

“Lies, politics and Nigeria's great rumour mill” by Sola Odunfa*

There is only one industry I know in Nigeria which is completely immune to the vagaries of the national economy and the well-oiled machine of the government security and intelligence services.

It is big, it is strong, it never sleeps and it is unimaginably creative - but it is invisible. I am talking of the Nigerian rumour mill.

Radio Nigeria describes itself as Africa's biggest news network - yet it is puny compared to the awesome rumour mill.

While the conventional, licensed media have to contend with laws and regulations and interests and finance, the Nigerian rumour mill is a wild industry which respects no conventions or authority or checks.

[...]

There are localised rumours - in small communities, in social clubs, in religious organisations.

They come with such authority that hardly anyone doubts them.

[...]

The mill in Nigeria is so powerful that it has permeated the conventional media.

Many newspapers and magazines publish products of the rumour mill as authentic news.

The less dishonourable of them publish retractions in obscure corners several days later.

The one factor binding all rumours is that they are fabricated to injure individuals or organisations.

They damage reputations and cause disaffection among people.

[...]

The Nigerian rumour mill gained ascendancy during the long period of military rule when the news media was castrated.

Information circulation went back to the old days of mouth-to-mouth communication.

Opposition newspapers were persecuted and, therefore, their journalists went underground.

'Street talk'

Since then many Nigerians, including the most educated, have relied on 'street talk' for what they regard as authentic information.

Today Nigerians say that genuine official information is forced out by the rumour mill.

[...]

No journalist worth the description should subscribe to the rumour mill and I try not to, but the Nigerian environment is different.

[...]

If the rumour mill went to sleep there would be no communication whatsoever between the ruling establishment and the people.

*(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8389020.stm> Web. January 12, 2010.)

University of Alberta

Street Stories:

Orality, Media, Popular Culture and the

Postcolonial Condition in Nigeria

by

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Dedication

To “June 12,” and the unsung street heroes of the struggle;

and to

Michael Nkeolisakwu Otiono, my dad,

who sadly exited before the

embrace at the finish line of an expedition

he so keenly supported,

and was buried on another June 12.

Abstract

This study unravels the curious politicization of everyday life in Nigeria. It tracks and redefines a seemingly simple and commonplace but peripheralized genre of everyday life, “street stories,” that is taken for granted as rumours, gossip, and myths, and examines its interrelation to contemporary postcolonial politics and culture in Nigeria. The term “street stories” is used specifically to refer to mythopoeic oral texts produced and circulated as weapons of political resistance or compromise in multiple cultural formations within the postcolonial state—especially in the metropolis with its complex demographics. This research thus demonstrates how these texts assumed heightened critical value, especially during the brutish years of military dictatorships (1985 and 1997), and the unfolding democratic order since 1999, with emphasis on President Umaru Yar’Adua’s short-lived regime (2007-2010).

Lagos, Nigeria’s commercial capital, is my paradigmatic research setting. This work analyzes how the “unofficial” narratives (street stories) open up alternative expressions of civic responsibilities and the pursuit of justice and human rights in the context of government’s abdication of its social contract in the postcolonial state in Africa. The study addresses questions such as: What forms of empowerment and social justice emerge when ordinary citizens gather in pubs, mass transit stations, around urban newsstands, and other arenas of socialization in the “public sphere,” and conduct impromptu “mock trials” of rulers and traducers of human rights in the context of postcolonial tyranny? How do street stories mediate, and are mediated by the critical press, Nollywood films,

popular musical works and their producers? The significance of these street stories can be gleaned from the state's vicious censorship of their transmission channels, and its issuance of regular public statements and billboards discouraging rumour mongering, as well as administering oaths of secrecy on public servants.

My primary texts comprise “street stories” already published in Nigeria’s press, or/and captured in Nollywood video films and popular music. I complement these with texts associated with limited ethnomethodological fieldwork. I examine these texts using theories of Oral Literature, Media Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Cultural Studies, and Anthropology against the backdrop of my nearly fifteen years field experience as a journalist and activist in Nigeria. I argue that besides their aesthetic appeal, “street stories” function powerfully as “hidden/public transcripts,” that offer important insights into popular culture’s role in participatory democracy, political oppression, and in narrating/performing the nation.

Acknowledgments

As this study is a part of my intellectual biography as a writer, journalist and researcher traversing three continents—Africa, Europe and North America—my debts to several individuals and institutions that have contributed to shaping it are so long that the very business of offering acknowledgements risks not doing justice to all in so short a space. I would therefore wish to be excused any memory lapse as I recall some of those people and institutions that have impacted the evolution of this work from my graduate studies years at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, to its present completion site at the University of Alberta, Canada.

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On the whole, this intellectual pilgrimage was initially launched with the mentorship of Isidore Okpewho, eminent Oral Literature scholar and award-winning novelist in whose double vocation I found a model, and under whose supervisory wings for my Honours and Masters dissertations at the University of Ibadan I discovered the joys of scholarship. Even when we became relatively estranged following my assumption of duty as a journalist in Lagos, and the massive brain drain in Nigeria triggered his relocation to the United States of America, Professor Okpewho sustained interest in my intellectual development. His mentorship, friendship and exemplary scholarship have continued to light my path, and for this I am most grateful. I also appreciate Dan Izevbaye and Ademola Dasylva, co-supervisors during my initial erratic attempt at undertaking this

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Introduction

Travelling Texts and the Politics of Everyday Life in Nigeria

Open your ears; for which of you will stop
The vent of hearing when loud Rumour speaks?
I, from the orient to the drooping west,
Making the wind my post-horse [...]
Upon my tongues continual slanders ride,
The which in every language I pronounce,
Stuffing the ears of men with false reports.

—William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV part 2*

One of the most intriguing elements of everyday human communication is rumour. So important and complicated it is that it has detained commoners, kings and queens, writers and scholars across disciplines. So smitten by the phenomenon was the great Shakespeare that he not only memorably anthropomorphized it but also foregrounded its centrality in human affairs in his play, *King Henry IV part 2*. In what may pass as the most remarkable passage on rumour in literature from which the above epigraph is excerpted, Shakespeare proposes a stereotypical depiction of rumour as a negative force.

However, everyday experiences of the phenomenon, especially in more oral societies including Africa, paint a more complicated and different picture that calls for a detailed scholarly inquiry into the conjunction of the academic category of “orality” and the popular phenomenon regarded as “rumour.” Beyond the conventional negative understanding of the term “rumour” as dramatically portrayed by Shakespeare and in contemporary scholarship, we must begin to see it more as some positive force, a subversive weapon of resistance on the lips of everyday people. This study is partly inspired by that more complex and

alternative perception of rumour as well as by its significance or performative function in everyday life and popular contemporary culture in the postcolonial urban social space. The need to properly characterize the oft-confusing communicative practice that relates to, and is interchangeably used with, oral literature, gossip, grapevine, and journalism have also motivated this work. My understanding of the nuanced relationship between these genres has prompted me to reconceptualize and examine these categories in this study under a new, more embracing nomenclature, “street stories.” In the postcolonial Nigerian urban context, street stories are symptomatic of ordinary citizens’ attempt to comprehend their socio-political circumstance through narratives, and to promote popular uprising against an oppressive state.

My objectives in this project may therefore be outlined as follows. First, inquire into ways and means by which street stories shape contemporary social history and reality as well as new forms of cultural production against the backdrop of postcolonial governance. My case studies are the dictatorial military regimes of Generals Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida and Sani Abacha, respectively from 1985-1993 and 1993-1998.¹ My work also includes articulating the role of a confrontational narrative ideology to hegemonic discourses aimed at ridiculing the rulers in the post-military era and emerging democratic ethos in Nigeria from 1999, but specifically focusing on the democratic rule of late president Umaru

¹ Although it can be argued that General Abdulsalami Abubakar’s military regime (1998-1999) which succeeded General Abacha’s was a dictatorship, for me, it was generally an uneventful regime. Besides the death in detention of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, winner of the June 12, 1993 election, the stage for which was set by Abacha, Abubakar’s was largely a stop-gap regime that eased Nigeria out of a political logjam and hurriedly handed over power to a democratic government.

Yar'Adua from 2007-2010. In all, I am looking at a period of about 25 years of Nigeria's contemporary history (1985-2010). In focusing on the controversial street discourses which define this period in Nigerian history, I align my interest with Caroline Bassett's (2007) "defence of narrative," as "a vital element of contemporary culture, lying at the heart of the processes through which humans make sense of everyday lived experiences that are, by virtue of their mediation through and across information, increasingly multi-layered and complex both temporally and spatially" (2-3). And it is for such reasons that the concept of "the everyday" can be contentious.²

Second, chart the interdependence of the triad of orality (which embodies street stories), the print media, and popular film and music. In so doing, I will show why any attempts to articulate each one of these forms in an isolated manner would be inadequate in dealing with the "slippery,"³ "elusive" forms that foremost African popular culture scholar, Karin Barber (1987, 1997) has identified in her seminal study of the emergent forms of popular arts in Africa. Barber also deploys expressions such as "fugitive category" and "residual category" to describe them. She draws attention to the challenges of constructing a theory (or theories) of popular culture in Africa, and contends that "there appears to be no firm ground from which to start," adding that "both our analytical tools and the field to which we wish to apply them are ambiguous,

² Cavanaugh (2007) offers a remarkable overview of the concept of "the everyday." I align my usage of the commonly used and abused term with Cavanaugh's suggestion that "the everyday's best definition could be 'a site of intervention and resistance,' or a site of production and questioning" (13).

³ Interestingly, Finnegan (1992) uses the same adjective—"slippery" (5)—to qualify the distinction between the oral and the written. For a more detailed clarification of 'orality' as a terminology/concept used in this study see the next chapter.

shifting, and indefinite” (“Popular Arts in Africa” 6). Stuart Hall (1994) shares this difficulty over the term *popular culture*, stating that he has “almost as many problems with ‘popular’ as [he] has with ‘culture,’” and adding that “[w]hen you put the two terms together the difficulties can be horrendous” (455). Barber (1987) observes that “despite the slipperiness, the term “popular” has [...] been deployed with remarkable unanimity by the majority of Africanist scholars in a “tripartite scheme” which parallels the European conception of the popular—Traditional; Popular; Elite—to apprehend aspects of African culture (9). But even then, Barber (1987) cleverly observes that “it is not really tripartite at all. It is in fact composed of only two positive terms, with a fluctuating, undefined, and shapeless space between them” (10). Crucial to these diverse conceptualizations of the popular in Africa is the idea of its functionality—a challenge as it were to formalists in the study of oral literature who advocate for the primacy of aesthetics and “aesthetic experience”⁴ in oral performance.

Contentious as this notion of functionality is—especially given Fabian’s (1998) critique—Barber’s idea that these cultural forms are essentially popular in the sense in which they express the collective social struggles, concerns and anxieties of the popular majority is useful. In fact, I adopt as a working definition, Karin Barber’s (1987) powerful conceptualization of popular arts as:

the large class of new unofficial art forms which are syncretic, concerned with social change, and associated with the masses. The centres of activity in this field are the cities, in their pivotal position between the rural

⁴ I am here thinking of Sekoni’s (1990) “theoretical position that aesthetic experience in oral narrative-performance is made up of three inseparable components: captivation of audience, retention of audience and the transfer of cognitive experience to the audience” (140)

hinterland on the one hand and the metropolitan countries on the other (23).

But I also use the term *popular* in the sense promoted by Biodun Jeyifo (1984) in his study of popular Yoruba travelling theatre, as covering “the entire range of occupational and socio-economic group and classes” (1). Stuart Hall (1994) accentuates the point being made in the conceptualization of “popular culture” as deployed in this study. Hall states that “popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged; it is also the stake to be won or lost in the struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” (Ibid. 466). It is also a site for fanaticism and acquiescence or betrayal as represented by a section of the popular press in Nigeria as demonstrated by Uko (2004).

My third objective is to explore street narrative culture as a site of agency in the social and political dynamics of the postcolony, and also as a site of creativity, a performative space where the fabulist or myth-maker is as much king as the finest literary writer is in their domain. The task of capturing the full performance event and the language of a Smokey Joe (more on him presently) may be challenging given my reliance on street stories in their transformative forms in the popular media. For part of the popular purchase of the street stories is that they come mostly in Nigeria’s unofficial ‘lingua franca’—pidgin, “rotten English,”⁵ or pidgin interlaced with traditional languages in a code-switching

⁵ Ken Saro-Wiwa robustly illustrates this kind of English sometimes used in Nigerian urban street verbal interactions in his experimental novel, *Sozaboy*, describing it in his Author’s Note as: “a mixture of Nigeria’s pidgin English, broken English and occasional flash of good, even idiomatic English [...] [i]t borrows words, patterns, and images freely from the mother-tongue and finds

format that reminds us of Ato Quayson's (2003) idea of the "multilingual negotiations" (xii) in everyday life in postcolonial Africa—but morph into narratives in standard English when they are mainstreamed by the regular media.

Still, it is possible to gain footing with the street stories in their 'new' format in popular culture as represented by the texts selected for this study. These texts relatively recover the language, cadences, and humour of the street stories which they appropriate. The new format—as in the texts that I discuss extensively in this work—reflect, even refract as the case may be, the mutation of the original texts in a way that reminds us of Finnegan's (2010) observation that in the current approaches to the study of orality, "oral and written are no longer automatically viewed as antagonistic or mutually exclusive" (10). Instead, "[w]ritten textuality is now commonly presented in its engagement with aural/oral modes and performances (and vice versa), and not just as an interaction of separate modes but also as merging, overlapping, or mutually working together as different sides of the same coin" (Ibid.). Perhaps more than any of the popular cultural expressive forms, street stories are best suited to appropriate that metaphor—of separate oral and scribal modes merging, overlapping, or mutually working

expression in a very limited English vocabulary." (*Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*. London, Lagos, Port Harcourt: Saros International, 1985.) Interestingly, Yinka Ibukun (2010) offers a noteworthy report on efforts to "study and standardise [the] language spoken by millions but denied official status" of which I was part of the inaugural meeting in Ibadan in August 2008. The work is under the auspices of the new Naija Languej Akademi, a project promoted by the French Research Institute in Africa (IFRA) with Bernard Caron and some Nigerian scholars as coordinators. Ibukun reiterates the fact that: "In a country with wide disparity in education [...] Pidgin operates as a de facto lingua franca, a bridge between social classes, ethnicities and educational levels" and is "estimated to be used by 50 million people, and with variants spoken in Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone." (See "Nigeria harnesses Pidgin English power," *The Guardian*, Tuesday, 9 November 2010; available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/nov/09/nigeria-pidgin-learning-english-ibukun> Web. November 11, 2010.

together as different sides of the same coin. And over the next few pages I will develop the theoretical construct of street stories with respect to its provenance, context, and its possibilities in opening up a space of enunciation in terms of providing a language with which to analyze the narratives I am concerned with in this study.

Street stories, “terminological confusion” and interdisciplinarity

The challenge of distilling an informed understanding of street stories from its various associated genres of everyday life in the postcolonial city is further problematized by the paucity of scholarly attention to “city” narratives – in *performance*, as distinct from oral “performativity” (that is, doing-things-with-words schema). More so given that a textual bias still exists in academic investigations of culture in Nigeria, if not in Africa as a whole. This scenario therefore necessitates some urgency in the task of expanding and redefining the evolving discourse of oral literature and popular culture in Africa, as I attempt in this study, by spotlighting and tracking the genre that I call “street stories” (and street narratives sometimes). I do this through empirical and qualitative transdisciplinary theoretical insights from Popular Culture, Oral Literature, Anthropology, Cultural Studies and Popular Culture, Media Studies and Postcolonial theories. For while scholars have attempted to: (a) apprehend the popular arts of Africa (Ogude and Nyairo 2007; Coplan 2001; Barber 1997; Waterman 1997; Fabian 1997; Lawuyi 1997); (b) study oral literatures of Africa including their evolution in contemporary times (Finnegan 2007, 2006; 1998; Okpewho 1990, 1998, 2004; Kaschula 2001; Brown 1999; Furniss 1995, Furniss

and Gunner 1999); (c) study the relationship between orality and politics (Sekoni 1997), or the role of the press and communication technology in democratization (Agbese 2006, Olukotun 2002a, Hyden, Leslie, and Ogundimu 2002, Wasserman 2010, Huntington 1991); (d) research on rumours and gossip (Stewart and Strathern 2004); but the much needed *composite* scholarly effort at tracking, contextualizing and analyzing how “street stories” mediate the fields of cultural production or “fields of forces” as Pierre Bourdieu would say, and are in turn mediated by them, are difficult to find, if any exists at all. This study attempts to fill that gap. For this informal but powerful cultural expression—street stories—has for long been taken for granted by scholars of African Studies who seem to generally ignore them altogether or look at them only tangentially, while much of the research on two aspects of it—rumours and grapevines—has been largely sociological.⁶

In extending the discourse of (Oral) Literature, Popular Culture Postcolonial Studies, and Performance Studies to the often overlooked street stories, my interpretative framework coheres with Berger and Del Negro’s (2004) apt observation that “[t]he notion of performance has allowed [...] scholars to view a wide range of expressive genres (from highly marked events like rituals or

⁶ Specifically, in the fields of behavioural sciences (social psychology) and mass communication. One of the rare extensive studies of rumours in the Nigerian context that I encountered in the course of my research on the subject is Olusola Oyeyinka Oyewo’s *Rumour Management in Organizations*, unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Department of Language and Communication Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, 2002. Also see his “Rumour: An Alternative Means of Communication in a Developing Nation: The Nigerian Example,” *International Journal of African & African American Studies*, VI.1 (January 2007). <https://ojcs.siue.edu/ojs/index.php/ijaaas/article/viewFile/85/145> Web. January 2, 2011. It is important to note that in this essay, Oyewo informs that “in a paper titled “YarAdua’s rumoured death, and the question of literacy in Nigeria,” [he] chronicled through history, how leaders in Nigeria had been objects of various forms of rumour; ranging from the seemingly harmless to that overtly destructive” (12). Oyewo indeed provides a summary of the victims’ ordeal, most of it social in nature.

festivals to everyday conversational genres like urban legends or proverbs) through the same lens,” and in the process, “find common social dynamics in practices as seemingly disparate as front porch storytelling [...] and political oratory” (15).

And what are “Street stories”? “Street stories” are complex oral texts essentially produced and circulated by citizens of a state who occupy what Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* describes as a “liminal space” (5) within the postcolonial power equation and urban setting. This “liminal space,” differentiated from its original application in the seminal work of Victor Turner (1967, 1969, 1974 and 1985) building on the idea of Arnold Van Gennep (1909) and Mircea Eliade (1959) on ritual, and the postcolonial theoretical frame as used by Bhabha, is re-deployed to cover both the material and the invisible (that shadowed zone between the oral and the written) world. Ever mutative, street stories often assume the form of astonishing narratives or anecdotes by which the subaltern—as in the sense of the Subaltern Studies Group, especially Ranajit Guha (1983, 1998), Gyan Prakash (1991, 1999), and Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) reference to “centre” and the periphery—seeks to “speak truth to power” or to interrogate socio-political and economic developments. Denied access to the centres of power and the media, and other formal or institutionalized channels of authoritative discourses, some less privileged residents of the city often resort to “extrainstitutional strategies”⁷ such as spinning complex verbal texts in different narrative forms. Some of the texts are allegorical or mythical while others are

⁷ Wayne A. Santoro, "Conventional Politics Takes Center Stage: the Latino Struggle Against English-Only Laws," *Social Forces* 77.3 (1999): 888.

satirical and humorous. My core proposition in this study is that by producing such hybrid texts, those disadvantaged citizens try to fill the liminal lacunae in the communicative process between conventional media, and themselves.

These street stories which can also be described as ‘counter texts’ or what James C. Scott (1995) calls “hidden transcripts”⁸ or “public secrets” (Taussig 1997) may come in the form of rumours, or an amalgam of realistic and fantastic/mythic tales woven into compelling tapestries sustaining the interests of oral transmitters as well as those of audiences outside of informal information channels. The stories swing between personal narratives and “talk of the town” stories derived from other sources— including “community media”⁹—and aimed at interpreting “social reality” especially in the postcolonial context (Mbembe 2001: 6). They are related to, but differ from, Jayson Harsin’s (2008) deployment of ‘rumours’ as assuming “a very special role in *professionalized politics*, where communication experts shrewdly read the new convergence culture and use rumor to try to steer political discourse via inter-media agendas”¹⁰ (emphasis added). I

⁸ James C. Scott’s entire oeuvre provides insight into our appreciation of street stories as tools for political resistance. See especially his classic, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press, 1990, and his earlier work, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, 1985. In Scott’s influential theorizing, the corollary to “hidden transcript” — “discourses that take place ‘off-stage’ beyond direct observation by powerholders” (4) is “public transcript”: both are terms that describe the kind of subterfuge that undergirds the narrative power relations “between subordinates and those who dominate” (*Domination 2*).

⁹ In the sense explored by Fuller (2007) and Howley (2005). I am particularly struck by the definition quoted by Fuller: “Community media provide a vital alternative to profit-oriented agenda of corporate media. They are driven by social objectives rather than the private, profit motive. They empower people rather than treat them as passive consumers, and they nurture local knowledge rather than replace it with standard solutions...And they are committed to human rights, social justice, the environment and sustainable approaches to development” (1).

¹⁰ See “The Rumor Bomb: On Convergence Culture and Politics” at the critical forum on television and media culture published by the Department of Radio, Television, and Film at the University of Texas at Austin —

<http://flowtv.org/2008/12/the-rumor-bomb-on-convergence-culture-and-politics-jayson-harsin-american-university-of-paris/> Web. June 5, 2010. Citing the example of Apple CEO Steve Jobs

use the term “street stories” to capture the complex configurations of these narratives which shift between the private and the public domains in everyday life, and around which there is terminological confusion. For instance, Microsoft Word program’s grouping of the words report, information, news, intelligence (as in espionage), gossip, rumour and hearsay as synonyms further aggravates the terminological confusion.

I am concerned with tracking the oral-to-written and written-to-oral transmission of such popular “discourses” in the Nigerian urban context.¹¹ For it is in the city buzzing with the kind of population that we find in Lagos that one best feels the populist and political impulse of such street stories as they oscillate between the literary aesthetic of the fictive, creative non-fiction, and the kinds of “distinctive urban lore” (Fabian 1997: 18), and direct humorous discourses cum anecdotal jokes (street narratives which sometimes thrive in the viral Internet media) that Ebenezer Obadare explores in his related study, “The Uses of Ridicule: Humour, ‘Infrapolitics’ and Civil Society in Nigeria” (2009).¹²

who was rumoured to have had had a heart attack, Harsin also highlights the business side of rumours. He reminds us that “cases of rumor exploding into public scandal are fairly global. They have prompted suicides, imprisonments, stock plunges.”

¹¹ Although I am focusing more on the transmission of oral/news media narratives here, I have drawn insights for this study from David Liben-Nowell and Jon Kleinberg’s (2008) theorizing on the “ubiquitous process” (1) of information dissemination in human social networks. I am particularly struck by their deconstruction of the widely held idea that “the spreading of information truly proceeds with a rapid, epidemic-style fan-out” (Ibid.) [or viral form], and proposal of a “mathematical model” (Ibid.) that suggests that information rather follows a “potentially more complex structure” (Ibid.) which they conceive as “tree-like patterns of dissemination” (Ibid.).

¹² Obadare’s essay provides fascinating correspondences in his perceptive analysis of the role of humour and civil society in democratization in Nigeria, and throws up interesting narratives. Particularly striking is his discourse on humour as a weapon of political resistance, and the textual coincidence in his choice of Gbenga Adebayo’s work which constitutes one of the popular culture texts that I analyze in Chapter Four. For more on the point being made here see Ebenezer Obadare, “The Uses of Ridicule: Humour, ‘Infrapolitics’ and Civil Society in Nigeria.” *African Affairs*. 108.431 (2009): 241-261.

Clarifying the nuanced terminological and conceptual challenge suggested by my reference to “aesthetic of the fictive, creative non-fiction and the kinds of direct humorous discourses/political narratives” requires additional reconceptualization of the narrative conventions of the term “rumours” or oral narrative within the province of Media and Oral Literature studies. While there are subtle differences in the conception of rumour by various humanistic scholars—“the poor man’s bomb”¹³ (Achille Mbembe), “slender narrative” (Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*), and “urban folklore” (Ropo Sekoni in “Politics and Urban Folklore in Nigeria”)—they all appear related to the conceptualization of rumour in sociological inquiry represented by Tamotsu Shibutani’s (1966) classic definition of rumour as: “a substitute for news; in fact it is news that does not develop in institutional channels,” and that “[f]ar from being pathological rumour is part and parcel of efforts of men to come to terms with the exigencies of life” (62). In addition to this commanding definition of rumour by Shibutani, Allan J. Kimmel (2004) provides an excellent review of “[s]ome representative definitions, dating back to the 1940s” (21). These definitions of rumour are denominated by their *speculative* propensity, and point to rumour’s nebulous nature and universality. Shedding more light on our understanding of the phenomenon and its centrality in our time Kimmel notes:

¹³Harsin also deploys the term “bomb” to qualify rumours in a stimulating essay on the phenomenon: “The Rumour Bomb: Theorising the Convergence of New and Old Trends in Mediated US Politics.” *Southern Review: Communication, Politics & Culture*, 39.1 (2006): 84-110. Reprinted in Michael Ryan ed. *Cultural Studies* (Blackwell, 2008). Although related, the notion of ‘bomb’ here is different from Paul Virilio’s application of the “information bomb” in relation to “the new weaponry of information and communications technologies” evident in his book, *The Information Bomb*. London: Verso, 2000.

with any desired bit of information instantaneously available with a click of a computer mouse, we might expect that rumors, which traditionally have flourished during periods of news blackouts and information famines, would be a thing of the past. Ironically, the opposite seems to be the case. In contemporary society, rumors circulate like the air we breathe; more and more, they seem to arise not from a lack of information, but within a context of information overload. This apparent contradiction can be traced in large part to the public's seemingly insatiable need to know. As demands for greater access to news and instantaneous communication continue to grow, the reliability of any one piece of information has become that much more difficult to assess.¹⁴

Kimmel's characterization of rumour not only reflects its universal application, it also highlights its ambiguity in everyday usage; "rumour" can be as problematic to define as its notorious characterization in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*.

The transposition or transfiguration of rumours into various forms in the mass media raises its significance for the popular culture scholar interested in the popular press in a postcolonial setting where orality is still vital to interpersonal and corporate, everyday communication. So much that in bureaucratic Nigeria, word of mouth sometimes carries more weight than written communication—indeed part of the postcolonial bureaucratic practice in Nigeria is the tendency of important appointments to public office and dismissals to circulate as "street stories"—with the appointee *hearing* it for the first time as rumour, then in the

¹⁴ Allan J. Kimmel, ed., *Rumors and Rumor Control: A Manager's Guide to Understanding and Combatting Rumors* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), ix.

news on radio or television, before possibly getting an official letter.¹⁵ This phenomenon can be summed up under the concept of “I.M.” (an abbreviation of *Ima Madu*—literally “knowing someone”—an Igbo term that connotes being “connected” or having “long legs” or influential social ties). It sometimes determines official privileges, and implies a level of intimacy that enables face-to-face communication, analogous to the face-to-face interpersonal “republic” promoted by Goffman (1983), Fishkin (1991), and Boden and Molotch (1994). Hyginus Ekwuazi (1991) reinforces this point when he declares: “In an oral culture, speech *is* golden; no less premium is placed on seeing than on hearing” (103).¹⁶ Bayart (1999) imbues this commanding “compulsion of proximity” (Boden and Molotch 257) with “social capital”, and affirms that “[t]he ‘moral economy’ of ethnicity, often really a moral economy of the kinship group, has developed ‘civic traditions’, and in particular sentiments of solidarity and business confidence [...]” (39). But Hountondji (1992) rather controversially sees the emphasis on face-to-face communication or what Boden and Molotch following Goffman (1959: 238) call “copresent interaction” (258), as one of the “encumbrances [...] that must be removed—in terms of the daily life in our (African) countries—if we want life here to be more agreeable, more productive,

¹⁵ An excellent example of this practice was experienced by Ken Saro-Wiwa, the environmental rights activist who was executed by the military in 1995. For details see Timothy Hunt, *The Politics of Bones: Dr. Owens Wiwa and the Struggle for Nigeria's Oil*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005, 40.

¹⁶ See Hyginus Ekwuazi “Towards the Decolonization of the African Film.” *Africa Media Review* 5.2 (1991): 95-106. Contrasted with the idea of “virtual reality” or “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), popular in our globalized world of technologically mediated communication, the realm of face-to-face communication would lead us to better appreciate Boden and Molotch’s gripping essay where they declare that: “The robust nature and enduring necessity of traditional human communication procedures have been underappreciated” (258). And—to borrow from Ruth Finnegan (1988) citing McLuhan (1967:12) — it is partly to “the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner’ so long imposed on us by the limiting and dryly academic medium of print” (37) that we owe this appreciation.

and more fruitful” (344). Further elaborating on how entrenched face-to-face communication is in postcolonial Africa¹⁷, Hountondji regrets that if you want some information from a public service office and make a phone call to ask, “[n]ine out of ten times the civil servant who answers will ask you to come in yourself and will be surprised that this has not occurred to you” (ibid.).

Rooted in this kind of cultural economy, therefore, I understand street stories as striking an unusual note well worth paying serious attention. In the wider context that some scholars have theorized, rumour is a socio-psychological phenomenon—see, for social theorists, Rosnow (1991, 2001); Fine, Campion-Vincent, and Heath (2005); mass communication (Kimmel 2004); behavioral science or social psychology (Fine and Rosnow 1976), and commerce (Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia (2007); DiFonzo & Bordia (2004); and Difonzo, Bordia, and Rosnow (1994). In the mass media rumour is associated with an all-pervasive celebrity culture in the Western world (Cf Harsin op cit.). Yet, it is noteworthy that besides these conceptions of rumour the anthropological models see it as a social/cultural phenomenon. In the postcolonial Nigerian context in which I adopt street stories as a preferred designation, rumour functions as both social—as reflected in all the studies listed above—and remarkably political as I shall prove. Describing the dispersed, underground narratives as “street stories,” enables us to recognize the functions of the kinds of “rumours” for this study and

¹⁷ I need to quickly point to out here that I switch back and forth between Nigeria and Africa as a way of occasionally underscoring some shared or pan-African socio-cultural experience, generally testified to through comparative analysis by African Studies scholars such as Hountondji in this instance.

their aesthetic narrative qualities. It also enables us to locate them within the province of (Oral) Literature and recommend them for literary analysis. Put another way, street stories constitute a form of “narrative knowledge”¹⁸ and art through which the abject seek to comprehend oft-puzzling socio-political experiences in the postcolonial state. For as Bonnell and Hunt (1999) have argued, “[o]ne important way that knowledge works is through narrative power—establishing authority by means of a story,” (15). They add that “[n]arrative is an arena in which meaning takes form, in which individuals connect to the public and social world, and in which change therefore becomes possible” (17). This partly explains why I am interested in how these street stories are produced, how they mediate and are mediated by the popular press, and transposed or extrapolated into other forms of popular cultural production such as film (Nollywood in Nigerian parlance), popular music, and pop-print.¹⁹

Notably, I differentiate the “unofficial”²⁰ oral narratives of this project as being similar to, but different from, the traditional description of the kind of oral narratives popular in the study of Oral Literature, i.e., epics and heroic narratives that are performed by bards, griots or rhapsodists. Unlike traditional oral

¹⁸ See Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*: 18-27. Calvin O. Schrag interestingly explores the bifurcated relationship between narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge which Lyotard discusses in Chapter Four (Narratives and the Claims of Reason) of his book, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge* (97ff). This distinction will become even more important in the subsequent chapters as we juxtapose both forms of knowledge to “indigenous knowledges” which also frame the street stories.

¹⁹ I use the term here to refer to a special kind of urban broadsides (posters) called “Almanacs” in Nigeria, and similar to those studied by Wilson Mano (2010). They are large, news/features posters informed by present-day sensational news items. Their themes may also be educational like Onitsha Market pamphlets bearing brief historical information about political leaders; they may also contain the alphabets or the anatomy of the body. They are largely sold on the streets at traffic jams in Lagos and other parts of the country.

²⁰ I use the term in this study in the loaded sense applied by Bakhtin (1970) and invoked by Mbembe to highlight “the way “non-official” cultures invert and desecrate “official” values in carnivalesque activities” (2001: 133 n1). Also see Karin Barber (1997: 9).

narratives, street stories are often sinister, subversive or satiric, and maintain a “current affairs” narrative quality and thematic immediacy. They are performed by amateurs not professional bards, but like the formal oral narrative, aggregated, the stories can become alternative social history; even unofficial national history of significant political experiences, only this time narrated by unrecognized street historians. Hence, Barber insightfully notes that “the popular arts operate outside the formal official institutions” (“Popular Arts” 11). And Jonathan Haynes may well have been thinking about their relevance when, in a related context, he identifies a situation where the political landscape takes “a Foucauldian, postmodernist form, in which political resistance...takes numerous dispersed forms, often at lower levels of political expression: in “the popular,” the politics of everyday life, a *politique par le bas*” (112).²¹ In other words, following Foucault, he deconstructs the seemingly unstructured, unstructural or unstructuring nature of such resistances enacted via the popular arts.

