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The Gloomy Image is Merely Based on Myths: A Critical Review of Empirical Studies on the Nigerian Image Crisis

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ABSTRACT

It is common to come across scholarly critiques, commentators' opinion articles, world politicians' declarations and elements of popular culture that represent Nigeria or Nigerians in a negative light. From Donald Trump's slamming of Nigeria in 2018 (for not returning to "their huts") to Cameroonians' tendency of seeing Nigerians as "domineering" and "invaders" in their motherland, the Nigerian nationality has arguably not always been well perceived in countries across the world. However, much of the gloomy representations of Nigeria are not founded on empirical research. In other words, most observers – including scholars – simply hinge on mere alarmist assumptions and/or poorly substantiated theories and logics to describe Nigeria as a land of various negativities. Such observers often fail to make sufficient efforts towards providing concrete evidence supporting their claims. In this paper, a critical review of literature is used to assess the extent to which the debate over Nigeria's image crisis is founded on empirical bases. Seven key features of Nigeria are considered in the review namely: (i) the Nigerian product, (ii) Nigeria as a country (iii) Nigeria as a people [that is Nigerian cultures], (iv) the Nigerian government, (v) the Nigerian police, (vi) Nigeria as a touristic destination (vii) Nigerian hospitals and (viii) Nigerian schools.

Keywords: Nigeria Image Crisis, Nigerian Schools, The Nigerian Spirit, Nollywood, International Community

Introduction

Observers most often define the Nigerian image using panoramic research purviews and intuitive approaches. Some of these observers simply hinge on mere alarmist assumptions and/or poorly substantiated theories and logics to describe Nigeria as a land of various negativities. Such observers often fail to make sufficient efforts towards providing concrete evidence supporting their claims. It is also common to find authors who generically assess Nigerian image in the negative without determining the exact sector(s) in which Nigeria is negatively seen or without balancing their assessments with an examination of areas in which Nigeria is apparently doing well. Authors such as Ademola, Talabi and Lamidi (2012) have used blanket statements (sweeping statements) to define Nigeria's image in the international scene. The above mentioned trio notes for instance that Nigeria is viewed in the international arena as the biblical city of "Nazareth" from where nothing good can come[1].

Generally, no or very little effort is often made by these researchers to granularly explain the sectors or facets of Nigeria that the more, are negatively perceived in the international scene. To avoid this misleading way of examining the image of Nigeria, it will be expedient to identify specific sectors of Nigeria as a brand, and show how these specific sectors are perceived in the international scene. In this paper, recent literature is reviewed to show how empirical research has been used to explore the image of Nigeria in the international scene. Seven key features of Nigeria are considered in this review namely: (i) the Nigerian product, (ii) Nigeria as a country (iii) Nigeria as a people [that is Nigerian cultures], (iv) the Nigerian government, (v) the Nigerian police, (vi) Nigeria as a touristic destination (vii) Nigerian hospitals and (viii) Nigerian schools.

Nigeria as a Country

While interviewing Nigerian literary icon Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie during the famous Paris "Night of Ideas" symposium, the French journalist Cecile Broué (cited in

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McKenzie 2019: 34) made a statement which, to an extent, could reveal Westerners' limited knowledge and controversial perception of Nigeria. Broué actually claimed that most Frenchmen knew very little about Nigeria except perhaps the recrudescence of terrorism in the country. In her 2009 TED Talk, Adichie (2009) similarly observed that many Westerners tend to view the whole of Africa as a country. And going by such a deplorable ignorance, it will be no surprise that Nigeria (as a country) means nothing or little to many Westerners. This observation could equally mean that many people in the West tend to perceive Nigeria – like any other Black African countries – according to the same popular misleading stereotypes. Perhaps, it is only issues such as the sporadic global media coverage, the occurrence of major crises and Nigeria's participation in international sportive events such as the FIFA World Cup, the Olympic Games and international cultural/artistic schemes such as the Canes Film Festival that used to draw the attention of the Western world in particular to Nigeria.

