

Echoes of Secession: The Hero, the Rebel, and the Rhetoric of Might in Nigerian Civil War Pictorial Propaganda

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Abstract: This article evaluates the nature of images that negotiated and sustained secession propaganda during the Nigerian Civil war between 1967 and 1970. More specifically, it examines the character and disposition of the constructed image of the secessionist leader Emeka Ojukwu through a variety of photographs, cartoons, and posters used during the war in order to assess his role and tendencies in the politics of the thirty months war. By studying pre-war ancillary traits of politics and political elites in Nigeria, this article relies on the earlier studies of class conflict in Nigeria to argue that the images offer insights to lingering mutual suspicions and understanding of the war.

Introduction

... if the power of images is like the power of the weak, that may be why their desire is correspondingly strong, to make up for their actual impotence ... what the picture awakens in our desire to see ... is what it cannot show. This impotence is what gives it whatever specific power it has.¹

The failed secession bid of Biafra from Nigeria in a civil war that ended after thirty months of military hostilities, internal displacements, starvation, and civilian deaths has remained a topic of painful reminiscences. As a result, its discourse has drawn more debates and literature than perhaps any other event in the history of the Nigerian nation. The interests of these reflections on the dark event in the country's history and the polemics it stimulates have become increasingly varied in substance and facts. Many themes of the war tend to dwell on the reportage of war events and the varying roles of the major players in the conflict—Yakubu Gowon and Emeka Ojukwu, who were both contemporaries in the Nigerian military.²

On the one hand, the stories of the war bear striking similarities to a typical pros and cons debate raising more fundamental questions than it often sought to explicate. On the other hand, causative explanations for the war are extended to include the rigged national census and its attendant controversies in 1962 and 1963. Others are the national election crises of 1964 and the slide into total anarchy in the Western Region in 1965 culminating in the open call for the restoration of law and order by the military. Beyond this, the lopsided assassination of eleven prominent politicians including the Saduana of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello, and Prime Minister Abubakar Balewa in a coup d'état of January 15, 1966, led by Major Kaduna Nzegwu and other

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v17/v17i3a1.pdf>

colleagues who were mostly from the Igbo ethnic group, was considered as a fundamental misstep. A series of events that followed the total takeover of governance by the military leader and Head of State, Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi also provided grave antecedence that fertilized the war. Prominent among these events was the abrogation of the federal structure of government in favor of a unitary structure by force of a decree.³ This structural change by the military regime fanned a general atmosphere of mutual suspicion and led to the assassination of Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi in the second coup, this time by Northern Nigerian military officers. The slide into anarchy was further aggravated by the spiralling riots and retaliatory killings of Easterners in Northern Nigeria bringing together a defining narrative that amplified the polarization of the new nation back to ethnic, regional, and religious lines. The other critical event, at least to a section of the military in the East, was the controversial installation of Gowon as the supreme commander and head of the Federal Military Government, which led to Ojukwu's open rejection of Gowon's leadership as the Head of State.⁴

The varying perspectives that have inundated the Biafra literary discourse seem traceable to the large pool of biographical notes and media propaganda on the war. More problematic are the images that accompanied the war propaganda and the inconsistencies they fanned. A panoramic understanding of the the civil war seems impeded by the paucity of scholarly discourse on image construction throughout the war and perhaps more especially among the *dramatis personae* in the conflict. This essay, therefore, draws on discourses of the power of images to suggest that the Nigerian Civil War was at the core of its offering essentially an image war driven by constructed stereotypes of class and power. The desire for an "image enquiry" becomes even more strengthened when the war propaganda is assessed on the template of being the first in Africa to utilize the modern technological gadgetry of radio, television, and print media. It proposes that the combination of the media blitz on the war aided the delivery of a coordinated propaganda campaign that projected not only the heroic ventures of the war personalities but also the alleged atrocities caused by them during the war. According to Nzimiro,

. . . the Civil War of Nigeria as one of the world upheavals which should be seen in the context of the class structure of Nigeria which is part of the world capitalist social order. Liberal western intellectual writers who see the African problem in terms of "tribalism" alone have divested the entire phenomenon of one essential approach and analytical tool which could be of help in putting the whole exercise in its historical perspective. That essential approach is the class analysis.⁵

The telling strength of the images evident in the thirty months and sixteen days of conflict between 1967 and 1970 amplifies Nzimiro's assertion and invariably illustrates a need for their singular and collective appraisal. This paper, then, is concerned with establishing a framework for understanding the contestations of might in the context of the obvious, the hidden, and omitted facts of the civil war in Nigeria, from the essential structure of the use of images as a propaganda device. It seeks by this understanding to establish the fundamental issue of class in the negotiation of power in the Nigerian Civil War. This paper proposes that there is a significant connection between the elite power tussle in the secession polemics and the pictorial

metaphors employed in the selected visual medium for the prosecution of the propaganda war by the belligerent governments in secessionist Biafra and Federalist Nigeria.

Using images employed by both the Federalist (Nigeria) and the Separatist (Biafra) regimes of the time to develop the framework of power rhetoric that propelled the war, this paper examines the assumptions of might as a “political tool” and its consequence as “class rhetoric.” It contends that the desirability as well as the employment of these images in the context of the Nigerian Civil War was based on the variables of propaganda imageries that negotiated them. Elucidating on this in the illustrations that follow, the visual concept of the “personage” and the symbolic representation of the political personalities can be captured in the construction of the visual propaganda of the Nigerian Civil War.⁶ These images sourced from photographs, cartoons, and posters that negotiated the war also serve as devices for the construction of meaning commensurate with the iconic status of the projected personalities in the war.⁷ Early insinuations in the history of colonial Nigeria seem to prove that politically exposed persons devoted conscious effort to creating acceptable iconic images of themselves. In fact, visual representations as far back as the early 1920s indicate an affirmation of what Coleman refers to as the “Europeanised African” image in the political ascendancy of the Nigerian elite.⁸ Accordingly, popular arts of the colonial and pre-independent Nigeria, namely illustrations, paintings, photographs, and commercial product advertising, evolved to promote the genre in the country. The Europeanised image and other distinct stylistic traits of the African elite became a necessary part of the complex web of iconic constructions deemed desirable for acceptability among the people. The followers and well wishers of these African elites variously saw them as heroes of colonial emancipation and nationalism. It was therefore not unusual for national leaders/politicians to construct mythical, larger-than-life qualities to distinguish themselves from the ordinary masses. Prominent West African and national leaders who created distinguishing images through dress and personality code include, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Festus Okotie-Eboh of Nigeria.⁹ It is, therefore, in the context of elite persona and the corresponding understandings that the visual construction of the Ojukwu image as the *dramatis persona* of the secession bid from Nigeria shall be examined.

