

Post-nationalism and Recollecting the Nigerian Civil War Memories through Hero Beer Brands Marketing in Igboland, Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract

Since the failed attempt at secession from Nigeria in 1970, after a 30-month civil war, the Igbo ethnic nationality—who constituted the majority of the defunct Biafra Republic, have sought avenues to (re)create the memories of the short-lived country. In the political space, they attempted establishing *Ohaneze Ndigbo*—as an umbrella socio-political organization for recreating and projecting the Igbo agenda. This, to a large extent, has not achieved the desired objectives. Not surprisingly, militia groups have sprung up since 1999 when an Igbo failed to secure Presidential race ticket to agitate the actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra. These groups include Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and recently the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). However, pop circle provided the much needed social space for Biafra nostalgic displays. In 2012, *Hero Beer* advert better known as *O Mpa*, a coined greeting style by Onitsha people for great achievers with reference to Ojukwu father figure in the Biafran struggle was launched. This study examines the nexus between beer advertorials and ethnic identity using the Igbo example. It argues that the advertorials successfully permeated into the psychology of Igbo beer drinkers, who attached ethnic connections to them and appropriated them as theirs, using the brands to recreate the memories of Biafran struggle of Independence from 1967-1970.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Ethnic Identity, Appropriation, Branding and Advertorials.

Introduction

Without doubt, the absence of a collective national identity has been a common observable phenomenon in most nation-states in Africa—a development which many scholars have attributed to the artificiality of colonial creations. (Falola, 2004, Osaghea, 1994, and Nnoli, 1998) Emphasis on cultural distinctiveness and expression of primary loyalty to particular ethnic group has therefore shaped social and political discourse in post-colonial Africa. On the other hand, considerable efforts have been made to look at its dynamics and manifestations in different societies. Nevertheless, understanding the manifestations and expressions of cultural and ethnic identity in Africa entails recognition of the broader embedded social and political contexts that fashions group identities and distribution of resources among the constituent nationalities.

Among the Igbo of southeast Nigeria—one of the major three ethnic groups of the country, ethnic distinctiveness and inclinations to cultural sentiments have been a recurring issues that have shaped their social and political dispositions in the Nigerian milieu. Between 1967 and 1970, the Igbo attempted a secession from Nigeria under the auspices of the Republic of Biafra. This ambition was short-lived as a civil war ensued in which the republic was crushed and in turn brought the end of the separatist ambition. With the ‘political’ defeat of Biafra, another

round of ethnic nationalism developed among the Igbo. First, it began with nostalgia among those who witnessed the existence of the short-lived nation, and later a renewed agitation for actualization of the state, especially among the youths. This renewed agitation was based on psychological perception of the anticipated freedom—economic and otherwise in the envisaged nation-state. As part of their continued political agitations, they formed *Ohaneze Ndigbo*—a socio-political organization that attempted recreating and projecting their ethnic agenda. This, to a large extent, did not achieve the desired objectives. Not surprisingly, this took a new fillip in 1999 when militia groups sprung up, particularly the Movement for the Actualization for the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOP) was formed. A more aggressive group that called themselves Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) emerged by 2011 adopting propaganda tools of social media to attract global attention. These groups have played significantly in reinforcement of ethnic consciousness, solidarity and nostalgic feelings of the defunct republic. The result was a growing ethnic nationalism among the group arising from political circumstances of the country and a renewed agitation for a distinct cultural and political identity.

Since 2010, there has been an emerging trend in using beer brand to rejuvenate ethnic sentiments among the Igbo in Southeast Nigeria, SABmiller, a multinational brewery and beverage company based in London, tapped into this prevailing circumstances and launched its beer brand in 2012 with the name “Hero” in Onitsha—a bursting market city on the eastern bank of the Niger River. The company sought ways to develop a deep local feel of its beer brand through identifying with the tradition of the people, showcasing their culture and a total affiliation with the Igbo nation in its advertisements. By adopting the name “Hero”, in apparent honour of Odumegwu Ojukwu—the acclaimed Igbo hero who proclaimed and headed the Igbo defunct Biafran Republic, and adopting the rising sun depicted in the Biafran flag as beer logo, the company succeeded in creating a marketing strategy and advertisements that appealed to the Igbo ethnic group. Within a short period, Hero beer has paved its way into the taste buds of Igbo beer drinkers and has become an established brand among the Igbo, not only in South-eastern region where they dominate, but all across Nigerian major cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, and Kano, where Igbo reside. This greatly shaped the pattern and purpose of beer consumption among Igbo drinking population. As a result, other brand ‘Life beer’ and ‘33 beer’ thereafter borrowed a leaf from the success story of Hero beer to illustrate the important role of cultural attachment to the growth and survival of beer brands.