The Nigerian national football teams have often had impressive performances in international competitions organised by FIFA, CAF and the like. Nigeria has also produced high class soccer players such as Jay-Jay Okocha, Rashidi Yekini and Nwanko Kanu among others that have contributed to spreading Nigeria's soft power in the world. Additionally, Nigeria has had a remarkable performance at world or international female soccer championship, sometimes winning world trophies and seasonally attracting the attention of the world. Thus, Nigeria as a country may only be popularly known among Africans, particularly in West Africa and in the Guinea Golf where the country has these last decades been very influential and active economically, politically and militarily.

In spite of this apparent limited knowledge pockets of international publics (particularly Westerners) have about Nigeria, a number of studies have been carried out to know foreign audiences' perceptions of Nigeria as country. In general, these studies reveal that Nigeria's image has been varying from one study to the other, from a year to another and from a people/country to another. Popular perceptions of Nigeria as a country among foreign people range from the stereotype of one of the most corrupt countries in the world (U4 Expert Answers 2015; Ujara 2014, Akinterinwa 2019; Boma, Terfa & Tsegyu 2015) to that of the most populous country in Africa [2-5] and one of the leading oil-producing economies on the planet (Ekene 2019; Olusola & Ufo 2016, Aleyomi & Abu-Bakar 2017, Adebesi 2017)[6-9]. In a recent survey carried out in 2019 [10], the American civil society organization U.S. News (2019) interviewed 20,000 global citizens requesting them to identify the country they considered the most corrupt in a list of over 80 nations. In the survey, the respondents were asked to determine how closely they related each of the 80 countries considered to the term "corruption". These respondents were not given any definition of the term. Based on respondents' answers, Nigeria was rated third most corrupt in this US News ranking after Iraq and Venezuela. Nigeria has thus been mainly seen as a very corrupt country in the international scene. Similarly, a 2019 Best Country in the World Index deployed by US News ranked Nigeria 67 out of 80 countries in the world (US News 2019). The index took into consideration the responses of over 20000 interviewees across the globe and sought to rank countries in terms of citizenship, cultural influence, entrepreneurship, quality of life, power, heritage, openness for business, movers and adventure.

Early International observers' assessments of Nigeria's image are similarly mostly negative. A 2001 World Bank report describes level of corruption in Nigeria to be "outrageous" (World Bank, 2001: 651)[11]. The report stresses that such corruption makes working conditions in the country to be extremely difficult. In the same vein, a United Nations report titled "*Nigeria: Interim Strategy Update Report*" highlights that fact that international/western observers and publics mostly see Nigeria as a country where historically, it is "very difficult to implement projects'[12]. The report explains that "of 20 projects initiated between 1985 and 1992, over 52% were unsatisfactory" (United Nation Organisation 2002: 55). International observers and foreign publics often argue that the implementation of projects in the country is most often an avenue to further siphon public funds. With close respect to the implementation of the National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP), Musa Rafsanjani (the executive director of TI National Chapter in Formation in Nigeria), contrary to political propaganda: "all the programmes initiated by [the] previous government and current government to address poverty were not designed to actually deal with the poverty in the country, rather they become an instrument to further syphon public funds in the name of poverty eradication" (cited in Damilola 2019:71)[13].

To this perception of Nigeria as a very corrupt country should be added stereotypes of the country as one of the poorest countries on planet earth. In a recent report titled "Rethinking Global Poverty Reduction in 2019" (a report written by Kharas, Hamel and Hofer, 2018:23)[14], the Brookings Institutes has for instance crowned Nigeria "the capital of poverty in the world", predicting that if the country does not change its current trajectory and economic policies, it will be home to more than 110 million of people living in extreme poverty. The report thus re-echoes the growing global perception that Nigeria is a country increasingly brutalised by abject poverty.