Ojukwu: The Hero-Rebel of the Nigerian Civil War

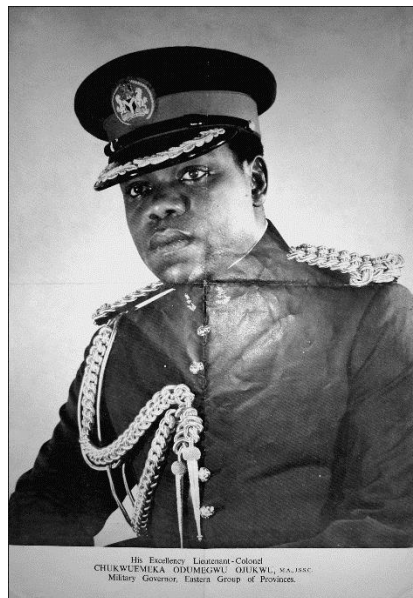
Pictorially, the image of Emeka Ojukwu as a secessionist leader of the Biafran Republic presents a binary personality of the hero-rebel of the Nigerian Civil War. This conjoined attribute is captured in the perception of the artists who made photographs and illustrations of Ojukwu on the one hand and the management of his persona during the period of the war on the other. Viewed from a panoramic perspective, these pictorial representations of Ojukwu significantly set him apart as the icon of the Nigerian Civil War and situate him within the discourse of class that governed the contestations of the political space in Nigeria before, during, and after Nigerian independence in 1960.

Emeka Ojukwu’s background reveals that he was born at the peak of this transformative consciousness in 1933 in the famous railway town of Zungeru in Northern Nigeria to an enterprising Igbo father. The rising fortune of his father, Sir Louis Phillippe Odumegwu Ojukwu, a businessman from Nnewi in South-Eastern Nigeria, may have contributed to his

ascendancy in Nigerian political history. As one of the wealthiest men in colonial Nigeria, Emeka's father had set his son on a path into the elites of colonial and postcolonial Nigeria. The younger Ojukwu did not disappoint. He maximized the educational opportunities that lay at his disposal and earned a graduate degree in history from Oxford University. Ojukwu's desire for public service made him one of the first university graduates to join the Nigerian military where his elite background and sound education guaranteed his promotion to higher ranks. This was preceded by a brief stint in the civil service in 1957 shortly after his return to Nigeria.

Emerging from this background, images published in the media reveal the visual transformation of Ojukwu's personality. At the early stage of his appointment as the military governor of the Eastern Region in January 1966, he was represented as a clean-shaven officer/gentleman whose "honorific portrait" by tradition adorned offices in the region of his command.¹⁰ The official portrait, in traditional grayscale, represents him as an officer of the Nigerian army whose youthful zest and striking gaze of seriousness affirm the traditional oath of defense of his fatherland that his uniform symbolizes (Fig.1a). In this military regalia, the individual personality of Ojukwu needed to be sufficiently appropriate to his status as a senior military officer in command of one of the country's richest and most enterprising regions. The half-length photographic image is interrupted at the base of the frame with a verbalized legend that approximates to a condensed advertorial of the Ojukwu personality (His Excellency, Lt Col Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, MA, JSSC, Military Governor, Eastern Group of Provinces). Whatever seems lost by the measured gaze of his asymmetrical photographic pose appeared to have been restored and reinforced by the rare combination of codes which his intimidating family name, graduate education, and rank in the Nigerian military on the only text component within the picture frame affords the reader. This guided intervention in the photographic message is what Barthes refers to as "a contiguous but not homogenised" message.¹¹

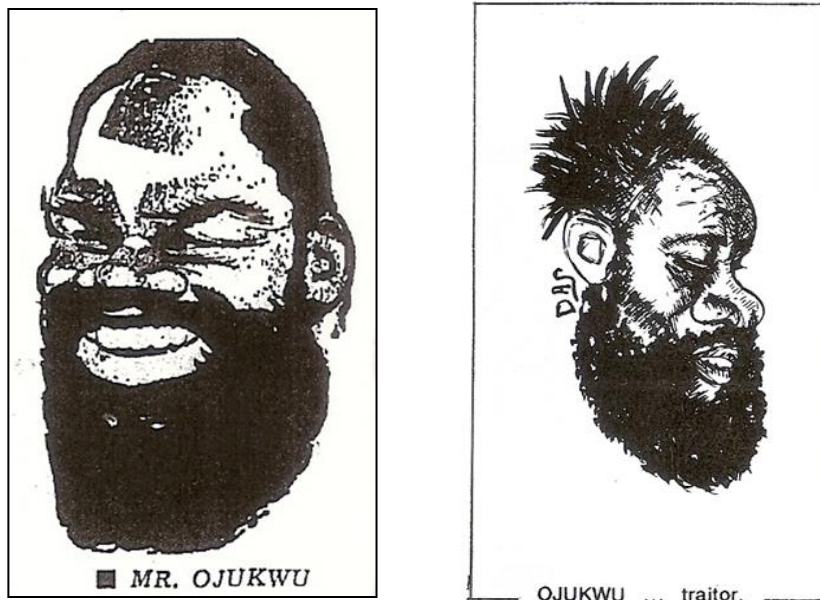
Fig. 1a: Lt. Col. C. O. Ojukwu, Official Portrait. [1966]. Fig. 1b: Lt. Col. C. O. Ojukwu



Source: Fig. 1a, Onuma Ezera Collections, African Section, Michigan State University, East Lansing. Fig 1b, Press Photograph (1966?)

