Wright defines cult of personality phenomenon as the idealized god-like public image of an individual consciously shaped and molded through constant propaganda and media exposure. (Wright, 2013) This according to the author would enhance the manipulation of others, based entirely on public influence or opinion. He also argues that cult of personality focuses on the often shallow, external images that many public figures cultivate to create an idealized and heroic image.

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, personality cult is defined as a situation in which a public figure such as a (political leader) is deliberately presented to the people of a Country as a great person who should be admired, loved, respected and obeyed. It must be noted that there is a strong relationship between cult of personality and propaganda. This is because leaders with cult of personality status usually employ propaganda to achieve their goals as was evident in Nigeria and Rwanda during the Civil Wars.

Propaganda on the other hand does not have a singular universally acceptable definition. This is because definitions abound in different academic disciplines. The institute for propaganda Analysis defines propaganda as "the expression of opinions or actions carried out deliberately by individuals or groups for pre-determined ends and through psychological manipulation". (Jowitt, G.S. and O'Donnel, V., 2012)

Elmo Roper defines propaganda as the art or science of setting and manipulation of a dormant, inactive and inattentive people in motion and to action on a controversial issue. Therefore, for the purpose of this current study, propaganda is defined as the information put out by individual, organization or government to support or promote a policy, ideology or a cause. It is pertinent to note that in a war situation, propaganda is an attempt to win victory with a minimum of physical expense. Before the war, propaganda is a substitute for physical violence, during the war it is a supplement to it, even after the war propaganda could play a part in the basking in glory of the victor and rationalization of defeat by the Vanquished. (Momoh, 2000)

### **Personality Cult and the use of Propaganda in the Nigerian and Rwandan Civil Wars**

Throughout history, leaders were held in enormous reverence and imputed super-human qualities. In civil war situations, such leaders did everything possible to ensure that they live up to the expectations of their followers. More often than not these leaders employ propaganda not only to sustain their cult of personality status, but also to manipulate the opinions and actions of their people in order to achieve their desired intents or goals. This was the situation in Nigeria and Rwanda during their Civil Wars.

In Nigeria's case, General Yakubu Gowon and General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu employed extensive propaganda to support their respective war efforts and in doing this, both leaders displayed individual charisma and qualities depicting their circumstances and personal qualities. For instance, Gowon in word and deed presented the picture of a gentleman trying to bring back an erring brother to the family fold, while Odumegwu-Ojukwu with his fiery oratorical eloquence presented the image of a dogged largely uncompromising fighter. His rhetoric was hypothetical and convincing almost throughout the conflict. (Momoh, 2000)

Similarly, in Rwanda during the civil war, President Habyarimana and Paul Kagame were leaders of the groups that were involved in the civil war. Both men commanded significant respects from their followers as they displayed outstanding leadership qualities which earned them such respects. President Habyarimana was feared by all because of his authoritarian nature. He was nicknamed "the invisible" because of the enormous supernatural power the people believed he possessed (Akyeampong, E.K., and Gate, H.L., 2012) Paul Kagame on the other hand is also a man of action who like Ojukwu in Biafra, decided to shoulder the responsibility of leading the RPF in the civil war and the genocide which occurred within its context.

Therefore, it is germane to note that there is a strong link between cult of personality and the use of propaganda in a civil war. This is because in a civil war the people usually look forward to getting reliable information from their highly respected leaders, who in turn employ effective propaganda to achieve their set objectives.

In Nigeria, at the earliest part of the conflict, General Yakubu Gowon, the Nigerian Head of State was reluctant in employing propaganda to propagate the Federal cause. According to Milverton who quoted the Nigerian High Commissioner in London:

When Gowon was advised that he ought to engage some public relations firms of equal standing to take up the Federal cause, he stated emphatically that he does not need any public relations firm to help him. He believed that at the end the truth shall prevail. (Cronje, 1972, p. 221)

The above stand by Gowon did not last long as Biafra's constant propaganda at home (and abroad through Markpress) pushed Gowon to commence aggressive propaganda to project the Nigerian cause and also to counter Biafran's propaganda.

As the psychological war continued in earnest between the Nigerian government and Biafrans, Gowon's most powerful unit of propaganda "To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done" continued to hold sway in almost every part of Nigeria. This key Federal Slogan repeated endlessly on the radio, television, in the press, on wall posters in government offices, wherever one turns it seemed. (*Ibid*). Minds were bending daily to denigrate the enemy.

