

# The Visual Culture and Heritage Research Group, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Conference

CALL FOR PAPERS

## **Politics, Religion and Personality Cult in Postcolonial Africa**

Personality Cult refers to a situation in which a public figure (such as a political or charismatic leader) is deliberately seen as an idealized, heroic icon worthy of unquestioning praise, admiration and veneration. Also commonly known as **cult of personality**, it arises when a country's government or people in any sort of power or authority employ the mass media, propaganda, spectacle, the arts, patriotism, and government-organized demonstrations and rallies to create an idealized, heroic, and worshipful image of a leader, often through totalising flattery and praise. Closely related to apotheosis, the term was popularised in 1956 in Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech *On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences*, in which he criticized the deification of Joseph Stalin, and his Communist ally Mao Zedong, as being contrary to Marxist doctrine. The speech was later made public and was instrumental to the "de-Stalinization" of the Soviet Union. Politically, personality cult is a common feature of totalitarian and authoritarian governments.

In Africa, as in most other parts of the world, the personality cult syndrome has also found fecundity in the realm of religion, as religion become more politicised and commercialised. Personality cult operates on a dialectic basis, either occasioned by the deployment of propaganda by its own subject, that is, the leader or personality around whom it is built, or generated by the people through excessive hero worship. In modern Africa, the media has become, among others, one of the major tools for the invention, sustenance and celebration of the personality cult. Today personality cult is sustained in the mill of the travestied democracies and religious movements that define Africa.

In Africa, politics is a complex phenomenon, largely driven by the sensitivities of ethnicity and ethnocentrism manifested in the pursuits of ethnic domination and cleansing, migration and re-settlements, minority issues, resource-control controversies, political exclusion and marginalization theories, ethnic conflicts, terrorism, gender inequality, sit-tight-syndrome, corruption and leadership ineptitude, etc. The quagmire is vividly complemented by the complexities and contradictions harboured in contemporary religions/religious movements, especially Pentecostalism with its propensity for nescience, nihilism, extremism and intersectional intolerance within and across countries in the continent. The situation is further compounded by the intermingling of religion and politics in neo-colonial Africa as the two realms increasingly become instruments of aggression and impoverishment against the masses. When religion trespasses into realms (such as education and politics) not traditionally its own, as Jonathan Sacks suggests in his *Politics of Hope*, the results can be very catastrophic.

With the enthronement of religion and politics as fundamental means to heroic materialism and crude power in contemporary Africa, there is not only a scramble by people to become pastors and politicians, but to amass wealth and wield enormous power thereof and to use these as instruments of control on the people. In a continent where hunger and poverty have taken the front seat in many nations, political and religious leaders quickly become agencies for bread and butter and are easily confused or substituted with the offices and interests they should ordinarily represent. It is in this socio-political, religious and economic context that personality cult thrives in the continent and is beamed onto the landscape as a legitimate phenomenon and model. Against this background, we

would like to invite papers for the conference “**Politics, Religion and Personality Cult in Postcolonial Africa**”, with a view to tracing the history and social dynamics and dimensions of personality cult as it manifests and operates within the realms of religion and politics in postcolonial Africa, using the following subthemes and other related issues as possible spin-offs:

**a. The Concept of Personality Cult**

What is personality cult, both as a concept and experience? How does it operate in societies in and out of totalitarianisms masking as democracies with emphasis on the African experience?

**b. History of Personality Cult in Africa**

This subtheme anticipates exploration of the history of personality cult in Africa from pre-contact through colonial time and up to the present. Papers should focus on any epoch in Africa’s history or on the interface and relation of the various periods in Africa’s political, religious and social evolution.

**c. Politics, Religion, Personality Cult and the Media in Africa**

How has the personality cult syndrome or phenomenon manifested in politics and religion in Africa, especially through the substitution/confusion of persons (politicians, Church men and women, public office holders, chiefs and other leaders) with the interests they should represent? And how has the media, both private and government-owned, abetted, promoted or mediated this syndrome over time?

**d. Interface of Politics and Religion and the Power Struggle in Neo-Colonial Africa**

How has the quest for power and the tendentious heroic materialism defined the soul and contours of politics and religion in Africa, as concretised in the behaviour and attitude of Africa’s postmodern, bread-and-butter politicians and churchmen and women? How are both realms of society characterised as complement to each other, as typified by the social reality in Africa?

