



A Journal of Culture, English Language, Teaching & Literature

ISSN 1414-3320 (Print), ISSN 2502-4914 (Online)

Vol. 19 No.1; July 2019

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**Is Nigeria Really “Big for Nothing”? Matters Arising from  
Kevin Nwabugwu Echeruo’s 1969 Propaganda Poster**

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Received: 19-05-2019

Accepted: 8-06-2019

Published: 31-07-2019

# Is Nigeria Really “Big for Nothing”? Matters Arising from Kevin Nwabugwu Echeruo’s 1969 Propaganda Poster

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**Abstract:** The audacious declaration “Big for nothing” in Kevin Echeruo’s propaganda poster during the Nigerian civil war offers illumination to the forgotten undercurrents that drove the 30-month war which in the last fifty years has contributed to the setting of agenda for separatist polemics in the Nigeria nation-state. Using largely the iconographic approach to visual description and interpretation, this study examines the cultural codes and representational conventions that inform contemporary artistic representational style as a cultural practice. The illustration not only approximates to one of the early visual indicators on the divisive national challenge rendered in highly coded visual and linguistic rhetoric of hegemonic power struggle by the elite class, but also a significant metaphor of contemporary frustration on nationhood and nationality for most Nigerians. Accordingly, this article broaches on the parameters of patriotism, nationality and self-determination to posit that the illustration represents the extremes of citizen dissatisfaction couched in a radical artistic narrative of a caricature. It submits that the strength of national allegiance and cohesiveness is a function of the reciprocity to its citizens.

**Key words:** Nigeria Civil War, Biafra propaganda, nationalism, visual rhetoric, iconography

**Abstrak:** Deklarasi berani “Besar untuk sesuatu yang tidak ada” dalam poster propaganda Kevin Echeruo selama perang sipil Nigeria menawarkan penerangan kepada arus yang terlupakan yang telah mendorong terjadinya perang 30 bulan dalam lima puluh tahun terakhir telah berkontribusi pada pengaturan agenda untuk polemik separatis pada bangsa-bangsa di Nigeria. Menggunakan pendekatan ikonografi untuk mendeskripsikan dan menginterpretasikan visualisasi poster itu, penelitian ini dapat mengkaji kode budaya dan konvensi representasional yang menginformasikan bahwa gaya representasional artistik kontemporer adalah sebuah praktik budaya. Hasil kajian retorika visual dan tekstual dari poster menemukan adanya indikator visual awal tentang adanya tantangan nasional yang ingin memecah belah negara yang disampaikan melalui beberapa bahasa kode tentang perebutan kekuasaan hegemoni oleh para kelas elit. Selain penemuan tersebut, hasil kajian poster menemukan adanya metafora frustrasi kontemporer tentang rasa kebangsaan bagi sebagian besar warga Nigeria. Oleh karena itu, artikel ini menggunakan parameter patriotisme, kebangsaan, dan penentuan nasib sendiri untuk mendukung penggambaran ekstrem ketidakpuasan warga negara yang dinyatakan melalui karikatur yang mempunyai arasi artistik radikal.. Karikatur itu menyampaikan bahwa kekuatan kesetiaan nasional bergantung pada keterpaduan fungsi dan timbal balik dari warga negaranya.

**Kata kunci:** perang saudara Nigeria, propaganda Biafra, nasionalisme, retorika visual, ikonografi

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria gained political independence from Great Britain on October 1, 1960, and became a republic within the British Commonwealth in 1963 with great expectations and euphoria of forging the most populous black nation into a strong regional power in Africa. However, the questions about the new country’s preparedness for nationhood through the conscious unification of the multi-ethnic groups has remained elusive to the extent that its unity has remained at the tenterhooks qualifying it either as a 1914 amalgamation mistake or as a geographical expression. In today’s national discourse, the lingering taste of the popular phrase “mere geographical expression” by one of Nigeria’s foremost nationalist Chief Obafemi Awolowo has been variously used (Afigbo, 2005, p. 240), and more recently by a popular columnist Ray Ekpu (2017) to discuss and clarify the elements of incongruity in the nation’s national question. The Nigerian anti-colonial struggle was, as a result, fought

based on already instituted regional sentiments and anchored on a tripod of three major ethnic groups in little or utter neglect of more than 300 hundred ethnic groups in the country. These major ethnic groups were, and still remain, Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba, respectively dominant in the North, South East and South-West Nigeria. In effect, independence struggle and fight for national freedom that crystallised after WW2 in the early forties took place under covert battles for the institution of ethnic hegemony. The compromises derived from conciliatory arrangements for the actualisation of independence amounted to the marriage of convenience, which became all too glaring as the realities of the new republic began to emerge. Regrettably, this conscious recourse to and perpetuation of separatists' tendencies have tended to govern the political space and influenced the post-independence developmental strides in Nigeria. These tendencies triggered the competition for control and patronage leading the political elite of the major tribes to jockey for domination of the federal bureaucracy and political space.