Although many stereotypes of Nigeria are true to the results of specific empirical studies, it must be underscored that, most western audiences/publics'

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perceptions of Nigeria are informed by sheer bias, racist media coverage of their country as well as questionable myths. Global Affairs Canada (2018)[15] stresses this truism thus: "Nigeria along with the rest of Black Africa, is conceived as a place of "unremitting despair"... but, then you come here and see gaggles of happy little kids running up to greet you and everywhere people hustling, trading, hawking energetically. The reality on the ground is a readily evident infectious, indefatigable spirit". Global Affairs Canada adds that:

> Nigeria is unfairly misrepresented in the dominant global media as being an excessively violent society, but the data on casualties resulting from political, ethnic and religious conflicts fail to support this. In fact, during the 1990s, Nigeria's conflict-related deaths, roughly 6 deaths per million inhabitants per year, represented only one-fifth the world frequency, while in the last four years under civilian rule and increasing freedom of expression, 17 violent Nigerian deaths per million capita still represents only about 62% of the world average, and one-tenth the frequency for all of sub-Saharan Africa. (Global Affairs Canada 2018: 81)

It is therefore important to stress that the reality is that, Nigeria is not all a shithole country – as some western observers have found pleasure in saying. Besides the ugly cultures and socio-political and economic dilemma that characterise the country exists positive values which many foreign publics and opinion moulders fail to report and take into consideration in their perceptions of the country.

The Nigerian People

As earlier mentioned, empirical studies focusing on foreign publics' perceptions of Nigerians are hard to find. Most of the available sources which, in one way or the other raise the issue are desk-studies, personality interviews, reports written/published by international institutions, online articles, review articles or opinion articles published in Nigerian tabloids or magazines. These sources dominantly point out the negative stereotypes of Nigerians in various foreign countries. One of such stereotypes is that Nigerians are number one scammers in the world. In his 2001 report titled *Nigeria: Common Country Assessment*, the United Nation Organisation (2001: 204) [16] estimates that Nigerians "419" scammers are popularly believed to have defrauded Americans of $100 Million in 1999, a amount that represented over one per cent of US' total official foreign exchange earnings. Similarly, Global Affairs Canada (2018) documents in its reports titled *Country Insight-Nigeria* that Nigerians are popularly regarded as major drug dealers in North America. The observer's report actually states that foreign/western publics and analysts are fond of estimating that "35-40% of the heroin trafficked into North America is controlled by Nigerian drug syndicates" (Global Affairs Canada 2018: 401).

Not only western publics but also oriental ones do view Nigerians largely along ne negative stereotypes mentioned above (that is drug trafficking, Internet fraud and corruption among others). In a study titled "The Diaspora Nigerians' Image Problem of Drug and Fraud", three Nigerian researchers by name Owoyemi, Din and Sabri (2015) examine the various ways in which the Malaysian and Indonesian press propagate the negative stereotypes mentioned above. Using a content analysis of some Malaysian and Indonesian dailies, The three researchers observe that the involvement of some Nigerians in crime and the constant slanted coverage of such involvement by the local media have motivated many Indonesians and Malays to generally view Nigerians as crime-minded, thereby committing the fallacy of hasting generalization. They write that in a bid to rapidly become rich, many unscrupulous Nigerians have exploited the opportunities afforded by Malaysia and Indonesia to commit varieties of crimes ranging from online fraud to drug/human trafficking and prostitutions. The negative impact of this involvement in crime is that the crimes committed by the few have been used to brand the mass. As they put it, "the negative activities of these few have had a bad impact on the image of the entire citizenry of Nigeria in Diaspora and this has led to stereotyping and prejudices-at times with dire consequences" (Owoyemi, Din & Sabari 2019: 55)[17]. Indeed, Nigerian criminal fraudsters' formidable activities in and outside their country have stoked the fires of anti-Nigerianism and tarnished the image of Nigeria in counties across the globe. In an article title

