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**AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION
CAMPAIGNS IN THE SOUTHEAST GEOPOLITICAL ZONE OF
NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The study investigated the Audience in the Southeast geopolitical region of Nigeria's reception of the national integration campaign. This region has been the site for increased secession propaganda by pro-Biafra media agents. Seven national integration campaigns on the Nigerian television Authority constitute the major thrust of the media campaigns for national integration which have enjoyed broadcast dissemination. The study is anchored on the encoding/decoding theory by Stuart Hall (1974). The theoretical position applied in the study explores three dimensions of integration campaign text; the worldview, Clarity of message, and concurrence with the personal and social life of audiences. The study adopted a qualitative approach. The research setting is Enugu State which was the capital of the breakaway Biafra state and continues to be the epicenter of Biafra social movements. In-depth interview was the data collection instruments. The themes of the qualitative data revealed general indifference to the national issues, the perception that the integration campaign as a failure, there is the perception that integration is a government agenda, there is also the theme of perceived superficiality of national integration campaigns, the ethnic affiliations overriding national interests and misgovernance. The national integration campaign rhetoric is problematic in the Southeastern region. The study recommends that the Government lead sincere efforts at reconciliation of diverse ethnic-religious groups in the Nigerian state.

Keywords: Southeast, geopolitical Zone, Nigeria, National Integration, Governance

Introduction

The southeastern geopolitical region of Nigeria has been the theatre for recurrent Biafra-themed agitations. Ever since the Nigerian Civil War, which ended in the year 1970, the quest for secession from the Nigerian state by splinter groups from the largely *Igbo* ethnic group has been a recurrent issue. In recent times, the push for the realization of the Biafra state has been led by a self-styled leader, *Mazi Nnamdi Kanu*, who has used the media channel Radio Biafra to win over sympathy for the actualization of the Biafra secessionist agenda (Maiangwa, 2016; Chime-Nganya, Ezeji & Ezegwu, 2017; Chiluwa, Taiwo & Ajiboye, 2020). The new phase of the separatist agitations relies heavily on the use of media messages and the reach of broadcast channels to the people, especially in the southeastern geopolitical region and the Diaspora ethnic *Igbos*, with a strong appeal predicated on a grievance base of years of marginalization of the *Igbos* in the Nigerian state and a future assured in the Biafra State (Chiluwa, 2018; Ekpo, 2019).

Strategies adopted by the Nigerian state to counter separatist propaganda include military action against agents who are deemed to be engaged in separatist activities, political negotiations and concessional arrangements, and the use of broadcast channels to promote national integration through strategic national integration campaigns (Adigun, 2018; Abada, Omeh & Okoye, 2020; Adefisoye & Ariyo, 2019). Of particular interest to this study are the media campaigns of national integration. The national integration campaigns consist of media texts strategically put together to persuade the public of the primacy of the Nigerian identity held together by the state and the need to forge a cohesive unit among seemingly disparate ethnic-religious groups within the Nigerian state.

National integration campaigns can be understood as an advocacy campaign defined by Madroane (2018) as "public engagement campaigns with policy change and societal transactional goals (p.147); the goal of such campaigns is persuasion. National integration campaigns, as shown on the network service of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), consist of persuasive texts in the structure of an argument for cohesion among ethno-religious groups in the Nigerian State. The use of rhetoric's plays out in the form advanced by Fairclough & Fairclough (2012) where there is a circumstantial premise (detailing the current state of affairs), a value premise (consisting of an ethical commitment to unity), a goal premise (where the producers advocate for a change in the circumstance to the promoted values) and a call to action (in which the public is enjoined to carry out activities that foster cohesion as opposed to divisive acts) (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Madroane, 2016; Pinga, 2016).