Now, toward reconfiguring the “dispersed forms” and fully appreciating the complex, structural interface between orality in everyday current affairs, literature and popular culture as it frames this study, I will share an apposite personal narrative that partially inspired this work. For as John Beverley advocates in his book, *Subalternity and Representation* (1999), our own personal memories and narratives should intersect with the theories we produce.

²¹ Alex Edelstein seems to acknowledge this point too when he observes that: “Popular culture theorists have for years recognized that consumers make their own meanings from texts presented in the mass media, regardless of the intent of the producer. So the audience has always had the power of resistance, in some sense. But with the new media, the audience participates not only in the decoding of messages, but in the encoding as well—in the creation of the texts” (xiii).

In the last quarter of 1999, I travelled from Lagos to Ogidi in Anambra State, Nigeria to visit celebrated novelist and founder of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Professor Chinua Achebe. My trip was part of a journalistic assignment as literary editor of *ThisDay*, one of Nigeria's leading newspapers based in Lagos. Within forty-eight hours, I was to produce a comprehensive magazine story on Achebe's homecoming after nearly a decade in exile in the United States of America.²² The urgency of the assignment necessitated my undertaking a perilous night bus journey from Lagos in South-western Nigeria to Ogidi, Achebe's hometown in Eastern Nigeria. It was a journey of about 480km which due to stretches of bad road and ubiquitous police checkpoints²³ could take up to eight hours or all-night to cover.²⁴ I arrived in Onitsha just before dawn. The city, known as a commercial hub of the region, and birthplace of the popular Onitsha Market literature,²⁵ was gradually stirring to life when I arrived at the open bus terminal at Upper Iweka.

²² The story was later published in the newspaper, *Thisday*, and republished in *ANA Review*, Nov 2008.

²³ Checkpoints are road blocks placed by the security agencies in Nigeria on major highways as a way of combating crime, especially of the armed highway robbery brand. They can also be taken as part of the sociology of power in the postcolony enabling the state to maintain surveillance on citizens, especially political activists.

²⁴ The bus journey itself could be a cultural studies researcher's delight, as it presented interesting vistas of everyday life for ethnographic analysis through the endless stories and dramas that characterize such trips, an excellent example of which has been documented by IsiomaDaniel, the Nigerian journalist on whom Islamic fundamentalists passed a death sentence as a result of one of her reports: "Broken Tales: Dialogues on a Bus." *Thisday*, July 13, 2002. 31. Alarmingly, the author became a victim of a fatwa issued by Nigeria's Islamic fundamentalists following a report on a beauty pageant she did for the same newspaper. See *Of Fatwas and beauty queens* [videorecording] Toronto: CBC Educational Sales, [2004?].

²⁵ Onitsha Market literature has fascinated scholars such as the Germans, Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn (1962), the American Bernth Lindfors (1991), and Emmanuel Obiechina (1971) who has identified its similarity to the Elizabethan pamphleteers which gave rise to the English novel. Also, Isidore Diala, (2006) citing Obiechina and Ernest Emenyonu, has highlighted "the factors that made Onitsha the setting of the extraordinary generation and production of such an enormous corpus of literature." Although Kurt Thometz (2001) describes Onitsha market literature as "Africa's first popular written literature" (xi), he is wrong because Literature in African languages

It was too early, too risky to get a connecting ride to Achebe's home in Ogidi, some 30-minute distance from Onitsha. So I decided to hang out at a makeshift shack run by a fellow nicknamed Smokey Joe, as I soon heard his patrons hailing him. Smokey Joe vended tea, coffee, sandwiches, patent medicine, alcoholic beverages, and I suspected, marijuana—also known as “Igbo” in local parlance. It was a cold night during the rainy season and so commuters were huddled in any available space provided by traders who were selling assorted wares—mostly food items, cigarettes and alcoholic spirits mixed with herbs and locally called *paraga*²⁶—and had small fire places made from charcoal crackling and generating some heat. Apparently popular at the bus terminus or Bus-stop, Smokey Joe's stall was filled with travelers and homeless loafers. It soon became obvious that part of Smokey Joe's popularity rested on his astonishing skill as a storyteller, a gift he adroitly deployed to his advantage, drawing more “customers” to his stand. Like others, I was held captive by Smokey Joe's yarns, forgetting the discomfort of hanging out under the damp weather, sitting on an uncomfortable makeshift hard, wooden bench.

Between plying his trade and smoking a wrap of what smelt like marijuana, Smokey Joe regaled us with fantastic stories about ordinary people and

was published in pamphlet form and serialised in newspapers from early in the 20th century, and there were some even earlier examples of English-language fiction that could be described as popular (e.g. *Marita or the Folly of Love*, which was serialised 1885-8 in a Gold Coast newspaper: see Stephanie Newell, "Introduction to *Marita: or the Folly of Lover* In *Marita: or the Folly of Love*, edited by Stephanie Newell. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

²⁶ See “Band of Worshippers” (53-54), a poem in my collection of poems, *Love in a Time of Nightmares* (2008). So popular is this herbal alcoholic concoction called *paraga* in parts of Nigeria, especially at motor parks, that it inspired this poem, and countless other creative writing projects amongst the younger generation.

Nigeria's political opportunists.²⁷ Smokey Joe, like his Onitsha market literature forebears, "addressed the more typical and topical tropical concerns" (Thometz 2001: xvii) of his audience. His narratives sometimes bordered on the mythical as was the story of the controversial death of Nigeria's last military dictator, General Abacha, in the company of Indian prostitutes who fed him lethal apples. He also told a stunning story about a highway armed robbery operation on one of the commercial luxury buses in Eastern Nigeria popular for long trips across the country. According to Smokey Joe, during the robbery operation, the driver of the luxury bus was shot dead by one of the robbers who was dressed in the white robe of the clergy, and had boarded the Lagos-bound luxury bus disguised as a preacher-man complete with a crucifix and a bible. He also told another story about a greedy businessman who had patronized a *juju* man who armed him with a talisman for success in his business. But according to Smokey Joe, the charms backfired, and the businessman turned into a vulture²⁸ at Upper Iweka

²⁷ It was the dawn of the present democratic dispensation; the country was just coming out of the cruelest dictatorship foisted on the people by General Sani Abacha.

²⁸ Related to lycanthropy, Bastian (2001) offers a thrilling expose on the subject in her essay "Vulture Men, Campus Cultists and Teenaged Witches: Modern Magics in Nigerian Popular Media." This theme is evident in the Nollywood film *Money is Money* (2005) directed by Prince Emeka Ani, and recurrent in some street stories with social themes that circulate in urban Nigeria. See *PM News Weekend*, Friday-Saturday, January 29-30, 1999 for a related story of a woman who turned into a bird. For *PM News* the incident occurred in Ojodu area of Lagos (Januray 1999). In the *Evening Sunset* edition another woman reportedly turned into a bird at the Gbagada area of Lagos. In their various versions, the lycanthropic narrative calls attention to contemporary theorizing on "occult economies" especially by Comaroff and Comaroff in "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction..." (1999). The best illustration of the theme which highlights the kind of mythic imaginary that frames the street stories in the postcolony, is contained in a report by Demola Akinyemi for *Vanguard* newspaper of 23 January 2009 entitled "Police parade goat as robbery suspect...For attempting to 'steal' a Mazda car." *The Punch* of Thursday, 29 Jan 2009 carried a follow up with an outpouring of remarkable responses to the online edition at <http://www.punchng.com/Articl.aspx?theartic=Art200901290585831>) The story which enjoyed instant viral circulation online (including on websites of international news media such as the *Edmonton Journal*, BBC, CNN, etc.) revealed how the Public Relations Officer of Kwara State police command, Mr Tunde Mohammed, called a press conference during which he paraded a goat as a robbery suspect. To quote the *Vanguard*, "It was a shocking sight yesterday as men of the

Roundabout there in Onitsha, a popular circular road not far from Smokey Joe's shack.

Throughout, Smokey Joe, as if cognizant of the implicit outlandishness of his stories for his audience, cited the authority of newspapers and news magazines as sources to support their veracity—indeed in one instance a member of the audience as if in some typical traditional oral performance in Africa (Okpewho, *African Oral Literature*: 58) challenged the authenticity of versions of some of Smokey Joe's stories. The spectator contended that it was not in an Ekesson Transport Ltd bus that the preacher-man-robber incident took place but in a Young Shall Grow bus. He also argued that the man-turned-vulture incident did not take place in Onitsha but in Lagos. In response, Smokey Joe emphatically affirmed the veracity of his narratives, stopping short of swearing, and subsequently punctuating his narratives with the following refrain in his native Igbo language:

Ede lie n'akwukwo (It is written in the papers –my translation)

Before discussing this encounter with the street storyteller, I would like to quickly share a related experience which Reuben Abati, a popular newspaper columnist and Chairman, editorial board of *The Guardian* of Nigeria, had at one of the ubiquitous police checkpoints on the streets of Lagos. Abati reports that

Kwara State Police Command paraded a goat as an armed robbery suspect. The goat 'suspect' is being detained over an alleged attempt to snatch a Mazda car. The mysterious goat, according to the Police Public Relations Officer, Mr. Tunde Mohammed, while briefing bewildered journalists at the Force headquarters, is an armed robber who attempted to snatch the said car, Wednesday night, and later transformed into the goat in a bid to escape arrest. He explained that men of a vigilance group in [...] the state capital had chased two armed robbery suspects who wanted to demobilise the Mazda car with the intention of stealing it, and "while one of them escaped, the other was about to be apprehended by the team when he turned his back on the wall and turned to this goat. They quickly grabbed the goat and here it is," [Exhibited] Mohammed said.

during the encounter with the police at the checkpoint, a policeman gave him “a lecture about... the biggest crooks that he had ever seen” the so-called big people in Nigeria. According to Abati, the policeman “even cited the example of the wife of an important Nigerian who was caught shoplifting in London,” and then the following instructive exchange ensued: “‘Didn’t you read it in the papers?’ he asked. I told him I hadn’t read that particular story. Then you should read the newspapers more often. I thought you said you are a journalist?’” (*Media Rights Monitor*, August 2002, 11.)

“An oral world whose daily organization is ruled by the written word”

The Smokey Joe and Abati anecdotes have wide-ranging implications for my project. The Smokey Joe encounter inspired me to take a more formal interest in further investigating the tension inherent in the oral and the literate, tradition and modernity,²⁹ despite my prior encounters with many “street parliaments” in session in commercial vehicles, bus-stops and especially news-stands in urban Nigeria, as well as in my earlier field work in oral literature.³⁰ Such “open parliaments”³¹ as I witnessed at Smokey Joe’s shack with him presiding are a

²⁹ I am intrigued by the correspondences between my field experience and those reported in the book *Anáil an Bhéil Bheo: Orality and Modern Irish Culture* Edited by Nessa Cronin, Seán Crosson and John Eastlake. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. See especially the introduction by the editors entitled “The ‘Sea of Orality’: An Introduction to Orality and Modern Irish culture.” 3-12.

³⁰ For both my Honours and Masters dissertations, I conducted fieldwork in oral narratives by collecting texts from traditional oral performances. This enabled me to experience the tension between orality and literacy in the oral performance of select storytelling groups/oral artistes that I investigated. See respectively “Private Interest and Public Good: A Study of Heroism in Three Bendel Igbo Heroic Narratives” (1987) and “Nweke Momah: A Portrait of an Oral Artist” (1989), unpublished dissertations at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

³¹ This concept of “open parliaments” which I shall discuss in detail in chapter three of this study reminds one of the ideas articulated by “argument theorists” who “have long been concerned with the explanation of practical everyday argument” as Prorise, Miller, and Mills (1996) inform us, adding: “Since Stephen Toulmin’s *The Uses of Argument*, [...] the study of argument fields has become a theme in argumentation theories that examine arguments in social space.” See Theodore

common feature of social spaces in Nigeria, and of the audience in Africa (Karin Barber 1987, 1997; James Ogude and Joyce Nyairo 2007; Duncan Brown 1999, Wasserman 2009, 2010).³² In these studies, respectively covering West, East and Southern Africa, the tension inherent in folklore and literature, tradition and modernity easily comes to the fore in a way that reminds me of Giddens' (1990) inaccurate observation that "[t]he modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from *all* traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion" (4); inaccurate because as this study demonstrates, aspects of traditional social order survive in the form of contemporary street stories. The tension inherent in the ancient and the modern has encouraged what Biakolo (2008) sees as a "binary complex"³³ between a sacral perception of the text and orality as evident in Smokey Joe's and the policeman's fetishization of the written text.³⁴ Such reverence is aggravated by postmodernism and globalization

O. Proise, Greg R. Miller, and Jordan P. Mills, "Argument Fields as Arenas of Discursive Struggle: Argument Fields and Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Social Practice," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 32.3 (1996), *Questia*, Web. 21 June 2010.

³² See: "Preliminary Notes on Audiences in Africa," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 67.3 (1997): 347-362, and her Introduction to *Readings* 1-12; Nadine Dolby's (2003, 2006) demonstration of how "popular culture is a site that is an important locus of public debate and of individual and community agency" in her discussion of South Africa-originated *Big Brother Africa* reality show (Dolby 2006: 33); James Ogude and Joyce Nyairo. Eds. *Urban legends, Colonial Myths: Popular Culture and Literature in East Africa*. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press 2007—see especially Mbugua Wa Mungai's chapter on "matatu discourse" in Ogude and Nyairo (2007).

³³ See Biakolo (1999). In this paper Biakolo vigorously contests the oft-denigrating Euro-western presentation of African orality and the privileging of writing. It is noteworthy that Ogude and Nyairo (2007) use the term "binary paradigms" to describe this pattern of conflict that has, as they rightly put it, "continued to define the field of cultural studies" (3). Yet, as Steven Feld (1986) has vigorously argued, dichotomous "typologies of society, social organization, techno-economic complexity, and symbolic focus do little to explain the dynamics of oral and literate processes, but rather, simply blur or push aside social detail, historical accuracy, and the complexities of oral-literate interactions for the sake of sweeping generalizations that do not provide real evidence for the assertion that oral/literate are fundamentally different states of mind" (20).

³⁴ The concept of the Text as used throughout this study is, in the words of Jonathan Culler discussing Roland Barthes' definitive essay "*De l'oeuvre au texte*," "as the product of a sign

which depend essentially on digitization for their propagation. Technologization or “digitization” of the “word” in print, cassettes, CDs, DVDs, etc., has imbued the latter set with a certain archival permanence and authority which oral texts lack. Of course, the Smokey Joe verbal theatre goes beyond these buzzwords associated with “late modernity” (Fredric Jameson 1991; David Harvey 1989) or what Giddens (1994) sees as a “runaway world” (2000), a “post-traditional order” that “differ[s] from all preceding forms of social order in respect of their dynamism, the degree to which they undercut traditional habits and customs, and their global impact” (1). The verbal theatre demonstrates how such floating street narratives as Smokey Joe performs in a seemingly innocuous social space, “speak to power” even while seeking their legitimacy in the ostensible sanctity and authority of textual archives (and new media) represented by newspapers and the Internet.

For me, the narratives offer a handle for theorizing orality of the Smokey Joe variety and scribal journalism as “intertexts” that imbricate everyday life. This, in any case, syncs with “the nature of the postmodernist³⁵ text, with its insistent intertextuality, and tendency to blur the boundaries between genres and across the rhetorics of fiction’ and ‘reality’” (Marris and Thornham 2000: xiv). This much is obvious in the merging of written and oral texts in the street

system that must be interrogated.” See Jonathan Culler. “Barthes, Theorist,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14 (2001): 439-446.

³⁵ This nature of the postmodernist text is sometimes evoked in ambivalent terms especially in reference to African. See Jan-Georg, Deutsch Peter Probst & Heike Schmidt. Eds. *African Modernities*. Oxford and Portsmouth: James Currey and Heinemann, 2002; Eliso Salgado Macomo, *Negotiating Modernity: Africa’s Ambivalent Experience*. London and New York: University of South Africa Press, 2005; Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, Eds, *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

imagination of Smokey Joe and the policeman that Abati encountered. Emerging from the two realms—oral and scribal—is a hybrid text that teases the boundaries of fiction and reality, and harbours a muted desire for authenticity or authority of a text.

Instructively, in her thrilling analysis of a certain rumour cycle in Nigeria, Jane-Frances Agbu (2004) underscores the mingling of the oral and the written, fiction and reality, in the complex channels of circulation of rumours:

One way in which rumours and gossips sip out of a group to a larger audience is through the mass media – TV, radio, films, newspapers, magazines and more recently, mobile phone text messages. Worthy of note is the fact that such agents of communication may make the rumour more contagious by altering it in such a way that extraneous details are dropped and others exaggerated so that the message becomes clouded in mystery (18).³⁶

A remarkable counter-narrative experience that I had interviewing a leading Nigerian journalist and media executive complicates the conventional interpretation of the flow of such stories—from tertiary orality and the scribal to the oral—and throws more light on the problematical relationship between the kind of street stories that the Smokey Joes peddle and the oft-touted “fact-is-sacred” dictum of journalism which influences their veneration of the printed word. As part of my ethnographic studies for this project, in August 2009 I

³⁶ See Jane-Frances Agbu’s “From ‘Koro’ to GSM ‘Killer Calls’ Scare in Nigeria: A Psychological View.” *CODESRIA Bulletin*, Nos 3 & 4, 2004. 16-19. The essay focuses on the cyclic rumour theme ‘Koro’ or ‘vanishing’ genitals, and the GSM Killer Calls scare of 2004 in Nigeria. These ‘themes’ belong to what I identify as the social themes of street stories which are outside the focus of this study.

interviewed Dan Agbese, a founding executive of *Newswatch*, one of Nigeria's earliest news magazines modeled after *Newsweek* and *Time*, at the magazine's corporate headquarters in Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria. I asked Mr. Agbese, the Executive Editor of the magazine, what his experience had been with reporters providing story ideas for the magazine at the weekly editorial conferences over which he presides. Mr. Agbese, known for his dead pan humour and periodic sentences, recalled occasional encounters with young reporters who in response to the usual question about the sources of their story ideas for the week would gleefully announce: "The story is everywhere," [that is, on the streets or talk-of-town]. In other words, in a reverse form of provenance of the street stories which Smokey Joe identified, the news reporters were citing the 'authority' of the Smokey Joes, purveyors of such street oral narratives, as the source of their news story ideas. Such a complex, if oppositional, interface between the oral and the written in relation to the circulation of street stories emerges in bolder relief especially when seen from the vantage position of an oral literature scholar and a journalist.

In this inquiry I contend that those oppositions sometimes develop within oral social spaces before they are appropriated into print and, in other cases, vice versa. Yet various studies including postmodernist and post-Fordist scholarship³⁷ have drawn attention to the alienating effect of modernization on traditional forms of orality. It is believed that the age of the Internet may be coterminous with a

³⁷ David Korten's fascinating book, *The Post-Corporate World* (1999) provides a somewhat polemical point of departure in its celebration of "the power of story" (4) even in the context of contemporary "capitalist cancer" (15). See especially Chapter 12, "The New Storytellers," where Korten explores the stories of "ordinary heroes" (226).

requiem for orality. More than ever before, the remark by award-winning Zimbabwean writer Chenjerai Hove that “we live here for the most part in an oral world whose daily organization is ruled by the written word”³⁸ assumes greater significance in a way reminiscent of Lefebvre’s (1971) assertion that “the ‘world’ is divided into the world of everyday life (real, empirical, practical) and the world of metaphorical writing” (11). So that verbal *texts* are neither trapped only in books as Hove suggests, nor are they just technologized in Walter Ong’s sense of “secondary” and “tertiary” orality. They have become more fluid in cybernetic multimedia forms and cable networks. Fredric Jameson (1984) identifies this tendency as:

One of the features that characterizes more “scientific” periods in history, and most notably capitalism itself, [which] is the relative retreat of the claims of narrative or storytelling knowledge in the face of those abstract, denotative, or logical and cognitive procedures generally associated with science and positivism. (xi)

Persuasive as such a theoretical construct might appear, my postcolonial experience strongly questions it, and indeed finds justification in the “opposite effect” suggested by Giddens (2000: 20-21; 30-31). As McNeece (2005) observes, “[t]he academic establishment in the West has also produced facile dichotomies such as the opposition of “science” to “art” or “history” to “myth,” categories rooted in the ideology of recent Western industrial development, that have

³⁸ I was so struck by the poignancy of these words that I used the quote as an epigraph to one of the stories in my collection, *The Night Hides with a Knife*, Ibadan: New Horn and Critical Forum, 1995. 51. Subsequent efforts to locate the source of the quotation, including direct emails to the author, have been unsuccessful.

prevented readers' from seeing Arab cultures as representational systems rather than merely aberrant versions of civilization" (516-517). I believe that, ironically, while technological advancement and hermeneutic studies in the advanced metropolises may be sounding the death knell for *oral* tradition except in its tertiary, transformative survivals in electronic media,³⁹ the experience in postcolonial Africa continues to centralize orality as an undying cultural heritage. Hence from this premise, I think of orality in line with Finnegan's (2010) suggestion of "multi-oralities—not oral culture, not oralism—diverse in its specificities, the actors, the cultural conditions, the politics, the forms, the uses, and so much else."⁴⁰ It is also in this sense that I understand Karin Barber's (2009) observation that, "[p]rint and electronic media have had profound transformative effects in African culture," adding: "Most of what is now regarded as "popular" – as distinct from "traditional"– in African culture was forged in colonial and postcolonial contexts deeply entwined with print, film, radio and later television and video" (3).

³⁹ Of course I do recognize efforts being made to preserve storytelling traditions in the West through storytelling events and festivals. Indeed more significantly, orality/'spoken word' have influenced many younger poets into shifting from page to stage. Stephen Moss (2010) notes in a recent polemical essay in *The Guardian* of UK: "Perhaps the most dramatic development in poetry is the growing influence of performance. Traditionally, the poem on the page has been accorded more reverence than the poem on the stage, but that's changing. "In the last 10 years there's been more of an acceptance that the poet standing up and performing isn't a second-class citizen," says McMillan. "In the past it was always seen as a lesser art." Beard tells me she began writing for the page, but in the mid-90s discovered the buzz of performing. Now the performance aspect has taken over, and she treats her readings as theatrical events; as jazz sessions, too, editing her poems as she reads them in response to the moment and the audience. It is the antithesis of the poem as perfect, polished artefact. "I do really admire form," she says, "but personally, right now, I couldn't give a fuck about it. It doesn't mean anything to me. And subject matter, while it has to be good and you have to be able to justify everything, is just a vehicle for communication. It's really about the audience." See "What is the future of poetry?" in *The Guardian* (Online), Friday 18 June 2010. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jun/18/the-future-of-poetry>).

⁴⁰ See the e-companion of Finnegan's "Response from an Africanist Scholar," *Oral Tradition*, 25/1, 2010, <http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/251/finnegan>, Web. October 20, 2010.

Toward establishing my theoretical trajectory in this study, then, I argue that media narratives and other forms of tertiary orality such as digital texts have ancestry in oral tradition complete with reinvented versions of its “older forms of communal cultural participation.”⁴¹ I hope to draw attention to what Foley (1995) describes as “those related forms that, although they may survive only as texts, have roots planted firmly in an oral tradition” (xi). As Foley further points out, “[t]he range of opinion and perspectives on the nature of oral traditional works that survive in textual form is...quite various. Each genre encounters textualization differently, and theories of how that process proceeds even within the same tradition and genre themselves vary” (78-79).⁴² The kinds of genre of “travelling texts” that I focus on in this study can best be appreciated in terms of “Little Genres of Everyday Life,” (Karin Barber 1997), which intermediate our “increasingly technologically mediated existence” (Allon 255). I use the more embracing appellation, street stories or street narratives, to encompass them.

I am interested in how these unofficial narratives (street stories) open up alternative expressions of civic responsibilities, justice, and individual rights in the context of the postcolonial state’s abdication of the social contract in the urban space with its complex demographics.⁴³ What forms of empowerment and social

⁴¹ Karin Barber, "Preliminary Notes on Audiences in Africa," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 67.3 (1997): 347-362.

⁴² For more on this, see chapter three (“The Rhetorical Persistence of Traditional Forms”) of John Miles Foley book, *The Singer of Tales in Performance*, especially the subsection “Transformations(s)” (78ff).

⁴³ Doreen Massey (1995) has suggested that “One of the most powerful ways in which social space can be conceptualised is as constituted out of social relations, social interactions and, for that reason, always and everywhere an expression and a medium of power” (284).

justice emerge when ordinary citizens⁴⁴ gather in pubs, commercial vehicles, bus stations, around public newspaper vending stands, and other arenas of socialization in the public sphere, and conduct impromptu mock trials of rulers and traducers of human rights in the context of postcolonial tyranny?⁴⁵ (I am thinking of a whole field of inquiry which underscores the socio-political context that frames this study—the idea of the post-independence, vampire state in Africa—using theories of “State Failure in Late-Century Africa” to borrow from Bates (2008); and the theorizing by Jean François Bayart, etc., which I address in more detail in Chapter Three). Arguably, the criminalization of such street stories, especially during the dark days of military dictatorship in Nigeria—even the most innocuous public gatherings were under surveillance—is an important indication of the extent to which the postcolonial state can deny even informal modes of accessing civil rights and justice through imaginaries of consequence and

⁴⁴ Heather Zwicker offers a template for appreciating the concept of citizenship here. She identifies *active* citizenship as referring to “the economic and social enfranchisement necessary for all members of a nation-state to participate fully in social polity” As well, recognizing that “Citizenship requires that subjects negotiate with the nation-state on quotidian basis; but It never imagines the public sphere as being limited to the state alone; it thus holds on to a sense of the private and public spaces as politically charged arenas for articulating belonging to a nation-state”(250). This is different from the idea of citizenship as merely representing “individual statutory rights such as voting or carrying a passport” (250). See “Between Mater and Matter: Radical Novels by Republican Women.” Cohen, Marilyn and Nancy J. Curtin. Eds. *Reclaiming Gender: Transgressive Identities in Modern Ireland*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1999. 249-265. Nadine Dolby (2006) shares a similar conceptualization of citizenship, describing it as “an active process that involves the core of people’s daily existence, including the ways in which they interact with and use popular culture” (35).

⁴⁵ In using the term “postcolonial” in this study as a term evoking a field of study pioneered by Edward Said, etc., I am not unmindful of the decolonization project promoted by Africanist scholars such as Walter Rodney, Cheik Anta Diop, Chinweizu and Ngugi wa Thiong’o. The suggestion of the use the more critical term “neocolonial” instead has a baggage of arguments trailing it that are outside the purview of this study. For more insight on the debate see Esiaba Irobi’s essay, “The Problem with Postcolonial Theory: Re-Theorizing African Performance, Orature and Literature in the Age of Globalization and Diaspora Studies.” *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*, 2.1 (October 2008). www.sentinelquarterly.com Web. November 7, 2008, and Ama Mazama’s “Eurocentric Discourse on Writing” (1998). Also useful in this regard is” Kwasi Wiredu’s “How not to Compare African Thought with Western Thought,” *African Philosophy: Selected Readings*, Ed. Albert G. Mosley. Prentice Hall, 1995. 159-171.

retribution that are produced by the mock trials. Perhaps a western equivalent of the power of these sites of cultural expression can be located in Jurgen Habermas' (1991) discussion of the role of coffee shops and salons in the radicalization of the social space in early western Europe—especially in reaction to the tension between the *liberal* and *plebeian* public spheres and the rise of political journalism. Also relevant here is Zygmunt Bauman's (1999) idea of "Public spaces—agoras and forums in their various manifestations [...]—" as "places where agendas are set, private affairs are made public, opinions are formed, tested and confirmed, judgements are put together and verdicts are passed" (24). The problem with this conceptualization of the public sphere is that besides the contemporary critiques of the formations explored by Habermas and Bauman, they are more mainstream, forerunners of the various talkshops popular in Lagos; whereas the street stories that I focus on are mostly liminal.⁴⁶

Notably, much of the audience for street stories in these social spaces or public spheres is constituted by the "hi-tech generation," the Nigerian youth,⁴⁷ many of whom, like Smokey Joe, although not so literate share the betrayal by the ruling circle and the denial of the promises of independence and fruits of Nigeria's oil boom,⁴⁸ and have had to resort to eking out a living as creatively as possible. Reflecting on the fates of such young people against the backdrop of

⁴⁶ For more on this see the sub section of this study, "Public Sphere, Counterpublics, Alternative Sphere and Street Stories" in Chapter Two. For a fuller meaning of "liminality" as understood here, see La Charles Shure's "What is Liminality?" www.liminality.org Web. October 23, 2010.

⁴⁷ A friend and colleague, Paul Ugor, has produced a revealing study of youth culture and social space in Nigeria in an unpublished doctoral dissertation entitled *Youth Culture and the Struggle for Social Space: The Nigerian Video Films* (2009, University of Alberta, Canada).

⁴⁸ Karin Barber offers interesting analysis of "popular reactions to the petro-Naira" in her essay of the same title in *Readings in African Popular Culture* (1997: 91-98). Also see Andrew Apter's "The Politics of Illusion," *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

national alienation and the rupture of the dreams of independence, Mamadou Diouf (2003) states that “[n]ot only are young people losing the prestigious status that nationalism gave them in its ascending phase, but they no longer represent the national priority” (5). He adds: “Excluded from the arenas of power, work, education, and leisure, young Africans construct places of socialization and new sociabilities whose function is to show their difference” (Ibid.). According to Diouf, such differences are “either on the margins of society or at its heart, simultaneously as victims and active agents, and circulating in a geography that escapes the limits of the national territory” (Ibid.).

The urban space as a focal point

Recognizing the heterogeneity of the “national territory” and how unwieldy it would be to spread out the focus of this study, I take Lagos, Nigeria’s sprawling commercial capital and “black Africa’s biggest conurbation” (Obadare and Adebawo 2010: 9), as the paradigmatic locale of my study. But as already hinted by the Smokey Joe story, occasionally I also venture afield beyond the city of Lagos, into other urban centres. This is because they share certain general characteristics within the theoretical constructs of *urbanization*, and provide us useful comparative insights in the sense exemplified by Okwui Enwezor et al’s (2002) focus on four African cities—Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, and Lagos.

My choice of Lagos is influenced by its general acclaim as Nigeria’s “melting pot” (Mabogunje 1961) and “premier city” (Nzegwu 1996: 116) which is not just “a geographical destination but [...] an important vibrant, economic

and socio-cultural urban space where everything happens and nothing is impossible” (Ibid.). Importantly also, it is not only the most populous city but the home of most of Nigeria’s media houses, and the epicentre of a heterogeneous modern urban culture as articulated by Waterman (1990), Ahonsi (2002), Koolhaas (2008, 2002), and Konu (2002). More than any other city in Nigeria, perhaps in Africa as a whole, Lagos represents the idea of cities as “the world’s experimental laboratories.”⁴⁹ It is a site for power struggles and the social construction of identities.

But my understanding of the “city” includes the semiotic dimension of the otherwise common term “city” offered by Hamilton (2002) as he invokes the authority of Georg Simmel to inaugurate a related contextual usage. Hamilton exemplifies the defamiliarization of the commonplace which ethnographic method encourages with regard to studying the everyday, and asserts that “the city is in the mind,” literally an oppositional concept to the physical cityscape that we have come to recognize generally. Situating his definition of the “street” in social theory, Hamilton states that streets should be seen in social and imaginary terms. By “social” he evokes the ordinary usage of street as representing a physical space; by “imaginary” he refers to the existence of the street as an abstraction, something that exists in our imagination with reference to the social activities that take place there. The traditional (oral) and new media

⁴⁹ See Parag Khanna’s “Beyond City Limits: The Age of Nations is Over. The New Urban Era has Begun”, *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2010, 128. Khanna also regards Lagos as one of the emerging “megacities, superpopulous urban zones that are worlds unto themselves but that—for now—still punch below their weight class economically” (123). For a more detailed study of Lagos see Koolhaas (2008), and the recent UN Habitat Report, *The State of African Cities 2010: Governance, Inequalities and Urban Land Markets* (2010: Chapters 1.7 and 3) which states that: “Lagos is expected to be the second-fastest [city in Africa] with a projected 3.5 million addition, or a 33.8 per cent increase on its 2010 population of 10.5 million” (54).

narratives I focus on therefore exist in two realms—the physical and the abstract—covering on the one hand the urban locale, and on the other, the street-in-the mind, and Online, beyond Hamilton’s intent of the abstract.

