

Civil society has been defined as a realm of social interaction between economy and the state, made up above all of the personal sphere (particularly the family), the field of associations (principally voluntary organisations), social movements, and types of public communications. It has also been described as the area of social association in society as distinct from the state, involving networks of bodies through which society and groups within society speak for themselves in cultural, ideological and political ways. Civil society is within the superstructure, and is related to institutions, forms of consciousness and political and cultural practices. With regard to Africa, there has been a debate about the applicability of the civil society concept to the continent. The negation of its applicability is usually based on the idea that the most obvious prerequisites for a Western-type civil society (such as a self-confident urban citizenry that has previously achieved some degree of autonomy from the state) are typically missing. That this narrow Eurocentric definition has been assumed by many illustrates the poverty of mainstream African studies. That conventional Western scholars base their study of Africa on the European experience and on how processes match up (or do not) with their societies, has long been problematic, particularly as these are often the gatekeepers of African studies in the West.

Moving beyond their limited field of vision, however, it is more than apparent that civil society, the civic realm, associational life, call it what you will, exists and is thriving across the continent. During the colonial period, the imperialists were often deeply suspicious of such expressions of African agency and sought to close down as much as possible the opportunity for African self-expression and solidarity. As John Makumbe noted, African forms of civil society went against the interest of the colonial regimes as they were outside of their immediate control; thus, many civic groups and organizations were disbanded and on occasion destroyed by the Europeans, so as to thwart possible social mobilization.<sup>1</sup> In his groundbreaking essay on 'Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement', Peter Ekeh emphasised that the colonial period and how Africans experienced this alien intrusion led to the development of two 'publics' (civil societies).<sup>2</sup> Ekeh referred to these two public realms as the primordial and the civic public. These two spheres exhibit different rights and citizenship obligations and, though linked, have different standards of morality. This is primarily because the state that was left by colonialism possessed minimal legitimacy and was not embedded in African communities for a long enough time to transform African society. Thus, colonialism left two public realms: the native sector and the modern public sector. In the primordial sector, morality is highly regarded but this area has no real economic reward; it is used rather to gain respect and security. In contrast, the civic public realm is purely for economic gain. It is an imported alien system based on

## Laughter as the Best Medicine: Coping with the Nigerian Tragicomedy

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*Humour, Silence and Civil Society in Nigeria*

by Ebenezer Obadare

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unfamiliar values and crystallized in the Western state structure. This realm is amoral; one is not obligated to give back. Ekeh argued that Africans are members of the two publics and will use the civic public realm for possible gain, so that they may give to their communities and gain respect. For Ekeh, the primordial realm is not restricted to 'civic' public associations, as conventional understandings of civil society would have it, but is much broader.

Clearly, the concept of civil society in Africa is something beyond the usual definition of an associational sphere somehow autonomous of the personal, market and the formalised state. It is thus crucial to move beyond the formal associational realm in our analysis. This means looking beyond the plethora of non-governmental organisations that have sprung up under the tutelage (and pay) of the Western aid industry and to those agents within African society who are active in staking out social goals. Given the condition of many African economies, this has often been expressed through resistance to the elites and the structures that confine the bulk of the continent's population to poverty and marginalisation. This means delving into what Celestin Monga designated as 'the anthropology of anger' of the popular mood.<sup>3</sup>

In Nigeria, there is a lot to be angry about. Regrettably, Nigeria is a byword for corruption and mal-governance.<sup>4</sup> The country currently holds roughly half of the Gulf of Guinea's oil reserves. Yet a World Bank report estimated in 2005 that as much as 80 percent of Nigeria's oil revenues benefited just 1 percent of the country's population. Though the Niger Delta region produces 90 per cent of Nigeria's oil and over 75 per cent of the country's export earnings, very little of the wealth has percolated to the residents in the Delta.<sup>5</sup> Since independence, there has been only one Nigerian head of state originating from any one of the oil-producing states—Goodluck Jonathan of Bayelsa State. In fact, 'the northern predominantly Hausa region has benefited in a disproportionate manner from oil resources, contributing to grievances by the rest of the country and ongoing instability'.<sup>6</sup>

Currently, around 84 per cent of Nigerians live on less than one dollar a day, i.e. in absolute poverty, as defined by international institutions. In recent years,

'despite the improvements in fiscal management, budgets [are] not implemented as stated, funds [are] impounded by the President, and extra-budgetary spending continue[s]'.<sup>7</sup> Well-connected political insiders steal approximately over 100,000 barrels of oil per day, worth circa \$1.46 billion a year. At the same time, government budgets are routinely estimated on projected income based on assumptions that are wildly below the actual revenues collected.<sup>8</sup> It is anyone's guess where the surplus finances from oil sales go—certainly not into government coffers or to the broad mass of Nigeria's citizens.<sup>9</sup> Indeed:

Some Western diplomats estimate that Nigeria lost a minimum average of \$4 billion to \$8 billion per year to corruption over the eight years of the Obasanjo administration. That figure would equal between 4.25% and 9.5% of Nigeria's total GDP in 2006. To put those numbers in perspective, a loss of 9.5% of the United States' GDP to corruption in 2006 would have translated into \$1.25 trillion in stolen funds or \$222 billion (GBP 108.6 billion) in the case of the United Kingdom's economy.<sup>10</sup>

The conspicuous discrepancy between Nigeria's abundant natural resources and the actual welfare of its citizens is an embodiment of the perennial crises confronting virtually all African oil-producing states. Like most oil-rich states in Africa, those who control Nigeria's government are corrupt, self-serving and uninterested in promoting broad-based development in the country.<sup>11</sup> What agency they exercise is directed towards self-accumulation and playing the system to their own benefit, rather than any national or public good. Consequently, Nigeria's population 'has assumed a pyramidal shape, with a tiny but fabulously rich elite at the apex, a "disappearing" middle class in the centre, and a huge and ever expanding impoverished mass at the base'.<sup>12</sup> In such circumstances, one either laughs or cries.

As Ebenezer Obadare brilliantly shows, humour and mockery have developed as a way by which ordinary Nigerians seek to critique and tease out meaning out of their condition. Obadare demonstrates that jokes in Nigeria serve a double purpose: as a device for the popular classes to disparage and scoff

at the state and its parasitical agents and also themselves as victims of the system. Humour is shown to be a way through which a civil society beyond the formal associational life of Western concepts challenges, subverts and analyses the Nigerian state and those associated with it. For Obadare, 'real civil society has to be sought ... outside the professionalised third sector, and often in the content of collective citizen action rather than in its organizational forms' (p. 27).

Despite its significance as a type of agency, humour and a dissatisfied silence have been greatly disregarded in extant literature on civil society. Silence is seen as trivial (p. 62) and humour has been seen as the converse of what expressing a political voice is meant to be about (p. 85). The dominant approach to what constitutes civil society has been in terms of formal organizations; yet humour by its very nature is not organized and is invariably spontaneous and uncontrollable. Equally, the idea of civil society intrinsically implies a respectful and courteous frame. As Obadare shows, Nigerian expressions of humour are anything but that. In this regard, a joke from the Akpos canon of Nigerian humour is appropriate:

Akpos found a bottle on the beach. He rubbed it and, sure enough, out popped a genie.

'I will grant you three wishes,' said the Genie. 'But there's a catch.'

'What catch?' Akpos asked.

The genie replied, 'Every time you make a wish, every politician in Nigeria will receive double what you asked for.'

'Well, I can live with that! No problem!' replied Akpos.

'OK, what is your first wish?' asked the genie.

'Well, I've always wanted a Ferrari,' he said. POOF! A Ferrari appeared in front of him. 'Now, every politician in Nigeria has two Ferraris,' said the genie. 'Next wish?'

'I'd love a billion naira,' replied Akpos.

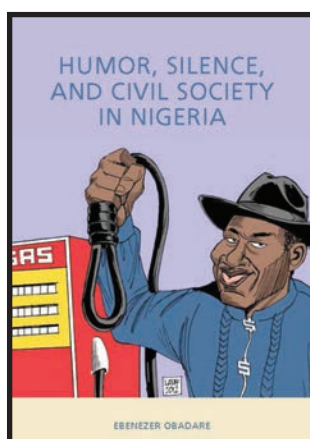
POOF! One billion naira appeared at his feet. 'Now, every politician in Nigeria has two billion naira,' said the genie.

'Well, that's okay, as long as I've got my billion,' replied Akpos.

'So what is your final wish?' asked the genie.

Akpos thought long and hard. Finally, he said, 'Well, you know, I've always wanted to donate a kidney.'

The book is made up of four main chapters, as well as an Introduction and a Conclusion. Chapter one is made up of an extensive and impressive melding of diverse literatures to develop a theoretical framework and argument that underpins the book. Essentially, Obadare makes the argument that civil society must be seen as more than an area of political action, a broad complex of diverse actors all expressing forms of agency in the wider public realm. Chapter two examines how the notion of civil society developed in



Nigeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s in response to the worsening social and economic conditions brought about by the calamitous imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes and the intensifying autocracy and misrule of military rule under Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha. The separate but concurrent growth and amalgamation of formalised associations and the discourse of civil society, according to Obadare, illuminates the disregard for the 'historically robust social life outside of associations' that has typified Nigerian social existence (p. 49). Chapter three then looks at how humour is but one component of Nigeria's 'robust social life'. The author engages in a thoughtful discussion of whether jokes can be seen as politically effective. Obadare argues that the political consequences of jokes and their ability to have any political impression or influence at all is dependent on the context. There is no doubt, however, that jokes serve to demystify power relations and can actively ridicule (and thus delegitimize) political actors in the eyes of the populace. In this sense, humour functions both as a coping mechanism for the marginalised individual seeking to come to terms with the daily evidence of the decay of society's foundations *and* as a device to 'puncture the hubris of state power' (p. 67).

