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## **Rebranding as an Administrative Strategy in Nigeria: The Journey so Far** (*Pp 119-128*)

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### **Abstract**

*The idea of rebranding the Nigerian state was conceptualized by Professor Dora Akunyili, the Minister of Information and Communications. Her ministerial portfolio requires her to rebuild the image of the country which has been badly battered in the eyes of the international community. Her zeal to revamp the image of Nigeria made her to undertake this onerous task as her pet project. Having emerged from self-conscious efforts to make a mark in her new office, she gathered a cross-section of Nigerian artistes to create a logo and also suggested what appropriate captivating slogan to be adopted for the project. The outcome is what has become "Nigeria: Good People, Great Nation". This paper examines the appropriateness or otherwise of the project and its progress so far.*

### **Introduction**

Branding is usually associated with products and services rather than with countries, places and cities. Global companies and corporations and their marketing communications agencies have continued to create rebranding as a distinguishing and strategic competitive factor in the market place, and also in the market drive for consumers. Brands such as Coca-cola, Mercedes Benz, Nike, Microsoft, Harvard, Guinness, Ford, Toyota, etc. are beneficiaries of strong and strategic brand building efforts. This may therefore account for their global brand leadership positions (Appadorai, 2004). It is therefore not surprising to find governments and countries beginning to employ branding and marketing techniques to sell their products

and countries to the rest of the world in order to increase their international profile, attract foreign direct investments and make the places ideal for tourism and trade (Orivri, 2010).

The Nigerian government, through the Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation launched the Nigeria Image Project (renamed, the Heart of Africa Project) in July 2004, following the footsteps of some other African countries which had launched similar image campaigns such as Uganda with their “Gifted by Nature Campaign” and South Africa which launched a “Proudly South Africa Image Programme”.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Reference Group Theory**

The Reference Group Theory is based on the principle that people take the standards of significant others as a basis for making self-appraisals, comparisons, and choices regarding need and use of information. The theory allows for common expectations regarding the socialization process into desired groups. It also explains why members of these groups are willing to adjust certain interest in order to work on behalf of larger concerns. In this sense, it is implied that this common thread of socialized norms leads to the formation of a cognitive view where as a member of a reference group, one has confidence that the appropriate strategies employed to manage one’s life are befitting and valid. The cognitive is viewed as fundamental to the socialization in which members of specific populations believe that it is the commoner of their experiences which sets them apart from other members of society (Dawson and Chatman, 2001:1).

Cooley offered discussions relating closely to the concepts of reference group theory. He discussed how individuals took on various mental or psychological interpretations of themselves based on how individuals thought others perceived them:

In a large and interesting class of cases, the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one’s self – that is any idea he appropriates appear in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude towards this, attributed to the other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking-glass self... as we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours and pleased (or otherwise) with them according as they do (or do

not answer) to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends and so on are variously affected by it (Cooley, 1964:183-184).

Cooley argued that a self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification; the comparison with a looking glass hardly suggests a second element, the imagine judgement, which is quite essential. Cooley therefore believed that,

The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with feeling (Cooley, 1964:184-186).

In summary, Cooley is saying that an individual's perception of what he or she thinks others think about him or herself affects in some manner the way that individual perceives or feels about him or herself. Norms enter into a conceptualization of reference group theory because the domains in which members play out their identities are driven by this collective sense of being up to something. Individuals believe that the solutions they have worked out to define and shape their world are appropriate for them and that the decisions made by their collective view of reality provide the most certain solution to issues facing them.

Nigeria as a member of the comity of nations is also careful to ensure that she is viewed in positive light among the nations of the world hence her rebranding voyage.

### **Why Rebrand Nigeria?**

Nigeria is an oil rich country with an estimated population of 160 million people. It also occupies an enviable position as the sixth largest oil producer in the world. Despite these positive attributes, Nigeria's reputation as one of the most corrupt nations in the world, coupled with other socio-political issues has greatly affected its global image and has directly impacted on its attractiveness as a potential investment and tourist destination. According to the 2004 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, Nigeria ranks as the third most corrupt country in the world in a survey of

146 countries, coming only ahead of Haiti (the most corrupt country) and Bangladesh (the second most corrupt country).

Some Nigerian citizens including the members of the political class, have not helped matters; not with their ever increasing corrupt and fraudulent practices. These fraudsters are known as '419' people, named after the section in Nigeria's Criminal Code which deals with advanced fee fraud (Nwagba, 2009:23).

The new wave scammers comprising young boys and girls (mainly university students) are called "Yahoo boys and girls" as a result of information technology (IT) dexterity and their penchant for perpetuating the scams using the internet to constantly send unsolicited Yahoo scam e-mails and other free e-mail websites to targets all over the world, promising them spurious and ludicrous financial deals. Furthermore, Nigeria also suffers from problems such as bribery and corruption, unemployment, poor infrastructural development, over-dependence in the oil sector as its main revenue source, poor work ethics, increasing citizen's dissatisfaction with the political structures, corporate and large scale organizational irresponsibility, inadequate funding of the educational, health and other key sectors, neglect of the agricultural and other non-oil productive and manufacturing sectors, continued manufacturing of poor quality goods, over dependence on imported goods, poorly regulated capital and financial market, tribal ethnic and religious squabbles, lack of security and disregard for human life and property, armed robbery and the likes. These are common orientations in Nigeria.