My choice of the urban space as focal point is based on an appreciation of the fact that, unlike rural Africa where oral narratives and folktales are usually performed, the city—the postcolonial urban sphere—is the primary site for the flourishing of this complex genre. And the “street,” as Hamilton (2002) further theorizes, is “primarily a place where a complex set of social relationships occurs” (100),” and “an idea or conception perhaps as much as it is a real place.” So that we “[I]ook upon ‘the street’ as a place where a sort of theatre or spectacle of everyday life can be seen” (98). Conceptualizing *street* this way allows me to expand the rather conventional or “main street” sense of the *street*—in Bauman’s hyperbolic expression—as “that incoherent and contingent by-product of uncoordinated and desynchronized building history, the battleground of incompatible uses and the site of accident and ambiguity” (op cit 42).⁵⁰ Understanding the street that way also enables me to track how everyday socio-political experiences in postcolonial urban Nigeria migrate from the streets to various forms of cultural production. So that the kinds of texts that I discuss in this project become in Westwood and William’s (1997) logic, “complex cultural products which form part of the ways in which we talk about ourselves and meditate upon the fate of the peoples of the late twentieth [and twenty-first]

⁵⁰ Indeed it can be argued that this sense of ‘incoherence’ and “uncoordinated and desynchronized building history” which Bauman associates with ‘street’ applies more to the postcolonial city street such as we find in Lagos, than to the sometimes manicured western metropolitan locale.

century”, such that we have a “vision of the city, as a multiplicity of dramas and places” (5).

My choice of the city is also informed by an appreciation of contemporary efforts at designing “a new technology” or a “Networked, Narrative Places of Community” for some kind of street stories as proposed by Sack and Dale.⁵¹ Collectively, the complex urban locale technically provides the appropriate sphere between civil society and the state or in Habermas’ (1991) terms, “public sphere.” This is the communicative domain where street stories articulated as informal public opinion by less privileged private citizens engage formal, institutional and politicized narratives by the ruling class and the remains of once vibrant elite or technocrats—the latter had become victims of a harsh Structural Adjustment Programme, SAP, championed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Although the street stories may not always influence government policies as I note in the discussion of Mbembe’s submission on the issue below, they function to explain the opinion of the largely illiterate, semi-literate and sometimes privileged, citizens who transmit them within the postcolonial space⁵².

⁵¹ Warren Sack and Michael Dale of the Digital Arts / New Media Programme at the University of California, Santa Cruz, report that they have, as Dale puts it, “designed and implemented java-based cell phone applets integrated with flash web application to enable cell phones to record and receive geo-positioned audio narratives” (<http://danm.ucsc.edu/~dale/>). The Street Stories technology enables someone “[t]ravelling the geographical area of the map with the iPaq [to] listen to the audio stories associated with one’s current position simply by running the application” (Ibid.). The researcher’s design of this new technology for Street Stories has been inspired by the understanding that: “When [...] public place becomes private, pedestrian-unfriendly space, the powers of oral storytelling need some help. To survive, they need to be amplified and extended by a new media technology.” For more details see Warren Sack and Michael Dale, “Street Stories: Designing Networked, Narrative Places of Community,” <http://hybrid.ucsc.edu/SocialComputingLab/Projects/StreetStories/Description/> Web. June 11, 2008.

⁵² The open parliament with ordinary citizens holding debates is comparable to the Greek Assembly. Mackie, quoting Mogens Hansen, informs us that “Some time ago, Mogens Hansen divided the Athenian citizens into four groups: (i) the ‘passive’ citizens, who never attended the

They also indicate the function of storytelling as resistance and as an art for survival. It is here that we encounter a unique postcolonial dynamic where the informal and perhaps powerless peripheral domain engages with the state in its own terms and language. They also serve to enrich African epistemology in ways that E.J. Alagoa (1968), Kwasi Wiredu (1980), Achille Mbembe (1992, 2002), Molefi Kete Asante (1987, 1990), Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992), and other



Plate 1: Billboard posted by government discouraging rumour mongering

Assembly or the law courts, (ii) those who attended the Assembly and served on other political bodies but only voted and never addressed the Assembly, (iii) those who did address the Assembly but only occasionally, and (iv) the full *rhetores*, who were the most politically active, regularly addressing the Assembly, moving proposals, and participating in the law courts.' The speakers or orators who spoke the most, then, would be in this last group of citizens, and would be fewer in number. See C. J. Mackie, ed., *Oral Performance and Its Context*. Boston: Brill, 2004. 131. But it must be noted here that recent scholarship in the field underscore the need to reconstitute the public sphere as we used to know it: Nick Couldry and Anna Mccarthy's collection, *Mediaspace: Place, Scale, and Culture in a Media Age*, New York: Routledge, 2004 offers several essays that convincingly promote this viewpoint.

African scholars have demonstrated in their navigation of ethnophilosophy and the postcolonial condition.

The significance of street stories as a tool for political resistance can be gleaned from the state's regular press statements discouraging rumour mongering. In extreme cases, billboards are posted at conspicuous locations in the city showing a citizen with a shut-up sign over his lips, and declaring: "Stop spreading rumours around," (Plate 1) a 'tribute' to the viral, spiral and recyclic nature of street stories.⁵³ Hence this project is a study of Nigeria during a period of immense challenges to its survival as a country and the emergence as a democracy. Storytelling mattered, street stories still matter in ways that distinguish them from mere rumours. They are invested with political motives, loaded with agency by citizen-subjects struggling from the margins to appropriate, or at least, influence social history. As Chaffee (1993) writes, "[p]olitically speaking, the context for communication depends upon historical and cultural circumstances and the type of political system" (3). In the interesting parallel of Latin American politics and the role of street art which can be extrapolated for our discussion of street stories in Nigeria, Chaffee instructively affirms that,

under authoritarian regimes, the underground production of street art connotes an activist, collective sense. In essence, it becomes a form of psychological warfare against the dominant culture and elite and reveals

⁵³ Coincidentally, Oyewo (2007) reports that: "Following from a common perception of the rumour phenomenon as a categorical evil, successive regimes in Ghana, according to Ansah-Koi (1994), consistently viewed rumour mongering with apprehension and concern. To them, rumour mongering was commonly perceived by the various regimes as stuffing the ears of men with false reports." (6)

an emerging subterranean movement. This is threatening because it connotes a prelude to an organized opposition, or the existence of one. The repression of street art may not be directed at the message but at the symbol the act conveys. The act symbolizes a culture of resistance exists that autocrats pretend to ignore. This denial of resistance and of alternative views was particularly evident in the old communist regimes, although less so in those of Latin America, where the civil society and the state are accustomed to authoritarian-democratic cycles and where the presumption exists that there are alternative perspectives. (30)⁵⁴

While alternative perspectives may sometimes be fictional, they also create, in the words of Angela McRobbie (2000), “an ever-increasing, but less diverse verbal and visual landscape,” and “[i]t is these recurring fictions, and the characters who inhabit them which feed into the field of popular knowledge, and which in turn constitute a large part of popular culture” (389).

A commitment to the interpretation of the kinds of popular culture for this study therefore requires a social consciousness shorn of the orthodox totalizing

⁵⁴ Donald Ramos has offered an interesting parallel from a system which existed in “the captaincy of Minas Gerais, the core of the far-flung Portuguese empire in the eighteenth century” Brazil. According to Ramos, the system, which recognized the lower classes in an inversion of “top-down authoritarian system, [...] was built around the idea that in many areas of community life, local values and behaviors took precedence over royal or church doctrine, law or rules. These values and behaviors were based in the community and often cut across class, ethnic, gender, or status lines...They were held in contradistinction to the values of the “authorities”--the state... These community values and behaviors were manifested through the existence of a body of recognized public opinion...called the “people’s voice”--the *voz popular*--and the process of forming and disseminating that opinion was called *murmurac*”--a ... word referring to murmurings or gossip. Violations of this body of opinion were described as scandals. See Donald Ramos, “Gossip, Scandal and Popular Culture in Golden Age Brazil,” *Journal of Social History* 33.4 (2000): 887-912. There are studies too that point to the significance of gossip in medieval times, indicating, as John Watkins (2004) puts it in his review of *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe*, edited by Thelma Fenster and Daniel Lord Smail, “that medieval jurists not only admitted common opinion as evidence but codified its use” (139).

perspectives evident in some—especially Euro-Western—scholarship on Africa. This social commitment is apparent in the street stories, in their orientation toward poking fun at, and critiquing the political class, often described in predatory or pathological terms—“vampires”, “crippled,”⁵⁵ etc. The ordinary citizens of the vampire state in Africa resort to spinning these stories as a way of responding to political oppression; of ridiculing or undermining the ruling ring or sometimes for either comic relief or catharsis akin to the experience of watching a Greek tragedy as Obadare (2009) convincingly shows. Marginalized in official political discourse, these less privileged subjects mobilize subversive alternative media for apprehending and comprehending the “nervous conditions”—Walter Rodney (1974); Frantz Fanon (2004); Ato Quayson (2000: 93); and Tsitsi Dangarembga (1989)—which their lives have become. It is not surprising, therefore, that the theorist and philosopher Appiah (2006) has noted, albeit with exaggeration, that gossip shares the same root with literature. In his words “gossip—the fascination people have for the small doings of other people ⁵⁶—

⁵⁵ So pervasive is the use of such disturbing metaphors in public discourse that scholars have adopted them in the title of books on the postcolony. Examples include Osaghae E. Eghosa’s *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998, and J.H. Frimpong-Ansah’s *The Vampire State in Africa: The Political Economy of Decline in Ghana*. Trenton, N.J: Africa World Press, Inc, 1992. Also see the section “The Vampire State” (267 ff) in Andrew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. Amongst scholars who have used the adjective “predatory” to describe the postcolonial Nigerian condition are Nwankwo (2002: 170); Igbaramah (2004: 269); and Olukotun (2010: 165).

⁵⁶ Luise White (2000) offers a useful definition of gossip as “communication that plays on, and creates, ties of intimacy: it is not by definition either reliable or unreliable” (259). Ramos (2000) however calls attention to its importance in a Brazilian the context that we can extrapolate: “Gossip assumes a very important role in the articulation of colonial culture. It created a community which was inclusive, one in which both men and women participated. No doubt, men and women participated in several imagined communities whose membership was defined by the sharing of common knowledge. Gossip creates common knowledge but it is a truism that it is common only to those who share it. The act of gossiping is the act of creating communities—constructed communities” (889).

shares a taproot with literature” (112). Although Appiah’s definition of gossip does not adequately address the meaning of this everyday human practice in terms of its reference to “the small doings of other people”, its association with literature is pertinent. So too is its association with rumours or grapevine stories, and its linkage to the disciplines of sociology, psychology, anthropology, media and communication studies. And even in these disciplines, there is hardly any consensus on the definition of the terms “gossip”, “rumours,” “Grapevine stories,”⁵⁷ “urban legends” or in Ropo Sekoni’s terms for its Nigerian brand, “urban folklore.” The only consensus, it seems to me, is located in what White (2000) calls “gradations of fact and fiction” (259). As the staple of literary arts, it seems to me that Literature as a field in humanistic studies is best positioned to apprehend and characterise this “fugitive category,” to borrow Karin Barber’s memorable phrase. In recognition of this possibility, I anchor this research in English Studies, while relying on my background in Oral Literature and experience in journalism to attempt a radical exploration of this liminal cultural practice.

The centrality of the ‘essentials’ of human communication—orality, rumours, gossip, grapevine, and journalism—in everyday life is at the core of my research. For as the influential French philosopher and social theorist Henri Lefebvre has declared in his discourse on “everyday life,” “[t]he momentous eruption of the everyday into literature should not be overlooked.” He adds that

⁵⁷ Allan J. Kimmel rightly notes that “the distinction between rumor and gossip is often a difficult one to make” (18). Michael Warner (2002) recognizing that “Gossip might seem to be a perfect instance of public discourse” (78) offers more insights for defining it. He acknowledges “its potential for popular sociability” as well its capacity to “set[...] norms of membership in a diffuse way that cannot be controlled by a central authority” (Ibid.).

“[i]t might, however, be more exact to say that readers were suddenly made aware of everyday life through the medium of literature or the written word” (2).⁵⁸ But for Rosenberg (1991), “Writing does something ‘unnatural’ to the life of an authentic oral lyric or narrative: it concretizes it, removes it from the living stream of its existence” (93). Steve McCaffery (1984) accentuates Rosenberg’s position as he declares that, “Writing, at best, is an untrustworthy representation of representation,” adding, “[s]peech is the living” (146). These theoretical pronouncements draw attention at once to the larger conflicts which underpin this inquiry beyond its location in the city which de Certeau (1988) sees as “simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity” (95). These conflicts are embedded in the complicated relationship between orality and literacy, tradition⁵⁹ and modernity, Anglo-American theories which dominate contemporary critical discourses on the one hand, and Africanist approaches to discussions of African affairs⁶⁰ on the other—issues that scholars in disciplines

⁵⁸ See *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971. Together with his *Critique of Everyday Life*, first published in 1947, Lefebvre’s Marxian bent in theorizing everyday life has cast something of a spell on discussants of the concept in relation to subjectivity and the social production of space, especially in the urban setting. Lefebvre’s hypothetical situation paints a picture of how, if one needed to relive the social experience of the 1900s, newspaper reports of the time may prove to be the source of such information. Although Lefebvre’s ideas have widely influenced the study of everyday life, it should be noted at the outset that “the concept of everyday makes its first appearance in the work of [Hungarian literary critic and philosopher] Georg Lukács whose initial use of the term derived from the accounts of everyday social routines and rituals that had been developed by the German sociologist, Georg Simmel” (Bennett et al 2002: xiii-xiv)

⁵⁹ I associate the term “tradition” here with the discursive tension that Anthony Giddens (2000) highlights in chapter three (Tradition) of his book *Runaway World*. Giddens tilts more to Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1983) explanation “showing that many forms of behavior that we tend to assume come from time immemorial are actually recently constructed” (108), and Edward A Shils’ (1981) positive view of it.

⁶⁰ Appiah (2003) has offered an important note of caution concerning the situation of African intellectuals whose “training [...] has been in the ways of the West” and for whom “[t]here is, therefore, [...] no possibility of not bringing a western philosophical training to bear.” He warns that “[w]hat we must be careful about is simply projecting Western ideas, along with these Western-derived methods, onto the indigenous conceptual framework (121). See Appiah’s

ranging from the Humanities, Cultural Studies and the Social Sciences have continued to grapple with.

“The danger of a single story”

In exploring the kind of resistance embodied in the street narratives, I am mindful of Achille Mbembe’s (2001) argument that: “to account for both the mind-set and the effectiveness of postcolonial relations of power, we need to go beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination.” Mbembe identifies such binaries or what Hannerz (1989) calls “asymmetries” as: “resistance vs. passivity, autonomy vs. subjection, state vs. civil society, hegemony vs. counter-hegemony, totalization vs. detotalization” (103). Beyond these binaries, I would examine “the ways state power creates [and institutionalizes] its own world of meanings—a master code that, while becoming the society’s primary central code, ends by governing, perhaps paradoxically, the logics—that underlie all other meanings within that society” (Ibid.). I would also study the various underground verbal strategies that ordinary people adopt to subvert the “master code.” In other words, I advance from the premise that ordinary people are familiar with what the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie (2009) describes as “the danger of a single story,” and so engage in the “poaching of meanings” (Mbembe 2001: 106) and raiding of the master narratives, even proactively inventing theirs; much so that to cite Mbembe again, “it is in practice

“Ethnophilosophy and its Critics.” *The African Philosophy Reader*. Ed. Peter H Coetzee. Routledge, 2003.

impossible to create a single, permanently stable system out of all the signs, images, and markers current in the postcolony,” and as he adds, “this is why they are constantly being shaped and reshaped, as much by the rulers as by the ruled, in attempts to rewrite mythologies of power” (108).

However, rather curiously, Mbembe (2001) suggests that the battle of narratives, somewhat akin to the “battle of songs” observed in some traditional oral performances by G.G. Darah (2005),⁶¹ does not conflate to “resistance”:

By taking over the signs and language of officialdom, they [the ruled] have been able to remythologize their conceptual universe while, in the process, turning the *commandement*⁶² into a sort of zombie. Strictly speaking, this process does not increase either the depth of subordination or the level of resistance; it simply produces a situation of disempowerment (*impouvoir*) for both ruled and rulers. The process is fundamentally magical; although it may demystify the *commandement*, even erode its supposed legitimacy, it does not do violence to the *commandement*'s material base. At best it creates potholes of indiscipline on which the *commandement* may stub its toe. (111)⁶³

Yet Mbembe admits further on that “[i]f, to repress the population, the autocrat uses water cannon, tear gas, and guns, then he is resisted as best possible with the

⁶¹ See G.G. Darah's *Battles of Songs: Udje Tradition of the Urhobo*, Lagos: Malthouse Press, 2005, and Okpewho's discussion of the subject in *African Oral Literatures: Backgrounds, Character and Continuity*. Indiana: Indiana UP, 1992. 31.

⁶² The *Commandement* was based on a *regime d'exception*—that is, a regime that departed from the common law.

⁶³ Mbembe's position here calls to mind W.H. Auden's controversial contention in his poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” that “poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/In the valley of its making where executives/Would never want to tamper...” which has been challenged by many political poets.

help of the ‘poor person’s bomb,’ rumor” (158). I argue that although the popular narrative-resistance may not always be a consciously programmatic exercise by the people, the Nigerian experience proves otherwise as exemplified by the “June 12” struggle and the forced exit of the dictator, General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida on August 27, 1993 as I demonstrate in Chapter Three.

In the Nigerian context, street narratives, reinforced by a rhizomic circulation process that sees them creeping underground into the popular press and other forms of popular culture production, have sometimes destabilized sovereign “power” or what Mbembe calls the *commandement* and “potentate” in his francophone context. So that the renowned postcolonial scholar and philosopher appears contradictory on the surface, even guilty of the kind of totalizing postulations on the postcolony he critiques, rightly observing that “the postcolony is made up not of one public space but of several, each having its own logic yet liable to be entangled with other logics when operating in certain contexts” (104). In other words, Mbembe has been led to his generalization on the postcolony based on his case studies of the francophone African countries/case studies: Cameroon, Dahomey (now Benin Republic) and the Congo.⁶⁴ True, as Mbembe observes, “by dancing publicly for the benefit of power” (as a group of

⁶⁴ This is the basis of the first question Christian Hoeller, Editor of *Springerlin Magazine* (<http://www.springerlin.at>), a quarterly art/theory/cultural studies journal based in Vienna, Austria, asks Mbembe during an interview. Hoeller seeks to know how in *On the Postcolony* Mbembe could have been “targeting a single political-historical constellation that spans the whole continent” despite “the manifold local differences – different marks of globalization so to speak that imprint themselves in quite different ways in different African territories?” In response, Mbembe blames the limitation of “the methodological approach [he] use[s] in the book,” which “relies, to a large extent, on social science epistemologies.” He regrets that “[i]n spite of substantive attempts (especially in chapter 5 and 6) the rupture with such epistemologies is still not radical enough.” For more on this see <http://www.utexas.edu/conferences/africa/ads/1528.html> (Web. August 14, 2010).

Nigerian musicians and the Two Million Man marchers organized by one Daniel Kanu did during General Sani Abacha's draconian reign—see Chapter Six), “the ‘postcolonized subject’ is providing his or her loyalty, and by compromising with the corrupting control that state power tends to exercise at all levels of everyday life, the subject is reaffirming that this power is incontestable” (129). Yet, as I demonstrate in Chapter Six, the assertion is easily contradicted by the satiric popular music productions of some Nigerian musicians such as Sonny Okosuns, Gbenga Adeboye, and Bayo Gbenga Adewusi following on the well-studied path of iconoclastic Afrobeat King and activist, Fela Anikulapo Kuti. To fully realize the role of street stories—even in their incarnation in popular music and film—as a tool for political resistance in postcolonial Nigeria, I examine them as a genre of everyday life.

Everyday Life, Popular Press, and a Conceptual Aporia⁶⁵

My exploration of the interface between the triad of orality, print media, popular music and film introduced at the beginning of this chapter has revealed fascinating correspondences between the discursive practices of the storyteller and those of the news reporter/popular culture producers in their production of *stories*. Besides the shared fascination with storytelling for which John Hartley (1996) declares that “[a]s the sense-making practice of modernity, journalism is the most important textual system in the world” (32) these correspondences include the twofold politics of sources and/or “framing” or attribution/anonymity,

⁶⁵ I use “aporia” here in its original Greek sense—unencumbered by the theoretical exertions of Jacques Derrida and others—to simply refer to “a puzzle or paradox.” For more on the term see Victor E. Taylor, Charles E. Winquist's (Eds), *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Routledge 2001, 15, and Derrida's *Aporias*, Transl. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

the need for authoritativeness and the temptation to embellish. Indeed, so intriguing are these correspondences or “conventions of narration” (Schudson 1995: 54) that Abiola Irele’s (2000) “reflection on the association between narrative and the African imagination” (100) provides a pedestal for appreciating them. Irele’s two lines of reflection are luminous and consequential to my purpose, as he speaks of “the centrality of the oral tradition as a continuing reference for African imaginative discourse and the significance of the reference in the elaboration of expressive forms by which the intimate relations between narrative and history is established” (Ibid.). So pervasive, albeit informal and fluid, is this influence of the oral tradition that it cuts across the literary arts and popular arts—film popular music—and the popular press.

By “popular press” in this study I am not thinking of the conventional supermarket or popular tabloids in Misty Bastian’s (1993: 130) and Herman Wasserman’s (2010) sense. For the so-called tabloids are better known in Nigeria as “soft-sell” street journals or “junk magazines” and often associated with yellow journalism.⁶⁶ Rather, I use the term “popular press” to encompass the generality of (mainstream) newspapers and newsmagazines that circulate in Nigeria, especially given that the kind of Western distinction between broadsheets and tabloids does not necessarily exist in Nigeria.⁶⁷ For me the popular press in Nigeria includes more than “those newspapers and magazines that target the

⁶⁶ See Eghosa E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998, 243.

⁶⁷ Attempts to establish such broadsheets in Nigeria have met with failure for reasons beyond the scope of this study. From *The Democrat* newspaper in the 1980s through *The Post Express* of which I was a pioneering staff in the 90s to the more recent experimentation by *Next* newspaper in the new millennium, such efforts have been short lived.

widest audience literate in English” (Bastian 1993: 131) in the same sense as canvassed by Martin Conboy in his canonical book *The Press and Popular Culture* (2002). Unlike Bastian (1993), I recognize “the major news magazines [...] or the ‘elite’ newspaper[s]” (Ibid.) such as *The Guardian* as part of the popular press, and would retain the term “junk newspapers/magazines” following the revered Nigerian Nobel laureate for Literature and activist Wole Soyinka for the category that Bastian assigns the term. Having been the butt of the scandal-mongering tabloids Soyinka has attacked the genre with expletives including “the Nigerian yellow press” (Soyinka 2006: 414). In more recent years, the combined forces of economic hardship and falling readership have driven the relatively decent publishers of the genre into focusing more on popular music, fashion and trends, while the more audacious and desperate ones have resorted to publishing soft and hard core pornography. Dozens of such publications can be found at newsstands in Lagos and other urban centres in Nigeria where they largely circulate. Contrary to Bastian’s (1993) theory that the so-called “elite” newspapers and magazines “are either in languages unintelligible to the majority of the Nigerian population or use an elevated style of English that most readers find almost as difficult” (131) these “mainstream” news journals are patronized by the masses for reasons as serious as their reliability as sources of political news stories which bothers them most, and as mundane as status symbols—being identified with “those that know” by either buying the papers/magazines when they have the money or going to the newsstands to rent or partake in the popular

street parliament or unofficial Free Readers' Association (FRA). Needless to add the high pass-on rate of the newspapers!

The association of popular culture with revolutionary movements and resistance takes is rooted in the Marxist origins of cultural studies, especially in its affiliation to the notion of cultural hegemony influenced by Italian philosopher and political theorist Antonio Gramsci.⁶⁸ It is understandable therefore that leading popular culture scholar John Fiske (1989) argues that “[p]opular culture is the culture of the subordinated and disempowered and thus always bears within it signs of power relations, traces of the forces of domination and subordination that are central to our social system and therefore to our social experience” (4-5). It is this centrality of the popular to our social system/social experience that weds it to everyday life—the application of which in this study is guided by Fiske’s compelling working definition:

Everyday life is constituted by the practices of popular culture, and is characterized by the creativity of the weak in using the resources provided by a disempowering system while refusing to submit to that power. The culture of everyday life is best described through metaphors of struggle or antagonism: strategies opposed by tactics, the bourgeoisie by the proletariat; hegemony met by resistance, ideology countered or evaded;

⁶⁸ Gramsci defines ‘hegemony’ in his *Prison Notebooks* as “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.” Edgar and Sedgwick (2008) notes that: “[t]he theory of hegemony was of central importance [...] It facilitated analysis of the ways in which subordinate groups actively resist and respond to political and economic domination. The subordinate groups need not be seen merely as the passive dupes of the dominant class and its ideology” (165).

top-down power opposed by bottom-up power, social discipline faced with disorder. (47)

But Fiske (1989) adds an instructive caveat, which as I will subsequently show, frames and complicates our discussion of popular culture and everyday life in postcolonial Nigeria. Amid acknowledging the contradictory proclivity of popular culture “in societies where power is unequally distributed” (4)—as if there is any utopian society where power is equally distributed—Fiske observes: “[w]hile recognizing the close interconnections between class and culture, we must not map them too deterministically one onto the other. The proletarian and the popular are overlapping but not coterminous concepts” (47). This clarification is important because of a general tendency to limit the concept of the “everyday” to the “proletariat” as reflected indeed in much of contemporary scholarship in the field, represented for example by Tony Bennett and Diane Watson’s definitive reader, *Understanding Everyday Life* (2002):

When we speak of everyday life, it is usually the lives of ‘ordinary people’—members of the working and middle class—that are at issue rather than the daily lives of the members of the powerful social elite or classes. Its focus, to put the point colloquially, is more on the ‘poor and nameless’ than on the ‘rich and famous,’ though they are also seen as being caught up in the mundane aspects of everyday life pretty much like everyone else. (x)

In Nigeria, a cultural production that has contributed to shaping public understanding of “the everyday” along the above lines is Tajudeen Adepetu’s

syndicated popular television drama series, *Everyday People* which sought to dramatize the lives of ordinary people to the letter. My usage of “everyday” embraces both the class sense and the general theatrical sense articulated by Erving Goffman in his seminal book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and Michael de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988). Given the significance of the everyday in cultural formations and socio-political life, especially in the light of its utilitarian value—as a repository of sorts and a site for the peoples’ struggles—one would expect that everyday culture would not be taken for granted in our polity. But that has not, regrettably, been the case.

The importance of this research, therefore, partly hinges on the element of cultural recovery associated with it, especially considering the lamentable dearth of up-to-date archives of socio-cultural materials that reflect or refract the struggles of everyday people against the Nigerian rapacious political elite. A scandalously poor archiving culture by the Nigerian government and people has ensured that there is little or no preservation in libraries and archives (where these exist at all) of the salient works of popular culture which have enshrined aspects of everyday life in popular formats such as cassettes, CDs and DVDs.⁶⁹ In the

⁶⁹ Shockingly, I could not find many of the texts that I had identified over the years for this research when I finally set out to collect those that I had not collected for close study and analyses. Chief among the texts that I found difficult to locate in media libraries and national archives are: copies of *Maradona: IBB Must Go* (1993), a multi-genre video film/satiric music production by Gbenga Adewusi, and *Razor* newspapers, which represents the popular street print (newspapers) that flourished to resist military dictatorship in Nigeria in the early nineties. For both, I managed to contact their producers but could not get much help from them. While Moshood Fayemiwo, publisher of *Razor* who is now based in the US, sent me scanned sample copies of the publication with which he managed to escape from Nigeria while he was haunted by the military’s death squad, Gbenga Adewusi could not track any copy of *IBB Must Go* for me. To the best of my knowledge, the only documentation of the latter available in print is Jonathan Haynes’ “Mobilising Yoruba Popular Culture: Babangida Must Go.” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 73.1 (2003): 77-87. Incidentally, the only available copy of Adewusi’s hybrid video text *Maradona* I located was Jonathan Haynes’, but regrettably, it got missing in the mail

more radical instances, copies of such subversive popular culture products were confiscated by government agents, not to mention the detention of the publisher of one such popular culture artefact, *Razor* newspaper, in chains in an underground gulag before his eventual escape into exile.

Therefore, with my research I not only call attention to the connections between the poor shelf life and general longevity of sensitive African cultural texts of the type I study here and the role of politics in archiving, but I also memorialize representative texts and the people's struggles. Additionally, I aim to remind readers of the unsung heroes of the struggle for democracy in Nigeria outside of the mainstream history or political science books. Lefebvre's (1971) statement about the "national press" as a site for discovering the mores of a people or "those occurrences that must have been silently developing in the hidden depths of time" (1)⁷⁰ becomes more salient. For as Guyer et al (2003) have rightly noted, for example,

Under the wretchedly negligent, repressive and rapacious military government of Sani Abacha (1993-1998), the only sources of accurate information about popular life—either scientific data or simple witness accounts—were a very brave press and a small scattering of equally resilient researchers. (xi)

when he sent it to me from his base in the US, as he informed me. I had a similar experience locating three other primary texts for this study: Sonny Okosuns audio music cassette, *Hidden Agenda* and Gbenga Adeboye's "Guess Who," and *Stubborn Grasshopper Parts I & II*, directed by Simisola Opeoluwa which was produced in 2001, not long after Nigeria returned to democratic rule. (See "CPJ Calls for Release of Imprisoned Nigerian Journalists, End to Persecution of Press," <http://www.cpj.org/news/1998/ghanaconf.html>, Web. December 28, 2009.) For more on these see Chapters Three and Five of this study.

⁷⁰ In chapter one of the same book cited earlier, Lefebvre illustrates how "news items and a few marginal reports" can be all there might be available "to reconstruct the everyday life of a period in time, say dating back from 1900" (1).

But I consider the notion of the press as an “accurate” epistemic site a bit hyperbolic and therefore invite reflections on a research methodology that would enable one to treat the media materials not just as historical documents but as “filters” of a complex socio-cultural process.

Research Methodology

Asa Berger (1996) has declared that “[t]he mass media and popular culture are best thought of as battlegrounds, where armies of critics fight with one another about methodological matters” (8). With the contemporary street stories of this dissertation rooted in oral tradition, my study draws a lot from Oral Literature, while summoning analytical tools and theories from various disciplines as evidenced from my discussions so far. Indeed as I had noted, a unique aspect of this oral-literary study is its affiliation to media studies. Previous studies of oral narratives in Africa have rested fundamentally on the normative domains of Oral literature, Folklore, and Anthropology. But in an ambitious, albeit complementary manner, White (2000) offers the historian’s stake in her riveting study of the possibility of using gossip and rumours in Africa, and their interface with the print media, to reconstruct local history in a similar way to that promoted by Penny Summerfield (2005). My study stretches disciplinary boundaries, bearing in mind previous scholarship across the disciplines.

Thus in order to achieve my goals, I employ quasi ethnomethodological resources of the sociologist/anthropologist, and research strategies from Popular Culture and Cultural Studies. I combine these with participant-observer cum empirical-theoretical approaches favoured by ethnographers, social

anthropologists and Oral literature scholars. These approaches encourage drawing from one's personal experience, and conducting field interviews with participants. However, I must add that my references to participant observation need to be qualified with an acknowledgement that this is limited and that most of the texts under discussion were drawn from print or the electronic media rather than live street performances. My reason for not quite carrying through the ethnomethodological strategy included safety concerns; for on one occasion I was nearly mobbed by commercial bus drivers at the Ikeja, Lagos, Motor Park who accused me of being an undercover agent who had come to obtain information on them for the police and State Security Services (SSS). My recording device was seized and almost smashed. It took the intervention of a more enlightened member of the group to rescue me and my fieldwork tools from the mob. That experience, and the limitation of my present approach notwithstanding, the overall strategy of drawing from "secondary sources" as well as from my Smokey Joe and Iya Ijebu encounters I believe, opens the doorway to a whole world of practices and meanings, strategies and social networks. Working with them also allows me to trace the interface and movement back and forth between the live street situations which inform their production and the print and media contexts into which they mutate. The process seems to me to be more holistic, textured and nuanced than working basically from my primary sources.

Relating this study to orature while emphasizing the metamorphosis of the oral text into other forms of popular cultural expression such as the print media, music and video film in relation to the idea of "mediated democracy" (McNair

2000: 12)⁷¹ allows me to pursue my aims. These aims include interrogating “the various regions of mediated space in which political affairs are reported, analysed, interpreted and discussed” (Ibid. 13), and tracking everyday oral narratives as they travel like a water cycle, across popular forms of cultural expression, especially print journalism, and across social spaces in Scholte’s (2000) sense of “territorial spaces, territorial distances, territorial borders” (16), or in more fashionable contemporary terms, the “translocal” and the “transnational.” Thus, I propose to explore the theories related to street stories and urbanization in a way that calls to mind their glocalization orientation, and disposition to what Soja (1989) has beautifully described as the “social science academic coalition” (69).

In negotiating the interdisciplinary framework of the study, I am mindful of Roland Barthes’ (1972) reflections on the concept. According to Barthes,

Interdisciplinary work, so much discussed these days, is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which in fact, is willing to let itself go). To do something interdisciplinary it is not enough to choose a subject (a theme) and gather round it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one. (Quoted in Clifford and Marcus 1986: 1)

Creating a new object, yes, in the sense of being “radically syncretic as to constitute a new form” (Karin Barber 1987: 10) as exemplified by my conception of “street stories”; but to speak of one “that belongs to no one”? That sounds somewhat extreme. But that notwithstanding, the interdisciplinary framework

⁷¹ I am indebted to Brian McNair’s analysis of this idea and of the “political public sphere” in his illuminating study, *Journalism and Democracy: An Evaluation of the Political Public Sphere*. London: Routledge, 2000.

which I adopt in this study would enable me to trace ways in which oral culture continues to influence the popular media and the production of knowledge in everyday life in the postcolonial state in Africa—in the Comaroffs’ and Bayart’s sense.⁷²

It would also enable me to unravel how street stories in all their guises—urban myths and legends, popular lore, rumours and fantastic tales—get circulated and legitimized in popular texts, and in various institutional forms and contexts of “politically invested arenas,” to appropriate Judith Butler et al’s (2000)⁷³ phrase.