Ojukwu earned his appointment as Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria from the Nigerian head of state, General Aguiyi Ironsi, for frustrating a coup plot in January 1966 at his area of command in Kano, and this was despite pleas for his support from Major Nzeogwu, the coup's leader.¹² This act of military discipline stood him out as a young independent-minded, scrupulous, and conservative officer. The unmistakability of the clean shaven officer gentleman seem enforced in yet another widely circulated press photograph of Ojukwu at the time where he adorns a peaked military cap with a Nigerian army crest (Fig. 1b above). While the practised convention of honorific photographic portraiture in public offices in Nigeria seemed a privilege which the head of state and the regional governors understandably earned, the formal portrait as commanding officer and the press photograph of Ojukwu contrasts with his image as a "bearded revolutionary" throughout the era of secession. This curious transformation between the clean shaven and the bearded military officer presents a binary assessment in the stylistic representation of the Ojukwu personality. One immediate assumption for this new look was that it served as a cultural and symbolic show of indignation against the spiralling riots (aptly tagged the Nigerian Pogrom) in Northern Nigeria, which is variously recorded as leading to the massacre of over 30,000 Easterners on May 29, June 29, and September 29, 1966. Whatever the reason for this transformation, the bearded look fitted the revolutionary posture not only because it had a cultural connection with the mourning of the dead from Eastern Nigeria, but that it also offered him a unique visual identity that many artists of that era found irresistible (Figs. 2a and 2b). The bearded pose and well-defined facial physiognomy seemed an instant iconic symbol for the Ojukwu personality.

Fig. 2a (left): "Mr Ojukwu; " Fig. 2b (right): Ojukwu ... Traitor."

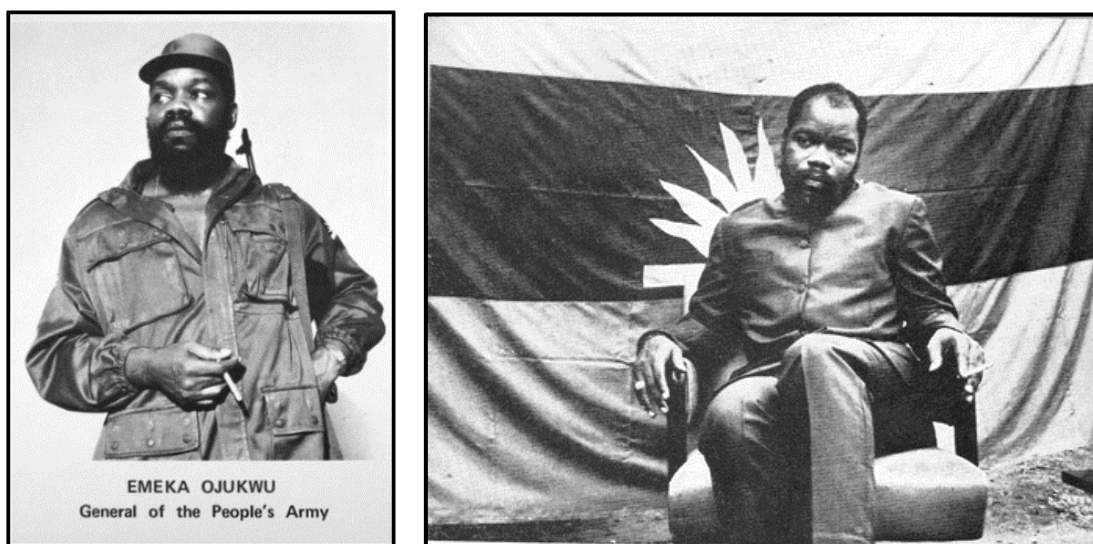


Source: Fig. 2a, editorial cartoon in *Daily Times*, Nigeria, Sept 28, 1968; Fig. 2b, editorial cartoon in *Drum* magazine, Nigeria, January 1970

Ojukwu assumed a different image in a popular portrait used for the declaration of the principles of Biafran revolution at Ahiara, near Owerri, in the heartland of Biafra. His pose of the combat-ready “General of the people’s army” evinces a connection to popular revolutions in South America and thereby insinuates a link to a widespread interest in guerrilla engagements of that era (Fig. 3a). What is notable here is the construction of another identity for the Biafran leader expressed through his new dress code and demeanor, and their social, ethical, and political significations. This regalia seems to associate Ojukwu’s image with that of the Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro and his ally Che Guevara.¹³ Posing casually in military gear, with eyes piercing askance into a distant sight and a nozzle of his rifle jutting out above his left shoulder, the photograph of Ojukwu in hands akimbo, with the right hand released and thrust slightly forward to reveal an unlit cigarette, attempts to project an unnerved but alert leader. Among the surviving artefacts which this image adorn is the pamphlet for the Ahiara Declaration announcing the secessionist Biafra’s resolve to challenge all vestiges of neocolonialism as well as pursue self-determination with the expediency and vigour it demands.¹⁴ To achieve the connection with the ordinary people of Biafra, Ojukwu needed to shed the characteristic honorific pose in the earlier pictures above.

The bearded style and its attendant transformative pictorial conduct in the Ahiara Declaration regalia was one in an arsenal of posturing that provoked several disapproving cartoons from the Federalists.¹⁵ The memory of what appears to be an associative “guerrilla-style” dress sense in the Ojukwu photograph and unconventional traits of terror that this type of warfare offers added to the apparent rhetoric of despair in the illustrations of and the defensive campaign led by the Federalists.¹⁶ The advantage of this campaign informed by the persistent failure to meet military datelines by the Federal Military Government (FMG), despite the abundance of a massive hardware support from its international allies, equally engendered an enormous confidence building for a war of attrition as captured in the visual campaigns by the Biafrans.

Fig. 3a: (left) Emeka Ojukwu; Fig. 3b: (right) Ojukwu and the Biafran Flag



Source: Fig. 3a, Courtesy Onuma Ezera collections, Michigan State University; Fig 3b, St. Jorre 1972.

The voluntary devaluation of Ojukwu's elite status into a willing warrior for his people did not appear to be new to the political class in Nigeria. It seems to bear some well-worn tendencies of early self-acclaimed colonial emancipators. What appears curious is the accompanying theatricality that the verbal code employs in short circuiting an unbiased interpretation of the photographic message by stripping Ojukwu of his intimidating credentials and imposing it on an alliance with "the people." This kind of adulations becomes understandable when juxtaposed against classical traits of the early intelligentsia and the political class who often rode on the crest of the mass popularity for the actualization of personal gains.¹⁷ Following the mannerisms of the early political class and the disposition of the masses towards the elite class, Ojukwu was, according to Tamuno, seen in "moderate circles, as a champion, spokesman, and defender of the aggrieved people of Eastern Nigeria."¹⁸ The methodical style of Ojukwu's October 4, 1966 speech can be well appreciated when placed against the choice of phrase which secures the belief that the pogroms were "well planned and efficiently executed."¹⁹ It seeks to describe the fixed position of the Northerners in their intense dislike for the Easterners. Accordingly, the manner in which the coordinated killings were executed and the dispatch of bodies of the dead and wounded only became glaring testaments in a web of hostilities in judging the veracity of Ojukwu's argument. This concern for the unacceptable treatment of the common folk of Eastern Nigerian origin in other parts of Nigeria and the later perception that he sacrificed his father's wealth for the liberation of the Igbo engendered Ojukwu's mass appeal as their emancipator and hero. The increase in the propaganda of difference between "us" and "them" became an effective mantra for the members of Ojukwu's cabinet. By referring to those Easterners by ethnicity as "thousands of our people," he directly asserted himself as protector of all Easterners regardless of their location, seeing himself not as Eastern Regional Military Governor but rather the leader of all Easterners wherever they were located.