As the nation progressed, the task for maintaining the unity of the association of culturally divergent ethnic groups and the apparent lack of political will to find common grounds for genuine association and cooperation as one united nation proved an arduous task for the emerging political leaders. The attendant post-independent spiralling crisis of the early and mid-60s led to a devastating 30 months civil war for the secession of the Eastern Region government with a new name "Biafra" from Nigeria. According to the secessionists, their decision to pull out of the Nigerian nation was aimed at enforcing their rejection of the "impending threat of neo-colonialism by the perceived hegemonic forces from northern Nigeria" (Inyang, 2018, p. 23). Expectedly, and with the aid of the radio and the print media, the war became an arena for the ventilation of perceived betrayal and bitterness through a variety of propaganda materials that fueled the sentiments for the inviolability of one Nigeria and the secession of Biafra. The modern production of verbal and visual materials for the execution of this war not only constitutes part of the country's heritage, but it also hints at the unique expression of its vagaries and reaction to its vicissitudes.

Until recently, the research into, and interrogation of published and unpublished cartoons, editorial illustrations, posters and various renderings of the Biafran Propaganda machinery to provide a multiple understanding to the unfortunate civil war in Nigeria only attracted a casual mention with the insertion of a few posters, cartoons and photographs in books on the Nigerian civil war with the aim of serving as supporting illustrations about historical events. Nonetheless, the collection of unpublished cartoons and editorial illustrations

on the Biafran war by the late Professor Uche Okeke at Asele Institute, Nnimo, and his efforts to preserve the visual narrative of the civil war may have instigated interest in the interrogation of these ephemeral artefacts.

A brief assessment of these rare artefacts reveals the various shades of illustrative flair and profound metaphorical statements from the volunteer artists. These mostly unpublished original black and white renderings were devotedly drawn on sketch pads or available scrap sheets with passionate fidelity commensurate with the exigencies of their time. In many cases, the conceptual brief detailing the visual focus and theme for each illustration could be seen at the back of the drawing sheets. Put together, these works seem to serve today as strong narratives that continuously push the frontiers of our understanding of the evolving realities of the Nigerian state. The collection of these class of artworks on the Biafra challenge to Nigeria nationalism in dust-covered files and folders are, however, not limited to those in Asele Institute, Nnimo. For instance, Kevin Echeruo’s *Nigeria Big for Nothing* illustration (see figure 1) is one of such black and white multipurpose propaganda illustrations that was adopted by the secessionist’s government of Biafra to be mass-produced as a poster, handbill and editorial illustration.

**Figure 1:**  
*Nigeria Big for Nothing, Propaganda Poster*  
Echeruo (1969) as cited by Okereke (1979)



Together, these graphic commentaries collectively constitute part of the elusive chunk of ready to publish visual expressions in cartoons, posters and propaganda illustrations that characterised Biafra visual culture of the time strewn across the globe. These illustrations, some of which are lost irretrievably to memory remain as templates for rumination on their ideological promptings and underpinnings have drawn credence to the global concern because the 30 months war has impacted on international politics and showcased Nigeria to the world. While it is yet challenging to locate the original pen and ink illustration in an identifiable collection, what appears as the only surviving sanctuary for the Kevin Echeruo's artwork is the BA thesis by Okereke (1979), which was dated approximately a decade after its production. Beyond the early textual anxieties in this illustration that tend to betray patriotism and national pride, one might be quick to query the rationale for inviting a symbolic rendering of an artist into the growing polemics of the Nigerian State.

This paper offers an analytical study of Kevin Echeruo's 1969 Biafra propaganda illustration and the attendant issues it raises in today's mainstream national discourse. In what follows, a brief history of the pre-civil war independent Nigeria is anticipated. This is closely followed by an iconographic reading of Kevin Echeruo's pen and ink stipple illustration. Further to this, the paper shall explore the thematic context of the illustration within the framework of Biafran visual propaganda against the conflicts that led to the expressive visual enterprises during the war. This shall be juxtaposed with separatist and self-deterministic rhetoric of the Nigerian nation. In analysing this work, we argue that despite the shared set of concerns as propaganda material, Kevin Echeruo's illustration represents the extremes of citizen frustration couched in a radical artistic narrative of a caricature. The work is an attempt to visualise a stereotypical country image. Hence, it is a symbolic expression in conflicted nationalism and citizenship identity that have had far-reaching consequences on the understanding of cultural politics and the national psyche.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of propaganda in the context of this work serves to support the principle under which information was relayed by the seceding Biafran government to its audience in order to reinforce favourable attitudes and disposition among them towards the course of the war. However, propaganda,



in all its forms, has become one of the most important forms of communication in our society. The success of any kind of propaganda is dependent on the psychological manipulation of its audience and various psychological techniques are employed to achieving them. Graphic images, in the form of cartoons, posters, and other forms of visual illustrations therefore, serve to enforce the psychological impact of the political propaganda message by “shaping perceptions, manipulating cognitions, and directing behaviour to achieve a response that helps the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1986, p. 16).