Applying the kind of eclectic perspective vigorously promoted by Shaun Moores (2000)⁷⁴ to the study of street stories texts will hopefully enable me to achieve the objectives of the study as delineated in this introduction. The approach will expectedly shift oral literary studies outside of its traditional concerns with formal oral narratives and performance, and reposition it in the light of important contemporary critical and social developments and theories. In other words, my research aims to contribute a more concerted approach to understanding the complex processes of everyday social interaction and popular media formats. In forging a common ground, I recognize the political significance of such theorizing and the tensions inherent in melding the various disciplinary

⁷² Both theorists have focused on the idea of the criminalization of the State in Africa or to use Bayart’s felicitous phrase, “politics of the belly.” See Bayart, Jean François, Stephen Ellis, Beatrice Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*. Oxford: The International African Institute in association with James Currey, 1999, and *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. Trans. Marry Harper, Christopher and Elizabeth Harrison. London: Longman, 1993. Also see *Criminal Politics: Violence, “Godfathers” and Corruption in Nigeria*, Human Rights Watch, October 2007. I offer a more detailed review of the subject in Chapter Three.

⁷³ Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas, Eds, *What’s Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, New York: Routledge, 2000. x. Although Butler and company use the felicitous phrase to refer to race, colonialism, sexuality, gender, I apply it here to streetscapes, public spheres and open parliaments of my study.

⁷⁴ See especially the subsection Theory, Research and Interdisciplinarity (10-11).

approaches. For as Judith Butler et al posit in their discussion of the ‘crises’ of theory,

Theory has become impure as it engages the social and political world through the reading of literature, and thematics have no doubt become more difficult once we avow the modes of representation that permit—or fail to permit—of certain kinds of politically significant insights into our world. (x)

Hence, “the task will be to consider what role literature and the literary still play within the context of this increasingly complicated social context” (Butler et al xii).⁷⁵

To fully apprehend the “increasingly complicated social context” or space, I work with certain texts that do not traditionally fall under academic peer reviewed category. These include the first group of primary texts in my analyses; they comprise newspaper/news magazine clips which focus on remarkable street stories that have engaged public imagination in interesting news cycles or loops. Inspired by the example of Parry and Lord in their discussion of *theme* as a “group of ideas [or ‘framework’] used in telling a tale” (Lord 1964: 68), I have grouped these under an expedient “themes” that I call “theories,” complete with

⁷⁵ Butler et al also state: “The extraordinary interest in social theory and the law that has recently emerged in literary studies has seemed to many to constitute an important redirection of the field toward political themes and active political investments in justice, freedom, and equality. Whereas some argue that literature should remain cordoned off from social science and social theory, others are relieved that literary studies has moved toward a more active engagement with social issues, with race studies, practices of gender and sexuality, colonial space and its aftermath, the interstitial cultural spaces of globalization. It may be that literary scholars make poor social theorists, as Richard Rorty has argued, but it seems more likely that literary scholars bring insightful forms of reading to bear upon social and political texts that have great relevance for the course of our collective lives.” (xi-xii)

their echoes of the common term “conspiracy theory” and *theoria*, a reference to the Greek origins of “theory” with its roots in *theatre*,⁷⁶ and immediately highlight the interface between the narratives, media and politics. The stories frame the regimes of some important political figures in contemporary Nigerian history, especially the Heads of State. For taxonomical, thematic and archetypal considerations, I classify the most significant “street stories” in contemporary Nigerian socio-political experience into the following themes or “theories,” respectively associated with the three heads of state under consideration: Dele Giwa and the “Gloria Okon Theory (Babangida);” the “Apple Theory” and the “Tea Theory ” (Abacha); and “the politics of Death theory” (Yar’Adua).

The second group of texts comprises other types of cultural production such as music and Nollywood video films. I discuss this second group to further illustrate the transfiguration process of street stories into a “multiplexity” (Finnegan 2007, 189) of other forms of cultural production in postcolonial Africa, and which in Finnegan’s terms, “point to the possibilities of overlapping multiplicities, running through a range of multiple media, modalities, participants, voices, situations or historical specificities”(189). Needless to add, an overarching part of the texts and my research strategies are my ethnographic observations such as the Smokey Joe encounter, my readings of the popular press, plus interviews

⁷⁶ I draw insight here from David Bohm’s (2004) suggestion that the word ‘theory’ ‘has the same root as ‘theatre’, in a verb meaning to ‘view’, so that “we might regard a theory as ‘a view’ or ‘a form of insight’ rather than a well-defined and certain knowledge about reality” (*On Creativity: The Art of Perceiving the Moment*, Routledge, 2004, 83). I am also inspired by Mbembe’s (2001) use of the term “theory,” following Kant and Ricoeur, as a discursive category which constitutes “operations of the productive imagination” (159).

with key personalities in the Nigerian press, and my field experience as a cultural journalist and activist.

Beyond the analyses of texts, I hope to engage aspects of postcolonial theory to show how liminal texts such as street stories provide a compelling understanding of the socio-political dynamics of the postcolonial state with its complex demographics, socio-political interests, and cultural representations. The study promises to answer Spivak's often quoted rhetorical question, "Can the subaltern Speak?" from an *evolving* oral tradition perspective. It seems to me that we cannot fully comprehend the meaning of living in the African postcolony without paying attention to what everyday people say in the streets, and the significance of the interpretations as well as the channels through which they contribute to public debates. Hence we need to rethink such media theorizing as offered by McNair (2000) which asserts that:

an important impact of journalism is its agenda-setting capacity. News agendas shape public and political agendas, signifying to individuals and organisations which events in the world are socially important at any given time. Good empirical evidence exists to show that the structure of the news agenda (which issues are highlighted, which are marginal) affects public opinion (as measured by polls) and voting behaviour (as reflected in election outcomes). (28-29)

As this study hopes to prove, the reverse is sometimes the case; street stories do shape news (public and political) agenda and media narratives, and mean a lot to the citizens who tell them in an urban context that is unambiguously different

from the pastoral, pre-colonial and colonial world of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Yet, the elite tend to see the street stories in a pejorative way, and Western scholars and media consumers prefer to see Africa in the light of canonical works by Achebe and other successful African writers on the one hand, and on the other, Western media and its obsession with AIDS, poverty, wars and corrupt leadership. The danger in such a narrow view is that it tends "to focus exclusively on the novel, to distort the cultural situation and the significance of postcoloniality within it" (Appiah, "Is the post- in postcolonial [...]?" 346). Indeed "despite wars, malnutrition, disease, and political instability, African cultural productivity grows apace: popular literatures, oral narrative and poetry, dance, drama, music, and visual art all thrive" (Ibid. 356).

Perhaps the best way to evaluate my methodological approaches to fieldwork adopted in this study and how they relate to everyday culture in the city is to juxtapose Harold Garfinkel's theory of ethnomethodology to the ethnographic strategies of the anthropologist who looked at the epic (Okpewho 1980).⁷⁷ In his influential book, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1984), Garfinkel establishes the basis for the approach in sociology. Taking off from the earlier interest in the commonplace encouraged by Ervin Goffman, de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre and other advocates of the self in everyday culture, Garfinkel argues in a neo-Hegelian fashion that social theorists should approach the commonplace experiences of everyday life to defamiliarize them, and focus on their "seen and

⁷⁷ In his essay "The Anthropologist Looks at Epic," *Research in African Literature*, 11. 4 (Winter 1980), Isidore Okpewho demonstrates how anthropological interest in the contents of the epic diminished an appreciation of the aesthetic wealth of the extended narrative form. Also see chapter one of Leroy Vail and Landeg White's *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History*, The University of Virginia Press, 1991.

unnoticed” aspects. This felicitous phrase points the researcher to the necessity of a careful interaction with, and observation of human subjects. Garfinkel defines ethnomethodology studies as:

seek[ing] to treat practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological reasoning as topics of empirical study, and by paying attention to the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded extraordinary events, seek to learn about them as phenomena in their own right. (1)

In spite of my partiality toward Garfinkel’s ethnomethodological “documentation” approach in this research, I am keen on what Dell Hymes calls the “ethnography of speaking texts,”⁷⁸ and also concerned about the artistic integrity of the complex street texts. Such an approach will enable me to scrutinize both ethnographic and aesthetic elements in the written, verbal, film and popular music texts, and allow me to capture, say with popular music, its ethnomusicology basis that is necessary for understanding its social relevance.

From oral literature which I consider the foundational discipline for this work, the trope of conducting fieldwork “towards a faithful record”⁷⁹ easily comes to mind; except, I am not essentially recording texts faithfully for analysis but recovering them around broad themes in the street and in print, and working

⁷⁸ Hymes robustly develops this concept in three essays: “Breakthrough into Performance.” *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, Dan Ben-Amos and K.S. Goldstein, Ed., The Hague: Mouton, 1975, 11-74; “The Ethnography of Speaking.” *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*. T. Gladwin and W.C. Sturtevant, Ed. Washington, DC: Anthropological Society of Washington, 1962, 15-53; and “Toward Ethnography of Communication,” *American Anthropologist* 66.6 (pt 2), (1964): 1-34.

⁷⁹ See Isidore Okpewho, “Towards a Faithful Record: On Transcribing and Translating the Oral Narrative Performance.” *The Oral Performance in Africa*. Isidore Okpewho, Ed. Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books. 285, 111-135.

with their basic content and form which enable us to focus on their major thematic thrusts and aesthetic value.

Finnegan's two volumes on research methods in fieldwork provide significant guides. But at her keynote address at the summer 2007 International Society of Oral Literature in Africa (ISOLA) conference in Italy, she regretted focusing on the ethnographic details of the oral texts she collected from the Limba region of West Africa early in her career, to the detriment of the context of performance. Hence, following the eclectic nature of the materials for my study, I apply multiple methodological approaches cutting across disciplines, reminded of Laura Hubbard and Kathryn Mathers' (2004) declaration that it "is not simply the undertaking of ethnography but also the critical analysis and historicization of image, texts, and objects of media as sites of production of power" (444) that matter. What is required, therefore, and which I offer, is a convergence of disciplinary, theoretical and methodological approaches. So that King, Keohane and Verba's (1994) observation that "theories or evidence designed for some purpose in one literature could be applied in another literature to solve an existing but apparently unrelated problem" (17) support my theoretical cum methodological strategies for studying street stories.

My multi-faceted methodology also coheres with Kimmel's (2004) observation that "[t]he often perplexing phenomenon of rumor" has attracted "disparate approaches by scholars from the behavioral sciences, marketing, and communication fields" (x). But more than that, what had been missing was not just appropriate characterization of such sub-genres of everyday life under a

single umbrella term *street stories* (instead of multiple terms), but the absence of the examination of street stories through an analytical lens that is wide enough to recognize their diverse linkages, and deep enough to bring them under a single genre with the multiple terms as sub-genres as I undertake in this study.

Expectedly, tracking street stories on the street especially in a high tension city like Lagos can be difficult and dangerous; tracking them online may be safer but not enough, although imperative; more so considering that these days so much cultural interaction already occurs online, even in the developing world. This is particularly true of political and critical blogs (and other Web 2.0 phenomena, example: social networking sites, media sites, etc.); in some cases, under conditions of political restrictions/censorship or sabotage as has been the example of *Sahara Reporters*.⁸⁰ Surely, such Internet Communication Technology (ICT) tools are not a mere pastime, but a new channel for freedom of expression and political struggle—numerous Nigerian blogs and social network pages, Youtube videos support this new social reality of contesting Nigeria’s political logjam through narratives and popular cultural formats. For this project, I have combed through the most notable of these resources in order to track important street stories that have mutated into these new media.

The complex location of the kinds of texts that I track in my study raises an important question regarding my strategy for ‘collecting’ them and for

⁸⁰ See <http://www.saharareporters.com/> So significant is the work of SaharaReporters that it was the subject of a recent paper entitled “From Urban Sphere to Cyber Space: New Media, Citizen Journalism and the Role of Sahara Reporters in Nigeria’s Political Struggle,” which I presented at the “New Media | Alternative Politics: Communication technologies and political change in the Middle East and Africa” conference hosted by the Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CRASSH), University of Cambridge from Thursday, 14 October 2010 to Saturday, 16 October 2010.

analyzing them in this study. Why focus on texts that exist in print and also speak about *orality*, one may ask?

Text, Authorship, Authority, and the Cultural Imaginary in African Orature

This study requires my moving beyond ‘text’ to: (a) the contexts in which texts circulate; (b) the ways in which meanings are constructed through textual production, use and circulation; (c) the intertextual relations within the text system as mediated by social agents, etc. In other words, that is moving towards the realm of insider meaning, from multiple perspectives of networked producers and consumers in urban and cyber social spaces, and then tracing the texts in their social movements. It strikes me that such a perspective is particularly important for oral texts in which the notion of “authorship” or “performance” is sometimes complex because production is sometimes collaborative. As Finnegan (2007) describes the “complex spectrum” of the “oral text,” “[m]any overlapping hands are often at work and it is not a simple matter to disentangle their various contributions,” because “[t]here are not always clear boundaries between composer, performer and audience, between analyst and artist [...]—all may play some part interpreting what eventually comes to be enshrined as an ‘oral text’ of some particular kind” (137).⁸¹ In a similar vein Graham (2010) discusses “the reciprocity, interdependence, and overlap of the oral and the written,” (232) while exploiting the “authority in writtenness,” and its “permanence” (Ibid.) for textual analysis. As Graham so graphically further puts it, “[t]he authority of

⁸¹ Also see Finnegan (2010) where she states: “Many recent studies of African oral literature engage with issues of performance and, alongside that, portray audiences as co-creators, directing attention to a wider range of diverse voices than just composers or front performers—or, indeed, just authors or scribes” (9).

being written down takes nothing away from the authority of the living oral word that is inscribed in the heart/memory as well as on the page/tablet” (238). He concludes that: “Both aspects of authoritative, important, and/or sacred texts need to be given their due as of major importance to the use and meaning of texts historically” (Ibid).⁸²

Hence while acknowledging “the idea of individualized art in non-Western societies (in the form of the verbal arts, of poetry, singing, storytelling),” I recognize “the contemporary anthropologists’ vision of a collective, anonymous art” (Hountondji 1983: 81). I am both interested in the creative agency of the Smokey Joes as oral artists in their own right, and in the “alternative creative space” as a site of cultural participation and production in the African postcolony. But rather than focusing mainly on texts collected from the field—including those performed by Smokey Joe for example—as is the norm in case-studies approach in the humanities and the social sciences (and as I indeed adopted in my Honours and Masters degree dissertations),⁸³ I chose nodal points (themes) or what I term “root stories” or “kernel stories” already in circulation as organizational rubric. The choice of this methodology is guided by the need to track the salient street stories or “branches” as they travel or circulate across multiple popular culture platforms. As Finnegan (2010) has perceptively noted, “new technologies, not least electronic, are unsettling our idea of stable, finalized, and closed text” (13), and “[a] written text can be a transcript capturing (more or less) some spoken performance; written from dictation; related to oral delivery

⁸² Graham Allen also offers interesting insights into understanding this complex relationship between “texts.” See Chapter 6 of his book *Roland Barthes*, Routledge, 2003.

⁸³ See Chapter One, fn 30 for details.

whether as *aide-mémoire* (notes, paraphrase, text, unofficial jottings), or as a full text (locally defined as such, that is) for enunciation in some approved manner and recognized situation” (10). McKenzie (1985) canvasses a similarly broad definition of social text as suggested by Marris and Thornham (2000) earlier, and Finnegan, to include "verbal, visual, oral, numeric data, in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives or recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information" (13).

It is also necessary to move beyond the traditional *text* in another direction for the sake of context: from insider meaning (the networks of users) to the broader political-economic-media system in which text circulation is embedded. Such circulation moves the text from the face-to-face, less-economic mode (stories and rumours actually told in the streets) to mediated market-driven forms (CD-ROM versions, for sale in the same streets) and the Internet. Thus I will examine the circulation of the narrative form from ordinary “face-to-face embodied interaction” (Lister et al 2003: 20) to the disembodied media economy and materiality of the street (where it is subject to market as well as political forces), since it is constitutive of meaning and broader social impact. When a story is produced on cassette or CD-ROM as some of my collected street stories (especially those around military dictatorship) are, it must be profiting someone in the digital economy. One is thinking here of the commodification of culture,⁸⁴ and the circulation of media products in a politically-charged environment whose representation is simultaneously the

⁸⁴ Larkin (2000) provides more insight into my thoughts here. See especially the subsection of his essay Video Culture and the Commodification of Media (217 ff)

source of profit and social struggle. So at that point there is a critical shift of motives, and perhaps one should no longer naively assume a "protest" or "critique" function, whatever the prima facie evidence in the "text" seems to be saying—rather it is possible that apparent freedom of oral or mediated expression is in fact functioning within a broader cultural hegemony and economic interest. Indeed some political regimes in Nigeria have occasionally "eased up" on censorship and coercion as was the case with the General Babangida oxymoronic "military presidency," precisely in order to increase their grip on power.⁸⁵ Still, the deeper textual meaning cannot be read out of what Kelber (2010) calls "typographical captivity" (115) alone, but only by situating text within the broader political media economy contexts. To further appreciate the "textual" dimensions I adopt in this study it is helpful to recall Michael Warner's (2002) affirmation that "Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption" (16). It is for this reason that I occasionally refer to a plural "public spheres."

Plan of Study

Given "the ambiguity of terminology" (Lord 1964: 5) evident in this study, such as "orality/orature," "myth" "legend," etc., I focus the next chapter on clarifying their meaning potentialities, and establishing the features and the discursive mechanics of my primary texts in relation to the production of social

⁸⁵ A more recent experience is one in Northern Nigeria with the cat-and-mouse operations of the Censor's board especially in Kano State.

history and/or knowledge. Additionally, I undertake a review of the relevant literature in the field, and investigate the role of orality and myth in the production of everyday social history and knowledge.

In Chapter Two I study the interface between Street Stories, the Popular Press and Politics in Nigeria. This is necessitated by the idea that the kinds of street stories that constitute my primary texts point to the fact that both narrative genres—street stories and activist news stories—so share a common DNA as adversarial political discourses embodied in texts produced by news reporters especially in the context of resistance against the political elite that we need to unpack them. Together with the introductory chapter and Chapter One, this chapter further sets the foundation for my close reading of the texts selected for this study, which occupies the middle chapters—from Three to Six.

The four textual analyses chapters generally focus on the public narrativization of Nigeria's socio-political experience under military misrule represented by Generals Babangida and Abacha on the one hand, and on the other, on their civilian co-travellers in the democratic dispensation represented by the late president, Mallam Umaru Musa Yar'Adua. In the last of the textual analyses chapters, Chapter Six, I shift attention to the use of small media technologies in the transmission of street stories.

The last chapter is the Conclusion of the study.

Conclusion

This introductory chapter sets up the scaffolds for constructing the entire study. I draw attention to the need to reconfigure such significant but often

overlooked genres of everyday social interaction as rumours, gossip, and myths and urban legends under a new nomenclature, “street stories.” I outline my objectives, and indicate my preference for a cross-disciplinary theoretical strategy for achieving the objectives by examining these street stories in order to reveal a more *holistic* picture of the complex symbiotic routes through which they make their way from the streets (Watkins 2004),⁸⁶ to contemporary forms of cultural production such as newspapers and newsmagazines, film and pop music, and vice versa. I believe that it is in tracking these interrelated expressive forms and the narratives they embody that the social and political pulse of the people and of the nation is allowed to beat the strongest. As Harsin (2008) has declared, “rumors are having powerful effects, and considerable numbers of people attach to them, at least for a while.” Harsin further observes that: “[t]he question of why and how they are launched and why and how people attach to them is room for new research that moves beyond the outdated strictly interpersonal or even old media treatment of rumor,” adding that, “[t]he present conjuncture is much more complicated, exciting, and dangerous.”⁸⁷

In undertaking this complicated, exciting and challenging project, I hope that my dissertation will uniquely bring into conversation, orality, high Critical theory, Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies and the Media Arts in an

⁸⁶ My commitment to this research is also informed by an understanding that the kind of “‘narrative folklore’ among streetwise African Americans in Philadelphia” that Roger Abrahams studied in 1970, and which Richard Dorson did “on factory workers in the industrial towns of northwest Indiana (1979)” —Quoted in Okpewho 1983: 363—represent, as Okpewho puts it, “carryovers from traditional patterns” (362).

⁸⁷ See “The Rumor Bomb: On Convergence Culture and Politics” at <http://flowtv.org/2008/12/the-rumor-bomb-on-convergence-culture-and-politics-jayson-harsin-american-university-of-paris/> Web. June 5, 2010.

unusual blend toward a better appreciation of the poetics and functions of a cultural phenomenon that defines the postcolonial condition in Nigeria—street stories.

Chapter One

Orality, Myth, Everyday Social History and the Postcolonial Political

Gridlock

The folklorists who struggled to disaggregate rumour from legend ended up struggling over the relative importance of the truth of stories compared to the importance of how or why they were told. Those who regarded legends as frozen rumours had not paid close enough attention to the full narrative style of legends, and those who saw rumour and legend as unrelated tended to focus on the truth of the stories not how they were told. But folklorists understood that what made rumours or legends powerful was that people believed them. (Luise White 2000: 56-57)

Two operational terms that I might have used the most in the introductory chapter are “street stories” and “orality.” While I have elucidated what I mean by “street stories” in the Introduction, the same cannot be said of “orality,” which I have used rather freely, sometimes interchangeably with orature, oral tradition, etc., and even referencing its existence in transformational forms in conjunction with technology as in “secondary orality” (Ong 1991: 11; 1982: 136),¹ and “tertiary orality.”² There is no gainsaying the fact that in the various contexts that I unreservedly use the term, its meaning may not always be clear. Add to that its centrality to my overall project and the controversies surrounding its usage amongst scholars. I begin this chapter, therefore, by elaborating on the term

¹ By which is meant media tools such as radio, television, and telephone.

² This refers to digital media and its capacity to generate real-time communications exchanges.

“orality” in relation to journalistic texts and existing literature in the field. Then I proceed to explicate other key conceptual terms that I use in this dissertation. My intention is to establish the bases for much of the principal ideas that drive this study such as myth, urban legend, social construction of history or production of knowledge, and the idea of “African imagination.”

Ruth Finnegan, pioneer scholar of Oral Literature in Africa, has probably paid the most sustained attention to the controversies that have coloured the use of the term *orality* retained in the title of this dissertation. From her earlier volume *Oral traditions and the Verbal Arts* (1992),³ to her most recent book *The Oral and Beyond* (2007) and her recent essay “Response from an Africanist Scholar” (2010),⁴ Finnegan addresses the terminological controversies that have trailed the use of orality and related terms by scholars of Oral Literature in Africa. As Finnegan (2010) rightly observes, “[t]he term ‘oral,’ which at one time seemed so clear, emerges not as some single quality but as overlapping or intermingled in varying ways with other modes (visual, acoustic, tactile, material, olfactory)” (10). Among the various but related keywords that have been associated with the term “oral” are: orality; orature; oracy; oralism, aurality; oral narrative; oral literature, folk literature; folklore; and more recently, *spoken word*. Discussing these terms, Finnegan accentuates the significance of spoken word in Africa (as an all-encompassing verbal genre) in the following words:

...Africa is celebrated...for the treasure of her voiced and auditory arts,
and as the home of oral literature, orature, and orality, and the genesis and

³ See chapter one of *Oral traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices* (1992).

⁴ See especially the subsection The Elusiveness of “Orality,” *Oral Tradition*, 25/1, 2010: 7-16.

inspiration of the voiced traditions of the great diaspora. Commentators from all sides concur on the significance of the oral and the spoken word.

Africa has been termed ‘the oral continent par excellence.’ (1)

In interchangeably using the terms “Oral culture,” “orality,” “oral tradition,” “oral story-telling,” “oral literature,” and “orature” in relation to scholars’ views on the subject in Africa, Finnegan foregrounds our dilemma on these conceptual terms in the field, and highlights the necessity of further explicating their meanings or contextual applications in relation to this dissertation.⁵

Beyond the orality-literacy binary, it is possible to point to a seeming contradiction in ascribing *orality* or oral literature to a study of journalistic narratives in print as embodied in this study. But a pertinent point for understanding my conceptual reference to *orality* in relation to journalistic narratives or what we may also call “current affairs stories” in print, is my hypothesis that street stories (whether in newspapers or other platforms of popular culture)⁶ have their provenance in oral tradition/literature, and are shaped by a similar mythopoeic—or in Abiola Irele’s sense, “mythopoetic” (1992: 217)—imagination, as well as sharing similar interlocking narrative protocols.

⁵ It is noteworthy that ten years before Finnegan’s groundbreaking book *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) Harry Levin (1960) called attention to the problematic of using the expression “oral literature.” Levin argues that: “The term literature presupposing the use of letters, assumes that verbal works of the imagination are transmitted by means of writing and reading. The expression “oral literature” is obviously a contradiction in terms. Yet we live at a time when literacy itself has become so diluted that it can scarcely be invoked as an esthetic criterion” (Preface to Albert Lord’s *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP, 1964, xiii).

⁶ The term “Neo-orality” has appealed to some contemporary critics such as John Sobol (*Digitopia Blues*, Banff Centre Press, 2002). He uses the term to define “a concept that is synonymous with the process of remixing...music, images, data, or text.” Quoted by Ian Samuels, “Poetry at the Digital Divide Remix Artworks, Neo-Orality, and Digitopia Blues.” *Horizon Zero #8: The Remix Issue*, 2003. <http://www.horizonzero.ca/textsite/remix.php?is=8&file=8&tlang=0> Web. May, 2, 2008.

Mamadou Diouf (2003) reinforces this role of the imagination in narratives as he notes that “in many ways, young Africans can be seen as searching for a narrative that provides a territory for the free play of their imagination” (6). For me, that “territory” is the streetscape where the postcolonial youth depend on narrative imagination in order to comprehend their everyday history and the challenges of navigating the treacherous political power games that threaten their very survival, and point to state failure. In locating this territory in the street, I am suggesting two things: first, an alternative referent that saves us from an old controversy which has seen Oyekan Owomoyela (1999) upbraiding African scholars who have suggested “orature”—and perhaps other terms—for “what used to be folklore” (281-282); second, an “alternative sphere” different from, but related to, the traditional African “village square,” Habermas’ popular idea of “public sphere,” and more recently, “counterpublics” (Asen and Brouwer 2001; Coleman and Ross 2010).

The continued influence of orality or Finnegan’s “voiced and auditory arts” among this youthful urban population derives partly from the oral tradition’s position as “the oldest and the most vital” (Ngugi 1998: 105) of the verbal traditions of Africa. Ngugi further observes, albeit inaccurately, that “[h]ere there is no mediation by the written sign. The production line runs from orality straight to aurality: the mouth produces, the ear consumes directly” (Ibid.).⁷ This declaration is misleading because in contemporary African street culture, print

⁷ A more contemporary acknowledgement of the process is represented by Michael Bull’s expression: “aural technologies.” See “To Each Their Own Bubble,” *Mediaspace: Place, Scale, and Culture in a Media Age*, ed. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy, New York: Routledge, 2004, 275-306.

sometimes mediates the circulation of the oral as I seek to demonstrate. But Ngugi is right in identifying that political element which has inspired the interweaving of orality, popular culture and social struggle in this study. According to Ngugi,

[i]n terms of anti-colonial struggles, it has played the most important role. Not surprisingly it is the only tradition against which the colonial state often took firm measures, banning many of the songs and performances, and gaoling the artists involved. This verbal artistic production carries the name orature. (Ibid.)

The power of orature rests in its grassroots appeal which partly informs its association with popular culture. Tracing the origin of the term, Ngugi claims that the Ugandan linguist and literary theorist Pio Zirimu coined it in the Sixties in response to “the difficulties of containing the world of the oral text within that of the literary.” As Ngugi (1998) also states, “[a]t first he [Zirimu] used it interchangeably with oral literature. But later he was to define the term more precisely as “the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression.” (111).⁸ But Ngugi is also quick to concede that “[n]ot everyone agrees with the coinage” (111), and cites Isidore Okpewho as the best example. Indeed, Okpewho devotes the first section of his incisive book *African Oral Literature* to intervening in the debate by answering the question: What is “Oral Literature?” Noting that the word “literature” includes everything written on a particular subject, as in say, “literature on bribery,” (3) he distinguishes such an interpretation from the more commonly used restricted sense of literature as “creative texts that appeal to our

⁸ See Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Toward a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998) 105, 111).

imagination or to our emotions (such as stories, plays, and poems), not to factual texts such as newspaper reports⁹ or historical records, however attractively written these may be” (3). Again, emerges an ostensible inconsistency of my alliance of the term with the kinds of journalistic texts I interrogate in the next chapter. But it is justifiable within the ambit of this study for reasons that I have continued to advance—its complex oral origins, form, and mode of circulation. Okpewho offers a definition of Oral literature, the most commonly used term for the subject, as simply “literature delivered by word of mouth” (3). This definition, he believes, and I support, provides a “very useful concept for those scholars interested in examining the cultural relationships between those who can read and write and those who cannot—or in a more professional language, between orality and literacy” (3). But for me, the interest is beyond what White et al (2001) describe as “the overworked distinctions between orality and literacy especially in the work of Jack Goody (1968, 1986, 2000) and Walter Ong (1982)” (14), and includes the complicated dynamics of oral texts as they travel across multiplicities of media formats and geopolitical space.

Despite the seeming difference in meaning between “orature” and “oral literature” then, they are united in the recognition of “word of mouth” (or “oracy”)¹⁰ as some kind of consensual terminological *lingua franca* amongst some scholars in the field. Hydén, Leslie, Ogundimu (2002) put this differently by

⁹ An understanding of the discrimination which newspaper reports or “news storytelling” (Bird and Dardenne, 212) bear in this context further fuels the conceptual explication in this chapter. A very important aspect of this study, I shall return to this issue in detail in the next chapter in the discussion of Street Stories, the Popular Press and Politics in Nigeria.

¹⁰ Austin Bukenya and Zirimu (1977) have proposed this rather awkward but intriguing term for describing the “skilful, confident and productive use of the spoken word”; Bukenya (2001) emphasizes the term as implying “not only the ability to speak, but also to manage, marshal, and deploy the spoken word efficiently, for specific purposes, in specific contexts” (33).

recognizing that: “Any study of communications in Africa must pay attention to the informal side, that is, the way Africans communicate by word of mouth and by other means than the conventional mass media” (1-2). And it is in this sense that I link orality with journalism because most news stories whether of the street kind or pure documentary share kinship with oral history, and are fed by oral sources through interviews with subjects that are susceptible to the influence of floating street stories. Indeed journalism can be understood as history in motion. Not surprising therefore, revisiting his introduction to a publication by the Namibia Orature Panel under the Ministry of Basic Education¹¹ Ngugi observes that the term orature is used “to refer to ‘all areas of knowledge that rely on an oral source, thus encompassing history, oral testimony and oral literature’” (117). As he compellingly sums up, “Orature, then, is not... a branch of literature but ... a total aesthetic system” (Ibid.), and this covers the overall character of street stories.

By combining the “integrative character of orature” (Ngugi 115) with an ideological vision toward a critical theory of the arts and the state in Africa, Ngugi’s conceptualization of *orature* provides the best perspective for appreciating street stories and my application of the term “orality” to discussing them as they travel across popular media genres. Indeed my application of the term to journalism rests on the challenge of “containing the world of the oral text within that of the literary” to recall Ngugi. Interestingly, Finnegan (2007) recognizes this as “an altered vision of oral texts” (181) from its hitherto

¹¹ See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Introduction to Orature* (Windhoek: Namibia Orature Project 1995); quoted in *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dream* 113. The point being made by Ngugi here is reinforced by the existence of UNESCO’s Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage project.

association with a “uniform Tradition of the past” and offers a relatively holistic view which serves my purpose:

Recent studies take in their stride such examples as a child praise-singer on South African television, poetry on video on the web, pop groups in urban settings, Hausa market-place burlesque, life stories, love songs, community theatre, a rap band, trade union songs...and the intersections of writing, voice and broadcast media in a plethora of contexts. Poetry, song, and story turned to political purposes or ideological struggle now come unquestionably within the scholarly purview (181).