Chapter four looks at the potential of silence as a deliberate and conscious political gesture. The chapter focuses on the case of Bola Ige. Bola Ige was a fearless and independent-minded individual, an astute politician as well as a thoughtful intellectual. During the military regimes of Babangida and Abacha, Ige displayed his independence by rebuffing all overtures from them, at a time when other less principled individuals succumbed to opportunism. Ige used his newspaper column to criticise the military regime and their unpredictable and almost comical rule. Ultimately, Ige deemed the situation so ridiculous that he declared that the best way to cope with the situation was to adopt a silent position on matters, i.e. *siddon look*.

*Siddon look* is a pidgin contraction of 'sit down and look' and can be translated to mean many things, such as 'let's see how it goes'; 'I am unconcerned with the going-ons'; or 'I will keep watching till I feel it is necessary to talk'. *Siddon look* is a form of political agency whereby an actor adopts a passive protest or feigned indifference to what is going on. Bola Ige was the master of this and, as the 'Cicero of Nigeria',<sup>13</sup> had a powerful impact on political discourse in that country. Certainly, the power of Ige's approach stemmed from his pre-existing status in society and it is doubtful that an ordinary

Nigeria's *siddon look* stance would have had any effect, although it is interesting to conjecture what might have happened if the mass of Nigeria's population had adopted this position.

The focus of the book is on the years of military rule, when things in Nigeria reached their nadir and humour was perhaps the best way to cope with the situation. Given that the country has (hopefully) emerged out of that mess, a second volume by Obadare looking at contemporary humour in Nigerian society would be of considerable interest. After all, although the clownish antics of Abacha may have expired in the arms of Indian prostitutes, there is still plenty of material out there in Nigerian political life for scorn and ridicule. Indeed, the thriving media in Nigeria is replete with outlandish stories that, as the saying goes, demonstrate that truth is stranger than fiction. The numerous newspapers in particular are full of puckish columnists with outrageous senses of humour that never cease to mock and expose the goings on of the Big Men and their circles. As everyone knows, jokes are essential parts of Nigerian life, helping ordinary folks to stay optimistic but also intrinsic to conversations and building relations with others.

Taken as a whole, this volume is an exceedingly rich and extremely readable discussion of a largely ignored aspect of Nigerian life. Obadare's definition of civil society beyond formal associations

helps us take in the role of humour as an expression of agency and as an intrinsic part of the public realm. Obadare's key target in the theoretical contribution of the book is his debunking of the ostensible claim by non-governmental organisations to be the chief ambassadors of Civil Society (big C, big S). I completely concur with the author's assertion that concepts of civil society that delimit the meaning to formalised organizations, be they non-governmental bodies or recognised kinship associations, are excessively restrictive and do not match the reality on the ground in the continent (or elsewhere for that matter). It is demonstrably important to take humour seriously as a means to comprehend popular critiques of the political classes and the socio-economic inequalities that characterise Nigerian (and the wider African) society. Obadare's inclusion of humour and silence as important aspects of the political, and as types of manifestations of civil society and agential resistance is thus a major contribution to the wider debate.

Overall, the volume is an outstanding and thought-provoking read. I have no doubt that the book will inspire future exploration into an aspect of politics and society in Africa that is usually overlooked. It sets a research agenda that promises a great deal of insight and I hope to see more books of this type examining other African situations.

## Notes

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3. Célestin Monga, 1998, *The Anthropology of Anger: Civil Society and Democracy in Africa* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
4. Peter Lewis, 1996, 'From Prebendalism to Predation: The Political Economy of Decline in Nigeria', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 34, no.1, pp. 79-103; Karl Maier, 2000, *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*, London: Penguin; Peter Cunliffe-Jones, 2010, *My Nigeria: Five Decades of Independence*, New York: Palgrave.
5. Austin Avuru, 2005, *Politics, Economics and the Nigerian Petroleum Industry*, Lagos: Festac Books.
6. Gregory White and Scott Taylor, 2001, 'Well-oiled Regimes: Oil and Uncertain Transitions in Algeria and Nigeria', *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 28, no. 89, p. 333.
7. Alexandra Gillies, 2007, 'Obasanjo, the Donor Community and Reform Implementation in Nigeria', *Round Table*, vol. 96, no. 392, p. 576.
8. Agwuncha Nwankwo, 2002, *Nigeria: The Stolen Billions*, Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension.
9. *Vanguard* (Lagos), October 26, 2004.
10. *Daily Trust* (Abuja), December 14, 2007.
11. See Michael Peel, 2009, *A Swamp Full of Dollars: Pipelines and Paramilitaries at Nigeria's Oil Frontier*, London: IB Tauris.
12. Ibrahim Gambari, 2008, 'From Balewa to Obasanjo: The Theory and Practice of Nigeria's Foreign Policy', in Adekeye Adebajo and Abdul Mustapha, eds., *Gulliver's Troubles: Nigeria's Foreign Policy After the Cold War*, Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, p. 61.
13. *The Nation* (Lagos), December 25,

