

## Overcoming Rhetorical Barriers in the Ahiara Declaration: Colonel Ojukwu's Rhetorical Success in the Face of Adversity

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Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu is remembered in Nigeria as a national leader even though he led the secession of the Eastern part of the country which led to the civil war of 1967.<sup>1</sup> The political climate in Nigeria prior to the time of the secession was tribalistic with a lot of conflict between the major ethnic groups. At the time Nigeria consisted of three main regions (east, north and west) where people lived according to their ethnic groups in most of the regions. The Igbo people (from the eastern region), tired of their mistreatment in Nigeria, urged their leaders to create their own country, and Colonel Ojukwu answered their call.<sup>2</sup> The western and northern parts of Nigeria acted as one to fight against the secession of the eastern part (Biafra). Nigeria had a population of 53 million against Biafra's 12 million and at the beginning of the war Biafra's troops numbered 35,000 against Nigeria's 100,000.<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, Biafra had no chance of seceding or winning the civil war because the western and the northern part of Nigeria combined were more than double its size in terms of population and land mass. Nigeria also had an upper hand in every other respect, from logistics and armaments to economic strength.<sup>4</sup> The Ahiara Declaration was written by the National Guidance Committee of Biafra and delivered by Colonel Ojukwu on June 1, 1969, when the war had already waged on for two years and Biafra clearly was losing.<sup>5</sup> Through the Declaration, Colonel Ojukwu successfully motivated the people of Biafra to keep on fighting. This paper will study the rhetorical strategies used by Colonel Ojukwu to divert the people's attention from their loss to the hope of a victory which lay ahead. According to Robert Rowland, a rhetorical barrier is "an attitude, belief or other problem that a rhetor must overcome in order to persuade an audience to accept a given position." In contrast, a rhetorical advantage is "an attitude, belief or other position that gives the rhetor assistance in persuading an audience."<sup>6</sup> This paper will show how a political leader can overcome their rhetorical barriers through embracing and enacting rhetorical advantages. Through the Ahiara Declaration, Colonel Ojukwu

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<sup>1</sup>Roderick MacCleod and Tomi Oladipo, "Biafra at 50: Nigeria's civil war explained" *BBC News Africa*, July 5, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-40507324/biafra-at-50-nigeria-s-civil-war-explained> (accessed April 10, 2018).

<sup>2</sup>Victor Alumona, "A Critical Rhetoric Analysis of Ojukwu's Ahiara Declaration," *African Identities*, vol. 9, no. 1 (February 2011): 67-84.

<sup>3</sup> A. K. Essack, "Biafra Holds Out," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January 1970): 8-10.

<sup>4</sup> Essack, "Biafra Holds Out."

<sup>5</sup> Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration: The Principles of the Biafran Revolution* (Geneva: Markpress, 1969). The text of the Ahiara Declaration also may be found online at: <http://biafra.org/Ahiara.htm> (accessed April 21, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Rowland, "Understanding Context and Judging Effectiveness," in *Analyzing Rhetoric: A Handbook for the Informed Citizen in a New Millennium* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2002), 35-57 at 40.

utilized his skill as a rhetor and the history surrounding the civil war to create arguments of dissociation and blame diversion that helped him overcome the rhetorical barrier of Biafra losing the war.

One major reason why Biafra was losing the war stemmed from the lack of support from the international community. Through the Ahiara Declaration, Colonel Ojukwu was able to combat this barrier by pointing to the racist history of the black man's relationship with the white leadership of Western countries.

I have for a long time thought about this our predicament the attitude of the civilized world to this our conflict. The more I think about it the more I am convinced that our disability is racial. The root cause of our problem lies in the fact that we are black. If all the things that have happened to us had happened to another people who are not black, if other people who are not black had reacted in the way our people have reacted these two long years, the world's response would surely have been different.

In 1966, some 50,000 of us were slaughtered like cattle in Nigeria. In the course of this war, well over one million of us have been killed: yet the world is unimpressed and looks on in indifference. . . .