These *transformations* point to the evolution of scholarship in the field as represented by mine, and other emerging studies in Oral Literature and Popular Culture in Africa, as well as by a number of conferences and books committed to mapping this trajectory also.¹² The transformations may be seen as “carryovers from traditional patterns” (Okpewho 1983: 362)¹³ and as an area of opportunity for new directions in the field. Okpewho rightly observes that this kind of investigation could yield “fruitful insights not only about the adjustments of oral literature to the imperatives of urban life but also about the stresses we undergo in adjusting both to the pluralistic structure of our societies and from a traditional rural to a technological existence” (363). Although expressed before the concept

¹² The biannual conferences of the International Society of Oral Literature in Africa (ISOLA) have advanced this cause as have the conferences organized by the South African Folklore Society and the Kenya Oral Literature Association. The emerging studies include Finnegan (2007); James Ogude and Joyce Nyairo (2007); Luise White (2000); Luise White, Stephan Miescher, and David William Cohen (2001); Duncan Brown (1999).

¹³ Useful insights can be gained from the kind of “‘narrative folklore’ among streetwise African Americans in Philadelphia”¹³ that Roger Abrahams studied in 1970, and which Richard Dorson did “on factory workers in the industrial towns of northwest Indiana (1979).” Quoted in Okpewho (1983: 363).

of globalization dominated contemporary discourse—personal computers and other tools of information communications technology were hardly in existence then—Okpewho’s views echo Walter Ong’s popular notion of “tertiary orality.” It also resonates with Ong’s (1988) unease with the term “oral literature” as revealing “our inability to represent to our own minds a heritage of verbally organized materials except as some variant of writing, even when they have nothing to do with writing at all” (11).¹⁴

I believe that it is in locating culture or “lived histories”¹⁵ in everyday life, and attempting a more radical engagement with a hitherto purely traditional discipline from angles wide enough to accommodate the seemingly unorthodox emergent genres listed by Finnegan above on the one hand, and journalism on the other, that we can fully apprehend the insights that such an investigation could yield in an age of globalization. So that orality in the context of this research not only extends to rumours and other fleeting social ‘histories’ produced in the streets of urban Africa. It also resides in certain media texts which travel across various popular culture platforms and vice versa; street stories are the soul of this orality in contemporary popular culture where, in the words of Ulf Hannerz (1989), “cultural interrelatedness increasingly reaches across the world” (66). That interrelatedness comes to the fore most in a web that entraps myth, narrative and the African imagination.

¹⁴ Also see Ong, "Literacy and Orality in Our Times." *ADE Bulletin*, No. 58, 1978. 1-7.

¹⁵ Sallie Westwood, and John Williams, eds., *Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memory* (London: Routledge, 1997) 6.

Myth, narrative imagination, and the African political gridlock

What is myth? Myth has been defined as “simply that quality of fancy which informs the creative or configurative powers of the human mind in varying degrees of intensity. In that sense, we are free to call any narrative of the oral tradition a myth, so long as it gives emphasis to fanciful play” (Okpewho 1983: 69). As the author expands, it is “not really a particular type of tale as against another; it is neither the spoken counterpart of antecedent ritual, nor is it a tale determined exclusively by a binary scheme of abstract ideas or a sequential order of elements” (Ibid.). This compelling definition of myth has not prevented scholars from differing widely in their conceptualization of that simple four letter word dating back to the “timeless tales of gods and heroes” as “the fountainhead of all literature.”¹⁶ Indeed the magisterial volume *Myth: A Symposium* (1955) edited by Thomas A. Sebeok offers a wider range of related but sometimes opposing interpretations of “myth,” illustrating just how divergent scholarly approaches to the term have been.¹⁷ One of the earliest attempts to comprehend *myth* in relation to folkways and folk life was by Bronislaw Malinowski in his seminal *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926). Malinowski was fascinated by the reasons for human “pragmatic interest in certain aspects of the outer world, and his need of supplementing rational and empirical control of certain phenomena by magic” (77). Other scholars have since devoted their intellectual resources to the

¹⁶ See the first preliminary page of Edith Hamilton, *Mythology*. New York and Scarborough, Ontario: Mentor Book, New American Library, 1940.

¹⁷ A sample of the wide-eyed views in the volume: David Bidney’s contribution “Myth, Symbolism and Truth” which considers the functionalist, ritualistic and aesthetic interpretation of myth by anthropologists, philosophers, theologians and literary critics as “the very degradation of man and his culture.” Instead, he promotes a “normative, critical scientific” approach and an “uncompromising faith in the integrity of reason and the transcultural validity of the scientific enterprise” (23).

search for the origins and meaning of myth, with some such as William Bascom and Roland Barthes (*Mythologies* 1957) locating it more in Nature than in ritual.

While some of Barthes postulations in the influential work are irrelevant and inappropriate for my study aspects of it enlighten my relation of myth to street stories. Barthes' hypothesis on the myths on the Left and the Right would not apply to the Nigerian condition.¹⁸ In what looks like an appeal to the jaded binary of "popular culture and high culture" (Gans 1974), Barthes (1957) argues that "the speech of the oppressed can only be poor, monotonous, immediate: his destitution is the very yardstick of his language" and that "[t]he speech of the oppressed is real, like that of the woodcutter; it is a transitive type of speech; it is quasi-unable to lie" (148). From another point of view, he posits that:

[s]tatistically, myth is on the right. There, it is essential; well-fed, sleek, expansive, garrulous, it invents itself ceaselessly [...] Its expansion has the very dimensions of bourgeois ex-nomination. The bourgeois wants to keep reality without keeping the appearances: it is therefore the very negativity, which solicits myth infinitely." (148-149)

The interesting twist in Barthes' ideological theorizing on myth with regard to my study is that the converse seems the case. In the Nigerian urban locale of my study, it is the oppressed that so desperately seek to mythologize the grim political experiences of everyday life. This explains why they are good at "fabularizing" (*Mythologies* 148) as Barthes would say, or creating fantastic negative tales that

¹⁸ It needs to be further noted that Okpewho's (1983) discussion of oral narrative theory suggests that Barthes' "historical-geographical movement" (16) of myth was not original. Okpewho traces this to the Diffusionists represented by Theodore Benfey and Stith Thompson.

seek to punish the oppressors, if I might sustain the Barthes Marxist rhetoric on myth.

Notably, Barthes acknowledges that “some myths ripen better in some social strata: for myth also, there are micro-climates” (149). He further rightly observes that “every myth can have its history and its geography; each is in fact the sign of the other; a myth ripens because it spreads” (149). The gift in Barthes’ latter statement for my conceptualization of myth is its implication for the transmission of street stories in the Nigerian urban space. It helps to relate this spread of mythopoeic street stories to the diachronic and synchronic format in Structuralists’ approach to the analysis of myth¹⁹ on the one hand, and on the other, to the literary opposition to their anthropological/sociological disposition championed by Okpewho in *Myth in Africa* (1983). Okpewho locates myth within a creative ambit, and like Luise White in the above epigraph, criticizes anthropologists and folklorists who “uniformly pursue the exploration of the ‘way of life’ to the exclusion of the creative process whereby culture is kept continually alive” (26). He emphasizes “the aesthetic virtues” (Ibid.) of the oral tales, and the “dynamic process by which perceptible reality is refined into the creative essence of symbol (Ibid.)” Okpewho further promotes “the literary quality of the oral narrative” in a way that points, in his words, to a “vindication of [...the] belief that myth is not so much a ‘canon of behavior or thought as it is a portrait of ‘life

¹⁹ In his book *Myth*, K. K. Ruthven provides a lucid background to these approaches to the analyses of myth in the chapter “Myths and theorists”, tracing the approaches to the “seminal distinction made in Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de Linguistique Generale*” and its extensions by Levi Strauss (*The Raw and the Cooked*, 1967). It needs be further noted that Okpewho’s discussion of oral narrative theory suggests that Barthes’ “historical-geographical movement” (Okpewho 1982, 16) of myth was not original. Okpewho traces this to the Diffusionists represented by Theodore Benfey and Stith Thompson.

grown literary” (Ibid.). It is this literary/aesthetic²⁰ amplitude that links myth to the street stories of my research, not its traditional association with god-like heroism. In fact most of the principal characters in the street stories can best be described as anti-heroes. In other words, I am served more by the literary characterization of myth; for the coloniality of the cultural relativism of early anthropologists was in their inability to ascribe aesthetics to cultures they positioned as “primitive” in relation to their “civilized.” Thus, in her review of methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of verbal arts, Finnegan (1992) acknowledges “the social psychological roles of story-telling or the psychic power of myth in shaping action or imagination” (32). The idea of “the social psychological roles of story-telling,” and the Marxist bent to the discussion of myth provided by Barthes above, forces one to think about the occasional class-defying and age-group defying street stories in the postcolonial metropolis—both the elite and the abject enjoy and transmit these rumours.

Why do we have such crossover stories, one might ask? A critical appreciation of the mythic origins of oral narratives/legends implicated in the definition of myth above, the categories of oral narratives, and contemporary social conditions in the modern polity would be useful in answering the question. The categories include etiological tales, mythic legends, historic legends and fables. As Okpewho (1983) reminds us, citing Jacob Grimm, “there is a considerable scope for overlapping between these categories” (62), creating a

²⁰ See Wheelright’s essay “The Semantic Approach to Myth” in Sebeok (1955: 155-168) for more on this. Suffice it to state here that the three-fold conception of myth which Wheel Wright offers as a conciliatory intervention in defining myth are: “*primary myth, romantic myth and consumatory myth*” (155).

need for a more enabling term for our discourse. The categories above fall short in characterizing the kind of contemporary urban narratives in my study. Hence I consider “street stories” a more robust and capable term.

Of the four categories identified above, “mythic legend” comes closest to qualifying as the mother of the contemporary urban street stories. This closeness is the result of the latter’s focus on pseudo legendary public figures or anti-heroes within a mythical framework. Luise White (2000) further canvasses this relationship between floating street stories (rumour in her context)²¹ and legends as evident in the above epigraph.²² Besides the wondrous character—thematic and narrative style—of legends and street stories, its tendency to moralize and sometimes anthropomorphize in a way that Smokey Joe’s story of the woman who turns into a vulture does, ties it to the “fable.” To appropriate Okpewho (1983),

[h]ere, the creative imagination can afford to be liberated of the constraints of time and rationalization. The spirit of the fable is largely *play* [...] Because the fancy is freer, and the setting arbitrary, the images of the tale move closer to the abstraction of symbol than to the fact-bound realms of historical reality” (65).

Okpewho (1983) also emphasizes: “[i]t is this quality of fanciful play that provides one solid structural link between several generations of the concept of

²¹ Indeed White admits that she uses the term “rumour” with so much care and caution because “it is a very poor term with which to discuss stories that the storytellers think of as true” (58). Further down the same section of the book she uses the label “street talk” in place of “rumour,” thereby drawing closer to my term for a narrative genre that is best recognized as “street stories,” as I seek to establish in this study.

²² For more on the relationship between rumour and legend see Patrick B. Mullen, “Modern Legend and Rumour Theory,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 9. 1972. 95-109.

myth, first as oral narrative and now as fanciful idea” (69). I agree with Okpewho “that movement of [a] story within ‘historical time’ will depend very much on the amount of ‘poetic’ flavor the narrator brings to it” (*Myth* 70), not to mention those added by other purveyors of the story as it moves from one narrator to the other. This much is clear in the contestation of the version of a street story that Smokey Joe performed before an audience from which a spectator not only shared knowledge of the story but evinced a stake in its ‘veracity.’

The street stories about Nigeria’s first generation modern political leaders were invested with positive mythic qualities comparable to those evident in the portraits of heroes of Africa’s epic narratives. These politicians existed not in an undated distant “heroic age” as we have come to associate with heroic narratives such as the *Ozidi Saga* of the Ijaw of the Niger Delta, *Sunjata* epic of the Senegambia,²³ and the types that I recorded in my earlier fieldwork in the Delta Igbo area of Nigeria.²⁴ The heroes were nationalists who lived in the pre- and immediate post-Independence (or pre-colonial and post-Independence—not postcolonial) period of the 1950s and 60s when men’s worth was measured by their larger-than-life struggles for social justice and sacrificial leadership stature, and not by the size of their loot as present-day Nigerian political elite believe. Like their legendary African heroic forebears celebrated in epics such as the *Ozidi Saga*, those politicians were discussed in supernatural terms. The African mythic

²³ See Clark-Bekederemo J. P. (trans.) *The Ozidi Saga*. Howard University Press 1991 and Okpewho essay on it, “The Art of The Ozidi Saga,” *Research in African Literatures* 34.3; and Innes, Gordon. *Sunjata: Three Mandinka Versions*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1974.

²⁴ Some of the narratives served as the basis of my unpublished Bachelor’s degree thesis entitled *Private Interest and Public Good: A Study of Heroism in Three Bendel Igbo Heroic Narratives*,” B.A. Hons Essay, Department of English, University of Ibadan, 1987.

imaginary was not only central to the valorizing of these champion nationalists who fought for Nigeria's Independence; it was significant in the god-like celebration of their achievements. Among this pantheon of demigods were Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (fondly called Zik of Africa or The Great Zik), and Chief Obafemi Awolowo (fondly known as Awo or the Sage)—who were, interestingly enough, arch rivals. So extraordinary was public perception of them that their 'fantastic' feats filtered into street stories like folklore; Lindfors (2002: especially the chapter entitled "Heroes and Hero-Worship in Nigerian Chapbooks"), Obiechina (2008), and Sekoni (1997) assemble some of these stories. Let me elaborate with one of the authors: Sekoni.

Describing the stories as "urban folktales"—a classification I find insufficient to capture the thematic and aesthetic sophistication of the stories—Sekoni calls attention to the growing scholarly interest in them, noting: "the issue of modern urban culture as a source for generating new folktales as well as of modernizing old ones has become the subject of many folklore studies all over the world" (142).²⁵ Among astonishing stories Sekoni recalls is one "in circulation in the early 1960s about the World Health Organization's purchase of Azikiwe's brain" (142).²⁶ Then, shifting forward in time, he recalls another story, longer and even more amazing, and which I had heard as a young lad in the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN)-ruled old Bendel State²⁷:

²⁵ The author cites the examples of Raphael Patai, *Myth and Modern Man*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972, and Jan H. Bruvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and their Meanings*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981.

²⁶ The story could be interpreted as a celebration of the superior intelligence of Zik of Africa, a champion nationalist, orator and firebrand writer.

²⁷ The party was controlled by Chief Awolowo, around whom the story understandably revolved.

[In] 1979, when Nigeria was returned to party politics after 13 years of military dictatorship, members of Awolowo's Unity Party of Nigeria created legends about him. A few days before the presidential election, urban centres, and indeed villages, were inundated with the story of Awolowo's appearance on the moon. One variant of the story claims that Awolowo appeared in the moon with his wife, waving, in a celebrative mood, the ceremonial Yoruba horse-whip. Another variant claims that Awolowo without his wife appeared on the moon, riding a horse. Many people in such distant places as Lagos, Ibadan, Benin, and Ilorin narrated stories in which Awolowo appeared on the moon, looking down on Azikiwe and Shagari from his Olympian position. (142)

In line with the obvious adulatory tone of these and similar stories which Sekoni records in his essay, and which paint the picture of a glorious past when Nigerian leaders so meritoriously served their people that they became folk heroes celebrated in street stories, I would like to briefly recall one such story that I had heard as a young boy. The story had the legendary Zik of Africa as its focus. The story claimed that when the white colonialists were returning to imperial Britain after Nigeria's independence in 1960, they searched for the wisest Nigerian to hand over the master key to the Lagos lagoon which they had walled off from over-running the island. According to the apocryphal story, from the rank of the freedom fighters crusading for independence the colonial lords chose Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe because of his vast knowledge—having graduated from Lincoln

University, US—and moderate temperament. It was believed that if he ever got angry and opened the gates, the waters from the lagoon would flood the city.²⁸

Given the present, post-first generation of Nigerian leaders negatively changed socio-political environment, it is unsurprising that such positive apocryphal stories have metamorphosed into satires against the ruling class. The legends have mutated into more urgent narratives about the people's painful political experiences and everyday tragic efforts at surviving against the odds, including recouring to the occult as 'documented' in some Nigerian video films, and theorized in recent scholarship (Apter 1999, 2005; Daniel Jordan Smith 2007).²⁹

Cognizant of such unfortunate slide, my study is a shift from the folkloric tales and more traditional epics or oral narratives that served as the basis for the analysis of myth by Okpewho, and the folklorists'/anthropologists', as well as the apocryphal anecdotes/legends that informed Sekoni's study, to the realm of contemporary urban popular and political culture. I share Sekoni's view that discussions of such urban narratives are regrettably not common fare in the Nigerian academy. Although "the thematization of politics in traditional oral

²⁸ With the advantage of hindsight, the interpretive possibilities of the story include reading it as a mythopoeic narrative aimed at addressing the danger posed by the tempestuous lagoon which has continued to threaten the existence of Lagos Island with the annual flooding of its banks as if some undecided hurricane were rehearsing a final raid.

²⁹ Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) provide more insights into the point being made here, and the essay is indeed regarded as the definitive work on this theme in contemporary African Studies. For details see Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony," *American Ethnologist* 26, No. 3 (1999): 279–301

poetic forms abounds in pre-colonial folk experience³⁰...[w]hat seems to be new in the Nigerian folklore experience is the [...] preference by folk commentators for concrete realistic styles of behaviour over abstract or symbolic ones that have characterized the folktale tradition for so long” (142), as Sekoni argues.

Regardless, my study raises questions about Sekoni’s claim that “[i]n many urban tales circulating in Nigeria today, fantastic images are made to give way to realistic ones” (142). As my subsequent textual analysis shows, fantasy is still the sublime staple of what Sekoni calls “urban tales” but I prefer to identify as “street stories” without prejudice to the “brutal fantasy” (Mbembe 2001: 166) that provokes them. Everyday grim social reality is infested with metaphors that speak to the political decay, and sometimes force laughter through their tragic-comical engagement with absurdity. Take, for example, the “Apple Theory” story which insists that Nigeria’s most brutal dictator died from poisoned apples in the hands of Indian prostitutes (See Chapter Four for a full analysis of the “theory”). But Sekoni is of course right in observing that following the return to civil rule in 1979 (the Third Republic), Nigerians “exchanged tales about top political figures as well as economic giants favoured by the ruling part of military junta” in “bars, *bukas* (restaurants), on buses, at parties, and even in offices and factories” (143). My study seeks to excavate and analyze these stories.

Beyond the social space where such street stories are performed, these stories triangulate around the fantastic compass of the griot, the magic-realist protocols of the fiction narrator or novelist, and the ostensible historical accuracy

³⁰ Sekoni cites the example of the Yoruba oriki or praise poetry, etc. See p.142.

of news reports by journalist. Understandably, more stories have been told since the return to the present democratic dispensation in Nigeria in 1999, two years after Sekoni's essay was published. Some of those stories—not “urban legends” or “tales”—form the foundation upon which this study rests. The stories which we shall examine presently are different in their passionate anti-establishment, and acerbic political temperament aimed at possibly bringing down the political elite.

Reality construction and “alternative modes of knowledge production”

It is in this adversarial, myth-making sense that the street narratives are politically connected to some traditional oral narratives as Okpewho (1998a and b), Kaschula (2001) cogently demonstrate in their studies on Africa, and McIsaac (2000)³¹ on her study on the aborigines of Australia. Okpewho's discussion of the centrality of myth is relevant for appreciating the relationship between traditional oral narratives and Africa's contemporary political impasse.

In his essay “African Mythology and Africa's Political Impasse” (which he fully developed into his book-length study *Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity*), Okpewho attempts an unusual interpretation of Africa's failed postcolonial leadership through the lens of oral narratives. Drawing from his extensive researches in the field Okpewho argues that the modern rapacious, criminal African dictators have their ancestry in the historic or mythic heroes of

³¹ See Elizabeth McIsaac, “Oral Narratives as a Site of Resistance: Indigenous Knowledge, Colonialism and Western Discourse.” *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of our World*, Ed Budd L. Hall, George Jerry Sefa Dei, Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg. Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc. 2000, 89-101. Also see especially the subsection entitled “Orality and the Modern African State” in Kaschula's Introduction to the volume *African Oral Literature: Functions in Contemporary Contexts* edited by him. Claremont: New Africa Books (Pty) Ltd, 2001. xiii-xvi. Part Seven of the book, Orality, Politics and History is also relevant to the point being made here.

the oral narratives such as the Sunjata epic, Ozidi Saga, and Shaka the Zulu of South Africa, and instructively declares:

If we looked closely at the power profiles of these recent leaders, we would find them uncomfortably similar to the heroes we have grown accustomed to glorifying in our studies: leaders who held absolute power, exercising total proprietorship over the material and perhaps spiritual lives of those who lived under the shadow of their might. (1)³²

Okpewho also illustrates how a “people's collective memory of traumas sustained” (10) and knowledge of oppression inspire tales of resistance against a hegemonic power. Discussing the resistance of the western Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria against a dominant Benin Empire he declares: “a close look at these tales convinced me that they were in a fundamental sense driven by the determination of the narrative culture to assert itself against the historical claims of Benin over it” (2) In a similar vein, street stories are constructed by citizens determined to punish the ruling elite by overcoming the narrative hegemony hitherto enjoyed by them (the rulers) through media monopoly or what Edelstein has qualified with the term “old propaganda”, noting that “[t]he participatory aspect of new media is central” to a “definition of the *new propaganda*.”³³ According to Edelstein,

³² Incensed by the misguided glorification of such leaders in the oral tradition, Southall (1977) angrily declares that “the warrior tradition is neither relevant nor useful to contemporary Africa” (166), adding further on that: “Outside the literary field, the warrior tradition is a dangerous toy to play with. Lacking any ideological anchor it degenerates easily to fascism” (Southall 175). And it is in this light that I see the contemporary African dictators as inheritors of the hideous aspect of that warrior tradition.

³³ Alex Edelstein differentiates the new prop from old prop by referencing music, writing, and performance, through which the younger generation “have been creating means to permit their participation in the popular culture,” and hails them as “the key to our *cultural nirvana*” [my emphasis]. (xiii).

Whereas the *oldprop* was characterized by the attempt of a few to impose a picture of reality on the many, *newprop* underlined a process of negotiation among many participants. As our media allow us to interact globally with others in a community of interest, we need a new way to think about reality construction. (xiii)

One new way of thinking about such reality-construction is through street stories. The significance of some of the political street narratives is not just in their focus on Africa's recent leaders who, like their forebears hold "absolute power, exercising total proprietorship over the material and perhaps spiritual lives of those who live under the shadow of their might."³⁴ The significance is in the censure of such leaders in the street narratives or in the songs produced by socially-conscious popular artists. While such characters were largely 'celebrated' in traditional oral narratives, or in more recent times in the songs of some praise-singing popular musicians (Waterman 1994, 1990; Barber and Waterman 1995), the reverse is the case in the kinds of texts that I focus on in this study. In the street stories, as in the song texts that I analyze later, appropriate contempt is heaped on such opprobrious despotic leaders;³⁵ they are ridiculed and shown to be enemies of the people. What is more, the narratives about their inglorious careers are constructed with mythopoeia, arresting metaphors and symbolism. I see such street stories, given their historical, mythical and aesthetic proclivity, as belonging to *newprop*, because they better articulate Nigeria's notorious political experience

³⁴ Isidore Okpewho, "African Mythology and Africa's Political Impasse," *Research in African Literatures*, 29.1 (1998): 1.

³⁵ There are interesting correspondences between these songs and those studied in *Songs and Politics in Eastern Africa* edited by Kimani Njogu and Herve Maupeu, Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2007.

and mean more to ordinary people than the sometimes heavily compromised *oldprop* traditional media narratives or contested historical accounts in academic books and journals. What emerges from the popular articulation of streets stories, therefore, is what I would call “alternative modes of knowledge production” and an “evolving narrative epistemology.”

In his insightful essay “Narrative, History and the African Imagination” (2001) Abiola Irele maps the complex link between traditional knowledges and evolving narrative practices and the production of “current events” narratives in the oral and written modes in Africa. In making this connection, my intention is to draw attention to the kind of consciousness that informs the production of street stories in postcolonial Nigeria, a consciousness that depends on narrative imagination to interpret social reality and assert creative agency as demonstrated by Smokey Joe and other street oral artists in their own right. Though untrained in the formal sense that the African griot undergoes tutelage or pupilhood, the street artists occupy an alternative creative space which also functions as a site of cultural sharing and production. A text (not graffiti) that I once saw on a danfo (a yellow commercial bus or van ubiquitous in the Lagos metropolis) speaks volumes about the axiomatic philosophy that guides the street artists: “In the University of Life there are no graduates.”³⁶ For such often unacknowledged

³⁶ This reminds me of the film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) directed by Richard Brooks, with Glenn Ford and Sidney Poitier where it shows the tension that exists between how classroom (as the inside) and street (as the outside) are conceptualized antagonistically. In one scene a student and teacher face off on a dark street corner with student ending off saying ‘you’re in *my* classroom now! To trouble this further, many people say ‘if you don’t graduate, you may end up on the street’, the street is the *last place* we want to ‘end up’– it is the place of the down and out, the marginalized and rejected. When someone says they have street smarts, the not-always articulated other part is – ‘*as opposed to book-smarts*’ – while street smarts are admired in a sense they are still lower on the hierarchy of desired knowledge than ‘book-smarts’ – the kind of smarts one can

popular artists, the street is a university, a citadel of learning where Experience presides as do Professors and Presidents in the ivory tower; and the kind of social/professional hierarchies associated with formal institutions is evident in street culture. Hence the best amongst the street philosophers at the margins command considerable peer respect for their amazing knowledge of tradition, current affairs and above all, the tricks for survival; so that such historical actors can be both oral artists and con artists informally schooled in the art of oratory and existential philosophy of the street kind. Unlike the experience of the oral artist or the modern African writer, for the street artist, myth-making is more than an art—it is an existential imperative that is reflected in the yarns he spins in his social space; and as it is both for the oral artist and the novelist, good memory is an important asset for the street storyteller’s survival and supremacy among his kin. The African Kuba informants that distinguished historian Jan Vansina (1994) interviewed as part of his fieldwork in oral tradition/history had a more memorable way of capturing the point being made here when they proudly declared their comparative advantage thus: “We too know the past, because we carry the newspapers in our heads” (17). This is an affirmation of the importance of newspapers, especially its tendency, as Obiechina (2008) points out, “to popularize certain ideas and expressions and to ‘demote’ them to clichés” (273).

Instructively, Wole Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1990) and Okpewho in *Myth in Africa* (1983) illustrate how African writers and

get inside classrooms and corresponding to a middle class hierarchy – which is not same for everyone – but it reflects an implicit value system within education. In the classroom, how much do those street smarts count, officially or not? The things people learn in the “school of hard knocks” or on the “mean streets” or by “walking the streets” mean more to ordinary people who reckon with the mean, urban streets and exchange stories in those social spaces.

their oral culture forebears have drawn from the same primordial pool of narrative knowledge and African aesthetics. To that exclusive rank of African oral artist and creative writer should be added a third—the street oral artist. It is in mainstream academia and the privileged elite’s conceited denigration of the works of the street artist by concentrating on the ordinariness or veracity of the stories not on the mythopoetic framework, that that they fail to fully comprehend the significance of the art, and why “people believed them” as Luise White suggests in the epigraph to this chapter.

Conclusion

I have tried in this chapter to establish the basis of my leaning toward a construction of “street stories” as a site for the convergence of generic narrative ambiguities, new media, and social and political struggles. I use the word “convergence” advisedly in this context to invoke Henry Jenkins’ (2006) gripping theorizing in his inventive study.³⁷ But compelling as Jenkins’ theorizing may be, its application to the postcolonial African context appears constrained by the reality of the “digital divide,” a reality that has inspired Afrocentric scholars into being suspicious of globalization as a totalizing or transnational and transmedia phenomenon which tends to further marginalize the underdeveloped parts of the world.³⁸

In addressing in this chapter the meaning potentialities of key terms such as popular culture, “orality” and “myth,” my aim has been to avoid reduction and

³⁷ See Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.

³⁸ See Olu Oguibe’s *The Culture Game* (2004) for example, especially the chapter, Connectivity and the Fate of the Unconnected.

embrace complexity. Too often, complex phenomena are enveloped in a generalizing and totalizing use of terminology that not only simplified the actual reality, but also facilitates its commoditization and colonization from the outside. The inadequacy of such terms and concepts has necessitated the expansion, redefinition and desensitization of the idea of *orality* and *myth* as invisible and unchanging concepts to be worshipped. It has encouraged me to extend their roots to concrete journalistic texts and related aspects of cultural production that “come out of a different strand of modern social theory which has been concerned directly with the performative or experiential dimensions of culture, aspects of symbolic exchange which [...] deserve our careful scrutiny” (Moore 2000: 149). Street stories embody such aspects of symbolic exchange through a diverse retelling or verbal retailing network; besides its complex circulation process, it provides a site for citizens of the postcolonial state in Africa “to reshuffle their own cultural repertoire to exploit, bolster, shrink, or transform their traditions or heritage” (During 2000: 388), and to show us “how [...] oral literature [is] adapting and functioning within the modern world?” (Kaschula 2001: xii). One key means by which oral literature has been doing so is through the press. I will now examine the role of the press, beyond the prefatory remarks about the popular press made in the previous chapter, as a vehicle for the transmission of street stories, and a tool for political resistance and compromise in military and postmilitary governance in Nigeria.

Chapter Two

Watchdogs, Tin gods, Attack dogs: Street Stories, the Press and the Postcolonial Condition

We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (Ben Okri 1997: 46)

One key means by which oral literature has been adapting and functioning within the modern world, to paraphrase Kaschula (2001), is through the press. This is particularly so in postcolonial Africa where in spite of globalization and the gains of modernity through technology, the origins of the press in an oral past have continued to influence the media ecology and everyday communicative transactions including the transmission of street stories. By focusing on the operations of the press in this chapter, I hope to illustrate as I move toward the textual analyses in the rest of the study, how verbal and media arts function as “travelling concepts”¹ that cut across disciplines and genres, and how the “oral tradition reasserts itself”² in the print media. Also in this chapter, I want to establish the frameworks under which the print media has pressed itself into the

¹ Mieke Bal. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division. 2002.

² See Gabriel, H. Teshome. “Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films.” *Colonial Discourse and the Postcolonial Condition*. Ed. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia University Press. 1987. 357. It is pertinent to note that I am mindful of Paulin Hountondji’s (1983) observation of “a deceptive singular” (160); that “what we commonly call oral tradition in the singular is an artificial yoking of which we must learn to recognize as such (179).” Although Hountondji upbraids ethnophilosophers in his intervention, it equally applies to our discourse here in its potential of neglecting “this plurality, this irreducible polysemy of discourses [...] which impoverishes “African literature by reducing all the genres to one and by giving its infinite variety a single metaphysical common denominator (179).”

service of street stories under the postcolonial condition in Nigeria, and how the apparatuses of the state have responded, especially during military regimes.

Orality, Street Stories, and Origins of the Press in Nigeria

Although scholars are right to trace the origin of the press in Nigeria to Henry Townsend's *Iwe Irohin* (1859) (Coker 1965; Duyile 1987; Omu 1996, 1978; Folarin and Mohammed 1996; Nwosu 1996; Ekpu, 1996), the approach is limiting in its glossing over of the association between the press and the traditional towncrier system. Long before the advent of the formal communication media, African towncriers used remarkable percussive instruments such as the metal gong (*agogo* or *ogene* in Igbo language of Nigeria) or talking drums (*dùndún* or *bata* among the Yoruba of Nigeria) or the *kakaaki* (a long trumpet amongst the Hausa of Northern Nigeria)³ to disseminate information or announce important news; much so that the popular saying “drummed up public awareness” has more than a metaphorical interpretation in this African context. So rich is this communication tradition that Amanda Villepastour (2010) sees it as an “ancient form of speech surrogacy.”⁴ Although the towncriers’ “broadcast” is no longer prevalent especially in the urban areas, I witnessed this system as a child in my hometown of Ogwash-Uku in Delta State of Nigeria in the seventies and eighties, and later as an adult in parts of Lagos metropolis while working as a journalist in the nineties. The oral past of the towncrier and the griot has continued to live in

³ Nigeria's Africa International Television (AIT) pays tribute *tokakaaki* by using as its official emblem.

⁴ Also see Debra L. Klein's *Yorùbá bàtá Goes Global: Artists, Culture Brokers, and Fans*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Interestingly, Waterman (1990) calls attention to “the rhetotrical efficacy of traditional Yoruba musical idioms” (34) represented by the drums (and songs), and their deployment as “local newspapers and propaganda ‘leaflets’” (Cole 1975: 138, quoted by Wareman *Ibid.*) by nationalist leaders such as Herbert Macaulay.

the present in the form of mythopoeic narrative consciousness that persists in the street stories and in their transformation into diverse popular culture media including the press. It is not surprising therefore that the historical reality of the first newspaper in Nigeria being in an indigenous language—Yoruba, which is widely spoken in South-western Nigeria—has found patronage in the establishment of recent models, chiefly *Alaroye* (Yoruba word for “towncrier”) founded in 1996 by Alao Adedayo who has interestingly written a book about it.⁵ So important is the role of the indigenous language newspaper in reaching out to the grassroots especially in the urban centres of Ibadan—where it is domiciled—and Lagos where it enjoys reasonable circulation, that Olukotun (2010) avers: the vernacular newspaper genre is “underreported, but increasingly assertive” (160) despite its having “made an insurgence in the closing years of military rule.” Olukotun indeed claims that *Alaroye’s* “circulation competes favorably with the most successful national dailies” (160).⁶ The significance of newspapers—whether in indigenous or in English language—and magazines as vehicles for the

⁵ Alao Adedayo, *Crude Journalism: The History of Alaroye and African Indigenous Language Newspapers*. Ibadan: Wepcom Publishers Limited. 2006. For more on these recent models of indigenous newspapers see Okoli 2010.