It is, however, unclear if, by reluctantly championing secession, Ojukwu was driven more by a messianic impulse than by the plight of the masses who were ready subjects of an elaborate visual and verbal propaganda when the xenophobic killings of the Easterners dramatically increased in northern Nigeria. But it would be wrong to box Ojukwu into a predetermined and rigid identity frame. As Hall explicitly states: "within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves."²⁰

In fact, a cursory study of some of the Biafra visual propaganda seems to inadvertently attest to a contradictory associative storyline of moods and gestures in the representation of Ojukwu, therefore opening up an array of interpretations. One illustration that fits this ambiguity is the rhetorical poise of a confident and relaxed Ojukwu in a "safari suit" against the backdrop of the Biafran flag draped horizontally (Fig. 3b). Following the nuances of conventional portraiture in paintings and photography the representation of Ojukwu in a safari suit appears to be one of the few portraits posed in a horizontal orientation, hence raising questions about the rationale for its preferred compositional arrangement.²¹ It privileges the beholder with tools for varying deductions from the acts that produced the official picture with the flag backdrop. In the first instance, an apparent desire to unmistakably announce the

centrality of the Ojukwu figure against the symbol of the “rising sun” without compromising the flag dimensions tends to skew the narrative away from what appears to be an “acceptable tradition” and which further seems to have taken root in conventional portrait photography. It is not exactly clear how this photograph was to be published and what purpose it sought to serve, but the sheer animated presence of the horizontal composition with all the trappings of informality seems to hint at the idea for which it may have been designed. With a cigarette in hand, the relaxed and confident pose of Ojukwu in this picture may have been constructed as a psychological boost aimed at neutralizing the rumble of air and mortar attacks. Propaganda posters of the time acknowledge this with illustration and text that reads “bombs or no bombs, Biafrans must stay to fight the foe.”

The other is the cartoon rendering of Ojukwu sharing a cocktail with Charles de Gaulle and aptly titled “Biafra–France Entente” (Fig. 4a). If this inclination was a deliberate detour from the norm, the pandering to a Western etiquette in the “Biafra–France Entente” cartoon by Chuks Anyanwu is fundamentally inconsistent within the locus of the photos discussed above. If anything, it is in contradiction with the diplomatic row that ensued in the hostage-taking of eighteen foreign oil workers on May 9, 1969.²²

Fig. 4a (left): Chuks Anyanwu, “Biafra-France Entente.” 4b (right): Oke Hortons, “Italian Hostages”



Source: Fig. 4a, Ministry of Information, Enugu. Dec. 1968. 4b *Sunday Times* May 25, 1969.

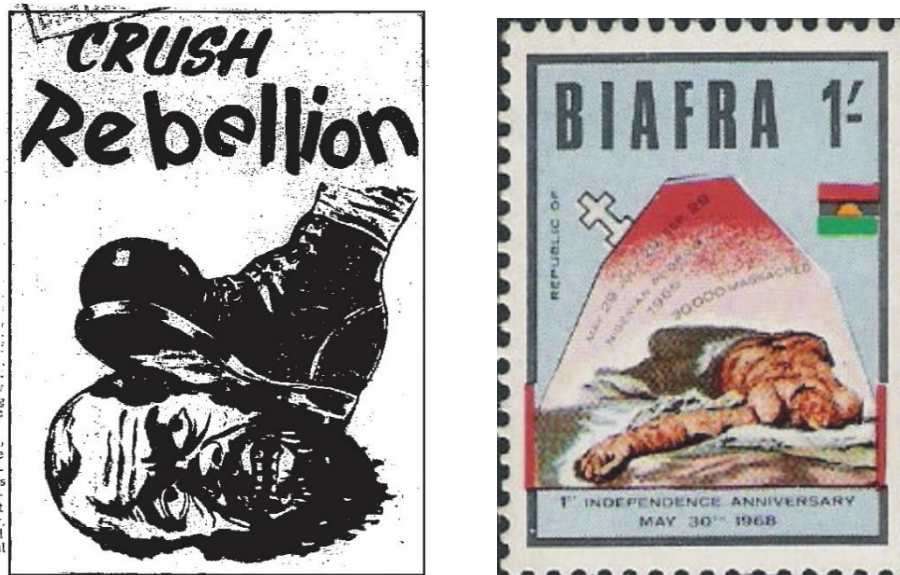
Another assumption that this photograph affirms is anchored on the suspicion which attended the consistent Federalist campaign that saw Ojukwu as being inseparably tied to the Biafran concept. The evidence in the transposable use of Ojukwu and Biafra by the international community of journalists and politicians abound. One key example is the front cover portrait of Colonel Emeka Ojukwu in the *Time* news magazine of August 23, 1968.²³ It is the artistic rendering of the Biafran leader in their usual tradition of using portraits of leaders who have drawn considerable world attention to themselves. Another example appeared in *The New York Times* which printed a story by Lloyd Garrison titled “Odumegwu Ojukwu’s Biafra” on June 22, 1969. If there were doubts about the sincerity of this allusion his declaration that “while I live, Biafra lives” may as well serve to affirm his personification of the Biafran struggle.²⁴ Ojukwu was not known to act on impulse or swayed by popular opinion. He demonstrated this single-

mindedness in his decision not to join Nzeogwu's January 15 coup by refusing to assist with logistic support. It may, therefore, follow that his decision to prosecute the war was borne out of his convictions to which the popular Federalists poster in Figure 5a below narrates.