In the same line of thought, David Vick (2020)[18] says in an article titled "Nigeria: Crime, Fraud and Punishment" that Nigerian-related fraud has these recent years spread like wild fire from Nigerian cities throughout the world as a growing number of unscrupulous Nigerians at home and abroad continue to tarnish their country's growing international reputation, making international publics to regard Nigeria as a place where crime and corruption flourish unchecked. Vick (2020) writes that Nigerian-related crime is so widespread that, in the US popular imaginary, it is often referred to as "Nigerian mafia". US police training manuals refer to these Nigerian crimes as mafia, "bearing comparison with the notorious Triad gangsters who have been exporting South East Asian criminal practices to Europe and the US since the turn o f the century" (Vick 2020: 42). The widespread Nigerian-related fraud causes both authorities and masses in foreign climes to likely view Nigerians irrespective of their personalities as crime fraudsters. Vick further writes that:

> Authorities in the US maintain that one in three persons arrested on drug trafficking offences in the US in recent times have

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> Nigerian connections. Now the world is becoming aware of the problem, Nigerians living, working or simply travelling overseas are under suspicion no matter how harmless and legitimate their intentions may be. The last thing law-abiding Nigerians seeking to settle overseas – or do business there need is a bad reputation with police, banks and businesses. But that is what they are getting, while an anti-immigrant campaign is being waged in the European press and racism is rearing its ugly head in Germany, France and Spain. (Vick 2020: 43)

Apart from internet fraud and drug/human trafficking international publics tend to associate the Nigerian nationality with voodoo and sorcery. In a publication titled "*Migration, Human Smuggling and Trafficking from Nigeria to Europe*", Carling (2006) [19] underlines the tendency of communities or public institutions in European countries to automatically read any irrational or very strange behaviour perpetrated by Nigerian nationals on their soils as the product of voodoo. Carling (2006) uses the specific cases of Nigerian prostitutes and sex slaves who despite being liberated from brothels by the police, still wanted to go back to shameful business and shows how common it is for some Westerners to stereotype Nigerian as voodooists. He writes that in the face of this strange attitude by Nigerian sex slaves: "the police, the immigration authorities and the social welfare structure developed a common understanding of occult threats as the main reason driving the women to remain in slave-like prostitution" (Carling 2006: 52).

Thus, Nigerians have often been perceived along stereotypes that are hardly proven/provable. The strange or questionable behaviours of the few have most often been used as yardstick to judge and brand the rest or majority of Nigerians. As noted by Vick (2020) above, many Nigerians are today discriminated upon and subjected to racist treatments in many western climes because of the numerous negative stereotypes their country is associated with [20].

The Nigerian Government

As earlier mentioned, the available empirical studies revealed that the Nigerian government is mostly perceived in international climes as being corrupt, authoritarian and relatively insensitive to the plight of the masses they govern. In a 2019 global survey involving 20000 citizens, the America civil society organisation called US News reported that the Nigerian government is perceived as the most corrupt in the world [2,10]. The country's government was so abysmally perceived compared to 80 other countries. This negative perception of the Nigerian government has occasionally been re-echoed by various world institutions (notably Transparency International, Freedom House, Article XIX, Reporter Without Borders and Human Rights Watch among others). In an interview, former British President Tony Blair referred to the Nigerian government as one which is fantastically corrupt (cited in *the Economist* 2016). Similarly, current US President Donald Trump in a speech made during the 2016 presidential campaign, manifested what many will see as the common Westerners' attitude towards Nigerian – or rather Black African – governing elite. During this speech, Trump described Nigerian government as people who are so corrupt that they have become a danger to their own people. He remarked that members of Nigerian 'governments are so corrupt. They rob the people blind and bring it all here to spend and their people run away and come down here and take our jobs" (cited in African Independent Television 2016: 3) [21].