⁶ Funmi Iyanda, a popular Nigerian television personality and blog writer, corroborates the significance of *Alaroye* and its ethnic bias when she writes in her blog: “the ALAROYE headline grabbed my attention and summed up the feelings of the South West as at the time [2009 presidential election in Nigeria]. It screamed, OBASANJO KE! The true interpretation of that exclamation is as deep and prone to intuitive interpretation as the Yoruba culture itself. It expressed shock, disbelief, unbelief and outrage. It says how can you, still being in possession of your full faculties, begin to even consider that” (<http://fiyanda.blogspot.com/2006/11/babangida-ke.html>) Sept 26, 2010. Interestingly too, Herman Wasserman (2010) provides a comparable example in his review of the impact of Afrikaans-language newspapers in South Africa, especially during apartheid when they served as “key institutions for the articulation of nationalists ideology” (4) in the same way as *Alaroye* promotes the interest of the Yoruba nation in Nigeria. It is important to note at once that an interesting parallel to indigenous language newspapers in South Africa is what Adhikari, Mohamed and Les Switzer (2000) have identified as South Africa’s Resistance Press in their book of the same title.

circulation of street stories in urban Nigeria is foregrounded in Obiechina's (1971) seminal study of Onitsha Market literature, and also in the context of Bernth Lindfors' (2005) acknowledgement that even a most abstract act like literary criticism has been democratized by newspapers in Nigeria. As Lindfors (2005) puts it, "[t]he cultural columns in the Nigerian press have literally democratized literary debate in that country, moving it from university ivory towers directly to the streets. Nowhere else in Africa has this happened on the same scale" (347).

Advocating a broadening of the concept of literature, leading African philosopher Paulin Hountondji (1983) unwittingly leverages the primacy of orality via the towncrier, who I suggest, is a precursor to the modern press in Nigeria. According to Hountondji, "[i]ndeed, it might seem that the concept of oral literature should theoretically precede that of written literature, as speech precedes writing" (102). Hountondji believes that "[a] written text appears to be simply the transcription of a previously oral statement, one that is not supposed to modify the content and scope of that statement at all" (Ibid.). Although to me the written text is not simply a mere "transcription of an oral statement," it should be noted that Hountondji's claim can be applied to journalism which often depends on oral accounts/interviews with eye witnesses and documentary evidence for its investigations and news reports. Indeed to appropriate the beautiful term used by Hountondji (1983)—borrowing from Bachelard in a different context—the process can best be described as one of "*envelopment*" (90). That is, literally, the *enveloping* of the oral sources in print. In adopting this word it is pertinent to

recall Oyekan Owomoyela's (1999) critique of Hountondji's celebration of writing, and Owomoyela's distinction using "folklore" and "literature" as descriptive tropes representing, respectively, tradition and modernization—orality and literacy—and his call for a progression from a "folklore complex to a literature one" (277). Rather than perpetuate such a binary, I seek not just to investigate the interface between the two traditions as they affect the production and circulation of street stories in Nigeria, but also to unravel the processes of interconnectedness or symbiotic relationship between the two traditions which thrive in urban settings and a near obsession with political developments.

Apart from this shared urban and political character of street stories and the popular press, there are other affinities. These include interfaces in their textualities, the comparative discursive practices of the news reporter and the street storyteller, their commitment to the narrative genre, their agenda-setting role, and their predilection for talk-of-the-town discourses somewhat akin to the "talk stories" of Talk of the Town section of *The New Yorker*.⁷

In the Nigerian context, the kinds of street stories that constitute my primary texts show that both narrative genres—street stories and print media narratives—tend to share a common umbilicus as adversarial political discourses.

In focusing on the circular or symbiotic flow of such stories—from the street to the mass media and from the mass media back to the street—I also attend to the

⁷ Lolita Lark eloquently characterizes this section of *The New Yorker* as "light-hearted reporting" in her review of Lillian Ross' classic book derived from it, *The Fun Of It: Stories from the Talk of the Town*, Modern Library, 2001. (For Lark's review see *RALPH (The Review of Arts, Literature, Philosophy and the Humanities)* XXVIII.3 (Winter 2001 – 2002). <http://www.ralphmag.org/BD/new-yorker.html> Dec 12, 2010. In other words, I am referring here to the literary tendency of the street stories as well as their paradoxical lightness and seriousness in covering a wide-range of socio-political themes.

parallel triangular circulation of stories from the oral to the written and back to the oral which is often ignored by scholars of oral narratives and media studies. But for now let us further explore the political basis of the street stories and newspapers.

Politics, activism, street stories and print media

Historically, modern Nigerian press evolved from the activities of missionaries who needed a more popular platform for the propagation of their agenda and from which the Nigerian press evolved into an anti-colonial cum political phenomenon. The key founding fathers of modern Nigeria were not just political activists but also media men who founded the modern newspaper in Nigeria and who were both proprietors and publishers cum editors/writers.⁸ Lai Oso (1991) claims that “the pioneer proprietor-editors regarded themselves as politicians or, more appropriately, as anti-colonial crusaders and their newspapers as political organs for the achievement of certain political goals” (45). Golding and Elliot (1979) address the scenario even more floridly: “Nigerian journalism was born of anti-colonial protest, baptized in the waters of politics, and matured in party politics” (21). But this anti-colonial angle to the emergence of the Nigerian press may erroneously create the impression that journalism did not flourish until the twentieth century when the struggle for independence flowered. Thus, Oso overstates the case, and Golding and Elliot greatly oversimplify it. Indeed some early newspaper editor-proprietors were anti-colonial, but others

⁸ The list included: Victor Babamuboni who founded *The Lagos Daily News* in 1925 and Herbert Macaulay purchased it in 1927; Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe who founded *West African Pilot* (1937); and Chief Obafemi Awolowo who founded *Nigerian Tribune* and *Telegraph* as well as the first television station in Nigeria, the Western Television at Ibadan, in south western Nigerian.

(e.g. Sir Kitoyi Ajasa, editor of the *Nigerian Pioneer*) were conservative, opposed the protonationalist position of Herbert Macaulay, and consistently supported the colonial government.

Olatunji Dare reinforces, albeit hyperbolically, the centrality of the press in Nigeria even before the formal creation of the Nigeria state: “There were indigenous newspapermen before there were indigenous ordained priests and doctors in Nigeria, and there were even ‘Nigerian’ newspapermen before the geographical entity called Nigeria formally came into being in 1914 (253).⁹ So the press has been a cornerstone of the emergence of modern Nigeria. The activism of its practitioners—whether as missionaries or nationalists—over the centuries provided the template that shaped “the political economy of the Nigerian press” (Oso 1991: 50), and bred generations of journalist-activists whose most trying period were the years of military rule in Nigeria, first from 1966-1979, and then 1983-1999 with an interim civilian government between January 2, 1993 and November 17, 1999. From these difficult times emerged a press that has been regarded as “Africa’s most prolific and vociferous, setting the standards for media practitioners across the continent,”¹⁰ through its fiercely anti-establishment disposition. With a caveat regarding sections of the press (essentially government-owned or sponsored) pursuing the agenda of the ruling class, this anti dictatorship,

⁹ Nigeria was formally created in 1914 and so named after the Niger Delta area by Flora Lugard, wife of the first British Governor-General of the region, Sir Frederick Lugard. For more on the early Nigerian press see especially pages 252-258 of Olatunji Dare’s “The Press, Politics and Democracy in Nigeria Since 1960” in Holger G. Ehling, Claus-Peter Holste-von Mutius. Eds. *No Condition is Permanent: Nigerian Writers and the Struggle for Democracy*. Matatu 23-24, Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi. 2001. Also see Lai Oso’s related essay in the same volume, “The Nigerian Press and the Ruling Class” (265-282).

¹⁰ Kakuna Kerina, “Free Press Hopes Fade”, *Columbia Journalism Review*, <http://www.cjr.org/year/98/6/nigeria.asp> November/ December 1998. Quoted in Uko (2004:115).

anti corruption disposition of the press is very much at the base of my study. And it is at this juncture that the anti-establishment street stories produced and circulated by ordinary people in urban Lagos find soul mates in the media narratives.

Foremost Nigerian media scholar, Ayo Olukotun, has provided an impressive sustained critique of the role of the press in the Nigeria political process (see 2000, 2002, 2004a and b). Amongst other studies—Aje-Ori Agbese (2006); Ukpo (2004); Ibelema (2003); and Agbaje (1992)—Olukotun’s most recent publication arrestingly entitled “The State as Undertaker: Power and Insurgent Media in Nigeria” is a gripping read. Between this essay and another by Isaac Olawale Albert (2010) entitled “When the State Kills: Political Assassinations in Abacha’s Nigeria”¹¹ emerges a shocking picture of the brutal scenarios under the military, and the kind of travails suffered by news reporters and other citizens. Olukotun (2010) captures the sweeping hostility against the press and the latter’s devising of a survival strategy through guerrilla journalism, and referencing Adebani (2005) insightfully asserts that,

the martyrdom of journalists was a metaphor for a discourse space besieged by rampant censorship, economic denial, hostility toward cultural production that did not glorify the custodians of power, as well as the harrowing and harsh imprisonment of journalists. In a bizarre development, five journalists were framed and sentenced to life imprisonment allegedly for being accomplices in phantom coups. (173)

¹¹ For a comprehensive study of political assassinations in Nigeria see Shehu Sani’s chilling book, *Political Assassinations in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Bookcraft Ltd. 2007.

The aggression toward cultural production that exposed or antagonized the tin gods in power was evident in outright assassinations or commando-style burning or closing of media houses as was the case with *The Guardian* newspaper, an incident that *Stubborn Grasshopper*, one of the film texts analyzed below, recreates. Expectedly, some participant-observers have captured such “quasimilitary tactics” in memoirs and studies whose titles speak volumes.¹² Adesokan (2006) who was also imprisoned at the time captures the guerrilla journalism phenomenon in an insightful review of Jennifer Hasty’s book, *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana* (2006)¹³:

In the early 1990s, a handful of privately funded newsmagazines emerged in Lagos, Nigeria. Coming at a time when the cynicism of military dictatorship was plain for all to see, the new publications—particularly *TELL*, *TheNews*, and later the tabloid *TEMPO*—took on an adversarial role, that of being the nemesis of the government of the day. This role was visible in magazine headlines, and could be felt in the very prose of news reports. Journalism, the profession of objectivity, suddenly turned aggressive, speculative, and unapologetically sensationalistic. There were screaming headlines; sources became “impeccable” or “anonymous.” It was a virtual rewriting of the rules of reporting, and it got caught in the

¹² See Sunday Dare, *Guerrilla Journalism: Dispatches from the Underground* (2007); Kunle Ajibade, *Jailed for Life: A Reporter’s Prison Notes* (2003) and *What a Country!* (2008); Wale Adebaniwi, *Trials and Triumphs: The Story of The News* (2008); Ndaeyo Uko, *Romancing the Gun: The Press as a Promoter of Military Rule* (2004).

¹³ It should be noted that Hasty’s book offers interesting parallels between a vibrant Ghanaian presses of the late 1990s after the repeal of draconian censorship decrees that had choked the socially conscious Ghanaian journalist.

spawn of its own success when four journalists were imprisoned as accessories after the fact of treason in the “phantom coup” of February 1995. (139)

What is more, two casualties of the war against the media—George Mba and Kunle Ajibade—spoke further on the persecution they suffered as suspects in the phantom coup in the interviews they granted me respectively. Together, Mba and Ajibade represented the radical, privately-owned press which operated as counterpoints to the state-owned media. Olukotun (2004) foregrounds the difference between the private and state-owned media, pointing out that, “a discernible split existed on most national issues between a compliant state-owned media (in league with a few private media) and the bulk of the private, outspoken media (including a guerrilla press), which opposed the military state and advocated an alternative, democratic vision at great personal and institutional cost” (34). It was easy, therefore, for the state to target media houses it considered subversive or hostile toward her, and so inflicted a brutal regime of censorship against the newspapers, magazines, and other popular culture producers. Indeed as Olutokun (2010) further observes, “there was a contest in the discourse arena between the authoritarian state as *undertaker* and journalists with a critical bent who, forced underground, resorted to guerrilla tactics in getting across subversive messages” (173). He adds that “[i]n this bid, they were buoyed up and assisted by new technologies, globalization currents, and the international civil society” (Ibid.).

Apparently then, under dictatorships in Nigeria, media and street narratives became vengeful weapons that tortured the military goons and their civilian collaborators. In the fight for social justice, every tactic appeared acceptable as fair game. In pursuing this lofty activist agenda, sections of the press in Nigeria (especially of the radical brand represented by *TELL*, *The News* magazine and *Tempo*) seemed not to mind compromising the ethics of the profession, and adopting some of the tactics of purveyors of street stories as they moved from being watchdogs to attack dogs, leaving the compromised others—especially government-owned media—as lapdogs.¹⁴ What Barsamian (2001) said concerning the media’s role in society—especially the public media—applied to them; reinforcing the philosophy that drives the operations of the critical press in Nigeria, Barsamian advocates an adversarial role for the media coherent with “an adage that the function of journalism was to ‘comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable’” (12).¹⁵ Unlike the conservative, largely government-owned sections of the Nigerian media, the radical press stood with/for the people, refusing to join those journalists whom Barsamian condemns as “comfort[ing] the comfortable and afflict[ing] the afflicted,” and “becom[ing] overpaid stenographers to power” (Ibid.).

In the single-minded pursuit of the anti-fascist agenda of the military by the radical press, fictionalized accounts crept into news reports, and I was told

¹⁴ Helge Ronning (1994) attributes such a weakness in African states to the consequence of “low legitimacy, and the state apparatus [being] often dependent on various forms clientelism often combined with authoritarian practices” (3).

¹⁵ Interestingly the adage is credited to two different sources in one book, Thomas F. Stafford’s book with the telling title *Afflicting the Comfortable: Journalism and Politics in West Virginia*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2005. While Stafford attributes it to H.L. Mencken (320), the blurb of his book credits it to Finley Peter Dunne.

about a media executive who would tell his reporters to “add atmospherics”¹⁶ or what Ibelema (2003) critically calls “undue misrepresentations and overt partisanship.” Really, unapologetically, news stories became shaped by the anti-military agenda and by market forces. That is, media houses sought to produce *juicy* stories for which the public with an anti-military consciousness yearned.¹⁷ Ndaeyo Uko (2004) decries this practice in his searing critique of the role of the press during military dictatorship in Nigeria.¹⁸ In a most damning section of the book Uko writes that one important way in which the press laid down its moral authority,

was the frequent underhand – to avoid saying fraudulent – methods used by the press to combat the regime. The most unfortunate method was the publication of deliberate sensational lies. Mohammed Haruna, a respected journalist addressed the problem of this mendacious streak when he said of the Nigerian press: “Naturally we have other enemies. But if we become errand boys of other people instead of reporting objectively, if we seek to persuade the public of our positions by half truths and oftentimes barefaced lies, then we must be our own worst enemies.” (122)

Interestingly, in his ostensibly playful discussion of “fiction” in *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault offers a remarkable way of understanding the “fictional” dimension of such news stories which Uko and Haruna decry, as he

¹⁶ Personal account by a friend and colleague with whom I shared a flat in Lagos in those halcyon days, and who worked in the media organization where the Executive Editor presided.

¹⁷ Reviewing some of the cover stories I wrote or edited for some of the news magazines in the 1990s I am struck by how much I was influenced by a misapplication of the “new journalism” genre then, further discussion of which I undertake in the subsection “‘Gossip Season’, Riots, and the June 12 conundrum” below.

¹⁸ For a similar critique also see Mercy Ette’s “Agent of change or stability? The Nigerian press undermines democracy.” *Press/Politics*, 3 (2000): 67-86.

states: “As to the problem of fiction, it seems to me to be a very important one; I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions” (193). Foucault further explains that he does not mean “that truth is therefore absent” but that he believes that “the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or ‘manufactures’ something that does not as yet exist, that is, ‘fictions’ it” (Ibid.). And in a turn of expression that captures my thoughts on the brand of journalism that shadowed the critical press in Nigerian in the period under review, Foucault concludes: “One ‘fictions’ history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one ‘fictions’ a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth” (Ibid.). In other words, Foucault brings into play, it seems to me, the role of ideology and the imagination in the construction of social reality. And it is for this reason that what Osinubi (2008) calls “the ‘distortions’ attending the circulation of one core narrative in different spheres” (137) or spaces; that is as the text travels across multiple popular culture domains makes meaning to me.

The issue really is beyond the press fictionalizing reality. It is also about the interconnectedness or complementarity between the narrative protocols of the news reporter and those of the street oral artist; in this context, the use of embellishment comes to the fore. More importantly, the adversarial role of the press in the criminalization of the ruling gang, and the ordinary citizen’s participation in current political discourse was more urgent and paramount. Interestingly enough, studies of what may appear as “criminal resistance” to, or acts of subversion of state misrule have sometimes justified the unorthodox, albeit

“underhand” approach to the criminal state in Africa. Olukotun (2010) must have been thinking about this in observing that:

The effects of political persecution that forced several journalists into exile after receiving death threats meant that they had to practice their craft in the shadow of death. Of course, for journalists like Dele Giwa and Bagauda Kaltho, who were murdered because of their efforts to widen the discourse beyond the official straitjacket, the state as undertaker assumed a concrete and ultimate form. It is important to grasp, however, that the martyrdom of these two journalists is only a dramatic illustration of the fray in which the media sought to combat the authoritarian state. (156)

This was the background that shaped the narrative performance of both the news reporters and the street storyteller. Understanding the context of performance by the street storyteller and the journalist under military rule as a reinscription of “the imminent sentence of death under which [they were] performing” (Mack 1995: xxiii), stresses the application of storytelling as survival in different “spheres.” “Spheres” here are not just the multiple media formats where these stories aggregate but also the public spheres or social spaces, or the context-specific locale of most of the street stories for this study, “authoritarian-mediated sphere” (Wasserman 2010: 10) where the texts are reproduced or performed. It takes exceptional nerve to dance under the gallows. But what really is public sphere in relation to the media and street stories?

Public Sphere, Counterpublics, “Alternative Sphere” and Street Stories

Having positioned the street as both a physical and an invisible space,¹⁹ or in Larkin’s (2008) terms in relation to urbanization “built form” and “immaterial form” (12) I now turn to redefining the idea of public sphere as it applies to this study. I have mentioned in passing its traditional conceptualization by Habermas (1991), domesticating it through our use of “open parliament” to describe the “public arena” at a typical Lagos bus stop. Given the increasing interface between street stories and media narratives as revealed in our discourse, the concept of the public sphere must address space where street stories and media narratives collide, to appropriate Henry Jenkins’ vocabulary on convergence theory again.

The public sphere of the postcolonial narrative discourses that I focus on in this study are clearly different from that of the advanced, Western world, where newsstands do not have the kind of ‘open parliament’ or “politics of spaces” (Foucault 1980:149) inscribed in them. Warner (2002) seems to recognize such a difference/peculiarity stating, “a public is inevitably one thing in London, quite another in Hong Kong [...] since the form must be embedded in the background and self-understanding of its participants in order to work” (9), adding that to “identify the form only with its Western articulation might be to block from view some of the most significant points of difference, both in colonial settings and within Western cultures themselves” (10-11). Embedded in Warner’s apt observation is an interesting geography of thought that points to the politics of

¹⁹ Michael Warner (2002) accentuates this idea as he states that “[m]uch of the texture of modern social life lies in the invisible presence of these publics that flit around us like large, corporate ghosts” (7).

knowledge production and cultural relativism that in my view, corresponds with putting vernacular forms of discourse in such open parliaments at a disadvantage.



Plate 2: A street news-stand in Lagos: “Free Readers Association” in session.



Plate 3: Aerial view of a densely-populated Oshodi bus-stop/market, Lagos

Against the backcloth of the open theatre that Smokey Joe's shack proves to be in Chapter One, **Plates 2²⁰ and 3** offer us graphic views of the significance of the street newsstand and the city of Lagos and the kind of haggling of ideas that they engender. To paraphrase Obadare and Adebani (2010), in the postcolonial state, "the zones or spaces of encounter (actual and symbolic) [...] are inherently tension-ridden" and constitute discursive platforms "whereby the state...is experienced by [its] subjects" (11). These tension-ridden spaces which they inhabit are related to, but different from, the "dissident networks of communication excluded by the dominant public sphere and its hegemonic discourse"²¹ upon which attention is focused in the Western academy.

A further graphic representation of the unique interdependence of oral narratives, popular culture and the media in Africa is evident not only at the theatrical open newsstand, but in the way newspapers are "consumed" in postcolonial Africa. As Luise White (2000) lucidly articulates it,

Newspaper reading in Africa is a social event: not every reader [is] a purchaser, as many people read newspapers on the street without buying them and many more read newspapers handed around to friends, neighbors, and kin. Newspapers travel from reader to reader in neighborhood after neighborhood. (252-253)²²

²⁰ This photograph is comparable to the one on the cover page of Herman Wasserman's book *Tabloid Journalism in South Africa*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, and speaks to the common socio-dynamics of the print media and its mode of circulation in Africa.

²¹ See <http://publicsphere.ssrc.org/guide/differentiation-of-the-public-sphere/counterpublics/>

²² Herman Wasserman (2010) identifies a similar experience from South Africa as he writes that the South African tabloid *Daily Star* is "shared among more people, creating a community of readers" (2)—something akin to the Free Readers' Association which I mentioned earlier.

White further presses Isabel Hofmeyr's point into her conception of newspaper reading in Africa as she writes: "'illiteracy' in Africa is not a monolithic state: Africans need not read to participate in a complex 'documentary culture' in which they take—and just as often reject—ideas from written texts" (Ibid.). Harry Garuba (2009) underscores such an epistemological process as "oralization of written texts" and affirms that it "is not just a matter of a low degree of literacy; it is a cultural practice that emerged at a period when literacy was not the dominant mode of communicating and transmitting ideas" (326). According to Garuba, this practice "endured to become a new way of creating various kinds of publics around issues deemed important to particular groups" (Ibid.). Garuba exemplifies the practice with the street newspaper stand exchanges which produces the "kinds of written-oral chain stories" that "were frequently used to create various publics during the Babangida and Abacha dictatorships" (338 fn. 2).

This practice of newspaper "reading" in urban Nigeria therefore validates the notion that "print requires a large literate and mostly urban audience" (Aje-ori Agbese 2006: 19), and that in a country with a large percentage of underprivileged citizens who cannot afford newspapers,²³ White's observation on a "complex documentary culture" becomes even more poignant.

The scenario respectively painted by White and Garuba at once calls attention to the politics of public *space* which has attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines in more recent years, with a few leaning more

²³ Elena Obukhova (2003) provides useful insights into the "major volatility affecting the newspaper and magazine industry," and notes that the industry "has been heavily hit by the economic downturn," such that "[b]etween 1986 and 1996, the price of newspapers increased from 30 kobo to 30 naira" (152).

toward theories of the public/“counterpublics” (Robert Asen 2000, 2001; Couldry and Curran 2003; Warner 2002; Coleman and Ross 2010). Of the set, I am most fascinated by Warner’s and Stephen Coleman and Karen Ross’ compelling argument against the traditional conceptualization of the *public sphere* as a singular, homogeneous space. Coleman and Ross describe it, instead, as “simplistic and unhistorical, for it assumes that manifold modes of human association can be compressed into indivisible citizenry of civic sphere” (72).

Persuasive as the concept of counterpublics attributed to Negt and Kluge,²⁴ and further developed by Coleman and Ross, may be, I consider it inadequate to fully address the postcolonial African context. For sure, it is possible to consider the spaces inhabited by the subversive street stories and the media narratives as belonging to “counterpublic enclaves” (Coleman and Ross 91). But this descriptor would not adequately address the idea of “alternative public sphere” as distinct from “alternative to mainstream [or traditional] media” (Coleman and Ross 76)—or simply “alternative media”—in which the Nigerian subversive street stories and media narratives reside. I use the term in a sense similar to Chris Atton’s (2009) application in his discussion of participatory media production “as providing the constituents of an *alternative public sphere*, where agendas are set and discussion is developed through the journalism of social movements and communities” (269) (Emphasis added). Atton further offers a related view to our appreciation of the significance of the open parliament as he

²⁴ See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

points out that scholars including Mathes and Pfetsch,²⁵ have shown “how an alternative news agenda can spill over into mainstream media” (269). The difference in my application of the term “alternative public sphere”, and the reason I am reluctant to ascribe the more contemporary term “counterpublics” to the open parliament is that the purveyors of the street stories may not *always* consciously be driven by a programmatic desire to set agendas. They are driven by a mythopoeic narrative culture and a civic subjectivity that empowers them to critique the ruling class outside of the formal public spheres and channels.

In the city of Lagos, with a sprawling population, the force of the alternative public sphere can be measured by the crowd that gathers around newsstands in such hotspots as Ikeja, Oshodi, Obalende or Mile Two. It can also be felt in Molues—a type of mass transit bus which the late Afro-beat musician and political activist, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, memorialized in “Shuffering and Shmiling” (1978), a song that highlights their having “49 sitting, 99 standing,” a sarcastic reference to the sign typically posted on their front board in order to discourage commuters from complaining of being packed like sardines.²⁶ It is in this setting that real life dramas covering everyday social struggles, advertisement of different wares including medicines, Pentecostal evangelism, and satirical

²⁵ See R. Mathes and B. Pfetsch, “The Role of the Alternative Press in the Agenda-Building Process: Spill-over Effects and Media Opinion Leadership.” *European Journal of Communication*, 6, 1991. 33-62.

²⁶ The equivalent of the Molue in East Africa would be the Matatu, which has been the subject of popular culture discourses in the area. See, for example, Mbugua Wa-Mungai’s essay “Kaa Masaa, Grapple with Spiders: The Myriad Threads of Nairobi Matatu Discourse” in Ogude and Nyairo (2007), 25-57. Also see Wa-Mungai, “Innovating ‘AlterNative’ Identity: Nairobi *Matatu* Culture.” Kimani Njogu and John Middleton. Ed. *Media and Identity in Africa*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009. 267-274.

narratives about the ruling elite are enacted as partially captured by Isioma Daniel (2002).²⁷

The alternative public sphere is thus that space where, as I noted in my Introduction, ordinary citizens and sometimes progressive working class types conduct impromptu trials of the political leaders of the day and hand out summary judgments for their abysmal performance. And herein is some kind of paradox. For though the current Nigerian political arrangement may be described as “pseudo-democracy” with several principles of democratic governance turned upside down, what Charles Baudelaire said of societies where democracy has been institutionalized—read the Euro-western world—also applies to the Nigerian state: “In democratic societies public opinion is a pitiless dictator” (55).²⁸ Lyman Chaffee (1993) seems to have been justifying this statement when he noted that “[t]he effectiveness of the underground media stems from the lack of credibility of the state-controlled media (30).” And this has particularly been the case in Nigeria from the years of military dictatorship to the current democratic dispensation.

Reading the Popular: Street Stories, Print Media, New Media and “The Desire to Believe”

In his stimulating essay “The Desire to Believe,” William James (1996) declares that we have “the freedom to believe ‘what we will’”, and the “right to

²⁷ Isioma Daniel, “Broken Tales: Dialogues on a Bus,” *Thisday*, July 13, 2002, 31.

²⁸ Quoted by Matei Calinescu (1987) referencing Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jacques Crepet (Paris: Conard, 1932), VI, “Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses oeuvres,” VIII-IX, X-XI. I should quickly add that I am extending the meaning of “public opinion” in this context to include street stories through which the subject in postcolonial Nigeria articulate their opinion on public issues and governance.

believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will” (183). This right, for me, is a condition for the construction and reception of narratives by audiences. Yet in what can be taken as a further justification for this study, Bird and Dardenne (2009) affirm that “[i]ndeed, the audience role in news storytelling is under researched. We know very little about how journalism narratives enter daily life and consciousness” (212). Relatively true as the statement may be, it falls into conventional thinking on the subject in its presupposition that the flow of life stories is one dimensional: from journalism to the streets; indeed this is what Obiechina (2008) suggests when in his study of the influence of newspapers on the contents of Onitsha Market pamphlets he states that ordinary people “pore over newspapers pages as if they contained the rarest words of wisdom. That means that new ideas thrown up in the newspapers are soon picked up, committed to memory and sometimes put to new use by avid newspapers readers” (274). While acknowledging this pattern of flow (as Smokey Joe’s story would appear to support), I believe that it is more complicated, more interconnected, than some scholars including Bird and Dardenne would make us believe. In fact, the reverse tends to be the case especially in societies with a strong oral culture such as Nigeria. The fact remains that today, to borrow from Bird and Dardenne (2009), “[a] cacophony of narratives increasingly competes with mainstream journalism to define the day’s stories.” They add that: “[n]ews audiences choose and pick stories they want to attend to and believe, and choose from a seemingly endless supply of information to assemble their own stories” which “they produce and disseminate [...] on blogs, wikis, and personal web

sites” (212). This kind of framework forces us to see news as “part of a conversation” (Ibid.).

Identifying news as “part of a conversation” is critical to understanding the controversy surrounding how news stories are mediated or “read” or received/circulated amongst scholars. Schudson (1995) provides another lever for grappling with the controversy when he states rather matter-of-factly: “News in a newspaper or on television has a relationship to the “real world,” not only in content but in form; that is, in the way the world is incorporated into unquestioned and unnoticed conventions of narration, and then transfigured, no longer a subject for discussion but *a premise for any conversation at all*” (54). (Italics mine.) Often glossing over the significance of the idea of *conversation* in news stories’ circles, media researchers focus more on “dumbing down,” top-down, bottom up explanations of the complex relationship. Tracing the evolution of the theories, Elizabeth Barbosa (2005) identifies two related initial explanations or theories: Magic Bullet theory and Hypodermic Needle Theory (Lasswell 1927).²⁹

²⁹ Magic Bullet theory emphasizes the gullibility and passivity of media audiences, and the power of the media to shape public opinion. As Barbosa puts it, “[t]he belief is that messages are like “magic bullets”, they strike all members of the audience uniformly, creating even effects among them” (28). Similarly, Hypodermic Needle theory shares a similar interpretation. “Audiences are injected with a “shot” of information, which is believed to be capable of equally affecting audience’s thinking and behavior” (Ibid.). Other “mechanistic” or “direct effects” theories include the uses and gratifications theory (Rubin 1994; Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1973; Fisher 1978), and Dependency Theory—a variant of uses and gratifications theory—(MacFarland 1990, Brown and McQuail 1970). More contemporary theories of the relationship between media materials and the audience recognize the agenda-setting role of the media (Coleman et al 2010, Roberts et al 2002; Dearing and Rogers 1996; Rogers 1993); effects of news framing and salience (Entman et al 2010, Shah et al 2009, Kwansah-Aidoo 2005, Reese et al 2003); and the commercialization of news or “economic rationalization of journalism” (McManus 2010, Bagdikian 1992, Underwood 1993). Together, these approaches confirm that the “audience’s role in both responding to and creating “the story” that plays out in everyday life” (Bird and Dardenne 212) is a complex mosaic that can best be appreciated from the ideological position of the researcher or the context of the research.

Beyond media studies, it seems to me that in the Nigerian context, a better way to fully comprehend this media-audience relationship is through the bifocal lens of oral literature and popular culture. As Edelstein (1997) has argued, “[o]ne of the key concepts of the study of popular culture is that its producers create texts with certain ideological meanings, but consumers actively interpret the text to create their own meanings” (xii).³⁰ John Fiske (1989) puts it differently:

[...] the dominant cannot control totally the meanings that the people may construct, the social allegiances they may form. The people are not the helpless subjects of an irresistible ideological system, but neither are they free-willed, biologically determined individuals; they are a shifting set of social allegiances formed by social agents within a social terrain that is theirs only by virtue of their constant refusal to cede it to the imperialism of the powerful. (45-46)

Popular culture therefore rightly assigns agency to the audience or the reader, to the ordinary citizens who ‘consume’ the texts—bearing in mind, however, that I also argue that the general public sometimes produce the texts which are circulated by formal channels of popular culture, including the media. So that Edelstein relatively misses the point, and falls into that conventional loop, when he overstates that “in a postmodern society, one in which generations are defined by their cultural artifacts more than by age...the crisis in control (of a powerful, centralized media system) can be redefined as a shifting of power from the few to the many, and keeping it so” (xiii). Indeed, “new media cultures,” (Marshall

³⁰ See Alex S. Edelstein, *Total Propaganda: From Mass Culture to Popular Culture* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997) xii.

2004), also known as “new media order” (Morley and Robins 1995:11) or alternative media easily contradict such a point of view. The intervention of new media and the new virtual public sphere in the old debate about media power and control is illustrated by Bird and Dardenne’s (2010) declaration that: “Stories are powerful. That’s why governments, corporations, and special interests employ legions of people to create the right ones and alter, or alter our perceptions of, all the others” (214).³¹ They also see it as the reason “why so many people, including alternative and independent media activists [...] see [the Internet] as a best hope to get competing stories in circulation” (Ibid.), especially when “journalists [...] do not have the will to do it [the stories], or if the corporate and other owners do not provide the resources to do it” (Ibid.).