Nigeria's experience of long periods of military dictatorship which saw the country's national treasures pillaged and citizens' rights abused have also contributed to the negative international image which Nigeria has today (Babundo, 2009:26). In 2004, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) at a public forum in Lagos, Nigeria concluded that Nigeria's poor external image is denying it the much needed foreign investment to accelerate her economic growth. According to the 2004 UNCTAD report, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flow to Nigeria was 1.2 billion dollars in 2002 and 1.3 billion dollars in 2003. This is a pittance for a country with such huge potentials for economic growth and social development.

### **Rebranding and Managing Nigeria's Image**

This realization of the negative effects of the issues on Nigeria's image as a potential investment country persuaded the government of Nigeria to launch the Nigeria Image Project in July 2004. The Olusegun Obasanjo's government in that year launched an image project which it called the Nigeria Image Project (Obasanjo, 2004). The project was renamed in 2005 by the then Minister of Information and National Orientation, Frank Nweke Jr. as the Heart of Africa (HOA) Project. Planned as an informational and orientation campaign, the HOA project received an initial government contribution of 600 million naira (about 3 million dollars) with the expectation that the private sector will also contribute towards the project as part of the corporate social responsibility (Adujie, 2009:13).

The issue of Nigeria's image was again reiterated in March 2009, when it was relaunched with a slogan – Nigeria: Good People, Great Nation. According to Nigeria's Information and Communication Minister, Professor Dora Akunyili, "Nigeria cannot wait until it solves all her problems before it can stand to give serious thoughts to re-branding her battered image. This is because our development is tied to our image. This negative perception has had destructive effects on our people and stymied our growth and national progress". Adding his voice, the then Vice President, Goodluck Jonathan who represented President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, at the occasion said, "Let us resolve that we would no longer be held ransomed by the fraudsters that give Nigeria and all of us a bad name and image" (Aririesike, 2009:1).

Isawa Eliagwu, a spokesman of the committee in the new Nigeria Project said that the programme is a rebirth of the country "we are not happy with the Nigerian product we have now; hence we have decided to do something about it". He said "all we hear in the past is that Nigeria is a fertile ground for credit fraud and all kinds of crime. We all can rebrand ourselves, and then Nigeria can be rebranded" (Eliagwu, 2009:26).

It is no doubt a herculean task in marketing Nigeria as a brand in the international community. At the presentation of the green passport as a Nigerian, one is automatically labeled and stereotyped. In many international airports, special checkpoints are created where Nigerian travellers are subjected to rigorous and intensive security checks. It is worthy of note that not all Nigerians are fraudsters, racketeers, criminals, money launderers, etc. There are good, noble and upright Nigerians. In fact, there are personalities/celebrities in Nigeria who have risen from rags

to riches as a result of sheer hard work. They have made Nigeria proud, both locally and internationally (Aliyu, 2008:74).

Professor Dora Akunyili added that rebranding entails the renewing of values and identity of Nigeria, a nation which has had a battered image over the years. The Information Minister maintained that the negative perceptions about Nigeria persisted because Nigerians allow others to tell their story. In spite of these negative perceptions about Nigeria, it is nevertheless a country with countless opportunities (Epiekese, 2009), hence the need for a people-oriented national campaign to correct the wrong perceptions. This would provide a change in character and the way Nigerians themselves talk about their country. This is the vision which the rebranding campaign intends to inculcate in Nigerians.

The launching of the rebranding campaign was on live television in the African Independent Television (AIT) network and other Nigeria television stations. It was spiced up with some live musical interludes provided by the great Nigerian artiste, Bongos Ikwe, whose popular tract “A Nigerian has come to stay” provoked tears of lost patriotic feelings and love. The Minister further asserted that in the quest to rebrand Nigeria, Nigerians ought to be positive in their thinking and speech, which the country needs to tell the world that we are not all criminals. “There is the need to tell the world that in here are many good people. The world needs to be told about the good stories in Nigeria. We need to project ourselves positively and we need to manage the negative stories responsibly; that is all we are talking about in the rebranding programme” (Agbaegbu and Philips, 2009:32).

### **A Critique of Nigeria’s Rebranding Project**

The rebrand Nigerian project has been greeted with a lot of criticisms. The first is that the energy and resources channeled into the project could be better used elsewhere. It has been asserted that the right approach has not been followed. The amount of money that has been allocated to this project in the 2010 budget further raises question as to its desirability. The question being raised is: what exactly are the issues that need to be addressed? If Nigeria is to move forward in practical terms, some of the problems are not insurmountable, rather they only need concerted efforts and perhaps “political will” to deal with them (Fagbemi, 2009:22).