It is from this understanding that one can evaluate the national integration campaigns on Nigerian television. Seven media campaigns on national integration that are very popular are Nigeria's "*one nation one people*", "*the national anthem*" by Glo, the "*One Nigeria, one nation campaign*", "*A great nation with great people*," "*This land*" "*One Nigeria, One nation*" and the musical "*let us live together*" by the defunct singing group *Kush*. The integration message "*Nigeria one nation one people*" is a minute-long audio-visual presentation that begins with images of First Republic Nigerian leaders. This integration message hinges the nationalism and its accompanying ideals on the vision of the founding fathers of the post-independent Nigerian state. The narrative of this presentation is epitomized in the text excerpt from the voice-over reproduced below:

"...These patriots worked together to achieve independence for one united Nigeria. Although some may say Nigeria is a mistake, we all know that the Almighty never makes mistakes.

The *Glo-sponsored* integration message is a performance of the national anthem which begins with a young girl in the colors of the flag, green and white, from a platform that is heard by many people in different geographical and cultural terrains. This campaign is intended to evoke a positive feeling of nationalism as a primary identity. The integration campaign titled "*a great nation with great people*" is a voiceless presentation with a background instrumental performance of the Nigerian anthem and progressive alteration of images that begin with the Nigerian flag and other national symbols cutting

across the major ethnic groups. The integration message "*This land*" is a musical performance by an ensemble of iconic artists and celebrities. Here again, the campaign begins with a depiction of a conflict situation and the victims. The musical performance proceeds with the argument that there is no need for division, as it could lead to undesirable consequences. *Let us live together* is a musical performance by a defunct music group known as *Kush*, a group comprising three females and a male; each of the female singers presents a verse in Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa. The theme of the presentation is the futility of acrimony and the emphasis on the brotherhood shared by all Nigerians. The integration message "One Nigeria, one nation" is a 2 minutes 51 seconds long audiovisual presentation of a performance in the bilingual format of English and Hausa.

The three major ethnic groups of Nigeria, the Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, are referred to in the presentation along with the cultural dressing of each region. These integration messages were produced to persuade the public in a call to action aimed at fostering unity, promoting a strong sense of nationalism and easing simmering tensions across ethnic groups. It follows the pattern of narrating a circumstantial premise of disunity, conflict, and the likely consequences of such dispositions. The value premise is usually the identification and promotion of cohesion and unity based on a common shared national identity. The goal premise evident in the campaign is the fostering of unity based on a strong sense of Nigerian identity. The call to action is the promotion of activities and attitudes of friendliness, hospitality, and national brotherhood.

The production and dissemination of these integration campaigns on the network service of the NTA utilize the reach of the broadcast channel, which is national in outlook, to reach audiences across the federation. Madroane (2016) stated that every campaign adopts a strategic approach to communication through targeting and clear objectives, and has a clear role for the public. National integration campaigns are to be influenced to the extent that they become unification agents. This role of the public is based on the reception of the integration messages encoded in the campaign. For people in South-Eastern Nigeria who are exposed to the broadcast stations and the integration campaigns, it is imperative to investigate the reception of the integration campaign messages in light of competing ideological variants in Biafra-themed media messages. It is pertinent to examine the reception of the ethos, message, and values in integration campaigns in the Southeastern geopolitical zone where separatist media is very prominent.

The theoretical basis for reception studies

Studies on the reception of campaign messages began to flourish with a paradigm shift in the core assumptions about how the media affects the public. The earliest theories of mass media assumed media audiences to be passive receivers of media messages. This was when the transmission views were commonplace (Gillespie & Schiffman, 2018). A paradigm shift opened up when scholars questioned the transmission view. Stuart Hall (1974) is widely credited with the reception of the media approach. This paradigm shift was aided largely by a movement toward the notion of the "cultural audience." Audiences exposed to the media had a mediating variable of their cultural identities (Decherney, 2018; Sarisakaloglu, 2020).

Studies along this line operated with the assumption that audiences are active interpreters of the media messages it follows; therefore, insight into how media messages are received will depend on the internal perspectives of the audience (Riddell, 1997). Cultural audience studies produced three strains of research areas: reception studies, the media ethnography approach, and constructivism (Alasuutari, 1999). Studies that are modeled on the core assumption of Stuart Hall's (1974) reception approach utilize the encoding/decoding theory by Hall (1980) to explain the process of media message reception. There is the basic assumption that the understanding of a media message is not determined solely by the producer who encodes it but by the receiver who decodes the media text.