Civil War Artists and the Construction of the Ojukwu Imagery

The tenacity and talent invested in developing Ojukwu's iconic figure as a hero or villain by a handful of visual artists in the support or repudiation of the secessionist cause are noteworthy. While photography accounted for the early development of the Ojukwu imagery, the league of visual artists in both the Federalist and the seceding regimes provided the desired animation required for propaganda. This imagery, often rendered with austere linearly black and white brush strokes, was fundamental to the illumination of this iconic figure for frontispiece commentaries in newspaper houses in Lagos and Kaduna on the one hand, and the Chukwumerije-led Propaganda Directorate in Biafra on the other.

Fig. 5a (left): Crush Rebellion, Ministry of Information, Enugu. Dec. 1968. 5b (right): "Nigerian Pogrom 1966," Biafra 1st Independence Anniversary Stamp, May 30, 1968



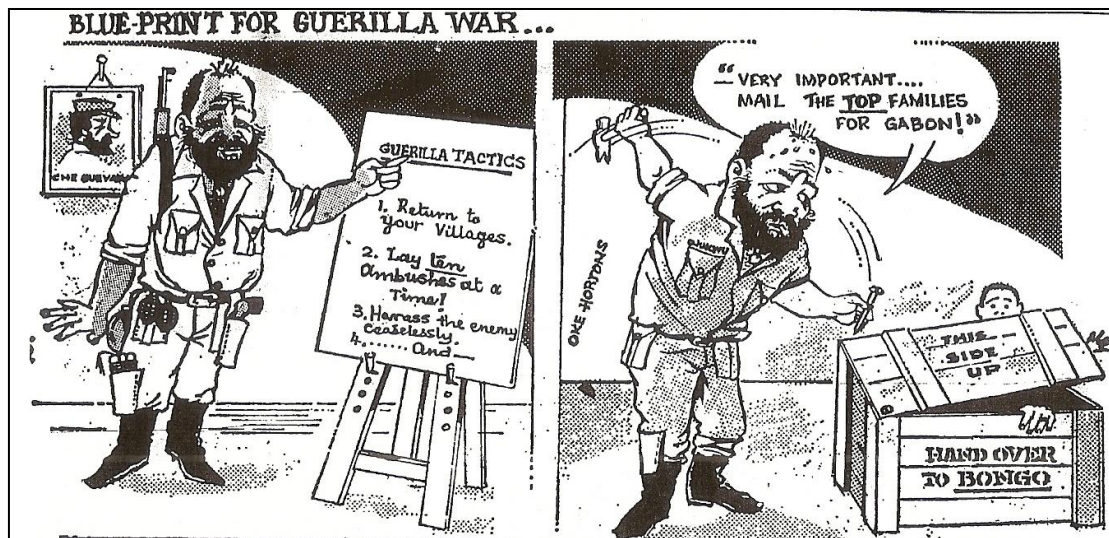
Source: [Http://worldstamps.com/2009/10/Biafra.html](http://worldstamps.com/2009/10/Biafra.html). Accessed July 2015.

Prominent artists like Chuks Anyanwu, Ndubuisi, Chinwe Ezeani, Paul Ibeanugo, and Joe Maranzu, who were cartoonists in secessionist Biafra, and Ayo Ajayi and Oke Hortons on the Nigerian side took turns to develop a consistent conception of Ojukwu as a hero or a villain. For the Federalists, the artistic representation of Ojukwu in editorial cartoons and illustrations was clear and unambiguous. He was singled out as a rebel who must be crushed. These artists variously depicted Ojukwu as a misguided, ambitious, and clannish rebel, whose "bearded" persona was to be exaggerated at will and rendered synonymous with a man with a troubled state of mind.

Internally, pictorial publicity relied on the sensitivity of the general masses to sell the sentiments of the war in varied themes to enforce the acceptance or rejection of both federal and secessionist campaigns. For instance, the martyr concept afforded Ojukwu through its beheaded

image by the visual campaign of Federalists may have been an exaggerated evaluation of this Biafran leader that ran contrary to the grains of emotional logic for the Easterners (Fig. 5a). The beheaded picture and “jackboot symbolism” which first appeared as an editorial illustration on a Federal government owned newspaper, *The Morning Post*. It was later adopted as a major campaign poster as a euphemism for the “quick kill” police action announced by Gowon.²⁵ For the Biafrans, it only seemed natural to assume that such a grisly illustration of a beheaded image of Ojukwu would evoke the memories of systemic massacres and countless beheadings occasioned by the earlier pogroms in the northern Nigeria in the months preceding the civil war. The commemoration of the act of mindless beheadings during the pogroms in the north in the Biafran philately offers an inkling of how grievous, such sarcastic symbolism meant to the people of the Eastern Region (Fig. 5b).

Fig. 6: Oke Hortons, “Blueprint for Gue[r]rilla War”



Source: Editorial cartoon, *Sunday Times* October 13, 1968

Other artistic constructions of Ojukwu by the Federalists, however, tend to show him as insincere and megalomaniac leader who has invested more on propaganda for a misguided adventure of secession. For example, the two-panel cartoon, entitled “Blueprint for Guerrilla War” by Oke Hortons attempts to highlight the insincerity of Ojukwu’s secession campaign (Fig. 6). While on the one hand, he is mobilizing Easterners for a war of attrition against Nigeria, he is on the other hand secretly parcelling his family members for shipment abroad and away from the conflict zone.

For the Separatist Biafra, a predominant style of a revered mythical and heroic figure was established for the construction of the Ojukwu Image. Chuks was undoubtedly one of the most prolific artists during the Nigerian Civil War. He pioneered the “Gulliver” narrative in his rendering of Ojukwu always towering over Gowon (the military head of state of a federal and united Nigeria) whose assured place is that of the Lilliputian in most of his single panel cartoons featuring the two of them.²⁶ There is no clear conceptual basis for these visual representations in Biafra, but the early allusion to these quickly point to the myth of Ojukwu’s family wealth in direct contrast to Gowon’s relatively humble parental background. While the

variation in size, especially in Chuks' cartoons, tended to place Ojukwu always at an advantage in a duel of personalities between the two, the logical consistency with other propaganda themes which demanded the projection of a people fighting against annihilation by the Nigerian forces seem to devalue these illustrations and associated propaganda in the world media.

Fig.7a : Chuks Anyanwu “The Boxing Match” cartoon; Fig. 7b: Chuks Anyanwu “Give me your oil .. I quit the fight.”



Source: Anyanwu 1968.