This is a new trend in Nigeria’s drinking culture. With about 40 million out of the 170 million population of the country, this development among the Igbo has sparked a new concern in ethnic studies in Nigeria and Africa at large. The study therefore examines the trend of embedding beer brands into cultural environment of the Igbo group in Southeast Nigeria. It attempts an analysis of the extent to which these advertisements have influenced the choice and pattern of beer consumption among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, and how it has shaped ethno-nationalism among them.

The study examines the extent to which these advertisements have influenced the choice and pattern of beer consumption among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria. It also looked at how this marketing strategy has affected the rate of sales of the breweries under review. The study used historical descriptive and analytical method. It stems from in-depth field studies on the impact of beer advertising on preferences of beer brand and pattern of consumption among the Igbo group in Southeast Nigeria—who are found in eight of the country’s thirty-six states. The research population is restricted to the five ‘core Igbo states’—Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. Two urban centres in each of the five states were conveniently selected as the study clusters.

Survey and participant observation research designs were adopted for this study, using oral interviews and focused group discussions as instruments of data collection. A total of 250 bars, drinking joints, restaurants and hotels were observed across the research areas. 50 survey respondents participated in the structured interview sections, 5 in each of the 10 urban centres. Additionally, Newspaper advertorials, billboards, posters, banners, Radio advertorial transcripts all constitute other sources of primary data for the study. These sources provided additional insights in the assimilation of the marketing strategy and they complimented the views of the respondents.

The data gathered was analysed using discourse analysis for systematic evaluation of qualitative data. The method allowed for categorization of data and attachment of meaning to dominant discourse. Critical discourse analysis was also adopted in construction of social identity and cultural changes. This analytical approach focused on interpretation of linguistic and ethno-cultural meanings of beer advertisements in Igbo region.

Context

Beer advertising and marketing has remained an important subject that has drawn concerted scholarly attention within the field of alcohol studies. Effective advertising has therefore focused on the use of iconic brands created through cultural attachments to fashion, music, food and many others. Undoubtedly, studies have shown that choice and preferences of beer products by consumers go beyond taste differentiations and consumption satisfaction. Okonkwo (2017) posits that the choice of beer products are influenced by multi-dimensional, socio-cultural and economic factors. According to him, "alcohol is a symbolic vehicle for identifying, describing, constructing and manipulating cultural systems, values, interpersonal relationship, behavioural norms and expectations." First, the choice of beer brand is used as a situation definer. For instance, the choice of Champagne suggests celebrations (Okonkwo, 2017:142). Some others are propelled to make their choices as a display of class and social status. This is clearly seen in the dichotomy between 'foreign' and 'local' drinks in some societies. Furthermore, some choices are made as an indicator of gender classification. Gender classification has frequently been expressed in most cultures using alcohol drinking. Some drinks are largely advertised as either masculine, or feminine. Some drinks have become symbols of national identity. The examples of Scottish and Irish appropriations of Whiskey and Guinness drinks respectively as 'national drinks' demonstrate how particular drinks could be adopted as images of national cultures and values. It is in this context that the various breweries in Nigeria attempted locating their brands to the prevailing social trends.

Between 1999 and 2006, Guinness Breweries launched a highly sophisticated pan-African campaign of its beer, Guinness Stout across the African continent with astonishing and fascinating displays of an advertising character, Micheal Power. Millions of African beer consumers were thrilled by the short TV advertorial action movies of Micheal Power, which were staged in Africa with captivating scenes of the character accomplishing several near impossible assignments. The most popular of the advertorials, *Critical Assignment* focused on instilling the feeling of possibilities in seemingly impossible situations. The character succeeded in launching the 'Made of Africa' a marketing strategy that not only promoted their brand among beer drinkers across the African continent, but also made it appear pan African. The 'Guinness success story' became a turning point in beer advertising and marketing across Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Nigeria where the brewery industry witnessed a 'beer war' among the leading breweries, who

thereafter embarked on aggressive marketing campaigns to contend for influence in the country's drinking space.

From Concept of Modernity to Indigenous Advertising

A remarkable feature of Nigeria's alcohol history is the ethnic distribution of the locally produced alcohol beverages. The Hausa/Fulani in the northern region, relish in two local beverages known as *Pilo* and *Burukutu*. The Igbo and other southeast group consumed palm wine, tapped from palm trees. In the Niger-Delta area, the locally produced gin locally called *Ogogoro*, *Kai-Kai* or *Sapele Water*, distilled from fermentation of palm wine. As Okonkwo posited, palm wine production, trade and consumption thrived in this society long before their contact with European (Okonkwo, 2017). With the advent of European imperial and colonial regimes, liquor and beer brands were added to their drinking cuisine.

The arrival of Star beer in 1949, have so many impact. Few of them will be x-rayed here. For example, in 1987, about 6,000 cartoons of Star beer was exported to the United Kingdom (NBL, 1987:53). Furthermore, there was remarkable increase in governments revenue generated from the Nigerian Breweries. The financial contribution in duties and taxes for the year 1985 alone was N81 million, compared to N149 million in 1984 (NBL, 1987:53). By 1962, the Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation (ENDC) initiated an idea of brewery to participate in the booming brewing industry, and by 1963 the Golden Guinea Lager beer was first produced following the production of the Eagle Stout in 1967 (Golden Guinea Breweries Ltd 23 Years after, 1985:5). From 1980 to 1987 was a period of beer and public space with many beer brands advertising modernity.