The best example in the Nigerian context would be *Sahara Reporters* whose slogan is “Report Yourself” or citizen journalism which we mentioned in the introductory chapter and which has played a significant role in the global circulation of subversive stories from the Nigeria streets. In his stimulating essay, “Alternative and Citizen Journalism,” Chris Atton privileges such citizen journalism and shows ways in which the Internet has democratized information flow, or how, as Roger Hardy writes, “in an age of globalisation, regimes can no longer cut their citizens off from news.”³² In fact, the January 2011 popular

³¹ A corollary to this would be found in the section in Gabriel García Márquez novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where following the massacre of about 3,000 striking workers in Macondo, “the official version repeated a thousand times and mangled out all over the country by every means of communications the government found at hand, was finally accepted: there were no dead” (Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Picador, 1978, 252.)

³²Roger Hardy, “Could other Arab countries follow Tunisia's example? BBC News Online, 14 January 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12198039> Web. January 15, 2011.

uprising in Tunisia is believed to have been galvanized by cyber dissidents.³³ However, some scholars have pointed out that claims about the democratic potentials of the internet may be exaggerated (Bauman 1998). And closer to the present-day Nigerian reality which I share, and for which some postcolonial studies scholars have critiqued the totalizing framework of globalization as noted earlier, Miller and McHoul (1998) argue that: “Contrary to what academics, themselves members of the new global elite, tend to believe, the Internet and Web are not for anyone and unlikely ever to become open to universal use” (53). Details of why this is so is somewhat beyond the immediate scope of this study; but in a basic materialist sense, the preponderance of street stories and open parliaments in Nigeria—in spite of globalization and its advanced technological apparatuses—is partly attributable to poverty, perennial energy crisis, and other social dysfunctions of a Third World state which reduce access to such technologies, and makes orality an obvious alternative.

The sheer volume and influence of these street stories call further attention to the complicated nature of the relationship between ordinary people who read/hear news stories and their chicken-and-the-egg position of primacy in the process. It is important to think of news stories as sometimes bearing voices that hide in their transcriptions in print which “[i]f they are to speak, we must find a way to listen,” to echo Robert Bringhurst (1999: 114). It is for this reason that Karin Barber (1987) has noted that “[r]eading this kind of text is very difficult” (62), and cautions that:

³³ See Aidan Lewis, “Tunisia protests: Cyber war mirrors unrest on streets,” BBC News Online, 14 January 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12180954> Web. January 14, 2001.

Popular texts, then, should not necessarily be taken at face value: they cannot be assumed to mean all they say or say all they mean. But the hidden political application is not always deliberately inserted into texts to fool the regime. Sometimes the relationship of the sub-text to the text is more indefinite and undefinable. The political meaning may be only occasionally glimpsed, then, for the most part remaining submerged and unacknowledged. (62)

Listening to popular texts and excavating their messages therefore requires opening up oneself to their multiple meaning potentialities, and tracking the subtexts, metaphors and symbolic essence as the texts often rearticulate common themes, episodes or political experiences in circulation. The challenge of reading such texts is most felt in this project in Chapter Six where I analyze film and music texts. Here-in resides the “interpretative challenge” of this project which I tackle by drawing from literary theory and oral literature to track the street stories complete with their motifs, symbols, characters, etc. across multiple domains of popular cultural production, establishing their interconnectedness, and reading what they mean in the contextual specificities of each artist’s performance.

Governmentality,³⁴ “realism of the grotesque”³⁵ and Censorship

“Realism of the grotesque” and unspeakable corruption have encouraged the critical press in Nigeria to become allies of the people in their deployment of

³⁴ I use the term here in the general sense promoted by Mitchell Dean as relatively different from the original nuanced sense launched by Michel Foucault. Dean defines ‘governmentality’ in terms of “how we think about governing, with the different mentalities of government” (16). For details see the subsection ‘Governmentality’ in *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, Sage Publications Ltd, 1999, 16-20.

³⁵ I wrench this phrase from its context in John Fiske’s (1989) referencing of Bakhtin (1968) to evoke an opposition in terms of “the realism of the grotesque [being] opposed to the aesthetics of the beautiful” (88).

subversive narrative to undermine the ruling cabal. In aligning with the people, the critical press in Nigeria appears mindful of Bringham's (1999) view of news stories stated above. The critical press understood the irony that as Walter Rodney has written, "the principal 'industry' of many underdeveloped countries is *administration*" (32) [My emphasis]. In Nigeria the 'industry' is so huge that it has become a threat to national development essentially stemming from its abuse. A recent article on the soaring costs of governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic published in *The Guardian* (Lagos) informs that a group of lawyers led by Mazi Okechukwu Unegbu were reportedly perfecting plans to sue the Federal Government "over high cost of governance in the country, especially what they consider as unbearable cost of maintaining the National Assembly."³⁶

Critics have lamented such unpatriotic acts, describing them as an "abuse of democracy"; needless to add that the coup d'état and electoral violence cultures as well as the internecine wars which have plagued Africa have been driven by *administration* as the "principal industry," laced with unbridled corruption, and the neocolonial, neoliberal policies of Euro-American governments and their transnational agencies. Associated with this is the concept of the "rentier state," (Bates 1981) prebendalism,³⁷ a winner-takes-all political philosophy that enables the ruling class to privatize the commonwealth via the "resource curse" (Bates

³⁶ The newspaper further reports that Barrister Unegbu reeling out statistics regretted that: "With Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$45 billion, as against the United States of America's GDP of \$13 trillion, an average Nigerian Senator's \$1,500,000 annual allowance outweighs that of the US President put at a paltry \$400,000. According to him [Unegbu]: "Governance in Nigeria is very high and I can't understand why. I will give you some statistics: The US president's salary is \$400,000 per annum. The GDP of US is about \$13 trillion per year. Allowance for a Nigerian senator is \$1.5 million per year. And the GDP of Nigeria is about \$45 billion per year. And yet, these people want more."

³⁷ For more on this see Richard Joseph's seminal study of the system in his book *Prebendalism and Democracy in Nigeria*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

2008: 29)—especially oil in the Nigerian context. Indeed Bayart has called attention to the fact “[t]he authors of Nigeria’s draft constitution in 1976 [...] defined political power ‘as the opportunity to acquire riches and prestige, to be in a position to hand out benefits in the form of jobs, contracts, gifts of money, etc., to relations and political allies’” (xviii). So central an ‘industry’ in national life is “administration” that a recurrent motif in contemporary debates in African Postcolonial Studies is that of “the criminalization of the state in Africa.” African leaders’ penchant to abuse the idea of statehood as an organized society that seeks to meet the needs of her citizens has been thematized and proven to lead to the “criminalization of the economy” (Bayart 1999: xiii). The toxic metaphors that have emerged from these theorizing on the postcolonial state in Africa are those of criminality, predation or blood-sucking (vampire).

For Bayart and the scholars of the African postcolony, corruption and abuse of state apparatuses of power have contributed to the impoverishment of the subjects; what has not been so well theorized is that it has contributed immensely to the efflorescence of a street narrative culture that ridicules the ruling elite.³⁸

It is not surprising therefore that the “curse of dictatorship” has been a recurrent trope in African Postcolonial Studies and that this has shaped the contents and character of the street stories, often producing narratives that tend toward the mythic and the melodramatic. In contemporary scholarship, the theme (the “curse

³⁸ Although Bayart and Mbembe especially focus on francophone Africa, Cameroun to be more specific, their observations on the postcolonial state also applies to Nigeria which I use here as a classic case study. Bayart uses a common metaphor of the belly to represent the consumptive nature of Africa’s numerous dictators. For Mbembe (2001, 2002), who has vigorously attempted a deconstruction of the stereotypical or “archetypal representation” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:8) of the state in Africa,³⁸ it is the metaphors of corpulence and death so graphically articulated respectively in chapters four (*The Thing and its Double*), and three (*The Aesthetics of Vulgarly*) of his authoritative book *On the Postcolony* (2001) that he uses.

of dictatorship”) is often tied to the idea of state failure. Amongst studies of the postcolonial state in Africa that have been more audacious in their titles are *This House has Fallen* by Karl Maier, and *When Things Fell Apart* (2008) by Robert H. Bates. While *This House has Fallen* (2000) focuses on the failure of governance in Nigeria, Bates’ book reads like a non-fictional reinterpretation of Chinua Achebe’s celebrated novel *Things Fall Apart*.

Besides the ties in the titles, Bates’ book is a critical study of the postcolonial state in Africa showing how the colonialists were no longer the agent-provocateur of social disintegration but the emergent crop of post independence leaders who beclouded the “suns of independence” (Ahmadou Kourouma 1968). As Bates (2008) argues, “[t]he conditions that led to the breakdown of order in Africa include the authoritarian nature of its states and their rulers penchant for predation. By rendering their people insecure, they provoked insurgencies” (7), including narrative insurgencies I may add. In his searing expose of the failure of Nigerian leadership since independence, Osaghae (1998) uses the metaphor of paralysis to describe this state of anomy in his book with the evocative title *Nigeria since Independence: Crippled Giant*.³⁹ Such morbid pathological metaphors have expectedly found eloquent expression in the

³⁹ The postcolonial studies academics with insightful critiques of political administration in Africa comprise both foreign scholars and indigenous African intellectuals like Mbembe, Quayson and Osaghae. The significance of this is that the jury may since have passed judgment on the disconnect between Citizen and Subject, to borrow the title of Mahmood Mamdani’s (1996) important book. This point is significant against the backdrop of the earlier romanticization or idealization of “Mother Africa” by Leopold Senghor and the negritudists whom Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka lacerated with the often quoted critical barb: “The tiger does not profess its tigritude.” Besides, it also needs be stated that the foreign critics were accused of Eurocentricism. Understandably such accusations have relatively melted away as successive African dictators unwittingly rewrite the script that these postcolonial theorists have studied.

metaphor of illness which underscores many of the street narratives about political leadership in Nigeria.⁴⁰

Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) have noted that in some postcolonial contexts, where “banditry” by the rogue regimes and their Western godfathers “shades into low-level warfare” and yield “new cartographies of dis/order, [...] no genre of communication is authoritative: ‘dark circuits’ of rumor and popular media alike flash signs of inchoate danger beneath the banal surface of things” (9). Cognizant of the “dark circuits,” the underground media—comprising the popular press and purveyors of street stories in the urban sphere—cash in on them to spin plausible street narratives that easily fit into the ludicrous profiles of the thieving ruling oligarchy. So disturbed was the state by such narratives that under the Babangida dictatorship as Olatunji Dare (2010) has written, “hostage-taking became an instrument of press suppression” and where an editor was wanted and could not be found, “his wife was arrested and held until he showed up” as was the case with the wife of Paxton Idowu, editor of *The Republic*. “She was eight months pregnant” (18). Under the military news reporting was like a contest between penpoints, gunpoints and the elusive street storyteller.

Penpoints, Gunpoints and the “Oral Bomb”

Persuasive as the theorizing by the Comaroffs and other “progressive intellectuals”⁴¹ critique of the role of the Western to the postcolonial condition is,

⁴⁰ It should be noted however that the Comaroffs argue in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony* (2006) that in some postcolonial contexts, “banditry” by the rogue regimes and their Western godfathers “shades into low-level warfare as a mode of accumulating wealth and political allegiance [...], yielding new cartographies of dis/order: post-national terrains on which spaces of relative privilege are linked to one another by slender, vulnerable corridors that stretch across zones of strife, uncertainty, and minimal governance” (Ibid.).

they do not exculpate the thieving political class. The modes of engagement with postcolonial states' political dysfunction by stereotypical conservative scholars such as Bayart and Bates (and their African counterparts) find convergence in the narrative thrusts of stories by the popular press and the street storyteller in Nigeria. The convergence of these interests is inspired by an understanding of "news stories as stories as well as news", in which "[g]ood ones exhibit a narrative structure akin to the root elements in human drama,"⁴² and in which negative news sells more than the positive, developmental types.

Aware of the potency of street stories and how they mediate the content of the press, the Nigerian government has continued to devise policies and strategies targeted at gagging purveyors of those stories both in the press and on the streets. From Official Secrets Act to outright brutal censorship and repressive acts, nothing has been spared to stop the spread of "rumours" as the sign board mentioned earlier declares. Government extends such acts of censorship to other forms of popular cultural expression such as film and music as I demonstrate in Chapter Six. But the censorship has not gone unchallenged by civil society. One group that has championed the crusade against censorship and campaigned for freedom of information is the Freedom of Information (FOI) Coalition. It is in recognition of this right to information that ordinary people and the radical press evolve subversive strategies to deal with the political status quo. And that bring us

⁴¹ I am using the term here without prejudice to how problematic the term and its ally "organic intellectuals" can be. More so in the context of the differences between theory and praxis, and the pretensions and betrayals often associated with it as roundly discussed by John Michael in *Anxious Intellectuals*, Duke University Press, 2000.

⁴² Peter Golding and P. Elliot 2000: 633. The authors offer interesting overview of the point being made here in their discussion of the dramatic structure of news.

back to the adversarial role of the press and the people's participation in political discourses through "dangerous" street narratives that sometimes challenge the boundaries of fact and fiction even in their occasionally fragmentary and digressive form. Evidently, these "narrative warriors" (in the context of competing narratives) understand that the master narrative promoted by "the oppressive classes" (Foucault 1980: 1) must be challenged. In so doing they demonstrate, without formal education, that history, power and knowledge can be determined by the *will* of the 'strong' even under a "climate of fear",⁴³ and that it can be deployed to exact "retribution against those who were their enemies" (Foucault 1980: 3). This view on storytelling and the production of social history is further corroborated by Foucault's observation that "there is a battle for and around history going on at this very moment...The intension is to programme, to stifle what I've called 'popular memory'; and also to propose and impose on people a framework in which to interpret the present."⁴⁴

Foucault's view partly sheds light on my formulation of a common political impulse and social activism which drive both the committed news reporter and the street storyteller or 'historian.' So that on the one hand, we see the media as the Fourth Estate of the realm, and on the other, the street storyteller

⁴³ Wole Soyinka, *Climate of Fear: The Quest for Dignity in a Dehumanized World*, Random House, 2005. I use "will" in this context advisedly, considering Foucault's argument that "power is not built out of 'wills' (individual or collective), nor is it derivable from interests. Power is constructed and functions on the basis of particular powers, myriad issues, myriad effects of power" (*Power/Knowledge* 188). It is interesting to note too that both Foucault and Gilles Deleuze respectively privilege ordinary people's capacity for knowledge and for speaking for themselves rather than being represented by the so-called intellectual. See, respectively, the section On Intellectuals in Barry Smart, *Michel Foucault Revised* (1985), especially page 67; and Deleuze's conversation with Foucault in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* p. 209.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Gerald Robert Vizenor, *Narrative Chance: postmodern discourse on Native American Indian Literature* 193.

as guardian of the republic. Enmeshed in this concept, therefore, is the issue of the relationship between power and ideology in media texts, and in street stories. The relationship between the two in much of the Third World often reminds one of Ngugi's (1998) stark conceptualization of the conflict of "mutual antagonism" within. "In every absolutist state the holder of the *pen*, which forces words on paper, is seen as the enemy of the holder of the *gun*, which enforces words of the law," Ngugi writes, adding: "Penpoints and gunpoints thus stand in confrontation. [...] One has the capacity to spill ink only, the other the capacity to draw blood."⁴⁵

Various shades of engagement with the political status quo have emerged in the Nigerian press reflecting this confrontation highlighted by Ngugi. It is why I see the press in its calibrated roles as watchdogs, lapdogs, and I must add, attack dogs. It is indubitable whether the critical press in Nigeria was at its radical best during the years of military rule. Those years provide the context where Ngugi's *penpoint* and *gunpoint* conflict was most apparent. Complementing the vibrancy of the Nigeria press in those years of military dictatorship when the state operated like an undertaker, is the oral bomb—street stories as weapons of popular resistance. And it is for this reason that I link the two—the press and street stories—so closely.

Conclusion

From its origins in oral tradition through its reinvention by Christian missionaries and activist nationalists, the press in Nigeria has served as a popular

⁴⁵ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Toward a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University, 1998.

platform for the pursuit of public good. The public advocacy orientation of the traditional press pushed it into alliance with the interests of main streets' storytellers. Besides, the interdependence between news reporters and oral artists in the streets ensured that the symbiotic relationship between the two reflected in common discursive protocols such as the application of "atmospherics."

The end of dictatorship in 1999 however has relatively exposed the cracks in the walls of ideological leanings of media organizations whose unorthodox practices during the years of military dictatorship in Nigeria spawned such epithets as "guerrilla journalism," "adversarial journalism", "underground journalism," etc.—all of which were aimed at describing the existential strategies and discursive practices of the press and their affiliation to street narrative culture. Now, time has offered the critical distance for former practitioners/critics to re-dispassionately examine the ideological bent and unethical practices of the military years. Perhaps the most revealing study so far is Uko's *Romancing the Gun: The Press as a Promoter of Military Rule* (2004). As its title suggests, the book is an acerbic critique of how some journalists aided and abetted military dictators—either for the love of lucre or out of sheer naiveté. Sunday Dare, one of *The News /Tempo* magazines guerrilla journalists during the autocratic regimes of Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha lends credence to the argument in his book *Guerrilla Journalism* (2007).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Dare cites other scholars and journalists who share this view of how the media houses may have betrayed their outward political/ideological bent. What is more, the people's verdict on this matter was reflected in the downturn in patronage of some of the newspapers or news magazines in recent years. In fact *Tempo*, easily the most memorable representation of that brand of radical journalism ceased to exist not long afterwards.

The establishment of new media houses by politicians, mainly serving and ex-governors, may have begun to negatively impact the commitment of the Nigerian press to the people's welfare.⁴⁷ Consequently, as I track the production or rearticulation of street stories in these media channels in the new democratic dispensation, one needs to check for possible pro-establishment bias in the agenda-setting role or developmental journalism practice of the media houses.

Besides questions of media ownership and ideology, other issues implicated in this discourse and which have engaged media studies scholars over the years include print-capitalism, mergers/acquisitions, and media monopoly.⁴⁸ During the years of military dictatorship in Nigeria, the political/ideological leaning of newspapers/news magazines was simply pro-democracy, anti-military. But with the advent of democracy in 1999 and the emergence of allegedly corrupt state governors as owners of new media houses, that pseudo-liberal philosophical and attack-dog orientation may have weakened, but perhaps not to the extent that one would imagine. How far the news cum street stories respectively disseminated in open parliaments in the postcolonial city in and/or in the print media "give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness," to quote Ben Okri in the epigraph to this chapter, remains to be seen. The next three chapters in which I analyze media texts in relation to the kernel street stories about Nigeria's

⁴⁷ Amongst a gaggle of new media houses established by former and serving Governors are: *Daily Independent* owned by James Ibori, former Governor of Delta State standing trial for corruption; *The Sun* owned by Orji Uzor Kalu, former Governor of Abia State; *The Nation*, owned by Bola Ahmed Tinubu, former Governor of Lagos State; *The Westerner* and *The Compass* owned by the Governor of Ogun State, Gbenga Daniels.

⁴⁸ Although focusing on the media in the US, the most cited work on the subject, Ben Bagdikian's *Media Monopoly* provides useful insights into the issues at stake. Also, recent scholarship by Nick Couldry (*The Place of Media Power*) among others, has tried to trace how patterns of ownership affect the ideological leanings of media organizations, and of course the kind of stories they publish.

heads of state—represented by the two worst dictators in history and a most beleaguered elected president—tell the rest of the story.

Chapter Three

Dictatorship and the Narrative Imperative: Babangida – Dele Giwa, the

“Gloria Okon” theory, and the June 12 Abbatross

For sure, rumours have been an abiding companion of government officials in Nigeria. But not until the cancellation of the results of the June presidential elections, have rumours flowed so freely, so fast and so thick. And they are encircling just about everyone; from the president and his family, to plain outsiders. This time around, the rumour mill operates on a principle all its own—the more the tale strains credibility, the more plausible it becomes to the listeners. (Godwin Agbroko 1993: 16)

So far I have provided a wide-ranging background to this study covering the explication of key terms and concepts, as well as the overarching media environment and socio-political context that frame the production and circulation of street stories in urban Nigeria. Foregrounded in the discussion has been the symbiotic connection between the oral and the written, street stories and the press, in relation to postcolonial governmentality. In this chapter, I commence close analysis of the news texts cum street narrative culture with reference to the Babangida dictatorship. I focus in effect on the triangular narrative threads that defined the Babangida era—The Gloria Okon “theory” and the assassination of the journalist Dele Giwa; stories associated with the SAP (Structural Adjustment Program) riots and the missing \$12.4 billion Gulf War oil windfall; and finally, the June 12 election annulment stories. Since the preceding chapters have

provided considerable backdrop to the regimes of Generals Babangida and Abacha, a thumbnail sketch of the most gruesome aspects of their combined twelve-year pestilential reign of terror and corruption is all that is needed to enable us to fully understand why their regimes gave impetus to street stories, and then launch me into the textual analysis proper.

Fortunately, in revisiting the Abacha years which succeeded Babangida's regime after civilian administration stint, Isaac Olawale Albert (2010) provides the needed macabre bridge for entering into a discussion of both the Babangida era and the Abacha years, and the street stories they provoked. Albert writes:

It has been agreed by most critical observers that the Abacha regime was Nigeria's worst regime, one that used assassination as a direct principle of state policy. The state under Abacha was under the grip of a criminal martial cabal that defined its preservation in power and the elongation of its privileges as constitutive of the national security interests of the state. Against this backdrop, prominent citizens who opposed the regime in one way or another, including even ordinary citizens who were involved in public protest, were seen as random targets for elimination. (213-214)

And Abacha was one of Babangida's legacies, his Siamese twin and arrowhead of that "criminal martial cabal" who was believed to have been left behind by Babangida when he "stepped aside" to protect the interest of the cabal. Albert further observes, rather disturbingly, that "[i]t is paradoxical, however, that the eight-year rule [from 1999-2007] of Olusegun Obasanjo, another army general, witnessed more high-profile assassinations in Nigeria than was witnessed under

General Abacha” (214).¹ Given that claim and the belief that the spate of political assassinations increased during the Abacha years (1994-1998), it needs emphasizing that the General Babangida years (1984-1993) inaugurated dastardly, commando-style assassination as “the central instrument of statecraft,” to paraphrase Albert (213). For it was under Babangida’s reign that the brilliant journalist, Dele Giwa, was assassinated on October 17, 1987 in an unprecedented manner in Nigerian history—through a parcel bomb that ushered in a sanguinary chapter in Nigeria’s political and media history.

The gruesome assassination of Dele Giwa illustrates what I mean by the title of this section: Dictatorship and the Narrative Imperative. Committed only three years into Babangida’s eight-year reign, the sanguinary elimination of the celebrated journalist and co-founder of *Newswatch* magazine—an organization that I worked for early in my career as a journalist—brings to bold front and centre, the imperative of controlling the master narrative in society, especially under dictatorship; more so in the context of competing street cum media narratives that defined the Babangida years, and finally forced him out of office. The narrative imperative represented by the oral bomb—everyday street stories—combined with the reports of the radical press to pit everyday people against the

¹ Indeed one of the most riveting assassinations was that of Bola Ige, an Attorney-General and Minister of Justice in President Obasabjo’s cabinet, on December 21, 2001, two days after I was also shot at by gun men under suspicious circumstances while I worked as a journalist with a newspaper house in Lagos. Like other political assassinations, the security agencies have yet to track the assassins, thereby confirming the widely circulated street stories believing that such assassinations were largely state sponsored. For more on this see Albert (2010). Also see *Criminal Politics: Violence, “Godfathers” and Corruption in Nigeria*, Human Rights Watch, October 2007 (42, n128): “Prominent Nigerians who have been assassinated in unsolved crimes since the return to civilian rule include—along with Bola Ige—Chief Harry, Funsho Williams, Aminasaori Dikibo, Barnabas Igwe, and Dele Arojo.”

generals in a dramatic game of domination and defiance, and finally proved too much for General Babangida, the self-styled Evil Genius, aka Maradona,² to bear.

During Babangida and Abacha's draconian regime—for under Babangida Abacha was Chief of Army Staff and perhaps the most powerful member of the Armed Forces Ruling Council, more regarded than Babangida's deputy then and Chief of General, Staff Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe—a rash of street narratives and radical print media reports redefined their actions and policies. These narratives combined to finally influence widespread disenchantment and riots that contributed to making the country ungovernable for them, and thus confirming our earlier rejection of Mbembe's (2001) theory that such a narrative process “does not increase either the depth of subordination or the level of resistance” (111). Babangida conceded the impact of the narratives in his “stepping aside” speech of August 17, 1993, during which a visibly shaking general painfully confessed that he and his family had so become the butt of daily verbal attacks, hate mails and evil wishes that as a “personal sacrifice” he was offering to “step aside” as president and commander in chief. Seventeen years after, Babangida again confessed his trepidation then in a recent interactive session with members of the Correspondents Chapel of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) Niger

² Okey Ndibe gave the wily General this appellation after the legendary Argentine footballer Diego Amando Maradona as a metaphor for his vacillation and nimble dribbles around transfer of power to an elected successor. Ndibe's recollection is most illuminating: “In 1986, on the first anniversary of the man's rule, I wrote a column in the (now defunct) *African Guardian* [magazine] in which I likened Babangida's political style to the dribbling wizardry of Argentine soccer star Diego Maradona. That name, Maradona, stuck on Babangida and has become one of his more famous monikers. Evil genius, I understand, is a tag Babangida adopted. My argument, in baptizing IBB with Maradona in 1986, was that, while the soccer player dribbles in order to create scoring opportunities, Babangida dribbled as an end in itself. There was little or no sense of purpose to his statecraft.” (“Is Obama romancing Babangida?” <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/okey-ndibe/is-obama-romancing-babangida.html>) March 15, 2010.

state on July 18, 2010: “People were shouting that I was the problem of the nation and that Nigeria will tear apart because I was the embodiment of all that was bad. Then in the interest of peace, I said ‘I will step aside’” (Aideloje 2010). So memorable was the “stepping aside” scene and the content of that speech that I remember them clearly. Reuben Abati, a leading Nigerian newspaper columnist, recalls it this way: “In 1993, General Babangida [...] introduced a dubious phrase into the Nigerian political lexicon when he said that he was "stepping aside.”³

Understandably, Babangida also reiterated the menace of street narratives and their contribution to his downfall in his valedictory speech of August 27, 1993. A bitter General, conscious of his unenviable place in history, said in an effort to defend some of his unpopular actions or “legacies”:

[...] it should also be recalled that the Administration was criticized and harassed by sections of the media, and by so-called human rights activists who believe that historical progress can be recorded without cost to society. These activists also peddled ignorance of the problems of human rights in advanced countries when such countries were at our stage of development. The Administration was also vilified to no end because of the ban [on certain categories of politicians].⁴

Not surprising, more than any other past head of the Nigerian State, Babangida has made the most effort to fabricate (or if you will, rewrite) history to celebrate his perceived “heritage”, and retains, to borrow from Dare (2010), “at his beck and call a Brain Trust of palace intellectuals” (361) or “State House professors”

³ See “IBB: What heritage?” <http://www.dawodu.com/ibb.htm> Web. September 12, 2010.

⁴ See “Our achievements may not measure up to our dreams but no one can fault our resolve and determination ...” in *The Guardian*, Friday, August 27, 1993. 10.

(281). Citing four volumes,⁵ Abati develops this idea further as he takes issues with:

the compulsion with which General Babangida seeks to document himself, and sponsor occasional publicity programmes about his place in the scheme of Nigerian affairs, there can be no doubt that he remains a man of ambition, obsessed with the public perception of his intervention in our lives between 1985 and 1993. I suppose this is more out of guilt, rather than the love of argument and ideas. In the pursuit of this enterprise, General Babangida has never been in short supply of contractual historians and professional revisionists who are determined to turn darkness into light, and truth into another truth, simply by employing rhetoric, marketing gimmicks, and by inflicting IBB on the public continuously as a brand that must be recognised. (Ibid.)

Besides such sponsored hagiographies, Babangida preceded the governor-publishers we mentioned above in setting up what he had hoped would be the best ultra modern (newspaper) publishing business in Africa with his defunct Triple Heritage Conglomerate, the flagship of which was the short-lived *Heritage* newspaper.

Clearly, with Babangida, the idea of competing narratives, the obsession with controlling the dominant narrative about a political subject, reached its

⁵ *IBB: A Heritage of Reforms*, 1 & 2, eds. Bala Yunus Mohammed and Chidi Amuta; *Prince of the Niger: The Babangida Years (1992)* by Chidi Amuta; *Foundations of A New Nigeria* by Sam Oyovbaire and Tunji Olagunju; *Transition to Democracy in Nigeria (1985-1993)* by Tunji Olagunju, Adele Jinadu and Sam Oyovbaire (Spectrum, 1993). *The News* magazine also called attention to Babangida's obsession to rewrite history in a cover story, "IBB Fights Back, Manipulates Transition, Rewrites History." (*The News*, November 30, 1998).

pinnacle, reflecting, as it were, Thomas King's (2003) thesis in a related Aboriginal Canadian oral culture that: "Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous" (9). Even more so when they are street stories; "for once a story is told it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world" (Ibid. 10). And so, the General has continued to struggle to combat the numerous damaging street stories about him flying like missiles in the Nigerian polity, especially in the urban axis of Lagos-Ibadan where the media houses that accelerated their spread are concentrated. Arthur Nwankwo, a public intellectual and publisher further articulates Babangida's narrative obsession in *Nigeria: The Stolen Billions*, a searing postmortem of the "years of decay" (130) and "Looting Incorporated"⁶ as he aptly calls it.

Though written in the context of the 1990s, Nwankwo's perceptive analysis resonates with Nigeria's post-military condition today. For nearly two decades after "stepping aside" Babangida has not let up in his determination to re-write history; indeed he appears even more desperate in the context of his recent aborted aspirations to return to Aso Rock, the seat of government in Abuja, through the ballot box in 2011 rather than through a coup d'état which he is more familiar with from his military career; this time strategically recruiting Raymond Dokpesi, chairman of a leading private broadcast media conglomerate—Africa Independent Television and Ray Power FM—as director of his campaign organization.

⁶ The term made popular by the press during Babangida's regime echoes a cover story of *The News* magazine: "Looting Incorporated, How Abubakar and his Generals Plunder Nigeria," May 17, 1999. Also see, for example, *TELL* magazine's cover story: "Babangida's Business Empire, The Story of His Multi-Billion Dollar Deals. *TELL*, October 18, 1993.

At this juncture the pertinent question to ask is: What indeed were the main stories that derailed Babangida's convoluted "419" political game?⁷ The road to the forced exit of the embattled General was paved with the three-themed or three-tier street stories I identified at the beginning of this chapter. These tripartite narrative strands combined with other forces to sack the General, and to plunge Nigeria into a political tsunami from which it is yet to fully recover.

In equating General Babangida (also known as IBB) with "419"—a Nigerian metaphor for crime, especially of the notorious e-mail scam type derived from section 419 (Advance-Fee Fraud) of the criminal code—Apter (1999) summarizes the popular perception of the gap-toothed dictator in the Nigerian street imaginary, and his association with the rot that enveloped the country following his reign. Amongst the terms with which his public image was tarred in street discourses for his "proliferation of fashionable fraud" (James 2001: 23), the most memorable are perhaps "settlement master" or "*egunje master*."⁸ These and

⁷ Apter has offered one of the most chilling studies of the five-star 'trickster' General, and how his regime introduced "419," an obnoxious term associated with the Advance Fee Fraud criminal code of Nigeria, into the Nigerian street lexicon. See Apter's "I.B.B. = 419: Nigerian democracy and the politics of illusion", in J. L. and J. Comaroff (eds), *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa: Critical Perspectives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1999, 267-307. Other related studies include Apter (2005), Anton (2009), Smith (2007), Baines (2003), Berry (2006), Edelson (2006), and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's humorous fictional engagement with the phenomenon, *I Do Not Come to You By Chance*, Hyperion Books, 2009.

⁸ Literally means "corruption master." In a 1993 article entitled "Words" published in *Ad-lib*, my column in a popular general interest magazine of which I was the editor then, I tried to deconstruct such terms that gained currency during Babangida's regime. "With each bland, dribbling speech the retired general made," I wrote in the column then, "he turned his era into one which unwittingly enriched the vocabulary of Nigerian English." My list then included the following words/terms and acronyms which have continued to recur in public discourse in Nigeria albeit in a pejorative sense: "Settlement," 'annulment,' 'Option A4,' 'open-secret ballot,' 'a little to the right, a little to left of the centre,' 'August 27,' 'newbreed politicians,' 'political impasse,' 'hand-over' [...] 'money bags,' 'sedition,' 'detention,' 'proscription,' 'first ladysm,' 'transition,' 'SAP,' 'MAMSER,' 'ECOMOG,' 'Better life,' 'OIC,' 'ABN,' and 'interim government' (*Classique*, September 20, 1993, 8.2: 22). In a related context, Igarumah (2004) defines perhaps the most pervasive of the terms "settlement" thus: "The settlement culture meant buying over critics of government policies through financial inducement. It was a policy used to silence and blackmail

other terms which gained currency in the context of Babangida's regime and the economic hardships inaugurated by SAP point to the General's legitimization or "democratization" of graft and as tools for survival and governance.