Other qualities which seem to influence the construction of the Ojukwu image was his demonstration of persuasive skills during the roundtable negotiations at Aburi, Ghana at the conciliation efforts before the war. Verbatim copies of the Aburi tapes of the negotiation added to the confidence that he needed to lead the Easterners away from Nigeria. His education and membership of the “Oxbridge Club” was also a source of pride for Biafrans’ deserving of the amplified visual status accorded him.²⁷ Ojukwu’s broadcast, “away with the old guard” after the January 1966 coup may have also served as a tacit announcement of his readiness to take charge of the new opportunity of leadership that the coup has bestowed on him and affirmed his predilection for power.

A summary of the visual of the Ojukwu image shows him as a dynamic maverick whose image as a mythic figure adapted to all phases of the war. Ojukwu however not only fits as the Biafran icon but also “dispersed among pre-existing, competing symbol systems ...[with] multiple kinds of allegiance and at the mercy of diverse forces pulling it in different directions.”²⁸ He was at once, a respected officer gentleman, an intelligent negotiator, an aristocrat, a comrade revolutionary, a hero, and a villain. Since the development of visual archetypes of the kind that fitted a figure in Ojukwu’s mould was in its infancy in Nigeria of the 1960s, coupled with an increasingly disadvantaged and itinerant propaganda machinery, the thirty-month period may have been too short to fully define Ojukwu’s mythical personality based on the collections available. However, the transformation Ojukwu’s image into a coordinated scheme for an elaborate propaganda may have been accelerated by the masses perception of his concern for the wellbeing of every easterner within and outside the secessionist region.

The Concept of Strategic Might: Mineral Wealth, Human Resources, and Infrastructure

Whereas Ojukwu's education, wealth, and aristocratic disposition, disarming personality, tact, rhetorical persuasions, and providence were the necessary determinants of his ascendancy to power as a hero of the Eastern Region in Nigeria, his strength and weakness as a rebel lie deeper and bestride other considerations. Some of the distinct factors are immanent in the frequently cited literary and iconographic assumptions in the visual narratives that the posters and the cartoons analysed earlier demonstrate. The Ojukwu regime may have been bolstered for secession by its perceived enormous might in terms of skilled human resources, strategic infrastructure, and mineral wealth. The harnessing of these resources and the sheer resilience it brought to the struggle bears a significant direction on the activities of the scientists and engineers at Research and Production (RAP) and its contribution to the sustenance of the Biafran secession attempt.²⁹ Another permutation that may have accelerated the "might rhetoric" was the independent access to the international community via air and sea transportation. Biafra had access to the sea from Port Harcourt and Calabar. There were also functional airports in Enugu and Port Harcourt. The feasibility of the direct access to shipment and international trade and the perceived infrastructural and human resource capabilities from returnees who heeded the "home call" messages may have principally informed the direction that the conflict took and served as the conceptual basis for the visuals employed in the war propaganda.

Basking in the dynamics of delicate balancing of a seeming contiguous people with the same regional destiny, Ojukwu began the secessionist struggle from a slow, steady, and methodical approach. He seemed patient enough to allow the sensibilities to attain a crescendo before declaring his ostensible position of collective strength, i.e. that "No power in black Africa can subdue us."³⁰ By this proclamation, the authority of class dynamics appear to have been determined since the decision to engage in a war to secede was sealed at the level of the Biafran establishment and not the lower class used here as an alibi. It highlights to a large extent the presumptuousness of the elite class within the Eastern Region that led to the excruciating debacle of secession.

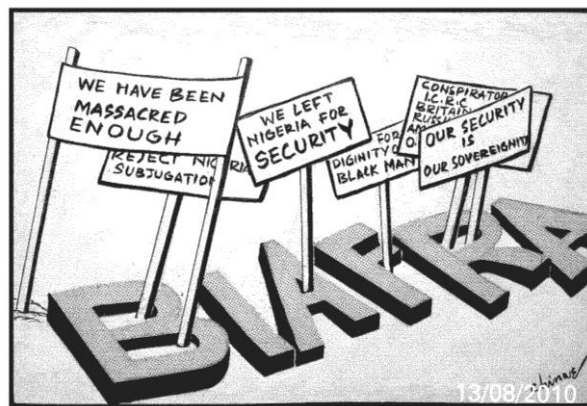
The declaration of secession was not oblivious to the numerical and hardware strengths of its military against that of the Federal Military Government (FMG) in the event of any repudiation.³¹ It was rather based on the presumed comparable self-sufficient intellectual and material endowments of the amalgamated peoples of Eastern Nigeria whose sense of homogeneity needed to be cultivated gradually and not assumed or enforced by fiat. Were this to work, national indoctrination for Biafra was a process that required time that the establishment did not seem to have. Presumptions were also rife about the Easterners' emotional rejection of the Nigerian nation-state based on the residual memory of the past pogroms in the North. The recollection of the determination of the Easterner who brought the pugilist art of boxing into its visual iconography is perhaps also instructive here of the seeming general assertion of an intolerant individual superiority.³² The evidence of Ojukwu's claim of superior might by this pugilism "know how" as celebrated in the cartoons of Chuks ultimately points to the historical antecedents that may invariably have encouraged Biafra and also destroyed it.

A deeper understanding of the dynamics that started with the home call of native Easterners as a result of the pogroms in Northern Nigeria seem to point differently at the “us” in the context of Ojukwu’s declaration. It resonates in concurrence with Tamuno, whose inquisition at a similar remark by Ahmadu Bello is of relevance here.³³ The choice of using the masses as cannon fodder for political ends seems an established pattern in Nigeria’s political history. Accordingly, Nzimiro’s position becomes illuminating. He states:

These Igbo leaders, as they styled themselves, were not the same class with the millions of Igbo workers, peasants, unemployed and the petty traders and so forth. This Igbo rich class...were not of the same identical class with the rest of the Igbo. But because the self-styled ruling class possesses education and wealth, its members appeared before their poor ethnic groups as the saviours, for the new symbols of recognising status had changed. Money and education brought with it a control of power in the society. Power brought economic rewards and the members of this ruling class...were indeed speaking inwardly for their class but using ethnicity as a smoke screen.³⁴

While it may be difficult to fully bring Nzimiro’s illustration above to bear on the direct, descriptive rendering of the visuals in Biafran propaganda, the contextual iconographic references in the pictorial publicity of the Nigerian Civil War provides an attestation to the above analogy. It seems ironic that the same placard carrying masses celebrating the perceptive exploits of their known hero on their behalf end up as those exploited to whip up the sentiments of their hero’s misadventure (Figs. 8a and 8b). In such symbolisms, the identifiable head becomes that of a hero or the villain who can be rendered to invoke hateful revenge. The hero, like the villain/rebel, is therefore classically identified by readily acceptable archetypes which vary with each intended visual narrative.