With the deluge of materials on secessionist and self-determinist tendencies in Nigeria, only a few critical writings have broached the power of Biafra propaganda and the overall effects on the growing secessionists and ethnic-nationalist consciousness. Roy Doron’s (2014), “Marketing genocide”, Arua Omaka’s (2014), “The forgotten victims” and Lasse Heertens’ (2017), “Spectacles of Suffering”, are seminal attempts at reviewing the secessionist polemics in Nigeria. Their works, however, anchor on the genocide cliché of Biafra and the minorities of Eastern Nigeria respectively. Other attempts to harness the rhetorical power of the satirical propaganda cartoons and illustrations in the Nigeria Civil war between 1967 and 1970 have been broached in Etiido Inyang’s (2013); (2017); (2018), “A Task That Must Be Done”, “Echoes of Secession”, and “The Elephant and the Tiger Ants” respectively, which provides a general overview of both the federal and secessionists visual propaganda campaigns. The tendency to revisit the submissions derived from these articles are also implicated in this article.

On the other hand, the nature and structure of the post-civil war Nigerian State equally come to evaluation here based on the perspectival allusions that have attended to the potentials and impediments for its growth and development. In light of these, publications from recent decades such as Post and Vickers, (1973); Ojo, (1981); Adebisi, (1989), as cited in Ifidon, (1999), have paid attention to various concepts of ethno-regional class manipulations as the causative factor for crises in the Nigerian State. It alludes to the strength of ethnic and regional competition for the control of the state and its resources. As a consequence, the potential to harness the human and abundant natural endowments of the state have been threatened. For an artwork that bears an already suggestive textual accompaniment, the significance of Echeruo’s illustration appears to have found some urgency today in the Nigerian project to merit a reappraisal in this paper.

## METHODOLOGY

Three positions in art historical discourse are instructive for this engagement. The first is Hegel's (1956) suggestion in his 1835 seminal work – *The Aesthetik* that although the art object was not made to serve the purpose of history, it, however, stands out distinctly as an activity of man that can be relied upon to chronicle time. The second is a re-articulation of Hegel's position by Beat Wyss where, the artwork is, “the proof of what has already been achieved; the receipt for the conquest of another level of culture” (Wyss, 1999, p. 135), which must be abandoned only for use as a historical source of reality. The third position arises from George Kubler's assertion on the problematic of interpretation offered by the limits allowed by the transformational energies between the original event and the present, – an interpretation where he states there is “another stage in the perpetuation of the original impulse” (Kubler, 1962, p. 20). Further corroborated here, is Foucault's reference to history as a “presentist” engagement (Munslow, 2006, p. 146). In all, the dilemma in the translation and reconstruction of historical evidence into facts in time for an illustration as the one above will become apparent.

As a qualitative research engagement, this paper adopts the three-tier iconographic approach to art historical analysis of the 1969 illustration as espoused by Erwin Panofsky (1955, pp. 40-41) as its main method of analysis. Iconography serves as a ready tool that allows for the systematic verbalisation of all material qualities on any piece of artwork vis-à-vis its historical circumstances. As laid out by Panofsky, this method employs three levels of inquiry that ranges from ordinary identification of the visual representation, the description through familiarity with the modes of representation, and lastly the interpretation of the subject matter by the reading and reception of the intrinsic meaning which the artwork ultimately possesses. This process may involve considerable historical research in primary sources or a single reference to an authoritative secondary source which this paper adopts. For this reason, a synoptic review of the Nigerian crises that led to the war and biographical information on the artist becomes expedient.

### **A. Pre-civil war independent Nigeria: A synoptic review**

The signs for the struggle for power among the political elites had become all too obvious in the last decade before Nigeria's independence in 1960 leading to an open exhibition of secessionist tendencies (Tamuno, 1970). This was as a result of mutual suspicion among politicians for the



control of regional and federal resources, accentuating in its wake, incentives for the cycle of violence that enveloped the young independent nation. The spate of intolerance arising from the competing struggle for the control of power and the penchant for manipulation of the political machinery to hold onto political power included divisive tactics of regionalisation, religion and ethnicity at the expense of national unity and nation-building. The consequent miasma of uncertainties enveloping the new nation coupled with the sustained media hype engendered the permutations of military intervention to stem the spiralling tide of political unrest in the country.

