

## **POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN VISUAL EXPRESSION: IPOB AND THE BIAFRA QUESTION IN THE SOUTH EAST OF NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*Visual expression has played a role in influencing society, public discourse and participation in national issues, including politics. It has been a catalyst for positive social change and transformation. It represents the ideals, norms and standard acceptable group behaviours with which a people identify with and are obliged to comply for the sake of social harmony and co-habitation. Visual expression has a silent but deep impact upon the minds of viewers. Thus, the indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) has adopted it as a veritable tool in their agitation. This paper believes that the alleged persecution of IPOB by the Nigerian government has occasioned the manifestation of a new form of visual campaign that is largely political. The paper examined the role of visuals in the activities of IPOB. It reveals how the struggle for self-determination could provide space for the articulation of the rise of visual culture in the post colonial state.*

**Keywords:** Politics, activism, political activism, visual expression, IPOB, Biafra.

### **Introduction**

Biafra, officially the Republic of Biafra, was a secessionist state in Nigeria, that existed from 30 May, 1967 to January 1970. The inhabitants were mostly the Igbo people who led the secession due to economic, ethnic, cultural and religious distrust and killing of the Igbo living in the northern part of Nigeria. According to Achebe (2012) Ojukwu, citing a variety of malevolent acts directed at the mainly Igbo Easterners-such as the pogrom that claimed over thirty thousand lives, the Federal Government's failure to ensure the safety of Easterners in the face of organized genocide: and the direct incrimination of the government in the murders of its own citizens, proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Biafra from Nigeria. This secession led to a civil war with the Nigeria Government. It lasted from 1967 to 1970. The Republic of Biafra took its name from the Bight of Biafra, the Atlantic bay to its South. The inhabitants were mostly the Igbo people. Other ethnic groups that constituted the Republic were Efik, Ibibio, Anang, Ejagham, Eket, Ibeno and the Ijaw, among others.



**Plate 1:** Map of Biafra

After two-and-a-half years of the civil war, Biafra was reintegrated into Nigeria. Nonetheless, the defunct Republic of Biafra belong to the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. Serious doubts may still exist in many minds as to why Lt. Colonel Gowon (later General) suddenly did a complete turn-about from an original plan of the North to secede as he had originally planned and rather preferred to plunge Nigeria into a civil war. That war took a toll of an estimated three million lives, in an attempt to re-unite the same Nigeria he had set out initially to break up (Ezeani 2013).

While trying to justify the reason why the Igbos got involved in the war Adichie (2006) argues that throughout history, injured people have had to resort to arms in their self-defence where peaceful negotiations fail and noted that we are no exception. "We took up arms because of the sense of insecurity generated in our people by the massacres. We have fought in defence of that cause," she said.

The alleged injustice, inequity and marginalization of the South-East zone in the political leadership of Nigeria by successive governments since 1967 are popularly cited by interest groups as the underlying causes of the quest for the secession of Biafra from the Nigeria State. Ezeani (2013) stated that the envy or hatred of the Igbo is exemplified in the discriminatory treatment meted to them both as a group and as individuals. In recent time, this form of institutionalized ethnic hatred was overtly manifested in the Obasanjo Government of 1999-2007. Osagie-Jacob (2010) noted that though the Igbo voted for "Obasanjo more than anyone else" he did not hide his hatred of the people. This commentator goes further:

While Chief Obasanjo on many occasions travelled down to Ogun and Oyo states to resolve political disputes during his last reign of terror, he caused mayhem to be unleashed on Anambra State. Police-men under his cover looked the other way when properties worth about N2b were being burnt down. During the eight years of his rule, this state knew no peace. He hunted down and disgraced by way of a national broadcast an Igbo Minister who collected bribe of N30m but refused to sanction his cousin, a former Director in Public service, who stole N400m! Also, his lawyer friend and tribesman who was paid N250m for registering a company and other services is still above the law.

Osagie-Jacobs (2010) believes, "The genocide against the Igbo in northern Nigeria and the so called war to keep Nigeria one is one of the most vicious inhumanity of man to man since Cain slew Abel. The irony in the Igbo-Nigerian politics is that though they are the innocent victims, they are intimidated to believe they are the guilty ones". These underlying factors were currently reinforced by the glaring under representation of the Igbos in the current president Buhari led government. The new government reportedly favoured other regions in its political appointments over the south east region. An analysis by Premium Times on 28th of August 2015 showed that 75% of the 29 appointments made by the president are from northern Nigeria while southern part had only 25%. A further breakdown of the analysis showed the Northwest had 41% while the Southeast zone had 0% ([www.premiumtimesng.com](http://www.premiumtimesng.com)).