Fig. 8a: Chuks Anyanwu “We are free” cartoon, 1967; Fig. 8b: Chinwe Ezeani “Biafra placards,” 1969.



Source: Courtesy: Biafrana Section, University of Nigeria Library, Nsukka.

Whereas the Biafran propaganda often highlights the strengths of Biafra, on other occasions, those controlling the propaganda found it more effective to emphasise Biafra’s weakness and vulnerability. This ambivalent posturing is at the core of the Biafran rhetoric. While this depiction—Biafra as simultaneously strong and weak—seems on the surface to be

contradictory, Allison Gluck believes that “the two images were in fact interconnected and mutually supportive.”³⁵ This paradoxical image was, in some cases, helpful in prompting different reactions from different “audiences.”

Thematised to present a dual posture of the weak and strong, some of the illustrations that echo this subject seem contradictory to the Biafran myth, having in another illustration demonstrated the single-minded determination of the Northern hegemony in the “Awo’s Turn” cartoon (Fig.9a). By the very structure of its conception, the “Awo’s Turn” cartoon adumbrates the issues of elite conspiracy in the weakening of the Nigerian project. It provides renewed evidence that demonstrates the Nigerian government’s reliance on the old contentious political tactics of strength by numbers and therefore in accordance with its policy to set aside issues that brought the process of estrangement about in the first place. It frames the colonial politics of divide and rule as an essential structure for the development of conflicts and tensions by the elite class in Nigeria. It is on this template that one may view the animation of the recurring problem of the “stranger and the settler” phenomenon within the Nigerian nation which had suffered repeated unprovoked attacks in a part of their country that they had always known as their home as unfortunate. The role demonstrated by Ojukwu in the protection of lives and properties of the peoples of the Eastern Region seem to derive from the reluctance of the stakeholders in Eastern Nigeria to define better ways other than secession for conflict resolution. As Uwechue argues, “What Biafrans lacked and what produced the present bitter and unfortunate conflict therefore is not sovereignty. It is security.”³⁶

Fig. 9a (left): “Its my turn General.” Fig. 9b (right): “Hands off Africa.”



Source: Anyanwu 1968. Courtesy Biafrana Section, University of Nigeria Library, Nigeria.

Negotiation by Foreign Might

Another significant element in the power negotiation of the civil war connects directly to the nostalgic reliance on or mortal phobia for the White man as the “Hands off” cartoon by Chuks illustrates (see Fig. 9b). This imperialist hangover made immanent in the conceptual notion of a supervising white man’s hand in the woes of Biafra becomes the implied rhetoric in most of the visual propaganda employed during the Nigerian Civil War. Quick pointers to imperial sabotage in the UK, USSR, and the US were raised to explain military failures as much as its affiliation with another imperialist, France, served as a morale booster for the secession

campaign. It can, therefore, be argued that the obvious weakness of the belligerents as highlighted in the visuals lay in its lip reading and claim as to where the support of each Western power favored. Ojukwu was therefore projected through visual propaganda as the gifted leader imbued with the wisdom to reject all forms of neo-colonialist antics from unfriendly western powers and the hegemonic influence of northern Nigeria. It seems reasonable to assume, that, the apparent conciliatory gains arising from Decree 8, which gave effect to the Federal government version of the Aburi Accord in 1967, became unattractive to the Biafra establishment because of the appealing chances for an unrestrained political ascendancy of an ethnically cohesive Igbo elite if secession succeeded. As Siollun states, Decree 8 gave Ojukwu 90 percent of what he demanded in his confederation option of the Aburi Accord and could have been considered to save the lives and needless loss of property of the Easterners.³⁷ Canvassing for Western allies to buy into the issue of insecurity of the lives of Easterners in other parts of Nigeria and provide logistical support for secession from the Nigerian Federation, shadows Biafra's unwillingness to accept political undercurrents that have played a predominant role in the Nigerian political realm far before its independence.

Conclusion

An analysis of the frontal and ancillary issues drawn from the images in this study privileges the rhetoric of messianic might of the typical Nigerian elite that Ojukwu represents. It highlights the hero-rebel polemics in the civil war discourse as a delicate appellation variously presented in the visual propaganda to the advantage of Ojukwu as far as the politics of secession and its tendencies in the Nigerian nation-state is concerned. The inventiveness of the cartoonists, poster artists, and photographers who scouted for poignant clichés that hover within the social milieu to establish the conceptual frame for their artistic statement only answered to the immediate needs of the time and helped to extend the propaganda discourse beyond the radio and the written text. By gauging the barometer of societal sensibilities, it is possible to determine when to appropriate the strength of Biafran ingenuity, boxing prowess, togetherness, inventiveness, legitimacy, and what needs to be highlighted to stir social action. The materiality of human action is not often foolproof, and these failings also manifested in visual form and are, therefore, essential in illuminating new positions on the war that may have been taken for granted or overwhelmed by the sentiments at the time of the war. Such visual reawakening falls into the unravelling puzzle that offers a unique strength to the image. The power of the images of the Nigerian Civil War serves to add insightful narratives to the body of the war discourse. The Biafran propaganda echoes "the image of the weak" whose evocation of weakness seems foregrounded in the political forces of the elite to achieve their desire for power at the expense of the masses they sought to protect. Sadly, as the images seem to reveal, the manipulation of images of the weak only ends up as an advantage for the elite political class in their struggle for power among themselves in Nigeria.