As anticipated after a long spell of rumours, and perhaps informed by the precedents of military coups elsewhere in Africa, young officers of the Nigerian army overthrew the government on the night of January 14, 1966, in a coup, code-named “Operation Damisa.” By the next day, most of Nigeria’s foremost leaders were either dead or missing. The coup’s aim as claimed by its leader Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu was to cleanse the Federal cabinet to make room for a strong, unified and prosperous nation, free of corruption and internal strife. Although many of the young officers were Igbo, the coup which later earned a contrary perception was not necessarily an Igbo coup. The coup plotters were mostly from the educated class of young military officers, who were incensed by the divisive politics of the political class and considered it expedient to act within the ambience of their avowed national interest. Hence, the bloody coup signalled a new understanding in the Nigerian visual iconography in a manner none of the earlier disturbances and killings could compare. The *coup d’état* took a life of its own. The realms of the new military government were handed over to General Aguyi Ummunnakwe Ironsi to bring the nation back to normalcy. However, rather than abate, the situation in the country spiralled away with new meanings and reactions leading to a counter-coup which took the life of the military head of state, General Ironsi. A succession of uprisings on the May 29th, July 29th, and September 29th, 1966 particularly in major towns in northern Nigeria targeted at the mainly at Easterners in a spate of retaliatory killings continued without any significant control from the new leader Yakubu Gowon who became the head of state after the killing and overthrow of Ummunnakwe Ironsi’s unitary government. The announcement of secession of the Eastern Region of Nigeria on 30th of May 1966 by Colonel Emeka Ojukwu after a series of failed conciliatory talks advanced a new sense of hope and liberation to the aggrieved people of Eastern Nigeria whose relatives were killed or escaped death in other parts of Nigeria. The declaration of hostility in May 1967 prognosticated the failure of Nigeria to realize the great dream of

becoming Africa's exemplar of Black power and the paradigm of excellence for other emerging African and Black nations in the world over.

For a country already bedevilled by entrenched controversial structures as highlighted above it becomes easy to appreciate the conceptual background to Echeruo's illustration. It seems natural to deduce at this point that the crisis of unity paved the way for the consolidation of secessionist gains, and the need for complex political calculations became imperative. For Biafra, it revealed a new thinking that the optimism of a quick triumph through military gains in the civil war against reunification to Nigeria is farfetched, hence new themes geared at ridiculing the Federalist became expedient. As the hostilities raged, Kevin Echeruo who by the circumstance of his birth found himself on the side of seceding Igbos of South East under Biafra, had to engage his artistic talents in Biafran Propaganda in deriding Nigeria in its failed dream of a great nation despite its huge resources. He became part of an active group of artists responsible for developing propaganda visuals for the prosecution of the war.

### **B. Kevin Echeruo, the artist**

In the last fifty years, the artist Kevin Echeruo who signed most of his illustrations and cartoons as "Kech" occupies but a phrasal mention in the Nigerian civil war discourse. On the one hand, he is seen as an upcoming poet deeply influenced by Christopher Okigbo, (Achebe, 2012, p. 116). On the other hand, he is mentioned with emotional reminiscences as an exceptional visual artist. While Simon Ottenberg (2014), fondly remembers Kevin with his first artwork purchase in Nigeria, from an exhibition in Enugu in 1960, his classmate in the University, Obiorah Udechukwu (1995), recalls his dexterity as a draughtsman. For one who was born into an aristocratic Igbo family in Umonumo, Ehime Mbano in South-Eastern Nigeria, the reason for the expression of national disgust and frustration in a constricted space of opportunities in Nigeria may not be farfetched. Reasons are, first, his father, Eze J M Echeruo, was the first regional manager of British Petroleum in Nigeria, a first republic politician and foremost minister from Eastern Nigeria. Like most middle-class families of Eastern Nigeria, the Echeruo's invested significantly in the Biafra war. Second, his elder brothers Michael and Emeka played prominent roles in the war. While Michael was Director War Information Bureau, Emeka was a Director of Engineering for the Biafra Land Army charged with sustaining food production in a time of war. For Kevin, not even his failing health could deter him from joining his brothers in the war effort. He was in his 2nd year in the University when the war broke

out. Displaced from the university in Nsukka by the rampaging Federal forces, Kevin invested most of his time in poetry, illustration and painting like his colleagues who shared the same sense of electric nationalism in Biafra. He loved cartooning and started a cartoon strip among other sundry illustrations to add to the war narrative “Adamu Nigeria.” Even though Kevin is mentioned as one of the few fledgling artists and illustrators who contributed to the war effort in Biafra, there seem to be very few of his illustrations available for assessment. To date, it is yet difficult to find his graphic illustrations in any print form beyond the plates available in the BA thesis. The *Nigeria Big for Nothing* poster may have been a parting verdict of the prodigious artist who died of health complications from natural causes on October 1969 at the age of 23, a few months after he made this illustration.