The Resurgence of Biafra Agitation and Expression on Nostalgia in Hero Beer

Collective memories about Biafra are being revitalised and to some degree, reinvented among the Igbo. As Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999 and attempt to forge a new beginning in the post-military era, many have expected the Igbo to put away the issues of Biafra and join hands in building a new nation. Unfortunately, the era witnessed a renewed agitation and movements aimed at redressing issues of perceived Igbo marginalisation in the country which actually was the core issue of the civil war. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) which they had formed as a militia group, played significant political and psychological roles in recollection of Biafran memories in the minds of Igbo, after about two decades of 'forced silence on Biafra. In addition, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) joined in the clamour for Biafra. The activities of the later have drawn global attention and greater consciousness of Biafra among the Igbo, first, the charismatic leadership of its leader—Nnamdi Kanu has been unequalled. Second, was the ability of the group to utilize social media in mobilizing followership. These groups have played significantly in reinforcement of nationalism, solidarity and nostalgic feelings of the defunct republic. However, the advertisement of Hero beer brand provided the much desired platform for post-nationalism expression of Biafra. Ethnic coloration of beer brand thus gave rise to creation and recreation of nationalism among the Igbo people.

Hero Advertorials and Biafra Memories—An analysis

The company, Sabmiller Brewery, first captured the attention of Igbo people by constructing a big statue of Ojukwu in military uniform, with a rifle slung over his shoulder at the direction leading to its factory in Onitsha. Almost all the respondents interviewed at various beer parlours in our study area affirmed that the company's marketing techniques of christening Hero beer "O Mpa"—an Igbo greeting that literary means "oh Father" invariably made Igbo beer drinkers to cherish the beer as it became a slogan adopted in reverence and respect for late Ojukwu. More so, the company adopted the picture of the Biafran flag and the rising sun, an insignia of Biafra as the logo of the beer. It also introduced the red cork like to symbolize the Igbo chieftaincy red cap, which greatly endued the beer to Igbo people, as many respondents tagged it *Nke a bu nke anyi* (This is our own). These heroic imageries and symbolism were also appealing to the Igbo beer drinkers which they related as their symbolic national identity signifier. These insignias gave the beer brand a traditional endorsement among the elite. Hero quickly took over radio stations in Onitsha metropolis some of which include; Brilla FM Onitsha, Radio Sapiencer, Minaj Radio and Anambra Broadcasting Radio.

The company's marketing strategy of the beer attached so much emotions in its advertorials with such captions like *A New Hero Has Arrived* (meaning the rebirth of Ojukwu), Land of Heroes (referring to Igbo People). In their advertorials, the company also tagged Hero Beer with such appellations as *Mmanya e jirimara Igbo* (Drinks that Igbo are known for), *Mmanya Odogwu* (Drinks for heroes), and many other Igbo heroic expressions. Through this, the company recognized the place of linking their brand to particular locality and queued into the prevailing ethnic nostalgia to create a geographically specific beer.

Hero beer provides a window through which Igbo projected certain ideas of greatness—mostly constructed in traditional Igbo perceptions. The symbolic trends in Hero beer advertorial, imagery and dispositions have created a sense of place and pride among Igbo people, and they have structured their social events to depict the beer as a cultural product, creating a local identity around it. Thus, the symbolic imageries of beer consumption offered Igbo drinkers potent symbolic makers of identity and belonging.

THIS IS BIAFRA



Source: Photo taking from field work

It appears this brand has edged out other brands such as Star, Harp and Heineken brewed by the Nigerian Breweries, as market leaders. Available records indicate that Hero beer took sixty percent of beer sold by major distributors. The rise of sales of the hero brand became so alarming these other beer companies began distributing incentives to proprietors of retail shops and beer parlours in attempt to quell the competitor-brand (TBA, Hero: The Local Beer, 2019). In spite of this strategy, hero beer has continued to be preferred.

Conclusion

The various beer adverts has since advanced from modernity to tradition. This was not the development in the period between 1945 to 2012. However, since 2012, existing beer advert since the arrival of Hero beer portrays ethnic identity, tradition and modern beer drinking. Existing beer bill boards now carry slogan such as *Igwe* (King), *Mmanyi Odogwu* (Drink for the Heroes), *Pride of the East*, *Made in Igboland* and other local coinages that signifies ethnic identity. These marketing strategies have consciously invoked the ghosts of Biafran feelings among the Igbo through the creation of ethnic and cultural attachments to beer brand that reflects the contemporary nostalgia of the defunct state. The significant use of the Nigerian Civil War memories on the Biafran side rekindled post-nationalistic memories which have advanced the sales of Hero brand of beer.

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