According to Cronje, Ojukwu's Biafra became a dream empire; even the image of poor Tshombe, gaoled in Algeria, was dragged in and some ingenious new adjectives coined, as in the traitorous and Tahomberian regime of Ojukwu; and a particular frightening poster appeared slightly slightly reminiscent of the worst of the 'keep Death of the Road' genre, showing Ojukwu's head on the ground underneath a heavy black boot with the caption 'Crush Rebellion' above it. (Cronje, 1972)

In Biafra, the same sort of thing happened. There were occasional processions in Enugu with the crowds singing popular war songs and, on both sides, there was a general, grass-roots level identification with the cause. This usually expressed itself through letters to the newspapers or sometimes through a well-known figure that would launch a public statement. It must be noted that the quality of popular support for the government helps to explain why, in defiance of all the normal functional laws of the modern state, life inside Biafra kept going (Jorre, 1972)

According to H.B.Momoh, propaganda in support of Odumegwu-Ojukwu's leadership was so strong that all over, songs in praise of him as the liberator of the Biafrans filled the air. They sought to prove that Odumegwu-Ojukwu was the only one who deserved to lead Biafra. He was referred to as the Moses of Biafra. Songs such as the one below were sung by Biafrans:

1. Ojukwu is king (*Ojukwu bu Eze*), he is the King of Biafra  
He is the man with heavy beared, he is the king of Biafra  
He is the most loving man in Biafra, he is the king of Biafra  
He is the man full of hairs on the chest, he is the king of Biafra  
He is the Moses of Biafra  
He is the liberator of Biafra.
  
2. We shall not, we shall not be moved.  
We shall not, we shall not be moved.  
Just like a tree that is planted by the waterside,  
We shall not be moved.  
Ojukwu is behind us, we shall not be moved.  
His soldiers are behind us, we shall not be moved.  
Just like a tree planted by the waterside, we shall not be moved. (Momoh, 2000, p.184)

Odumegwu-Ojukwu's name was so powerful that it became a morale booster. The admiration he received from the Biafrans was second to none.

In similar manner, cult of personality also had unprecedented effect on the use and efficacy of propaganda in Rwanda during the civil war. Propagandists naturally wove references to political authorities past and present into their materials as often as possible. For instance, Habyarimana appeared often in pictures and through the use of his quotations. (HRW Report, 1999). Religion was constantly used by the propagandists to sustain the cult of personality around these leaders. For instance, in presenting president Habyarimana as a man sent by God who has given Habyarimana the power to direct Rwanda, and that it was God who would show him the path to follow.

It must also be noted that cartoons sometimes portrayed Habyarimana as a saint or a priest. All these made the Hutu populace to believe that Habyarimana was chosen by God. In addition to Radio Rwanda, President Habyarimana also mounted effective propaganda using RTLM and Kangura Newspaper. It must be noted that because of these private propaganda media's intimate link with the Rwandan government, often times they appeared to be extremely well informed. They came to be regarded as a platform for President Habyarimana to prepare the ground for his decisions (Melvern, 2004). Therefore, with active complicity of President Habyarimana and his government, Massacres of Tutsis increased and went unpunished. Two Hutu political parties namely the movement Republican National for Development (MRND), and the coalition for the Defense of the Republic (CDR) increasingly promoted racist ideology (Destexche, 1995) with the complicity of the Army and those in power, they developed a simple strategy for retaining control through the formation of militias such as the Interahamwe which was bankrolled and supervised by a consortium of akazu leaders, who also ran their own death squads with names like the Zero Network and the Bullets group (Gourevitch, 1998:95), and the manipulation of the media, all of which later became tools of the genocide in 1994. (Destexche, 1998)

Paul Kagame on the other hand, has been described as being a secretive, sober, intelligent and intelligent and determined man, who within months gave the RPF direction, discipline and strategy. (Melvern, 2004:16). It must be noted that Kagame employed propaganda during the Rwandan Civil War, but was very careful not to play the ethnic game. He tried as much as possible not to use atrocity propaganda (like Habyarimana) considering the fact that he has always preached united Rwanda where ethnic division does not exist. According to him his major enemies were Habyarimana and other enemies of Rwanda.

In Nigeria, the Federal and Biafran governments continued to battle for supremacy in the war of word. The propaganda war was fought on two fronts, internal and international. Domestic propaganda received less publicity but certainly had the greatest influence in shaping the course of the war. (Jorre, 1972: 345) In other words, it is a mistake to think that because the internal propaganda was crude, untruthful to the point of ridicule and totally lacking in credibility to outsider, it was ineffective. (Jorre 1972:350).