For this reason our struggle is a movement against racial prejudice, in particular against that tendency to regard the black man as culturally, morally, spiritually, intellectually, and physically inferior to the other two major races of the world the yellow and the white races.<sup>7</sup>

Even before the Ahiara Declaration, Colonel Ojukwu had informed Biafran citizens several times that they would wage war with the enemy (Nigeria) until the conscience of the world would effectively be aroused against genocide.<sup>8</sup> He had hoped that the international community would intervene and bring about a cease fire which would lead to a political settlement guaranteeing the independence of Biafra.<sup>9</sup> The international community did respond to the attempted genocide in Biafra by providing humanitarian relief. However, that was not enough. The international community failed to provide the political intervention that Ojukwu's regime so desperately sought and needed in order to conduct and win the war.<sup>10</sup> At the time of the Ahiara Declaration, in fact, the Biafran troops were only able to maintain a position of defense, and even this defensive position increasingly was being attacked by the Nigerian army.

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<sup>7</sup> Ahiara Declaration, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140811030417/http://biafra.org/Ahiara.htm> (accessed April 21, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> John Stremmlau, "The Futility of Secession," in *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 320-356.

<sup>9</sup> Stremmlau, "The Futility of Secession."

<sup>10</sup> Stremmlau, "The Futility of Secession."

During his speech, he accused the international community, and especially the Western powers, of turning a blind eye to the genocide being committed by the Nigerian government.<sup>11</sup> The Western powers' decision not to provide political assistance to Biafra acted as a rhetorical barrier, one that Colonel Ojukwu combated by recounting the history of racism within the international system of imperialism. He painted the struggle for Biafra not only as one of independence from Nigeria, but also as one to rid the "Negro" of the West's racial prejudice. He explained in his speech that Western powers remained convinced of the "myth" of an innate inferiority in the Negro, and that this belief explained their lack of concern for Biafra's cause.

It is this myth about the Negro that still conditions the thinking and attitude of most white governments on all issues concerning black Africa and the black man; it explains the double standards which they apply to present-day world problems; it explains their stand on the whole question of independence and basic human rights for the black peoples of the world. These myths explain the stand of many of the world governments and organizations on our present struggle.<sup>12</sup>

This rhetorical strategy was one of a diversion of blame. During the declaration, Colonel Ojukwu also praised the people of Biafra for upholding their value of self-determination. As a way to instill hope in the people and divert their attention from the loss of the war, he stated that the only way that Biafra could achieve success was through maintaining the value of self-reliance. He says; "The only hope of success lies in the state pursuing an active policy of self-reliance in putting its own economic house in order . . . . This is what Biafra must do . . . if they are to save themselves."<sup>13</sup> By telling the citizens of Biafra that the only way they could achieve success was to pursue economic self-reliance, he instilled hope in the people. By diverting the blame of the war to the racist values of Western powers and providing a solution to Biafra's losing the war, Colonel Ojukwu made a case for the idea that Biafra could win the war without the help of the international community. He succeeded in overcoming this rhetorical barrier by portraying the people of Biafra as triumphant despite their numerous challenges and, in the process, utilized his rhetorical recounting of Biafran history to divert any blame to the Western powers.

Colonel Ojukwu faced another significant rhetorical barrier with the starvation and death of the Biafran people and he was able to overcome this by using his skills as rhetor to create an argument of dissociation and diversion of blame. At the time of the Ahiara Declaration, over one million Biafrans had died from starvation and millions more were suffering.<sup>14</sup> Other main causes of death were diseases such as kwashiorkor (a disease caused by malnutrition) and bombs being

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<sup>11</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Essack, "Biafra Holds Out."

dropped on Biafra by the Nigerian Army.<sup>15</sup> The international community responded to the starvation of the Biafran people by attempting to send aid in the form of food and medication. However, these materials could not get to the people of Biafra because the governments of the warring parties could not come to a consensus on an effective method of food transportation to the besieged territory. This led Colonel Ojukwu to accuse Nigeria of committing an act of genocide and the Western countries of aiding and abetting Nigeria in their crimes against humanity.<sup>16</sup>

Colonel Ojukwu was able to create and utilize dissociative arguments, first by establishing the Biafran value of respecting human life, and then by showing how Nigeria did not uphold this value. “The Biafran sees the willful and wanton destruction of human life not only as a grave crime but as an abominable sin. In our society every human life is holy, every individual counts.”<sup>17</sup> Nigeria, in stark contrast, “embarked on a crime of genocide against our people by first mounting a total blockade against Biafra.”<sup>18</sup> He was able to combat the rhetorical barrier of his people’s starvation by reminding Biafrans that, in order for them to uphold their values, they must gain their independence from Nigeria, which did not share those same values.