### C. The “Nigeria Big For Nothing” poster

As seen in the figure in context, Kevin Echeruo’s illustration is composed of four disparate images – a penny, an ape, a tribar flag, and a cast shadow (see Figure 1). These images are condensed into a single composite whole. It is rendered with an unmistakable mastery as a freehand stipple “pen and ink illustration” in a single colour. The gradation of the composite grains in this illustration is probably aimed at regulating the tranches of perceptual encounter that is offered by the visual narrative. In this encounter, the large frame of a bow-legged ape occupying the near totality of the left vantage space clutches down a vertically oriented tribar flag which shares a distinctive visual association with the Nigerian national flag when rendered in black and white. The positioning of the flag presents a connection with the dense mid-day shadow cast down from the scorching sun over the head of what appears a petrified figure to reveal an unusual silhouette – the map of Nigeria in a poetic and introspective illustration.

The mood of the beast is animated with a receding forehead, a shiny dome and unusual scanty facial hair as signs of premature baldness. With ears stretched out on the sides of its sunken eyes, a drooping flesh connecting to the nostrils with the lips seems to indicate a hopeless attempt at a recovery from a congenital palsy. Jotting out behind the left shoulder of the beast is a disc in a combination of embossed angular shapes, a circular opening and a textual referent – “penny” which immediately hints at its overall symbolism. The exaggerated penny – the size of what would instead serve as a hat – seems to dangle away behind the back of the ape leaving the head at the mercy of the scorching sun thereby amplifying what can be alluded as a pennywise symbolism. By these suggestive evocations, a dominating aura is captured in

an animated four-line text – *Nigeria Big for Nothing* – amorphously drawn with the similar textural flair of the imageries thereby offering without any additional embellishment of colour an entertaining and readable picture. The characterisation of the typographic illustration exudes a composite unity of an effective poster layout whereby image and text would function together to deliver a cohesive and congruent idea.

The composition of the four imageries in Echeruo's illustration is obviously directed toward the signification of negative and oppositional indexes of the Nigerian nation. These can easily be found in the tiny Nigerian map that seems cast down as the shadow of itself from the massive potbellied frame of the ape. The orientation of the flag is also suggestive of an aggrieved or reluctant patriot whose faith in the symbolism of the national flag has significantly waned. As shown in the illustration, the pointing down of the flag undoubtedly adds to the negative allusions and resentment to nationalistic ideals thereby contradicting with the positive conventions of waving and hoisting of the national flag as a tradition of patriotism that has endured for centuries. As Mason (2010, p. 44) states, political cartooning can be accommodated in Edward Said's list of cultural allusions. He posits that cartoons (which Kevin's artwork equally approximate) as a cultural discipline was exported to the colonies from Britain and Europe, and the codes, conventions and ways of signifying that are endemic to it had their origins in the rapidly industrialising urban environments of 19th century Britain and Europe."

The choice of an ape as a metaphorical representation for the Nigeria nation that prides itself as the "giant" in the continent of Africa is brought to focus in this illustration. Perhaps taking a cue from Edwin Marcus' 1939 pen and ink editorial illustration "under two flags" as cited in Husband (2015, pp. 116-117), Kevin Echeruo's illustration follows also in the use of animals for national representation. Simian figures in current visual representation bear a historical connection with a nineteenth-century parody of Irish nationals in England (Sullivan, 1998). According to him, these portrayals tended to equate them with monkeys and implied that they were less than human and closer to the beasts. It is perhaps this brutish assessment that may have been extended to Marcus' illustration and that of Kevin Echeruo 30 years later. However, before the use of the ape in artistic representation, animals have afforded the artist with a variety of ways to relate animal behaviour to the human condition. Tracing this evolution, Fern (1990), recalls that what began merely as simple characterisations such as the "horse face" advanced to appropriate

the qualities commonly associated with animals. Satirists used the popular traits of these animals (rabbits as timid, birds as elusive, lions as noble, asses as silly and so forth) to poke fun and comment on the notables of the time. The allied forces during WW1 pursued a propaganda campaign that saw the emergence of the ape metaphor to qualify Germany with the notoriety of a brutish and barbaric country. The 1917 American poster by H. R. Hopps with a bold display caption “Destroy This Mad Brute,” exemplify some of the earliest attempts to approximate this descent to barbaric savagery by the Germany forces as one of the most striking American recruitment posters issued during the war (Gullace, 2009).

The stereotypical reference to the ape in Kevin’s illustration becomes more interesting when juxtaposed against the association of Blacks with primates – an association that dates back to the sixteenth century, when European explorers first encountered sub-Saharan Africa. This association provokes fundamental questions beyond the general character of caricaturing. What could have instigated Kevin, being himself black and from a country that has only just seceded from Nigeria to adopt such a derisive metaphor? Did he overstep the bounds of self-assessment? However, there is more to these comparative allusions in the choice of the ape metaphor for reference to a nation.