The Igbo opine that they may have lost political relevance in Nigeria and in the current government in terms of appointments and leadership in the legislative arm of government due to its massive support voting for PDP, and not the current APC government. A statement credited to the President in July 2015 that he would treat the different constituency in Nigeria based on how they voted in the 2015 presidential election reinforces this observation.

Recently there is a resurgence of agitations by Pro-Biafra activists which once again placed the issue of the independence of Biafra in public discourse. The agitation lead by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has been described as the largest agitation by pro-Biafra supporters since the reannexation of south eastern Nigeria back to the country in 1970. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is an association that represents the indigenous ethnic groups constituting what was Biafra during the civil war and prior to the colonial era of that region of Nigeria. The organization is led by Nnamdi Kanu, a United kingdom-based

political activist who has been illegally detained by the Nigerian government since October 2015, but was released in April 2017 after more than one and half years in detention. The detention of Kanu, rather than quieten his followers in the South-East instead escalated the agitation. Many innocent lives have been lost in clashes between the agitators and different arms of the law enforcement. The detention brought Kanu from obscurity to global limelight and made him a hero among his followers thereby emboldening his followers in their agitation for the restoration of the sovereignty of Biafra from Nigeria. The organization believes that the lack of common values between Biafra and the other parts of Nigeria makes their unification a mirage. The organization has remained very peaceful in its effect at restoring Biafra. As is the case with many post colonial states in Black Africa, the Nigerian State has descended heavily on the members with little concern for its peaceful stance. Nigeria maintains that the organization is illegal and pursues an unlawful secessionist aim that threatens the territorial integrity of Nigeria.

However, IPOB is not deterred by the persecution by the Nigerian government in their quest for Biafra. The organization has indulged in political activism in the recent times using different methods and approaches such as sit-at-home, peaceful protest, broadcast medium: the radio Biafra, among others. Visual expression forms part of the text and texture of indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) agitation. These are protest Art which comprise of works such as the visual icons, banners, posters, and other printed materials. These works tend to be ephemeral, characterized by their portability and disposability, and are frequently not authored or owned by any person. Their form of protest art also includes (but not limited to) performance, site specific installations, graffiti and street art that cross the boundaries of art genres, media and disciplines. This paper examines visual expression in political activism, and also converses mediums of visual expression used by IPOB in political activism in Nigeria.

### **Background**

Authors have argued that the struggle for self determination by groups have constitute many varieties of political activism, from the face-to-face conversations to massive protest. A proper historicizing of face-to-face conversations to massive protests brings Achebe (2012)'s "There was a country" to mind. Achebe argues that failure to implement resolutions reached in a meeting and to act on issues pertaining to a country's sovereignty could lead to secession. He pointed to the fact that there were increasing indications that Northern leaders never had any intention of implementing the settlement negotiated at Aburi. Ojukwu at this

point was exasperated by what he saw as purposeful inaction from Gowon. Adichie (2006) gave an overview of the promise, hope, and disappointment of the Biafra war. She examines the state of Nigeria before the war, the wave of suspicion and violence that led to it and the hardship it brought to the Igbos. Ezeani's "In Biafra Africa Died" questioned the use of gun battle, such as: what and where is Nigeria today after spilling the blood of millions of people in undertaking the task to keep Nigeria one? From what is known today, would Yakubu Gowon still consider it worthwhile going to war to have this type of "one Nigeria" though he is of the view that Emeka Ojukwu should not have led his people to secede? Madiebo in his work "The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafra Civil War" (1980) gave a gripping account of what transpired in Nigeria between 1966-1970. The book is a first-class manual for anyone who wants to know the Biafra military machine and when it eventually collapsed to the Nigerian onslaught.

Forsyth (1969) narrated the heart wrenching account of 1966 coups, the massacre of eastern Nigerians, the pulsating operations in the theatres of war and kwashiorkor that brought Biafra to her knees. Others have questioned the use of diplomacy in the quest for self determination. For example the Punch Newspaper of September 21, 2016 on its page 10 gave an account of the arrest of 12 pro-Biafra protesters in Enugu as they were canvassing for the sit-at-home protest in all parts of the South-East and South-South Nigeria which is part of the group's plan to stage rallies in major cities of the world on September 23, 2016. Sunday Punch of September 24, 2016, page 11, IPOB argued that the sit-at-home protest was initiated to further compound Nigeria's economic misery. The statement signed by the media and publicity secretary of IPOB, Mr. Emma Powerful said "protests took place in all the continents of the world". A former President General of the Ohanaeze Ndigbo (An Apex Igbo Cultural group) Dr. Dozie Ikedife in the Punch of Wednesday September 28, 2016, page 18, described the comment credited to president Buhari for Igbo Youths to forget Biafra as unfortunate. Speaking on the September 23 sit-at-home IPOB order, Ikedife said it was a huge success.