The history of the Igbo people being attacked in Nigeria before the civil war acted as a rhetorical advantage for Colonel Ojukwu. He embraced this advantage by diverting the blame of the people’s starvation and death to the country’s enemies. The Igbo people had suffered death at the hands of Nigerians previously with acts such as the 1966 pogrom which led to the death of 30,000 Igbos living in the northern part of Nigeria.<sup>19</sup> In short, it should not come as a surprise to the people of Biafra that Nigeria would attempt to commit genocide. Colonel Ojukwu utilized the distrust of the Biafra people towards the Nigerian government to construct his argument of blame diversion in the Ahiara Declaration. “Fellow Biafrans, I have for a long time thought about this our predicament [and] the attitude of the civilized world to this our conflict.”<sup>20</sup> By using the term “predicament” he implied that the situation of starvation and suffering was one that the Biafrans were coerced into by forces beyond their control.<sup>21</sup> The predicament of the Igbo people’s mistreatment and now their starvation according to Ojukwu was something over which they had no control. Throughout the speech, Colonel Ojukwu portrayed the idea that the only way to avoid

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<sup>15</sup> Zubeida Mustafa, “The Nigerian Dilemma,” *Pakistan Horizon*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1969): 135-152.

<sup>16</sup> Another argument for the genocide was that the Western press alleged that Nigerian troops massacred the Igbo troops in large numbers and its air force dropped bombs on civilian targets. Although this allegation was subsequently disproved by a team of international observers, Colonel Ojukwu still pushed the idea of a genocide attempt in the Ahiara Declaration. Mustafa, “The Nigerian Dilemma.”

<sup>17</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 5

<sup>19</sup> A. B. Akinyemi, “The British Press and the Nigerian Civil War,” *African Affairs*, vol. 71, no. 285 (October 1972): 408-426.

<sup>20</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Alumona, “A Critical Rhetoric Analysis of Ojukwu’s Ahiara Declaration.”

complete annihilation of the Biafran people by its enemies was to keep on fighting. By portraying the war as essential to their survival, he was able to divert the attention of the people from their suffering to a greater purpose which was their struggle for independence. "Thus, the Biafran Revolution is not dreamt up by an elite; it is the will of the People. The People want it. They are fighting and dying to defend it. Their immediate concern is to defeat the Nigerian aggressor and so safeguard the Biafran Revolution."<sup>22</sup> Colonel Ojukwu overcame this rhetorical barrier of starvation first by reminding the Biafran people of their history and cultural values, and then by employing them to his advantage.

Colonel Ojukwu utilized his dissociation argument when corrupt government officials in Biafra created a rhetorical barrier. One of the main reasons why Biafra seceded stemmed from the fact that corrupt governments in Nigeria had allowed for the mistreatment of the Igbo people when they were still a part of the country. The Igbo people had long harbored a feeling of deprivation going back to the time of British colonization. According to Juliet Kaarbo and James Lee Ray, "The theory of relative deprivation is the idea that groups that perceive themselves as relatively worse off than others will mobilize and take action."<sup>23</sup> The Igbo people were convinced that northerners in Nigeria received more opportunities in the country in terms of education and jobs as a result of their corrupt government. Colonel Ojukwu played up this idea in the Ahiara Declaration:

Nigeria persecuted and slaughtered her minorities; Nigerian justice was a farce; her elections, her census, her politics - her everything - was corrupt. Qualification, merit and experience were discounted in public service. In one area of Nigeria, for instance, they preferred to turn a nurse who had worked for five years into a doctor rather than employ a qualified doctor from another part of Nigeria; barely literate clerks were made Permanent Secretaries; a university Vice-Chancellor was sacked because he belonged to the wrong tribe.<sup>24</sup>

This statement illustrates how many Biafrans felt towards the Nigerian government: a person from a tribal minority (that is, Igbo) who was the most qualified for a position invariably lost the opportunity to obtain the job as a result of nepotism and tribalism in Nigeria's corrupt government.