The incessant petrol scarcity is a very clear example of some of the problems that require more urgent attention than the so-called rebrand project. Fuel scarcity remains a big problem that our government has

consistently failed to tackle. It is so serious that President Goodluck Jonathan has had to issue a no-holiday directive to some ministers. The Nigerian government and her ministers owe Nigerians a genuine explanation for the perennial scarcity of petroleum products in an oil producing country. It therefore seems not only ridiculous to talk about rebranding but also unfair to expect Nigerians, many of whom have had to stay overnight at petrol stations instead of the comfort of their homes to go about proclaiming: “Nigeria, Good People, Great Nation”! It is difficult to see how this could be seen as a sign of greatness. Sadly, the government that ought to be dealing with this and other related matters seem to have abandoned its citizenry to the intrigues of a few elites in the society who are benefiting from it. Why refineries cannot operate at installed capacity remains a mystery. Is the Nigerian government really unable to deal with this monster? Surely, it is unacceptable for government to claim that it does not know how to deal with this problem, including the brains behind it. Who is going to rescue the masses from these lots? (Agbese, 2009:32)

Fagbemi in his analysis further highlighted the long industrial action embarked upon in the Nigerian universities in 2009 as another case in point. It was simply a case of demonstration of the short-sightedness and lack of appropriate commitment on the part of our government to deal with issues that matter most to our people, particularly education. Nigeria universities and academic staff are not well funded and remunerated respectively, but comparatively, Nigerian legislators are paid ridiculously high salaries and benefits which are said to be the highest in the world. As a result of its inability to handle the situation effectively in our universities, many Nigerians are now forced to attend very expensive private universities. The vast majority who cannot afford the cost are left to their own fate. Sadly, those who are vested with the responsibilities to look after our institutions either send their own children to private universities in Nigeria or overseas – for how long will this continue! It can be deduced from the foregoing that instead of bothering the Nigerian masses with unnecessary dictums about rebranding, it is the political class – the uneducated and illiterate politicians who desperately hold on to power – that need rebranding (Babundo, 2009:35).

Nwagba (2009) commented on his doubts on the rebranding project. He posited that the rebranding initiative is more of a palliative measure than an actual cure to the problem haunting us. It is palliative because it is only interested in the perception of the nation by others. But it would take more

than a change in people's perception to change a situation: for change to really take place, circumstances like those aforementioned in this paper would have to change; government has to change the way it governs, the citizenry have to change the way they perceive and react to their government (Nwagba, 2009:32) He however conceded that a bit of public relations would be needed to kick-start the process, here lies the rebranding initiative, only time will tell if this aspect of the task will be accomplished!

Nevertheless, other commentators like Agbese (2009) gave credence to Dora Akunyili's rebranding project. He said that "I think Akunyili was right to embark on the project. Its primary aim I believe is to underline the fact that if we fail to rebrand our country, she will remain a "sweet smelling country" (Agbese, 2009:29)

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Nigerians must realize that the country belongs to us all, regardless of the cultural and religious differences. It is on record that Nigeria consists of over 250 ethno-religious groups and among the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Therefore, there is the need for the "mindset orientation", a situation and time when Nigerians will begin to talk positively about Nigeria; when Nigerians would have faith in Nigeria and a situation where Nigerians would rise up in defence of Nigeria. The rebrand Nigeria campaign which aims amongst others to bring about the aforesaid should not be spontaneous, but simply that of a conscientious effort to begin to do what is right and desist from acts inimical to our continued growth and progress. Doing what is right entails individual change, positive thoughts about the country, selfless service, patriotism, faith and belief in the country. The Americans will not go an extra mile for us, neither will the Europeans. Nigerians have to do it for Nigeria to make progress and regain her position in the league of great nations The rebrand project should be given a chance to flourish. (Ocheja, 2009:40).

For now we are faced with the following questions:

1. What about the ordinary man on the street who thinks about cheating his next door neighbour at the slightest opportunity?
2. What about the traders who sell goods with the intention to cheat their customers?
3. What about our businessmen who deal in fake drugs, thereby endangering the lives of their fellow country men?



4. What about the students in our schools that engages in examination malpractices and their teachers that molest female students with sexual advances for high grades?
5. What about the civil servants who out of sheer wickedness hide their colleague's files to deny them promotion?
6. What about the police who demand for gratification from road users before they can have the right of passage in a public highway?
7. What about banks that sold shares and withheld certificates for 8 months and then returned monies to investors without interest?
8. What about drunk drivers who knock down fellow citizens in traffic and then speed away uncaringly?

The list is endless. The reorientation must start from the mind, which the rebrand project preaches. Sentiments should be put aside if we must move forward; the personality of the supervising minister should not be an issue, rather the motive of the campaign and its intended outcome. The challenge we are faced with is arresting these anomalies (Audu, 2010).

Our leaders therefore must rise up to the challenge and ensure that all organs of government are in tandem with the rebrand message. The citizenry must lend credence to government policies, as this gives it a good chance of success. Anti-corruption agencies should not be barking dogs, they must gain the trust of Nigerians by prosecuting corrupt Nigerians and not necessarily government officials. Political office should not be viewed as an avenue for self-aggrandizement, but rather as an avenue to contribute to the growth of the nation through selfless service. The success of the rebranding effort would rest squarely in addressing these anomalies.

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