Nigeria as a Touristic Destination

Nigeria is blessed with a plurality of touristic attractions. The country is known as the most populous black nation on the planet owning to its more than 200 million citizens. It has the largest city on the Black continent (Lagos) and is diverse it terms of landscapes, cultural heritage, languages, histories and natural resources. Various travel and tourism observers count its cities (notably Lagos, Ibadan, Abuja and Calabar among others) among the most beautiful destinations in Africa (Africa.com 2020) [22]. Such a beauty was once recognized by US President Donald Trump during a 2018 official meeting with his Nigerian counterpart (Buhari) at the White House. During this meeting, Trump formulated series of flatteries in which he described Nigeria as "the most beautiful country" (cited in Kazeem 2020: 7) [23]. Concretely, he said: "I would like to visit Nigeria. I'd like very much to visit Nigeria. It's an amazing country and in certain ways I heard from the standpoint of a beauty of a country, there's no country more beautiful, so I would like to" (cited in Smith 2020: 39) [24].

In spite of these favourable factors, a number of empirical studies have suggested that foreign publics particularly tourists continue to have negative perceptions of the Nigeria destination. In other words, many studies suggest that the Nigerian brand as touristic destination is one of the less popular in Africa and in the world in general (Oluwole 2014: 27) [25]. In a study focusing on foreign tourists' perceptions of transport services and some other infrastructures in the town of Lagos, Nwachuckwu, Nwosu and Chikezie (2018: 68) [26] observe that poor infrastructural development in Nigerian town contribute in motivating foreign national to view the Nigerian destination in a negative light. This poor infrastructural development de-motivates foreign nationals from seeing Nigeria as a suitable touristic destination. In a similar study, Ezenagu and Enohuean (2017)[27] examine how the ongoing terrorist activities of the Boko Haram group in Northern Nigeria have motivated scores of foreign observers and potential

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visitors to view Nigeria as a dangerous destination. Terrorism in Northern Nigeria coupled with the recent and recurrent ethno-religious crises in the countries has given international tourists the impression that the whole of Nigeria is facing serious security issues and has thus become a very unsafe part of the world. A recent study conducted by the Forwardkeys organisation (cited by Africa.com, 2020) on tourist arrivals in Africa's 10 most beautiful destinations has revealed that the Lagos International airport – and Nigeria by extension – is witnessing substantial declines in both domestic and international tourist arrival due to the Nigeria security situation. In 2018, foreign tourist arrivals in the country decreased by 2%. According to Fowardkeys (cited by Africa.com 2020), this decrease was due to the ravaging effects of lack of security in the northern part of the country. Insecurity – caused mainly by the Boko Haram insurgency – has caused most international tourists/observers to view the entire country in a negative light.

Thus, although blessed with numerous touristic attractions, Nigeria has over the years remained less competitive compared to other touristic destination in Africa in particular and in the world in general. Even though the country has in some years (notably in 2017) recorded tourist arrivals in the whereabouts of 1.3 million, the country has generally ranked low in the various editions of tourism and travelling competitiveness reports. According to JUMIA' s Hospitality Report Africa of 2019 [28], Nigeria is not one of the 10 most attractive destinations in Africa. Similarly, as per various editions of the World Economic Forum's *Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report* Nigeria is one of the most unpopular destinations in the world (World Economic Forum 2018) [29]. In 2017 for instance the above mention Report ranked Nigeria 129 out of 139 countries (Augusto 2020: 8) [30]. Compared to Ghana and South Africa that respectively enjoyed 120th and 53th positions, Nigeria's ranking was – and has continued to be – so poor. Similarly in 2019, Nigeria still ranked 129 out of 140 countries (Calderwood & Soshkim 2019: xiii) [31]. In an attempt to rationalise Nigeria's poor rank in the *Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index*, Calderwood and Soshkim (2019) particularly underscore the growing security problem which prevails in Nigeria. They write that: "Nigeria (129th) accounts for nearly half of the subregion's T&T GDP and is also its largest economy. However, it ranks in the middle of the pack regarding competitiveness and has the worst safety and security ranking (139th) in the entire Sub-Saharan Africa region. With a global rank of 88th" (Calderwood & Soshkim 2019: 55).