The striking difference between the representations of the image of the nation in this narrative can be easily identified. While the expression of the brutish savagery of a patriot is made apparent on the one hand, what comes across in the reference, on the other hand, is the expression of an imbecilic candour which Kevin seems to illustrate about the Nigerian nation. The substituted symbolism of an ape caricature becomes a strong representation with far-reaching consequences. Mark Sableman offers some insight into the context of artistic conceptualisation, which seems congruent for this analysis. He states:

Artists create their works within the milieu of their own culture, and often portray, describe, or critique their culture. Culture consists of the shared symbols, beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, artefacts, and modes of living in a place or period. The constituent parts of culture, including its symbols and shrines, its values and manners, its leaders and idols, are basic and expected grist for art. (Sableman, 2007, p. 193)



Therefore, it is debatable if the circumstances of culture may have propelled the initiation of this symbolism and its corresponding textual accompaniment. What appears plausible, as Inyang (2018, p. 41) suggests, is the revelation of “residual suspicions, mistrust, and self-preservation,” which had saturated the political space then. As is evident, details on the visualisation and production of this artwork are scanty. There is the strong likelihood that Kevin Echeruo’s illustration may have drawn its impetus from the secessionist propaganda campaign theme titled “[t]he clay-footed giant of Africa.” This title covers ideas that are driven to embarrass or demoralise the Nigerian government, their armed forces, and the people by showing the social, cultural and political contradictions in its makeup (Biafra Campaign Appraisal Committee, Report No. 9, 1969).

As far back as the early ’60s, some countries in and outside Africa regarded Nigeria as Africa’s giant due to its large population, human and mineral resource endowments. A counter-narrative through the Biafra campaign was aimed at demystifying that image of a black African paragon. Used in the general context, “[t]he clay-footed giant of Africa” represents a visual shorthand in the plethora of poetic expressions on the war to which Obododima Oha sought to draw comparative allusions on its complementary roles that

... some Nigerian poets of the time, for instance, Kevin Echeruo and Ogonna Agu, were both poets and visual artists, and the desire to present poetry and graphics as two “kissing cousins” has persisted in Nigeria, [thus] generating a spirit of cultural nationalism. (Oha, 1998, p. 166)

Echeruo’s concept for this theme was but one in a series of interpretations that attempted to illustrate the amorphous contraption in post-independent Nigeria. Other artists, notably Chuks Anyanwu – the prolific civil war editorial cartoonist – engaged several metaphors aimed at spewing insults at the federal establishment in Nigeria and the perceived principal actors in the war. Poets, musicians and radio and newspaper commentaries also keyed into this campaign. To these activists, the new country Biafra was all they needed to not only shed the Nigerian identity but to destroy its much-touted “giant” status to the outside world. Following Caswell’s (2004, p. 13) argument, a “sense of moral duty, a desire to oppose what they believe to be wrong, and the need to work for the greater good,” may have inspired these works.



By simple deduction, it is difficult to assume that Echeruo may have been driven by anything else other than a new sense of patriotism and a shift of allegiance to his new country to invent this strong narrative on his former country owing to the unrestrained killings of easterners in northern Nigeria. Biafra’s secessionist leader, Emeka Ojukwu, during the “pogroms of May 29, July 29, and September 29, 1966” demonstrated a unique sense of leadership and concern on the plight of the easterners living in another part of Nigeria to merit the eastern regional support for secession from Nigeria. The Ape archetype, thus, becomes part of the post-colonial hangover of learned symbolisms that found convenient expression in the civil war campaign. Echeruo’s work measures up to the belief which Streicher (1967, p. 431) holds that cartoons, provide an assortment of negative definitions and stereotypes, which are aimed at sensationalising and evoking public sentiments on the subject for self-defence and the cultivation of hatred.

Based on available historical antecedence, the best editorial cartoons or propaganda illustrations and posters seem to be those that reflect their creators’ raw indignation against the enemy. The combination of the Ape illustration with the header text “Nigeria Big for Nothing,” reduces the composition to Schilperoord and Maes’ (2009, p. 218) “X IS Y” metaphoric scheme. We can paraphrase the metaphors in this illustration by the composite action of the ape pointing down the flag within a cast afternoon shadow. The frills of associated national cues in the map and the tribar flag qualify the cartoon as an example of replacement in that the country Nigeria is replaced by an “Ape”. Hence, the metaphorical objects involved here can be paraphrased as the “Ape” and its shadow. Assuming this was the case, could this massive frame and its illustrated attributes be worth just a penny? The penny symbolism for nothingness, therefore, becomes problematic. The metaphors employed by Kevin Echeruo in his illustration of the penny makes it challenging to apprehend whether it is the shape or the value of the penny symbol that approximates to the nothingness as suggested by the text in the illustration. The public opinion in Biafra at the time based on the killings and homecoming of the easterners to the ancestral homes may have necessitated the conceptual frame of Echeruo’s campaign and erased any concept of a united Nigeria. Therefore, any campaign that would diminish the survival of a “United Nigeria” became its most immediate and ultimate objective. The improved campaign approach must be able to mobilise Biafran morale to a high level of defiance to the “United Nigeria” concept. It also aimed to sustain the ideology through an anticipated long-drawn war, to demoralise the Nigerians and their allies successfully.