Many authors have given their perspectives on Biafra and the activities of IPOB: Ike (1993), Uwechue (1971) and Ekwensi (1976). Others are the Punch, the Sun and Vanguard Newspapers, among others. However, little attention has been given to the use of visual images in all of these activities.

## **Visual Expressions**

Mayer (2011) states that visual creations are “special expressions” because they effectively convey or communicate feelings and ideas in visual form. That means every work created or designed has a story in it. This story is hidden in the object. Once a visual object or piece is presented, it stimulates different kinds of interpretations from different observers. Visual expression moves the viewer to admire the talented artist and to feel the expressed emotions themselves. Mankind has thought in visual terms since the dawn of time. People painted long ago before they could read and write. One only has to think of the power of ancient cave paintings in bringing a long forgotten world to life to realize the power of visual expression. Art has been highly prized right down through the centuries because it connects with man at an emotional level bringing about incredibly strong reactions and feelings.

Nonetheless the indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) uses visual expression as a veritable tool to convey their ideas, feelings, values, message, anger, agitation, and quest for secession from Nigeria.

### **Visual Expression in Political Activism**

Visual expression serves many functions in Political activism, some of them aimed at producing knowledge and solidarity within the group of protesters and others as a means of communicating to those outside what the protest is all about. It is very important in forging group solidarity, a sense of belonging and common purpose. It is a means of overcoming fear and anxiety in trying situations. Visual expression is a great recruiting tool which has been used by all sides of the political spectrum to transmit ideology. It is important in creating and communicating a collective narrative articulating “who we are, where we come from, what we stand for and what we are against”. Visual expression forms part of the text and texture of political protest, and once codified and objectified serves as a bridge between movements, past, present and future. Wendy (2013) states that social movements produce such works as the signs, banners, posters, and other printed materials used to convey a particular cause or message.

### **Mediums of Visual Expression used by IPOB in Political Activism**

The pro-Biafra group has a goal of actualizing an independent state; it however used different strategies and approaches in its agitations. It makes use of different mediums of visual expressions to demonstrate its anger, objectives and vision. These mediums include: Placards, Posters, Flags, Banners, Polo shirts/tee shirts, scarfs, caps, among others.

### **Placards**

A placard is a [notice](#) installed in a public place, like a small [card](#), [sign](#), or [plaque](#). It can be attached to or hung from a [vehicle](#) or [building](#) to indicate information about the vehicle operator or contents of a vehicle or building (Lorre, 2014). It can also refer to paperboard signs or notice carried by [picketers](#) or [demonstrators](#). It is a [large piece](#) of [card](#), [paper](#), with a [message](#) written or [printed](#) on it, often [carried](#) in [public places](#) by [people](#) who are [complaining](#) about something: A placard is placed on a building to indicate special information about that building. Temporary placards may be placed on buildings as warning signs over [tenting](#) to indicate the building is being [fumigated](#) so that no one should enter. IPOB use placards with different inscriptions to propagate messages to the world with respect to their political struggle for freedom from the state of Nigeria.



**Plate 2:** IPOB members carrying placards during protest

## Posters

A poster is a “public” paper conveying information through text (words) and/or graphic images (symbols or pictures). It is usually designed to be displayed vertically on a wall or window and is large enough to be seen and read from a relatively short distance. Its main target audience is the person walking by. Morris (2015) is of the view that a poster must convey its message with immediacy and purpose, because people on the street are often in a hurry. Posters are sometimes huge and can be seen from a long distance and may appear along highways (on bill boards) or on the sides of buildings.

Also according to Morris (2015) posters may also appear in much smaller versions, sometimes like a postcard, and are called handbills. Whatever the size or shape, posters have a job to do and that is to convey information. IPOB uses posters to create awareness, express their grievances, make their demands and make their plight known to the public



**Plate 3:** An IPOB member displaying a poster with Namdi Kanu's portrait, demanding his freedom

## Flags

According to Calvert (2014), a flag is a piece of fabric (most often rectangular or quadrilateral) with a distinctive design that is used as a symbol, as a signaling device, or as decoration. The term *flag* is also used to refer to the graphic design employed, and flags have since evolved into a general tool for rudimentary signalling and identification, especially in environments where communication is similarly challenging (such as the maritime environment where semaphore is used) (Calvert, 2014). National flags are potent patriotic symbols with varied wide-ranging interpretations, often including strong military associations due to their original and ongoing military uses. Flags is a piece of cloth, usually rectangular and attached to a pole at one edge, that has a pattern that shows it represents a country or a group, or has a particular meaning (Calvert, 2014).