The process of media reception unfolds in three dimensions; firstly, there is the aspect of worldviews. This is the ontological, axiological, praxeological, and epistemological positions that undergird the media text. Integration campaigns have embedded worldviews in the message. The dominant hegemonic position is either shared by the audience or not. Where the audience is in agreement with the dominant position, there is concurrence. Reception for Kimumuwe (2012) occurs at this level when the audience shares the ideology of the media message.

The second dimension is clarity. The media message is clear when the message is not ambiguous to the receiver. The receiver can understand the arguments in the campaign. The third dimension is the relatedness of the encoded text and the frameworks of the receiver (Kimumwe, 2012). The media use is assumed to be shaped by past experiences and the identities that have been forged in personal and social life. Puustinen (2006) explained that reception at this level assumes that the audience is in a negotiation position, as the audience can "decode the sender's message within the context of the dominant cultural and societal views" (p.9). Hall (1993) noted that the audience could have oppositional views when the audience who has decoded the message chooses to decipher a differing interpretation based on their societal beliefs. Some studies have provided empirical validation for the reception approach (Murdock, 2017; Steiner, 2016; Kimumwe, 2012).

Applying the encoding/decoding model to the reception of the National integration campaign

The national integration campaigns explored in this study have an ontological position of nationalism; the primacy of national identity ahead and above ethnic and religious identities. National identity is thus promoted as immutable and a core organizing principle for the divergent groups within the geographical bounds of the sovereign state. The primacy of national identity is given in the integration campaigns. It is necessary to have this ideological base as an organizing principle. The integration campaigns are received in the dominant languages of English, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba to enhance clarity. However, the third dimension is an important dimension which situates this study. The context of audiences in the Southeastern region creates a social situation where oppositional views might be expected. With exposure to contrary messaging of Biafra separatism, it is important to investigate the reception of the national integration campaign. It is therefore important to query how audiences in the Southeastern region receive the national integration campaigns on the network service of the NTA.

Research Method

The study adopts a qualitative approach. This approach is adopted as the facts of the reception are best elicited in unstructured data collection formats. The research setting is Enugu State. Enugu State is in the Southeast geopolitical region in Nigeria. Enugu was the defunct capital of the Southeastern region in post-independence Nigeria. Today, it is a state that has been a site of pro-Biafra resistance since the civil war era. Enugu was the capital of the breakaway Biafra State in the civil war and still bears relics of the state of the resistance. It was "declared the capital of the breakaway republic of Biafra by the defunct leader Lt. Col. *Chukwuemeka Ojukwu*. In a report by the *Guardian* newspaper of the United Kingdom, the situation was described thus;

"The Biafra question and the possibility of "Biafrexit" remain alive, as shown by the presence of a recent government-mandated military operation codenamed python dance II... A spokesman at Enugu's National Archives of Nigeria, who wished to stay anonymous, would only confirm the city's emotional pull: it is the epicenter of the Igbo race... Radio Biafra, founded in London by Nnamdi Kanu, is keeping the flame alive ... (Hoad, 2017)."

Enugu State, with its largely Igbo-dominated population, remains a place where Biafra ideology is quite popular. The study adopts a purposive sampling technique. Residents are selected with the inclusion criteria of being of the ethnic Igbo group and having a proximate experience of the civil

war or the immediate post-war reconstructions in the state. An in-depth interview data collection technique was used. The researcher intended to interview 62 respondents; however, a point of saturation was reached by the 12th respondent, as no new information was received. This is in line with the recommendations on discontinuing when a point of saturation is reached (Saunders, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam & Jinks, 2018). It is an unstructured data collection technique that is flexible. The following points are outlined flexibly in the data collection instrument.