As can be seen in Echeruo's Illustration, some complex dialogues are advanced by the combinations of a textual and iconic form adopted for the composition. The primary objective of the composition as rendered is to approximate the ideas of unmistakable finality in the textual legend "Nigeria Big for Nothing." Echeruo's cognitive style in the conception of the image can be assessed against the viewer's experience and meaning-making on the subject of nationhood, patriotism, and self-determination that climaxed in the Nigerian nation within the war years. The illustration comes as a fitting subject of visual discourse that approximates the evaluation of visual style and the constancy or otherwise of verbal thoughts. Baxandall (1988), argues that visual information is processed differently in the brain by everyone using a blend of culturally determined skills, which are innate or acquired latently by experience. The cultural factors influencing the visual characteristics differ from generation to generation and serve as an important index in the elucidation of the styles that they manifest. The cultural norms of each generation that determined this "style" can be described as "the period eye" (Baxandall, 1988). By this assessment, the Kevin Echeruo illustration possesses an extended relevance in the discourse of patriotism and nationhood in Nigeria beyond the circumstance that instigated its making in 1969.

## DISCUSSION

### A. Is Nigeria "really" big for nothing?

The derisive attack aimed at devaluing Nigeria as a country can be safely deduced if we are to take Echeruo's Illustrative verdict by their accompanying symbolisms today. Nonetheless, the artefact in focus – the poster – is caged in a second level polemical construct by being generally classified as an ephemera. Elizabeth Broun, in (Heyman, 1998, p. 8) clarifies on its temporality, accordingly, they are intended to "affect their audience for only a short time." If we must corroborate Hegel as cited in Wyss (1999), Echeruo's *Nigeria Big for Nothing* illustration was not made to serve the purpose of history, but as a human act, it can be relied upon to chronicle time in the deposition of the artwork considering what at the time inspired its making. In other words, the cartoon, as proof of what has already been achieved will continue to signpost similar allegories created in time.

In reference to the secessionist reality in Nigerian history, the poster serves as a new platform for the continuance of its original idea and therefore offers a presentist value for the interpretations of the past. The pertinent question, therefore, is whether Nigeria is genuinely a big-for-nothing nation. The subsequent discourse, therefore, underscores the pressing concern of this paper. To address the question of whether Nigeria is actually big-for-nothing, this paper approaches the evaluation from two different perspectives. The first focus is on the assessment of the Nigerian civil war era during which Echeruo conceived and produced his illustrations for publication. The second focus places the illustration under the prism of today’s understanding being that contemporary events and situation that informed the choice of this paper.

### **B. Echeruo’s “Big for Nothing” poster in pre-civil war Nigeria**

Lacking in supporting parameters for evaluation beyond the bold visual metaphors identified in the description of the illustration in the preceding pages, it seems challenging to accept Echeruo’s verdict of a sovereign Nigerian State as a big-for-nothing nation. If nothing else, the immediate concerns of Echeruo’s poster as a propaganda artefact of the civil war produced and released for publication in the throes of a bitter secessionist campaign in 1969 betray its sincerity.

In the first place, one cannot but wonder what bothered Echeruo about Nigeria as big-for-nothing when he had already chosen not to belong to it by identifying with the rebel side. Again, the fact that this proclamation of Nigeria as big-for-nothing after secession proves that the illustration was strictly meant for propaganda and directed to his compatriot rebels. He must have intended his fellow insurgents to feel that Biafra, their would-be nation, would be better, stronger and more progressive than Nigeria. On the contrary, was he by the poster championing implosion on the federalist “One Nigeria” campaign? Echeruo’s illustration, therefore, approximates a propaganda gimmick aimed at self-boost and for ego massaging of himself and his Biafran secessionists and as such barely depicts the actual and real Nigerian conditions at the time.

As seen above, the timing and motives of the illustration on “nothingness” rules out its possibility as an objective assessment since concrete facts now contained in historical documentation largely contradict the position of the illustration (Metz, 1991); (Falola & Heaton, 2008). With educational and industrial centres sustained by their precolonial potentials, the economy was looking up with stable growth with each of the federating

region making steady progress. Each region of the Nigerian Federation had its economic base predicated on peculiar agricultural produce which was exported for foreign earning while it also catered for the basic needs of the people. Driven by regional competitiveness, the Nigerian nation witnessed unprecedented growth during the period. For example, the northern region had groundnut as major produce, the western region had cocoa, and the Eastern Region palm-produce. Each region was a significant world producer/exporter of its own peculiar agricultural product.