Nepotism and bribery, however, were also commonplace in the Biafran government. This obviously posed a problem, because if the Biafran government was also corrupt, then the Biafrans were facing the same issues that they faced in Nigeria and their attempt at secession had been futile. Colonel Ojukwu overcame this barrier, however, by disassociating Biafra from the Nigerian degree of corruption. He achieved this through his speech by listing the failures of the Nigerian

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<sup>22</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Juliet Kaarbo and James Lee Ray, "Ethnic Conflict and International Terrorism," in *Global Politics*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth Publishing, 2010), 215-258 at 228.

<sup>24</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 12.

government and showing how Biafra can rise above these failures.<sup>25</sup> He conceded that there were a few corrupt government officials in Biafra who did not “shake off Nigerianism.” He accused those corrupt government officials of hypocrisy:

Let us admit to ourselves that when we left Nigeria, some of us did not shake off every particle of Nigerianism. We say that Nigerians are corrupt and take bribes, but here in our country we have among us some members of the Police and the Judiciary who are corrupt and who “eat” bribe. We accuse Nigerians of inordinate love of money, ostentatious living and irresponsibility, but here, even while we are engaged in a war of national survival, even while the very life of our nation hangs in the balance, we see some public servants who throw huge parties to entertain their friends; who kill cows to christen their babies.<sup>26</sup>

These corrupt officials were not “true” Biafrans because they were not upholding their country’s values. “It is clear that if our Revolution is to succeed, we must reclaim these wayward Biafrans. We must Biafranize them.”<sup>27</sup> Here he clearly used dissociation to demonstrate the corruption stemmed from Nigeria and not from Biafra, and then went on to describe the proper tasks of a Biafran leader. The ideal Biafran leader, according to Ojukwu, should always listen to the people and put their needs first. He/she has to know that he/she is a servant of the people placed in a position of power to fulfil the people’s wishes.<sup>28</sup> He described this leader as being “Biafranized”, in terms of embodying the values of the country’s revolution and rejecting the corrupt system of the Nigerian government. By distancing the Biafran movement from these corrupt officials Colonel Ojukwu was able to debar the voices of the naysayers against his government. By calling out the leaders who were corrupt, he showed how their acts were a reflection of their prior Nigerian influence and therefore could not be categorized as a shortcoming of the Biafran government. He successfully asserted that Biafra was making successful strides to rid itself of “Nigerianism.”

In the last five or six months, I have devised one additional way of learning at first had how the ordinary men and women of our country see the Revolution. I have established a practice of meeting every Wednesday with a different cross-section of our people to discuss the problems of the Revolution. These meetings have brought home to me the great desire for change among the generality of our people. I have heard a number of criticisms and complaints by people against certain things; ... All this indicates both that there is a change in progress and need for more change.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> Ojukwu, *The Ahiara Declaration*, 14-15.

## *Ogor*

As a result of his skills as a rhetor, Colonel Ojukwu was able to show how the people of Biafra would be able to rise above corruption and achieve their goal of self-determination. He turned around the situation of corrupt Biafran leaders to showcase how excellent attributes of the Biafran people would lead them to keep out Nigeria's corruption. He embraced rhetorical advantages such as his oratorical skill and good standing to overcome the political weakness of corrupt government officials.

Colonel Ojukwu remained a hero in the eyes of many Nigerians even though he led a major secession attempt. In 1982, he was granted a presidential pardon and returned to Nigeria after 13 years of living in exile.<sup>30</sup> At the time of his return, he was welcomed by enormous crowds. My findings about the Colonel through the descriptive and contextual methods of analysis explain his people's respect and love for him. He was able to embrace his rhetorical advantages and harness them to his benefit with clarity. As a result of the mistreatment of the Igbo people in Nigeria, his move to create an independent state has been viewed as heroic as opposed to being viewed as treasonous. The power of effective rhetoric is evidenced in the Nigerian public's remembrance of Ojukwu because he was able to maintain his good reputation even though he fought for a failed secession. Through his arguments of dissociation and diversion of blame in the Ahiara Declaration, he was able to showcase a different perspective of Biafra's loss and encourage the people to continue fighting for their right to self-determination.

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<sup>30</sup> Robert D. McFadden, "Odumegwu Ojukwu, Breakaway Biafra Leader, Dies at 78," (November 26, 2011), *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/world/africa/odumegwu-ujukwu-leader-of-breakaway-republic-of-biafra-dies-at-78.html> (accessed April 12, 2018).

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