**e. Religions and Personality Cult in Africa**

How has “men of God” been transformed to “God of men” in contemporary Africa through the misinterpretation of values and virtues by the “Shepherd”, “flock”, people and media, as the centralising mantra moves away from God’s purpose (“Come let us make man in our own image”) in surrender to man’s selfish purpose (“Come, let us make God in our own image”).

**f. Personality Cult and Socio-Economic (Under)Development/Survival in Africa**

How has both religion and politics trespassed each other’s terrain in Africa, through the instrumentality of Personality Cult? And how has the situation impacted (under)development in different countries in the continent?

**g. Personality Cult, Ethnicity, Religion and Politics**

In a multi-ethnic continent or cultural bazaar like Africa, Personality Cult can easily take a great toll on the social fabrics of the society as the main issues of religion and politics may not always be built around ideas and ennobling issues but on the personalities aligned with particular ethnic or religious interests. How has these tendencies played out in the history of religion and politics in Africa?

**h. Extremis, Apocalypse and the Personality Cult Syndrome in Some Religions/Denominations**

In postcolonial/neo-colonial Africa, the new crop of churchmen tend to turn religion into magic and what has been described by critics as “Jesus Industry”, while also playing on the “end-time” band-wagon as means of controlling the faithful. How has the ambition of some church men and

women fuelled and sustained the principles of extremism, that is, the belief in the possible end of history and the propensity to act in ways calculated to bring history to a forcible end?

**i. Personality Cult and Violence in Democracy in Postcolonial Africa**

How has the recourse to promotion of individuals and their personal ambitions as against what Jonathan Sacks describes as the “politics of hope” turned democracy into the decentralisation of violence and corruption in postcolonial/neocolonial Africa?

**j. Personality Cult as a Cultural Residuum in Africa**

Is personality cult both in politics and religion a cultural residuum deriving from autochthonous African culture and way of life or is it a hangover from primordial times or is it a child of colonialism?

**k. Personality Cult and Social Conflicts**

How has personality cult been at the heart of ethnic rivalries and religio-political uprisings and conflicts in postcolonial/neocolonial Africa?

**l. Visual Communication as a Tool for Personality Cult in Africa**

How have politicians and the church employed possibilities in visual communications and multi-media arts and design in the service of personality cult? Good examples are campaign and crusade posters, radio/TV jingles in which political or religious personalities are lionised visually, conceptually and otherwise, through the manipulation of images and text that can impact the psyche and judgement of the public.

**m. Personality Cult as Resource in Arts and Literature in Africa**

Personality cult has provided creative resource for propaganda art, resistance art, film, theatre and others over the years in the continent. Some of the art and/or artists may provide a basis for interesting studies.

**Note**

The Conference will be held at Continuing Education Centre (CEC), University of Nigeria, Nsukka on October 16-19, 2019. Prospective participants are to send abstracts of not more than 250 words to the editors via the email addresses: [nche.george@unn.edu.ng](mailto:nche.george@unn.edu.ng), and [michael.ugwueze@unn.edu.ng](mailto:michael.ugwueze@unn.edu.ng), for consideration before September 15, 2019. Abstracts should be submitted with the following information in this order: (a) title of paper, (b) author(s), (c) affiliation, (d) email address, (e) phone number(s), and (f) 5 keywords of your proposed paper. Outcome of the conference will be published in 2020 in an edited anthology.

Conference fee is ₦20,000 or \$100. However, early bird consideration (₦15,000 or \$75) will be given to payments made before September 1, 2019. For payment, request account details from Dr George Nche (see contact below) or visit the website [vch-researchgroup.org](http://vch-researchgroup.org).

In conjunction with the conference, an exhibition of works on the same theme by selected artists will be organised by the Art Republic at the CEC, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and later at Sankofa Centre for Art and Heritage, Enugu. Exhibition fee is ₦15, 000. For more information on the exhibition, contact Mr. Dunu on 08037293980 or visit the website: [vch-researchgroup.org](http://vch-researchgroup.org).

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