**Plate 4:** Biafran Flag

The Flag was created by the Biafran Government and raised 30 May 1967 a flag of red, black and green, horizontally, with a rising sun from the Coat of Arms (of the old Eastern Province) in gold in the centre. The design and colours are based on the Pan-African flag designed by Marcus Garvey's Union. The eleven rays of the sun represented the eleven provinces of Biafra. The lowest rays were usually more or less horizontal and the remaining rays spread evenly. The rays were normally long and slender, and usually slightly wavy. The three Pan-African colors on the flag represent:

Red: the blood that unites all people of Black African ancestry, and shed for liberation;

Black: black people whose existence as a nation, though not a nation-state, is affirmed by the existence of the flag; and

Green: the abundant natural wealth of Africa. (Znaimerowski, 2001).

The IPOB always sample Biafran flag in the course of their demonstrations to let the world know that Biafran state is still alive, and will emerge someday.



**Plate 5:** IPOB protest the continued detention of Nnamdi Kanu

### **Banners**

The word derives from French word "bannière" and late Latin *bandum*, a cloth out of which a flag is made (Latin: *banderia*, Italian: *bandiera*, Portuguese: *bandeira*, Spanish: *bandera*) (Danum, 2014). A banner is a flag or other piece of cloth bearing a symbol, logo, slogan or other message. Gina (2015) states that the banners for every business or organization are very important because through these banners it represents the company as a whole; it also shows the values and culture of the business aside from being a promotional flag and it helps make an impression for their target market. Banners are effective tools for the business to sell their products or services to their target market because it can create a unique identity for the company and they can also create their own design and customize the design of these banners. The IPOB inscribe symbol, logo, slogan or other message that are pertinent on banners used in their political activism.



**Plate 6:** IPOB members with a banner showing murdered Igbo indigenes by Fulani herdsmen in the South East Nigeria

### **Polo Shirts/T-shirts**

A polo shirt, also known as a golf shirt and tennis shirt, is a form of shirt with a collar, a [placket](#) with typically two or three buttons, and an optional pocket. The T-shirts can be in v-neck round neck without any collar (McKean, 2013). The IPOB members wear polo shirts/t-shirts with various inscriptions at the back, including the Biafran flag during their political protest.



**Plate 7:** An IPOB supporter wearing a white t-shirt with an inscription 'This is Biafra' and a Biafra flag at the back

## Scarfs

A scarf, also known as a Kremer, muffler or neck-wrap, is a piece of fabric worn around the neck, near the head or around the waist for warmth, cleanliness, fashion, or religious reasons. They can come in a variety of different colours (Lorre, 2014). In cold climates, a thick knitted scarf, often made of wool, is tied around the neck to keep warm. This is usually accompanied by a warm hat and heavy coat. In drier, dustier warm climates, or in environments where there are many airborne contaminants, a thin headscarf, kerchief, is often worn over the eyes and nose and mouth to keep the hair clean. Over time, this custom has evolved into a fashionable item in many cultures, particularly among women. Some IPOB members were scarf designed with the colour of Biafran flag and the logo during their political protest in a bid to show their solidarities on the struggle for the libration of Biafrans.



**Plate 8:** An IPOB member wearing a scarf designed with biafran flag colour and logo as a mark of solidarity

## Caps

A cap is a form of headgear. Caps have crowns that fit very close to the head and have no brim or only a visor. They are typically designed for warmth and, when

including a visor, blocking sunlight from the eyes. They come in many shapes and sizes. The IPOB members wear caps designed with the colour of Biafran flag and the logo as a mark of solidarity during their political protest.



**Plate 9:** An IPOB member wearing a cap designed with Biafran flag colour and logo as a mark of solidarity to the liberation struggle.

## **Conclusion**

The indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) has indulged in political activism in the recent times using different mediums of visual expressions including: posters, flags, banners, placards, polo shirts/t-shirts, caps scarfs with bold inscriptions such as "Give us Biafra", "In Biafra we stand", "We are not terrorists", amongst others. Visual expression impacts deeply upon the minds of viewers and sympathizers, thus the pro-Biafra group uses it to demonstrate its anger, vision and objectives.

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