For catch words used in the Nigerian crisis, the Biafrans had no answer to the use of the acronyms “Gowon” coined to read “Go On With One Nigeria.” This phrase conferred on Gowon a sort of divine mandate and an endorsement of pull through. According to H.B. Momoh:

Try as they did, Biafran propaganda gurus could not manipulate Odumegwu-Ojukwu’s name to yield anything that approximated to the divine or people’s injunction which Gowon’s Go on with one Nigeria portrayed. (Momoh, 2000)

Throughout the Nigerian Civil War, Gowon continually presented himself as a God fearing man who wants peace. According to Cronje. “Gowon’s good looks and pious manners, fitted him admirably for the image of a highly principled Christian gentlemen which was being built up for him, and unlike Ojukwu he was not too clever by half (Cronje, 1972:92). In the internal struggle, honours were just about even, each side achieving its own limited purpose. However, outside Nigeria, the Biafrans won hands down. The efficient projection of the Biafran cause and image abroad was an integral part of the drive for international recognition, humanitarian involvement and material assistance (Jorre, 1972:351)

There was no denying that the people of Biafra were behind Ojukwu, ever since the July coup and the subsequent massacres, he had been a popular hero and was to remain one even in the dark days of the defeat and reconstruction. According to John de Jorre:

His appeal lay largely in the way his personality matched the messianic feeling of the times. He was seen as a big man in all senses, a man who had lost his own vast fortune and given up a privileged and secure way of life to lead Biafra, a man who dealt with the outside world as an equal yet maintained contact with the common people. Ordinarily, folk had an implicit and touching faith in his capacity to win the war, and quite a personality cult developed which the government did nothing to discourage. (Jorre, 1972, p.223)

From the above quotation, it is clear that the people believed in Ojukwu’s leadership style and his capacity to lead the Biafrans to victory. Information and directives from him were received and acted upon by the people with immediate effect.

Once a while Odumegwu- Ojukwu would advise the Biafrans through their radio stations such messages were usually filed with emotions designed to whip up sentiment, and also to boost morale. He constantly advised the Biafrans to remain focused and never to lose hope, in addition to informing them about the level of progress recorded in the past days weeks or A months. Ojukwu would take the Biafran people down memory lane reminding them how their brothers were slaughtered, how their pregnant wives were stripped naked and butchered, how it would never be safe to cohabit with the enemy (Momoh, 2000) and how Biafrans would be exterminated by the Nigerian government if the Biafrans surrender Ojukwu through his constant speeches and activities of the Biafran propagandists was able to fire people into action particularly the under aged.

Therefore, it must be noted that in addition to the above propaganda, the massacres of the Igbo in Northern Nigeria made the Biafrans, young and old to get involved in the war. Recounting his experience in the Nigerian Civil War, (as a 14 years old in class two at Sacred Heart College in Aba), Ebere Onwudiwe noted that:

At Sahaco, the Biafran's *raison d'être* was sacred among us students young and old. We all believe that Ojukwu stood for justice and all admired and supported that position No more no less. To stand up against the massacre of Easterners in the North was the right thing to do, and Ojukwu to us was a good man for doing just that. Most students wanted to join the Biafran forces to stop the genocide (Onwudiwe, 2012, p.49)

The author went further to note that he could not recall any argument between him and his friends as to whether it was good or bad; whether the Biafrans had the troops and armament to beat the rest of Nigerians that retained majority of Nigerian soldiers and weapons of war. He also stated that Biafrans needed no elaborate propaganda machinery to win the hearts and mind of the young SAHACO students for secession because the evident pogrom did all the work particularly as the casualties brought home by truck and train loads did the talking in all its gory details. It must be noted that even though Onwudiwe claims that it was not a triumph of the deservedly much praised Biafran propaganda that led them into fighting in the war, but agreed that;

The pictorial news of the pogrom in daily newspapers, the attendant rumours and underlying fear of a putative secret plan of the Hausa-Fulani Oligarchy to exterminate the Biafrans, and the actual person loss of family and friends in the Northern part of Nigeria conspired to create a do-or-die atmosphere that was ripe for a just war (Onwudiwe, 2012, p.50)

The above quotation has shown that propaganda also played a role in influencing the minds of the SAHACO students. The author also noted that Odumegwu Ojukwu immediately assumed a gallant image of heroic proportions in the heart of all the students.