Notes

1 Excerpted from Mitchell 1996, pp. 74, 82.

- 2 Various accounts of the Nigerian civil war highlight the fundamental roles played by the principal actors in the crises that culminated in the war that engulfed the country for thirty months. See for example, Kirk-Greene 1971, St. Jorre 1972, Forsyth 1977, Obasanjo 1980, Madiebo 2000, and Saro-Wiwa 1989.
- 3 See Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette no. 51, vol. 53, 24 May 1966, A153 for details on the promulgation of the Unification Decree No. 34 of 1966, and the suspension of the 1963 republican constitution.
- 4 Siollun 2007 provides an interesting account of the power play within the military hierarchy after the death of Ironsi. While Lt-Colonel Gowon was chosen by northern soldiers who planned the second coup, Ojukwu insisted that Brigadier Ogundipe who was the most senior officer should become the head of the Military Government. See also Falola & Heaton 2008, p. 174; Akpeninor 2013, pp. 274-75.
- 5 Nzimiro 1982, p. 13
- 6 The term is used to accommodate the construction of the tenor or mood pictures convey in the depiction of a relatively fixed set of traits that spring from social class, race, and position of power, physiognomy, style of dress, and personality in a picture plane. This concept of personage is highlighted in Barnhurst & Nerone, 2000, pp. 72-73.
- 7 The body of extant visual materials on the Biafran propaganda are largely embedded in the print media and as mementos in private collections across the globe. Studying them together will require the blurring of difference between the major class of images that includes but not limited to wartime Posters, editorial photographs and cartoons. However, Serafini 2011, pp. 342-50, provides a veritable template and theoretical clarifications for the reading, interpretation and understanding of the multimodal statements that constitute this engagement.
- 8 Coleman 1986 pp.146-47.
- 9 There seems to be an interesting co-relationship between identity, power, and dress and personality code of African leaders of the colonial and early post-colonial period that requires psychoanalytic investigation. The examples highlighted in this study only serves to broach an extensive area of what appears a fascinating but uncharted research area. Studies by Hansen 2004, pp. 369-92, and Roach-Higgins & Eicher 1992, pp. 1-8, may well provide the direction for such engagement.
- 10 The concept of photographic portraiture serving both honorific and repressive functions was popularised by Allan Sekula. See for example Sekula, 1989 pp. 344-90. The tradition of hanging the official portraits of the head of Federal and Regional/State governments alongside the Coat of Arms at government establishments preceded the military intervention to which Ojukwu was a beneficiary and has remained the practice in Nigeria today.
- 11 Barthes 1977, p. 16.
- 12 Uwechue, 1971, p. 30.
- 13 The trademark olive-green military fatigues, beret, cigarette and rifle seemed an irresistible revolutionary symbol in Africa of the mid-60s following the Cuban revolution. Ernesto “Che” Guevara (1928-1967) was an Argentine Marxist guerrilla leader who was in the Congo in 1965 to facilitate a revolutionary war against what they termed neo-colonialism and “Yankee imperialism.” See also, Salas-del Valle February 2003.
- 14 The Ahiara Declaration was a document that sought to streamline the principles of the Biafran revolution with and the ideology of “non-alignment.” Generally agreed to be authored by a group of intellectuals under the auspices of the National Guidance Committee of Biafra, it

- was presented as a speech by the Biafran leader Emeka Ojukwu in the town of Ahiara on June 1, 1969. See Nzimiro 1982.
- 15 It still remains a potent argument that the symbolic association and predilection towards a communist styled revolution in Biafra through the principles set out in the Ahiara Declaration may have hurt its relationship with ideologically opposed would-be friendly nations in Africa and the West leading to the non-recognition of Biafra as a sovereign nation.
 - 16 A study of the Nigerian civil war seem to show a mutually opposite approach to their propaganda campaigns. While the Secessionist campaign tended to be proactive, the Federal government campaigns were either passive or reactive in style.
 - 17 Excerpts from Ita 1949, p. 15; Solarin 1963, p. 234 ; Protest committee of Nigerian Youths 1955, p. 9 as quoted in Zachernuk 1991, pp. 333-44 allude to the self-image of the elite and political class in pre-independent Nigeria.
 - 18 Tamuno 1989, p. 26.
 - 19 Ojukwu 1969, p. 49.
 - 20 Hall 1992, p. 277.
 - 21 While the study of portraits of heads of the government and political elites in Nigeria is yet to constitute a full area of scholarly inquiry, the representational traits are anchored on a rich western convention adopted since early portrait renderings by the foremost Nigerian painter, Aina Onabulu. The introduction of the flag as an accessory in the composition of post-independent official photography in Nigeria may have originated from the contradictions that the narrative of the Ojukwu imagery by the transition from “personage to person” illustrate. The exchange of temporal narrative for immediacy and emotional impact conflicts with the index of authority which the flag backdrop offers the photographic composition. For details on the “personage to person” narrative in visual studies see, for example, Barnhurst and Nerone 2000, pp. 72-74.
 - 22 Following a drop in the public opinion about the genocidal claim at the twilight of the secessionist Biafra regime, their commandos kidnapped foreign workers of the Italian oil firm AGIP drawing yet again world attention to itself. As illustrated in the cartoon, Ojukwu may have been portrayed as unreliable in his dealings with perceived friends since Italy and the Vatican was at the forefront of sending relief to Biafra. See Doron 2014, pp.137-56.
 - 23 See cover page image at <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19680823,00.html>
 - 24 See text of Ojukwu’s call from exile, issued through the Biafran Information Agency in Geneva and reproduced verbatim in *The Times*, 16 January 1970. <http://www.dawodu.com/ojukwu2.htm>. Accessed 12 February 2015.
 - 25 See further analysis in <https://www.africanstudies.northwestern.edu/docs/publications-research/working-papers/etiido-inyang-2013.pdf>
 - 26 It is interesting to note how the artists managed classic literary characters and converted them to visual metaphors for propaganda purposes. It stands therefore to reason that most of these visuals were largely meant for the literate reading audience that had become opinion leaders in their various communities. According to Zachernuk 1991, the population of this educated class had peaked significantly in the early 60s.
 - 27 According to Charles Perry Trumbull, “the Oxbridge Club, a fraternity based at Oxford and Cambridge University, had active circles in Nigeria. These men were considered special and highly respectable. Therefore, instead of being bitter or resentful in case they did not have

similar opportunities, they were proud that their leader fit the Igbo ideal.” Quoted in Trumbull 1973.

28 Freeman 2010, p. 244.

29 Ukeagbu 2005, pp.1395-423.

30 Uwechue 1972, p. 19.

31 Ebbe 2010, pp. 41-45.

32 Dick Tiger was the middleweight boxing champion of the world after beating Gene Fulmer in October 1962 in San Francisco. He successfully defended the title in Ibadan, Nigeria, on August 10th 1963 to become the second Nigerian from the Eastern Region after Hogan Kid Basse to win a boxing title, thereby reinforcing its imagery as a euphemism for power within the Nigerian context

33 Tamuno 1970, p. 565.

34 Nzimiro 1982, p. 42.

35 Gluck 2007, p. 27

36 Uwechue 1972, p. 19.

37 See Siollun 2007.

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