Nigeria, as a whole, was known as a world major food exporter as it had enough to feed its citizens and had excess to export as cash crops for foreign earnings. Noteworthy is the fact that Malaysia which is today a major exporter of palm oil got the plant introduced to them from Nigeria. In fact, there is a virtual consensus that blames strong and powerful regions as the bane of the first Nigerian Republic that lasted from 1960 – 1966 as many Nigerians insist that the fall was primarily as a result of each region being too powerful thereby weakening the centre. Even the centrifugal manipulations could hardly explain the finality of the verdict on “national nothingness”. It is therefore unfortunate that Echeruo’s Illustration intended for his fellow secessionists could be deceitful to the uncritical observer of Nigeria and its politics. Echeruo’s Biafran spirit of nationalism coupled with the euphoria of a possible independent nation separated from Nigeria must have gingered him to castigate his [former] country. Nonetheless, Echeruo may be correct if, by his verdict, he was taunting the nations inability to harness its glaring potentials as its source of strength, hence Biafra’s choice to secede.

### **C. The metaphor of Nigeria as a “big for nothing” nation**

Left behind by less endowed counterpart African nations on the Human Development Index (HDI), the relevance of Echeruo’s 1969 illustration conjures the prophetic metaphor of a nation enmeshed in a conundrum of national crises. In fact, in 1989 the World Bank also declared Nigeria poor enough to be eligible (along with countries such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Chad, and Mali) for concessional aid (Metz, 1991). Despite abundant natural resources, Nigeria today finds it difficult to accomplish its civil obligation mainly in the aspects of feeding and protection for its teeming population. Other unsettling national problems range from infrastructural decay, insurgency from Boko Haram, through the rising crime waves, herdsmen/farmer clashes to frequent ethnoreligious conflicts. Now Nigerians, more than ever before, are largely divided virtually on almost everything due to over-politicization of nearly every national issue.

Granted, that Nigeria today approximates to the big-for-nothing metaphor posed by Echeruo, one may be tempted to trace the present national woes to poor management of our diversity by our founding fathers and their successors in present-day Nigerian leaders. With military incursion, Nigeria found itself in a web of coups from 1966 to 1979; 1983 to 1999 during which Nigeria five coup d’état to which seven Heads of States were in command. This led to a summersault of policies by succeeding military regimes. Despite the military intervention, corruption escalated astronomically, leading to the erosion of the nation’s traditional value system in governance (Ibrahim, Liman, & Mato, 2014). More worrisome is the nation’s population estimated to hit the 300 million mark by 2050 (U. N. Population Division, 2017), with little to show to invalidate Kevin Echeruo’s doomsday verdict on the fourth republic Nigerian State. Attempts to capture the resources of the state has led to political manipulations and intrigues including hooliganism and election rigging at both State and Federal levels. In all these, it does seem that rather than finding ways to rid the nation of these contraptions, justifications are sought to qualify official aberrations. A clear example is what is referred to in common parlance as the “Nigerian Factor,” a term used to explain away the corrupt tendencies and inefficiencies in governance. “This is Nigeria,” comes as the ready refrain by the army of defenders who are often not in short supply to challenge anyone who dares to question these aberrant behaviours.

## CONCLUSION

As illustrated, the iconographic reading of Echeruo’s illustration presents symbolism and metaphors that are out of tune with the pre-civil war Nigeria. As a propaganda ephemera, it keys into the themes of the campaign to prosecute the war of secession, the concept of which may have been influenced by his personal loathing for the massacre of his co-Easterners in 1966. However, the reductionist verdict of nothingness on Nigeria opens up a variety of deductions in this paper. On the one hand, it could be seen as a logical way of encouraging his fellow Biafrans to fight to realize their separatist agenda. If this were the case, the illustration could not qualify him as a social critic, the reason being that his intention lacks sincerity and objectivism, notwithstanding his prodigy as an artist. The poster qualifies as an expression of hatred with the desire to motivate the people of the eastern region as a war effort for the side he belonged.

On the other hand, the poster can be viewed as a predictive assessment of Nigeria as a country. With the definiteness in Echeruo's judgement on Nigeria, one could argue about his uncanny ability to forecast the future with his illustration being that the nation Nigeria has remained in fits and start fifty years after the war, knowing that he passed on shortly after he completed this illustration.

Echeruo's illustration serves as a metaphor to present-day Nigeria and defines the capacity of art and artist in politics and political struggles. Accordingly, Echeruo's verdict on Nigeria aggregate to the limits of patriotism, nationality and self-determination. It is a representation on the extremes of citizen frustration couched in a radical artistic narrative of a caricature. National allegiance and cohesiveness are a function of the mutual reciprocity between the state and its citizens. This can be seen not only in the volte-face reversal of allegiance, not only witnessed in the Echeruo illustration but by the radical separatists like Boko Haram seeking their Eldorado in a divide and rule fragments of the Nigerian state. The way out of this national quagmire demands massive public enlightenment and reorientation of the masses. In addition, the educational system needs to be reviewed and made to fit into some national agenda in the form of ideology, creed or philosophy geared towards the development of the patriotic citizenry.

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