1. Awareness of national integration campaigns
2. Views about the message of the campaign
3. Respondents' views on the immutability of the Nigerian state (Ideology)
4. Clarity of the campaign message
5. Acceptance of the need for national integration
6. Support for cohesion as promoted in integration campaigns

These seven points are flexibly rendered and oppositional views will allow for an in-depth explanation from the respondent. To analyze the data, Akinyode and Khan (2019) suggest the reading and re-reading of data. Data coding is defined by Creswell (2007) as "a procedure of fragmenting and classifying texts to form explanations and comprehensive themes in the data" (p. 167). The thematic network is a process that builds from the ground up. The starting point is the identification of themes, where a theme is a standalone unit of meaning in a text; similar themes are collated to form an organizing theme, and a collection of organizing themes forms a global theme.

Research findings

The core themes in the in-depth interview are as follows

Indifference to national issues

Integration campaign as a failure

Integration as a government agenda

The superficiality of national integration campaigns

Ethnic affiliations overriding national interests

Mis-governance

These themes were derived from the thematic analysis of the data from the interviewed respondents.

Indifference to National Issues

Some respondents expressed indifference to national issues. Their responses indicated that issues about the Nigerian state do not resonate with them. The respondent thus holds the view that anything tied to the national identity does not command attention.

Integration campaigns as a failure

This is a major theme reiterated by most respondents. There is the view that the campaign is a failure either because the campaigns did not produce the desired effect or that the people do not want to internalize the message of the campaigns. These responses indicating failure indicate the means and the outcomes in behavior. The means of disseminating the integration campaigns are perceived to be defective, while the attitude and behavior of the people do not reflect the integration messages.

Integration as a Government Agenda

There is the view that integration is an agenda of the government. This is also related to the view that it is run on state-owned media. This idea considers integration as the objective of the government.

The superficiality of National Integration Campaigns

The cluster of themes that expresses the superficiality of the national integration campaigns identifies that the campaigns lack depth. They do not address the core issues or are just "lip service" to the objectives. There is an observation of the theme that the campaigns are superficial. This implies that

they are shallow, unconvincing, and barely scratch the surface of integration. The perception is captured across most respondents' views. A few excerpts are needed to explore this sense;

We cannot continue to pretend that we are one people in words and not action (interview respondent, 2020).

These responses indicate that the campaigns are detached from a lived reality. There is the view that the campaigns do not address the facts of integration on the ground. It is just some idealist message put out to fulfill a duty with little effect, as it is superficial. The media thus champions a campaign with no real substance. The campaigns are performances devoid of a referent in actuality, as their depiction does not translate to living beyond the presentation. Another respondent had this to say:

In my opinion, I believe the national integration campaign has not been received because if it were, I would have one nation and one people. We deceive ourselves that we are all Nigerians, but the eastern part ...and the western parts know that if you find yourself in an organization, then you'd have the idea of ethnicity and sometimes religion will come into play. We are not yet one nation, one people; in a nutshell, the campaign is not well-received (*interviewed respondent, 2020*).

From the response above, it is evident that there is a pervasive social force of ethnicity that makes integration campaigns ineffective. Another respondent puts it this way:

National integration campaigns are not popular with the people; they are only things that people mouth at the level of grumblings. Most of the agencies that carry such campaigns are corrupt (*interviewed respondent, 2020*).

Another respondent puts it this way:

No, it is not necessary to campaign to somebody when the person does not benefit from what you are doing... campaigns are for one Nigeria, for Nigeria (how) do you make it to be one? (I) am sorry if you say we are one, then we are beginning to deceive ourselves...then how do you take them seriously? (*Interviewed respondent, 2020*).

The two respondents portray a situation where the campaigns are just mere media campaign rhetoric: "a language designed to have a persuasive effect but apparently lacks sincerity or meaningful content." The actuality is the ubiquity of social forces of corruption in the media agencies and ethnic cleavages, which translate to a social situation that cannot yield to integration messages. A respondent refers to integration messages as deception or deceit, which implies that the messages intend to portray a situation that is not as it is. A couple of excerpts will illustrate the perceived superficiality of the campaigns:

Well, like I said earlier, on the surface of it, it looks nice and catchy, but in reality, it is an abysmal failure because there is nothing to show for it that people are proud of being Nigerian(s) after watching these campaigns of history to them it doesn't bring any pride in people ... we see that there is still injustice ...an average Nigerian is not proud...he does not see his aspirations (coming to) be(*interviewed respondent, 2020*).