As earlier alluded to, some of the reasons for the low rank and the negative perception of the Nigeria destination in the international scene include Nigeria's government limited attention given to the tourism sector, poor infrastructural facilities and insecurity problems among others. In view of the multiple challenges faced by the tourism sector in Nigeria, observers such as Africa.com (2020) contend that, according to many international audiences, Nigeria is more a business destination than a touristic attraction. It has enormous touristic potentials which have not yet been fully harnessed.

Nigerian Schools

According to some sources, Nigerian schools – particularly tertiary institutions – used to be regarded as some of the best in West Africa [32, 33 and 29]. This positive image of Nigerian educational system and institutions prevailed particularly around the 70s and 80s. In recent times however, many observers have lamented the decreasing quality of education in Nigerian schools associating such a decrease with a diversity of phenomena. Some of these phenomena include the Nigerian factor, poor educational infrastructures, mal-adjusted curricula and questionable educational policies among others. Authors such as Achi (2003) [34] as well as Omebe and Omebe (2015) [35] contend that Nigerian schools and system of education are popularly viewed from the prism of examination malpractices, the menace of secret cults, abandon projects, sex for grade and incompetence of teachers among others. Ogunfunmilakin (2015) [36] similarly observes that corruption has seriously bastardised the educational system in Nigeria causing both local and foreign observers to have reduced or no faith in the system.

A suitable tool for illustrating foreign observers and publics' perception of tertiary education in Nigeria is the various ways in which Nigerian universities are ranked in the world. According to the most diverse and largest university ranking in the world (the *Times Higher Education World University Ranking*) of 2020, a few Nigerian universities feature in the 500 best universities in the world with Covenant University being at the head of this few [37-38]. In this same ranking which is based on parameters such as teaching, research, research impact, innovation and international outlook, the two Nigerian Universities of Ibadan and Lagos respectively occupied the 501th and 801th positions globally (that is out of 1,400 world universities). In spite of this more or less favourable development, Nigerian universities have these last years been less competitive than Ghanaian, South African and Egyptian universities.

Conclusion

It is common to come across scholarly critiques, commentators' opinion articles, world politicians' declarations and elements of popular culture that represent Nigeria or Nigerians in a negative light. From Donald Trump's slamming of Nigeria in 2020 (for not returning to "their huts") to Cameroonians' tendency of seeing Nigerians as "domineering" and "invaders" in their motherland, the Nigerian nationality has arguably not always been well perceived in countries across the world. However, much of the gloomy representations of

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Nigeria are not founded on empirical research. In other words, most observers – including scholars – simply hinge on mere alarmist assumptions and/or poorly substantiated theories and logics to describe Nigeria as a land of various negativities. Such observers often fail to make sufficient efforts towards providing concrete evidence supporting their claims. In this paper, a critical review of literature has been used to assess the extent to which the debate over Nigeria's image crisis is founded on empirical bases. Seven key features of Nigeria are considered in the review namely: (i) the Nigerian product, (ii) Nigeria as a country (iii) Nigeria as a people [that is Nigerian cultures], (iv) the Nigerian government, (v) the Nigerian police, (vi) Nigeria as a touristic destination (vii) Nigerian hospitals and (viii) Nigerian schools.

The critical review conducted in this paper reveals that, in general, Nigeria's image has been varying from one study to the other, from a year to another and from a people/country to another. Popular perceptions of Nigeria as a country among foreign people range from the stereotype of one of the most corrupt countries in the world to that of the most populous country in Africa and one of the leading oil-producing economies on the planet. Based on the literature available, empirical studies on Nigeria's image crisis are very limited.

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