On the other hand, in Rwanda, there were other highly respected individuals who manipulated the general public particularly the Hutu through effective atrocity propaganda. The cult of personality around these powerful individuals made it very easy for the people to believe all their propaganda information. For example, Hassan Ngeze, the editor of the *Kangura Newspaper* was able to build a cult of personality around himself. *Kangura* was clearly anti-Tutsi and spoke out with audacity and made no apologies for its sentiments. The "Ten commandments of the Hutu" section of *Kangura*, grew to be very popular. This was hate media at its best. It clearly instructed the Hutu to have no dealings with the Tutsi, describing them as enemies of the Hutu. These were the instructions that set Hutu husbands against Tutsi wives and Hutu neighbours against their Tutsi neighbours, and ensured that they killed even the very closest friend or relative, as long as they belonged to enemy tribe (Otit, 2010).

Another individual that commanded over-whelming power in Rwanda during her civil war and the Genocide was Leon Mugesera, the then Vice-President of the MRND for the prefecture as well as an official of the Ministry for the Family and the promotion of Feminine Affairs. It is pertinent to note that in Rwanda during the conflict, party meetings offered propagandists essential opportunities to spread the doctrine of hate. In emotion-filled gatherings, where music, dancing performances and beer warmed the audience, propagandists could send their messages directly into the hearts of their listeners. Leon Mugesera used such opportunities to deliver his propaganda filled speech that came to be known as the "Mugesera speech". In this speech, Mugesera continuously advised the Hutu masses not to allow the enemies invade them. He also informed Hutus that the enemies' objective is to exterminate the Hutu ethnic group, urging them to rise up in self-defense. The cult of personality around these leaders contributed greatly in the acceptance and the efficacy of propaganda that emanated from these leaders. This had unprecedented effect on the Rwandan Civil War and the genocide which occurred within the context of the civil war.

Similarly, in the Nigerian Civil War, there were also other individuals whose cult of personality helped propagandists a great deal in manipulating their target audience, for instance, on the Biafran side, Lt.Col. Chukwuma Nzeogwu was respected and admired by the Biafran masses. He was a gallant soldier whose presence in a battle field boosted morale. Even though he died at the earliest part of the war, his heroic image was acknowledged not only by the Biafrans, but also by the Nigerian leaders. For instance, General Yakubu Gowon referred to Nzeogwu as a gallant officer with principles (Jorre, 1972). In a similar vein, Gen Olusegun Obasanjo described Nzeogwu as a brilliant officer with high sense of nationalism and Pan-Africanism. The remark of another Nigerian officer on Nzeogwu as was quoted in Obasanjo's *My command. An Account of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* went thus;

This enigmatic personality (Major Nzeogwu) at 29, is reputed to be one of the few astute soldier Nigeria has ever produced. He is known as a nationalist who is completely detribalized. Adored in the ranks for bravery and informality and respected (even feared) by his officer colleagues for his skill and persuasive ability (Obasanjo, 1980, pp.10-11)

The above quotation shows that Nzeogwu was highly respected and admired by both the Biafrans and the federalists. Biafran propagandists used Nzeogwu's name to boost the morale of the Biafran Civilians and Military alike. It was usually believed that with him in the war front, victory is sure for the Biafrans.

In Nigeria, soon after the war broke out, it was not the losses on the battlefields but the suffering of the civilian population which gradually became the concern of the outside world. The war exposed Civilians to mass starvation and epidemic diseases, which spread in areas affected by the war, particularly in Biafra. This led to series of propaganda and counter propaganda from the leaders of the belligerents. (Cervenka, 1971)

It has been argued by many, that both conflicting parties to the Nigerian conflict exploited the misery of the civilian victims of the war for their political ends, for example, Gowon was convinced that the starvation would force Biafra into submission, while Ojukwu believed that it would rally international support for the Biafra's cause. From the middle of 1968, the Nigerian war swiftly grew into a total war with the deaths of innocent Civilians greatly exceeding the losses on the fronts.

### **Conclusion**

There is a direct relationship between personality cult and propaganda in the Nigerian and Rwandan Civil Wars. Individual with cult of personality mounted effective propaganda on their unsuspecting target audience, who in turn accepted them hook-line and sinker, acting according to the dictates of the leaders. The effect of propaganda on the two civil wars in Nigeria and Rwanda, prolonged the wars, intensified them and established conditions for human suffering and deaths.

Propaganda from each group to the conflicts in Nigeria and Rwanda made it impossible for negotiated settlement to be achieved. The efficacy of propaganda in the two civil wars was determined by the cult of personality behind each unit of propaganda. This paper argues that propaganda was one of the major tools used by the political leaders in Nigeria and Rwanda, during the civil wars, to mislead and manipulate their target audience, for the purpose of achieving their set goals. The paper therefore, recommends that in a conflict situation, critical analysis of information received should be carried out, no matter the source.

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