Another respondent said:

As already stated, if by receiving, you mean if it is acted out, then I will say no. This is because I don't get to see it properly acted out as we receive the campaigns. So I will say it is more of "listening and less of doing or action (*interviewed respondent 2020*).

This is a major theme as it is reflected in most respondents' text.

Ethnic Affiliation Overriding National Interest

The ethnic affiliation was constructed as a more potent organizing identity than the national identity. Respondents clearly expressed that ethnic cleavages were prioritized ahead and above national identity. Responses are provided below to elaborate on this point. The respondents utilize ethnic affiliation as descriptors for the other. Hence, the reference to the Igbo man, the Hausa, or the Yoruba is a primary tag of the other person, as opposed to the language use that puts the Nigerian tag before the ethnic affiliation. This contrasts with a statement that would read "if a Nigerian from Igbo land." This implies that in expressing the power of ethnic affiliation, the respondents reinforce this power in discourse. They are both victims of the ethnic affiliation power and complainants of the problem. Ethnic affiliation is a very powerful contextual force.

Mis-Governance

The notion of mis-governance or government misbehavior is a major theme in the responses. Respondents largely hold the view that political actors who hold positions of governance discredit national integration campaigns through their misbehavior. The responses indicate that political actors do not provide the goods of the offices and such failures rub off on the citizens' perceptions about the nation.

Discussion of findings

The production of the national integration campaigns is done with a strategic objective of fostering unity. However, the reception of the campaign in the area of the study is mediated by lived experiences and social facts of the perceived state of affairs in the Nigerian state. Respondents indicated that the national integration campaigns are not far-reaching, as there is a grievance base that interferes with the internalization of the national integration campaigns. The theme of indifference to national issues is a reflection of the idea that there is neither an emotional or cognitive linkage with the Nigerian state by respondents. This absence makes support for integration campaigns elusive among the respondents. Some other respondents consider the integration campaign a failure, as it has not reached the stated objectives of unifying the Nigerian populace. There is also the perception of the campaigns as a government agenda. This perception reflects a distinction between the people on the one side and the government on the other. This distinction puts salience on the difference between the categories. Such distinction breeds suspicion about the government's goals. The notion that the campaigns are superficial ties in with other themes of indifference and the evaluation of the campaigns as a failure. The notion of the social identity of ethnicity also reveals that ethnic affiliation is the primary organizing framework for the Nigerian people instead of national identity. The perception of misgovernance shows that the failure of the government to provide goods for the citizens has made the agency of government problematic for the people in the region. What emerges is that the third dimension of reception in the theoretical formulation of Hall (1974) has an empirical referent in this study. The respondents in Southeastern Nigeria find that the national integration campaigns do not resonate with their personal and social life. There is thus a disconnection between the intended goals of the campaigns and the lived reality of many in the region.

Conclusion

The national integration campaign rhetoric is problematic in the Southeastern region. The region, which has remained a bastion for separatists' agitations, is prone to be more sympathetic to the polemics in Biafra propaganda than the rhetoric in national integration campaigns. The integration campaigns are perceived to be detached from the lived reality of the people in the region hence, it has not been well received and are ineffective.

Recommendations

The findings of this study reveal that the focal points of dealing with the problems of national integration lie outside the media strategy adopted. The lived experiences of those in Southeastern Nigeria are the area of intervention for the improvement of national cohesion. Based on this observation, the following recommendations are made;

1. The Government must lead sincere efforts at reconciliation of diverse ethnic-religious groups in the Nigerian state. This is because the grievance base that fuels poor reception of integration campaigns reflects a disconnection between the state and the people
2. The national integration campaign has to be produced around the circumstantial facts of the lived reality of people in the southeastern region. This will be important in identifying with the lived reality as a basis for further value judgment that underlies the integration effort.
3. Lastly, there is a need for dialogue among the seemingly disparate people in the Nigerian state. This will unhinge integration as a government agenda and put it within the purview of citizens.

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