Abstract: In today’s globalized world, nations are increasingly concerned about how they are perceived by their publics, often carefully planning and executing policies to maintain a positive identity or shed a negative image. While some countries are able to execute nation branding, others are not. Using the Nigerian experience as a case study, this article shows how the character of a state can undermine its capacity for successful nation branding. We argue that countries are judged not just by what they say but also by what they do, and that inherent contradictions such as sectarian violence, ethnic tension, and corruption underline Nigeria’s underdevelopment and its reputation at home and abroad. We assess this trajectory in the context of state fragility and “prebendalization” politics in a country with a powerful colonial legacy, and suggest a duality of order and disorder involving formal and informal structures of governance that impinge significantly on re-branding efforts.

Keywords: Nigeria, fragile state, corruption, violence, re-branding

* The authors wish to acknowledge the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

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Manuscript received May 5, 2013; out for review May 25, 2013; review completed August 6; accepted August 8, 2013.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1970s, successive Nigerian governments have engaged in nation branding aimed principally at shedding the country’s negative image domestically and internationally. Aside from being the most populous black nation in the world, with over 160 million people, Nigeria is also generously endowed with oil, gas, and other natural resources, making it strong ally in global economic relations. It ranks among the seventh largest oil exporters in the world. However, the hope that the country’s enormous human and material capital would translate into considerable influence in international affairs has remained elusive largely because of its negative image.

Nation branding is crucial in the current global order because it enhances public diplomacy, global socio-economic competitiveness, and soft-power promotion (Ham & Jun, 2008). The image and reputation of a country can attract both tangible and intangible benefits, including tourism revenue, investment capital, and foreign aid, and can boost its cultural and political influence in the global arena. Accordingly, there has been increasing awareness in recent years that the reputation of a country, city, or region behaves rather like the brand image of a product or company and is crucial to its progress and prosperity (Anholt, 1998).

In recognition of this, many countries formulate policies aimed at positively influencing global perceptions in order to realize the economies of scale that accrue from the production, distribution, and marketing of outputs in the global market. This quest for global competitiveness underpins China’s Shanghai Expo and its production of promotional films to boost its international image using domestic cultural revitalization as a springboard for soft power (Barr, 2012). Also, through careful nation branding, Spain—which was isolated and poverty-stricken in the Franco era—has emerged as a modern European democracy and first-choice tourist destination (Gilmore, 2002). Branding has also made Japan famous for technology, Paris for style, Switzerland for wealth, and Rio de Janeiro for carnival. Yet, much of Africa is notorious for corruption, poverty, conflict, disease, and weakness of public institutions.

The Nigerian public space and discourse have been replete with re-branding initiatives since the Jaji Declaration by the Obasanjo military government (1975-1979). Shortly after the Shagari-led civilian interlude, the Buhari/Idiagbon regime (1983-1985) launched the War against Indiscipline (WAI) campaign. This was followed by the MAMSER and Not in Our Character initiatives, promoted by the Babangida and Abacha dictatorships, respectively (1985-1998). The return to civil rule witnessed a revamping of image laundering in the country as exemplified by the Heart of Africa and Image Re-branding policies of the Obasanjo (1999-2007) and Yar’Adua (2007-2010) administrations, respectively. The Image Re-branding project was the most...