Generally, as Smith has noted, "[c]orruption in Nigeria was exacerbated by years of military rule, during which those who controlled the official tools of violence plundered the nation's resources" (141). And "although Babangida followed a long lineage of corrupt leaders, he raised the process of looting government money in the name of development to an art form, and ushered in an era in which government parastatals and NGOs [Non Governmental Organizations] would become primary vehicles for venality" (Smith 2007: 101). In so doing he created a climate of corruption. As M.D. Yusuf, a former Inspector General of Police and presidential aspirant bluntly summarizes it, "Babangida went all out to corrupt society [...] this corruption remains and it is very corrosive to society" (Maier 2000: 45). Since there is voluminous literature on critical aspects of Babangida's regime (Osaghae 1998, Nwankwo 2002, Maier 2002, Smith 2007, Robinson 2003, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative 1995, Dare 2010, Adebani 2008, Ajibade 2003, Igbarumah 2004, etc.), I return, instead, to analyze the Dele Giwa and "Gloria Okon" theme.

Although Babangida emerged in 1985 against the backdrop of considerable public discontent against the iron-clad rule of his predecessor General Muhammadu Buhari and his deputy, General Tunde Idiagbon, the unusually titled military "President" (who ruled from December 1983 to August

the opposition." Traditional rulers, academics, soldiers, politicians, social crusaders, writers and artists were 'settlement' targets" (249). It also included co-opting them into his regime through executive appointments.

1985) was ushered into power with muffled street stories about the circumstances that prompted his palace coup. The popular story that floated in the streets then was that Babangida plotted the palace coup to sabotage investigations for drug dealing and international narcotics trafficking, and so avert imminent arrest and trial. This story apparently drew energy from the General Buhari regime's zero tolerance for drug trafficking, provoking public outcry in its short term for executing drug traffickers. Whether this street story about Babangida was true or not remains to be proven. But it seems more than accidental that a US Country Report on drug trade in Nigeria at the peak of Babangida's reign in the 1980s highlights its increase during his tenure.⁹ Writing in "Was Babangida a Drug Baron?" posted on www.againstbabangida.com, a web site dedicated to campaigning against the retired General's ambition to return to the Presidency through the ballot box in 2011, the web site Administrator affirms that his team researched the rumour of Babangida's alleged involvement in drug dealing and found it to be true. He draws attention to a more damning report similar to the US Country Report done for the Canadian Parliament on the drug trade in Africa by Alain Labrousse, former Director of the *Observatoire géopolitique des drogues* (OGD), Geopolitical Watchdog on Drugs, and co-author, with Laurent Laniel and Alan A. Block, of *The Geopolitics of Drugs, 1998/1999* (2001). In the report Labrousse declares rather authoritatively:

⁹ See Joseph P. Smaldone's Chapter 5 of *Nigeria: A Country Study* edited by Helen Chapin Metz. US Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Library of Congress web site: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/cntrystd.ng> Online. September 26, 2010. Hugo Odiogor offers a similar damning report in "The Drug Abbatross," a cover story he wrote for *The Sentinel* magazine, 1. 4 (March 21, 1994): 16-20. According to Odiogor, "[f]rom relative obscurity in the early 1970s, Nigeria entered the 80s as a major transit country, setting off a chain of dramatic contests of between traffickers in narcotics and the law enforcement community" (16). The "coincidence" of the growth with the rise of Babangida is a matter for conjecture.

While small-scale trafficking benefits from the protection afforded by state officers (police officers, customs officers and so on) and, in certain instances, local politicians, as soon as trafficking operations increase in scope, they involve the complicity and direct participation of politicians at the national level. The international community has long considered Nigeria a narco-state: the United States put it on the list of "decertified" countries between 1994 and 1999, and the Dublin Group, consisting mainly of the European countries, unflinchingly called it a "narco-regime." *Its president, General Babangida, and his wife have been suspected of engaging in cocaine trafficking*, along with numerous other military officers. [Emphasis added]

That suspicion, it seems to me, partly arose from the street stories that escorted Babangida's rise to power as suggested above. The Gideon Orkar-led 1990 coup plotters referenced it in their coup speech, identifying Babangida and cohort's indulgence in cocaine, homosexuality, etc., as some of the reasons why they struck.

The "narco-regime" story became even more complicated, developing like a movie script as Babangida's regime progressed. The next chapter of the story, seemingly implausible in its untrammelled ghoulishness in Nigerian popular imagination, was scripted in bloody ink. It was the assassination of Dele Giwa who was believed in popular imagination to have made remarkable breaks in his investigation of the case of one Gloria Okon, a suspected drug dealer whose disappearance from detention while awaiting trial became the staple of at least

three versions of a story circulating in the streets of Lagos then, and in other Nigerian cities especially in the south. One version claimed that “Gloria Okon” was only a symbolic name for a key member of the Babangida drug gang; another claimed that it was a fake Gloria Okon that was imprisoned while the security agencies allowed the original Gloria Okon to slip away abroad; yet another version claimed that the “official government story” that the “detained” Gloria Okon died in detention was not a ruse as sections of the public believed, but indeed true, as it was a way of eliminating a principal witness capable of implicating the “narco-regime.” www.againstbabangida.com shows familiarity with the street theory around Gloria Okon as it writes hyperbolically: “Let's face it –we have all always suspected Ibrahim Babangida of being a drug dealer. The story of Gloria Okon, Dele Giwa's death, the burning of the Ministry of Defence [Headquarters on April 15, 1993] and other stories are all allegedly tied to an official drug ring during IBB's regime”(“Was Babangida a Drug Baron?”).

In that short statement is a summary of the kernel of the everyday stories interpreting the unprecedented incidents in Nigerian history. Perhaps more than any other Nigerian, social activist and iconoclastic author of *Sex is a Nigger's Game*, *The End of Knowledge*, etc., Naiwu Osahon, has pursued this theory to a significant extent. Osahon not only produced a series of articles (“Surviving the viper's poisoned food”) in *The Sun* newspaper that articulates the street theory eloquently,¹⁰ it cost him his column as he told me when we met in Lagos on August 24th, 2005 while I was consulting as literary editor for *NewAge*

¹⁰ See “How do we survive the viper's poisoned food?” (In three parts published across three weeks) *Daily Sun*, Thursday, June 24, 2004. 22; July 1, 2004. 29; July 8, 2004. 34.

newspapers. Osahon informed me at the time that he was looking for an alternative platform to continue his pursuit of the Gloria Okon story, and wondered if I could help him secure a column in *NewAge*.¹¹ Osahon was convinced that Babangida and his agents instigated the cancellation of the column in *The Sun* because of his sustained interest in the Gloria Okon/Dele Giwa assassination narrative. But thanks to the Internet, Osahon recently restored the kernel of the Gloria Okon story as circulated in the streets in a more comprehensive and more widely read format online at www.republicreport.com, among other web sites.¹²

So much is packed into Osahon's narrative and in the entire trilogy "How do we survive the viper's poisoned food?" published in *The Sun* that they read like a short history of critical aspects of Babangida's pseudo-odyssey on the Nigerian political landscape. Surprisingly, there is no mention in *Born to Run*, the authoritative biography of Dele Giwa written by Dele Olojode and Onukaba Adinoyi Ojo,¹³ that Giwa's assassination was related to his investigation of the Gloria Okon saga. Indeed not one of the four charges that Giwa was confronted

¹¹ An excerpt from the mail reads: "I read *NewAge* for the first time on 24 August 2005 after a chance meeting with Nduka Otiono. I agreed with Nduka to transfer my column in *The Sun* to the *NewAge*. I am sure you know I am controversy number one [...] I am thinking of starting my contributions with a one or two-page spread for a maximum two consecutive days' article on IBB. I am thinking of a title like "IBB should be in prison not Aso Rock." It has to be used quickly in one day or consecutively in two days at the most because of the pressure (bribe, etc.) *New Age* is likely to come under from IBB sources, at least, to suspend it."

¹² See <http://www.republicreport.com/exclusive-general-ibrahim-badamosi-babangida-the-evil-candidate-written-by-naiwu-osahon/> for more on this.

¹³ Regrettably, the important book published by Spectrum Books, Ibadan, Nigeria, is out of print since "the publisher had to withdraw [it] from the market because of a threat to his life" (Ajibade 2008: 40). However, I got an e-copy from one of the authors and a friend, Onukaba Adinoyi Ojo. The page references here are to the e-copy. It should be noted at once that Ray Ekpu, Giwa's colleague at *NewsWatch* and subject of some critique in the biography, attacked the book in a review in *NewsWatch* of December 28, 1987, pp 10 and 11. Ekpu angrily described the book as being "more sensational than authentic" and "closer to fact-ion than non-fiction" (11).

with by agents of the State Security Service on Friday, October 17, 1986 two days before his assassination included any reference to the Gloria Okon story. But suspicion that whatever led to the assassination of Giwa was related to his acclaimed investigative journalistic project gravely affected the powers that be in postcolonial Nigerian military dictatorship lay in the sophisticated manner of his assassination and the developments leading up to, and since following it. The scene in his study where the bomb exploded reads like a fictional account of some Al Qaeda suicide bomb attack (Born to Run 90):

The skin of his arms peeled in her [Funmi, his wife's] hands. She screamed for help. Giwa cried out in pain. Giwa's night shirt caught fire. His wife tore it off him. It was then she saw his thighs. Both of them were shattered. The bones stuck out, splinters of bone meshed with shredded flesh. Funmi's mind shut out the image. Her only thought was to get him out before the smoke—he was already coughing—choked him to death. (96)

The scene underscores media images of Giwa's demonic assassination which filled the national imaginary like some weird science fiction narrative, and opened another chapter in ordinary people's efforts to comprehend the "reality of the grotesque" orchestrated by postcolonial tyrannical leaders, through street stories. Thus, it appears from Osahon's submissions that the "Evil Genius" did not only appreciate the necessity to combat narratives in the public sphere, and indeed championed hagiographers to win it, but also attacked sources of such narratives as Osahon affirms. The turn of events following Giwa's assassination on October

19, 1986, and shortly after the Babangida regime's introduction of SAP, showed how complicated the narrative war could be, and how destructive.

SAP riots, \$12.4 billion Gulf War oil windfall, and a Riot of Narratives

Against the backdrop of the street characterization of Babangida as a drug dealer, murderer (with regard to the unproven case of Dele Giwa), and his personification of corruption incorporated,¹⁴ it was an angry public that reacted to his act of betrayal; betrayal because he cleverly and opportunistically fostered the kind of civic engagement I discussed earlier by devising populist initiatives, open debates and public consultations, etc., on whether Nigeria should accept the conditional World Bank/International Monetary Fund (IMF) panacea for her ailing economy—mainly through SAP—and finally disregarded the popular opposition to it (Ihonvbere 1994: 119; Mojubaolu Olufunke Okome 1998). For Babangida and his economic wonks, “*there is no alternative to SAP,*” to quote their chorus line then justifying the unbridled liberalization of the Nigerian economy in order to meet the conditions given by the Bretton Woods institutions. The hellish hardships suffered by the masses were too much to bear and so unequivocally captured by the press that one of the most memorable images of it is inscribed in a 1988 statement by Olusegun Obasanjo who declared that SAP lacked “a human face and the milk of human kindness.” There were: steep devaluation of the Naira, Nigeria’s currency; massive deregulation and colossal

¹⁴ In *Criminal Politics: Violence, “Godfathers” and Corruption in Nigeria*, Human Rights Watch, October 2007 report on Nigeria sheds more light on this: “From 1985 until 1998 Nigeria was governed by two military dictators, Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha. This period proved disastrous for Nigeria. As Babangida and Abacha helped to deepen and entrench patterns of corruption and human rights abuse from which the country has since made almost no progress in escaping. *Babangida was widely accused of institutionalizing corruption as a tool of political control* (13). [Emphasis added].

job losses; higher cost of living with worthless wages;¹⁵ labour strikes; schools closures; rapid institutional decay; etc.

The public exploded with outrage in 1989—a year of upheavals in many other parts of the world, especially in Eastern Europe—not long after the promulgation of SAP; the effects triggered what looked like Nigerians’ first attempt at mass revolution championed by university students across the country. Also known in the street as the “Babangida Must Go” riots, the riots threatened the survival of the military regime which responded with such maximum force that the press launched another moniker for him (and later General Abacha) in public discourse: “maximum ruler.” A peep into Nigerians’ blogosphere gives us more insight into the ravages of SAP. In “Look at all these rumours!” Chxtha’s world at blogspot, the blog writer Chxtha recollects the SAP riots, providing juicy background from the streets and articulating the scenario as it exists in popular imagination to date, while emphasizing the power of street stories for political resistance:

In 1989, a story spread like wildfire around Nigeria. The gist was that the wife of the then Head of State, Mrs. Maryam Babangida had deposited large sums of money in some banks in the United Kingdom and Switzerland. The effects of the story were both immediate, and understandable given that at that point in time the country was in the

¹⁵ Two memorable stickers issued by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) then tell the whole story: “My take home pay cannot take me home,” and “My boss is a comedian. The salary he pays me is a joke.” For more on the ravages of SAP see Osaghae (1998: 196-207), Ihonvbere (1994: 119-149; Igbarumah (2004: 253-257). Babangida’s half-hearted palliatives such as MAMSER (Mass Mobilization for Self Reliance and Economic Recovery) could not alleviate galloping inflation, poverty and general hardship.

throes of a major recession that was caused by the IMF recommended Structural Adjustment Programme [...] Overnight on the campuses of the nation's universities, students met and decided to protest. [...] The cry was 'Babangida must go.' [...] The riots festered intermittently for about two months (May and June) before the government of the day reacted with the decisiveness, violence and brutality that only a military government is capable of. Soldiers were deployed to put down the disturbances, and people got shot. Officially, about 500 people died, but being Naija [street argot for Nigeria], the number was probably a lot more. For me, that is academic. [...] As is usual with a lot of Nigerian protests, there was a general lack of direction, and after the initial *gra-gra* [street form for "bragging"], the whole thing lost focus. Second, *the riots were caused by a story that no one bothered to authenticate*. Granted that the Babangida government looted the Nigerian treasury on a scale never before, or never since seen. Up until today, most of those monies can't be traced. But at the end of the day, those rumours were just that, rumours. People died because of the rumours.¹⁶ [My emphasis]

This extended quote provides insights into the texture of certain street stories: the use of city argot and the feeling of angst and cynicism which envelops the transmitters, and their sometimes sophisticated profile—showing that it is not just the so-called ordinary people that are its aficionados.

¹⁶ See "Look at all these rumours!" Chxtha's world at blogspot: <http://chxta.blogspot.com/2007/03/look-at-all-these-rumours.html> Online. Retrieved March 7, 2007.

The quotation also presents the context in which stories of Babangida's handling of the controversial \$12.4 billion windfall from the 1991 Gulf War were told and interpreted in the streets and by the press, and how they have reincarnated in new media. Babangida had set up a Dedicated Account for the receipts from the sale of oil in its inflated prices while the US invasion of Iraq lasted. But the money later disappeared and has been the subject of public discussions since then; even becoming one of the key points on which the Okigbo Panel indicted Babangida.¹⁷

More interestingly, the popular perception of Babangida and his clique as personifying corruption generated more damaging street stories, the most memorable of which I would describe as the *Ebony* magazine saga. As the story goes, the popular Black magazine founded in the US by African American John H. Johnson had in one of its issues then carried a story of the richest people in the world; something similar to the annual ritual associated with *Forbes*. In that hallowed list, claims the street story, was Nigeria's dictator, General Babangida and his wife the First Lady, Mariam at number nine—there were various versions of the general's position on the controversial list. The list was said to have contained the names of other “stinking rich” members of Babangida's cabinet.

¹⁷ For details of the Okigbo Panel Report the official copy (as opposed to the kind of fake propagandistic documents circulated by activists and haters of the corrupt state) of which some media reports in Nigeria suggest is missing. (See Nwankwo 2002: 174). The main thrust of the report reads: “Between September, 1988 and 30th June, 1994, US \$12.4 billion had been recorded in these Accounts. That US \$12.2 billion was liquidated in less than six years; that they were spent on what could neither be adjudged genuine high priority nor truly regenerative investment; that neither the President [Babangida] nor the Governor [of Central Bank] accounted to anyone for these massive extra budgetary expenditures; that these disbursements were clandestinely undertaken while the country was openly reeling with a crushing external debt overhang – these represent, Sir [General Abacha], no matter the initial justification for creating the Accounts, a gross abuse of public trust” (174). Babangida had since secured a court injunction against the report on technical grounds.

Photocopies of the said edition of *Ebony* magazine were circulated in the streets much so that Nigeria's fiery social activist and educationist, Dr. Tai Solarin¹⁸ got a copy of it and spoke to it in the media. Matters reached a climax when Dr Solarin who had been lured into accepting an appointment in the Babangida regime as Chairman of the populist People's Bank—a grassroots bank ostensibly established as part of the measures to ameliorate the ravages of SAP and in consonance with Dr Solarin's crusade for the masses—was invited to national television by the regime and asked to produce a copy of the said *Ebony* magazine. A most embarrassed and humiliated Dr Solarin could not authenticate the street story with evidence from an original copy of the edition of *Ebony* magazine. In the words of Dare (2010), "he was made to come across in the famous Television Treatment as a doddering old man given to rumour peddling, an intellectual who has not the least regard for facts or for the rules of evidence, a rabble-rouser" (79). Reaffirming the centrality of such street stories to everyday life in Nigeria, Dele Momodu, a presidential aspirant for the 2011 elections and publisher of the international celebrity magazine *Ovation*, offers a slightly different version of the *Ebony* magazine episode:

¹⁸ A web site dedicated to the life and work of Dr Solarin profiles him thus: "Tai was a terror to many governments, past and present, and was in and out of the slammer several times. He had a near god-like disdain for danger and often travelled where angels feared to tread. Whenever he was convinced about something, he would let the world know where he stood. And he stood there defiantly. Sometimes he erred, because as a human being he was susceptible to rumours. If he erred, he often did on the side of the common man or on the side of crusading for honesty and integrity. When he performed the last public act of marching for democracy the Sunday before his death, he wrote for himself a fitting epitaph. He will miss the great tom-tom of the triumph of democracy over dictatorship in Nigeria when it occurs, but we shall remember him as one who gave the last ounce of his energy to that struggle. See <http://www.taisolarin.org/profile.html> (Web. October 29, 2007).

The rumour mill is Nigeria's biggest industry - bigger than NNPC.¹⁹ We are often regaled with tales that sound like tales by moonlight but which oftentimes turn out to be true. Rumours always have a melody; they are lubricants of democracy. In 1989, Dr Tai Solarin swore that there was a publication in America's popular black magazine, *Ebony*, about our former ruler, now warming up for another chance, General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida. According to the talebearers, Babangida had billions of dollars in Swiss bank accounts, his wife, [...] First Lady, Maryam Ndidiamaka [...] Babangida owned a very exclusive boutique in Paris, France. Of course, the rumours developed wings and began to fly like bushfire in harmattan.²⁰

Although some detail in Momodu's version differs—the boutique angle—the kernel of the narrative remains the same. Interestingly, over a decade since the street story was produced and circulated, it is still in circulation, shifting from the streets to the more permanent archives of the internet which was hardly available in Nigeria when it first broke out.

The role of the internet in the archiving and transmission of narrative missiles against Babangida and his cohort is also reflected in the interesting responses to Sola Odunfa's BBC report, "Lies, politics and Nigeria's great rumour mill" from which I excerpted the main epigraph to this study. As part of the

¹⁹ Nigeria National Petroleum Company, the national oil conglomerate often used in common speech to refer to the gargantuan size of a something else.

²⁰ See Dele Momodu, "Maladies and Melodies: Bipodal Insignia of a Tottering Democracy in Nigeria – Prospects." Lecture delivered at the 3rd Annual Senator Abraham Adesanya Lecture, Lagos, July 24, 2004. Interestingly, Michael Veal (2000) offers a different version, referencing the 1989 (not 1988 as he erroneously claims) "student uprisings in response to rumors of the excessive wealth amassed by President Babangida (who would reportedly leave office with 30 billion francs, surpassing even Zaire's legendarily corrupt Mobutu Sese Seko)" (227).

feedback stream following the main article—a parallel of the spontaneous responses of spectators in an oral performance—a contributor who simply identifies himself as “Shams, London, UK” retells one of such street stories:

Remember those days during the military, when journalists went under and started fabricating lies and we would all read in amusement and anger? Remember the rumour of Babangida's wealth supposedly printed in *Ebony* Magazine which led to street riots and many protesters' deaths? That is not funny, is it? The late Tai Solarin was disgraced on TV when he couldn't find the claim in the magazine. I saw him on live TV and pitied him.”²¹

The same theme is sustained in a similar vein in a website, *Nigeriaworld Messageboard Forum Index*,²² “eCommunity of Nigerians Worldwide.” The original post, and the conversations around it and other high profile cases of corruption involving Nigeria’s leaders, offer refreshing insights of sorts. The material on the web site shows the general thematic thrust and overlapping discursivity of the street stories as they travel outside the streets to other popular culture domains.

It is interesting that Dr Solarin features in another street story—the missing 2.8 billion naira controversy allegedly involving Justice Irikife. Mohammed Haruna, a leading journalist and publisher of the defunct *Citizen* magazine further references the story in a profile of General Muhammadu Buhari,

²¹ Sola Odunfa, “Lies, politics and Nigeria's great rumour mill,” BBC Online. Wednesday, 2 December 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8389020.stm> Web. January 12, 2010.

²² See <http://nigeriaworld.com/board/viewtopic.php?p=19553&sid=3935715abf653bd44ebb4e48eded8096> Web. October 29, 2007.

Nigeria's former Head of State during whose tenure the story emerged. Haruna contends that the former military ruler's disdain for journalists and final enactment of the obnoxious Decree 2 which jailed journalists was "presumably based on his nasty experience with the press back in 1978, when he was Minister of Petroleum Resources under the military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo." Recalling the Tai Solarin story, Haruna adds: "Then, the press had circulated the story that 2.8 billion Naira had gone missing in the country's oil account. It turned out that the story was a baseless rumour picked up in a bus by one of the country's leading social critics, Tai Solarin. Buhari never seemed to have forgiven the press for that *faux pas*."²³ Now, witness the difference in the setting of the same story—in the first version it was in a taxi, in the second a bus. But the content remains the same. The change in setting is very much in the character of oral narratives (including street stories) as they travel across space and time. On the existence of versions of a story, Bruce Jackson (2007) reminds us that "[o]rdinary storytellers, people like you and I, consciously tune and revise all the time. Change is as much a condition of our stories as are the beginnings, the middles and the ends" (21). But given that the 2.8 billion Naira story is outside my immediate purview, I only need to emphasize Dr Solarin's alleged admission that "he heard about the whole story in a Taxi Cab (or bus) when he was asked to show evidence that N2.8b was stolen from NNPC." This 'revelation' implicates taxis as important sites for the production and circulation of street stories in urban Lagos which I have so far taken for granted, privileging as it

²³ See Mohammed Haruna, "General Muhammadu Buhari – unlikely politician, likely winner?" Online. <http://www.gamji.com/haruna/haruna13.htm> Web. October 29, 2007.

were, the bigger “open parliament” sessions at newsstands, in luxury buses, *Danfos* and *molues*.²⁴

Highlighted in the two blog postings/conversations above is the extent to which citizens can go to injure the (mis)ruling elite by circulating dangerous street stories about them. More recently, the “poor man’s bomb” was dropped on the same Maryam Babangida just before she died sixteen years after she and her husband and family vacated Aso Rock, the seat of power. As Nigeria’s ace BBC correspondent Sola Odunfa (2009) reports in the article from which I excerpted the epigraph to this study, “[t]he elegant and once powerful former First Lady was on her sick bed in the US last month [November 2009] when the rumour mill back home published her obituary. It was on the world wide web pronto!” Then Odunfa adds: “Pray never to be in the shoes of her husband General Ibrahim Babangida. Nigerians simply love to hate the man. They would do—or say—anything to hurt him.”²⁵ Not even in his wife’s sick condition from complications related to cancer did an otherwise very compassionate people spare the “Evil Genius” from their “weapons of the weak,” even when tradition presumably forbids them from speaking ill of the dead much less of the sick.

The blog postings/conversations also highlight the role of internet communications technology toward the apprehension and appreciation of otherwise fluid street stories on the one hand, and their relocation from liminal

²⁴ For more on the role of taxis in the construction and circulation of street stories see Sekoni (1997); Lawuyi (1997); and Peter McSherry’s *Mean Streets* (2002) which, for comparative purposes, opens an alternative window onto the sub culture in Toronto.

²⁵ See Odunfa, Sola. “Lies, politics and Nigeria’s great rumour mill.” BBC Online. Wednesday, 2 December 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8389020.stm> Web. January 12, 2010.

spaces in the city to the virtual blogosphere where ordinary citizens scattered at home and in the diasporas participate in their retelling and discussion, and producing various versions in the process like the traditional oral artist. Typical of the street stories, the postings show how quickly the themes shift in historical time and performativity; from the unambiguous racy editorializing of the people's social experience under the military in Chxtha's World; to the kaleidoscopic narrative and rhetorical style of the "e-community of Nigerians Worldwide" of *Nigeriaworld Messageboard Forum*; and the rambling albeit animated comments appended to the main article; considered, we witness the passion with which these citizens engage political narratives that concern their survival as individuals and as a country. Away from the pastoral settings of their ancestral villages and scattered across the world, these citizens participate in a concert of narrating the nation in Bhabha's sense in *Nation and Narration* (1990). The postings also remind us about how oral literature is adapting and functioning within the modern world through the appropriation of oral texts into new media in the age of globalization.

"Gossip Season," Riots, and the June 12 conundrum

June 12, 1993 has become a watershed in Nigeria's scorched political history, observed in some states such as Lagos State as a public holiday. Simply, it was the date that Nigerians generally overcame recurrent ethnic and religious divides to elect a President in what is often described as the "freest and fairest election in Nigerian history." An unusual double Muslim ticket—the presidential and vice presidential candidates—in a country with more than half the population

being Christians was on course to winning the presidential election when Babangida annulled it. It had taken the high profile, financial power, and organizational skills of a “detrribalized” presidential candidate for the Social Democratic Party (SDP), Chief M.K.O Abiola, a billionaire mogul and philanthropist, to create the upset after “what is perhaps the longest and most expensive experiment in the annals of transitions to civil rule” (Okonta 2008: 282). So convoluted and wasteful was the eight-year and about 60 billion naira process²⁶ that Nigerians evoked Babangida’s topsy-turvy approach to it as one with a “hidden agenda”—a monstrous pregnancy conceived from the beginning to end in a stillbirth so that the president self-succeeds. Encouraged by a citizenry that was already disillusioned and suffering dictatorship fatigue, and so were determined to defend the “sacred mandate,” Chief Abiola, an erstwhile military apologist and close associate of Babangida, decided to fight back. The political impasses that resulted created more avenues for the efflorescence of street stories.

A *Newswatch* magazine publication at the peak of the street narrative boom entitled “Season of Rumours” (with an instructive rider: “Crackdown: War Against the Press”)²⁷ addresses the street storytelling phenomenon remarkably. The concord between the prevalence of rumours and the crackdown on the press on the magazine’s cover is significant because it reinforces the notion that street stories thrive more in a culture of official secrecy and silence on critical everyday

²⁶ There is no official figure for how much the process cost but estimates range around this figure suggested by Nwankwo (2002: 146). Also see Oyediran and Agbaje (1999).

²⁷ See *Newswatch*, August 9, 18.6 (1993). The relevant stories in this edition are Ray Ekpu’s preface to the cover, “Journalistic Impulses,” the first cover story “Hammer on the Media,” the lead cover story, “Gossip Season,” and the final cover piece “The Exodus” which states: “Despite assurances by various leaders, many Nigerians rush to their villages for fear that the political conflict may snowball into violence” (18).

matters affecting everyday people, as if the state were reifying Michael Taussig's (1999) theory that "truth = secret" (2).²⁸ Among the most relevant stories in the special *Newswatch* edition are: Ray Ekpu's preface to the cover, "Journalistic Impulses" (9); the first cover story "Hammer on the Media" (10-14); the lead cover story, "Gossip Season" (15-17); and the final cover piece or epilogue, "The Exodus" (18-21) with the promo: "Despite assurances by various leaders, many Nigerians rush to their villages for fear that the political conflict may snowball into violence" (18).

To take the cover stories in the order they appear in the magazine, let us consider the Ray Ekpu's "Preface" first. In this short piece, Ekpu regarded as one of the finest journalists of his generation in Nigeria acknowledges that "[i]t is the press' ability or lack of it to manage efficiently what enters the "public space" that determines the character of the press and whether its role is commendable or condemnable" (9). Ekpu breaks up journalism into two moulds ("without recourse to the various theories of the press"): partisan and liberal. By "partisan journalism" he means "ideological journalism, a brand favoured by ideologues and manipulators. It concerns itself less with the provision of hard facts as news

²⁸ A whole world of theoretical inquiry into the significance of the state and secrecy beckons here, but it falls outside my immediate concern here. However, it is important to note Michael Taussig's idea of "the public secret"—defined as what is generally known but, for one reason or another, cannot easily be articulated—and how it frames the contents of many political street stories. Arguing that this sort of knowledge ("knowing what not to know") is the most powerful form of social knowledge, Taussig works with ideas and motifs from Nietzsche, William Burroughs, Elias Canetti, Georges Bataille, and the ethnography of unmasking, and reminds us of Walter Benjamin's notion that "truth is not a matter of exposure of the secret, but a revelation that does justice to it" (Quoted in Taussig 1999: 2). This is very much the kind of philosophy that drives the street stories. And it is for this reason that the state so fiendishly protects its secrets even in the face of bombshells revealed by Julian Paul Assange's Wiki Leaks in the last quarter of 2010, and articulated in his memoir, *Wikileaks Versus the World: My Story by Julian Assange*, Text Publishing Company, 2011.

but more with the expression and expatiation of a viewpoint. It depends more on view than on news” (Ibid.). Ekpu notes that this brand “sharpens public opinion into rigid, inflexible and atomistic ideological factions that may be perpetually in conflict with each other.”

According to Ekpu, the other brand of journalism is “liberal journalism”—rather different from the usual application of the term along conservative-liberal ideological divide. This brand of journalism in Ekpu’s words is “preoccupied with facts and figures or news generally. It has a loathing for, or an indifference to, the expression of explicitly ideological point of view. It respects the integrity of the autonomous mind by providing enough information and explanation with which the reader or any seeker of truth can make an informed judgment.” Apparently critiquing the adversarial journalistic brand that was the staple of the radical press in relation to the more “sober,” conservative approach of his own organization for which they had been criticized as having sold out after the assassination of Dele Giwa, Ekpu argues further: “In [...] areas in which the journalist deals with general political and social phenomena, truth becomes a matter of perception and news becomes somewhat elastic. Here, the journalist drifts consciously or unconsciously into the murky arena of propaganda which he passes off as news” (Ibid.). Citing examples of journalists from other parts of the world who succumbed to the journalistic impulses of “overwhelming ambition to get into the limelight with a sensation; the spirit of journalistic competitiveness; a penchant for revealing secrets; for investigative reporting and even for mystery-mongering and an eye for the newsstand sales,” (Ibid.) Ekpu concludes:

In times of conflict the urge to sensationalise, to take liberty with facts, to let opinion run riot, to lift partisan journalism to a crude art form is often compelling among media that have a partisan ideology to propagate. Such media can be found at both ends of the journalistic spectrum. But somewhere in the middle are those that practice the brand of journalism that is generally known as libertarian journalism that keep the balance between sanity and insanity. (Ibid.)

Clearly, in this article, Ekpu elucidates the context for his magazine's engagement with the June 12 crises and other volatile stories at a time of national crisis. He also provides pungent insights into the *art* of journalism in the heady days of the Babangida dictatorship, and unwittingly extends the parallels between the narrative strategies of sections of the press and those of the street storyteller. A shared passion for spicing up the key narrative to thrill the audience even as it "sharpens public opinion" and sustains "the bring-down (of government syndrome)"²⁹ comes to the fore in a way that centralizes the role of the mythic imaginary in storytelling. In that loaded expression, "to take liberty with facts", lays the key for unlocking what happens to street stories as travelling texts especially under the postcolonial condition.³⁰

²⁹ This expression in the context of journalism practice in Nigeria at the time was attributed to former Anambra State governor and information minister, Emeka Omeruah, an air-commodore, in a *Newswatch* magazine cover story. See "Cry, Thy Beloved Press," *Newswatch*, September 19, 1988, 10. A variant of the syndrome in Nigerian street argot is a corruption of the degree PhD into "Pull Him Down."

³⁰ Some analysts have compared the performance of the press in the period under review to the experience during the 1964-1965 election crises in Nigeria. This was the consensus at a workshop organized by the Nigerian Press Council to examine the role of the mass media during national crises in 1994. See Adelani Olaniyi, "The New Child of Necessity", *TELL*, April 11, 1994, 5.

The next story in the group of cover stories, “Hammer on the Media,” focuses on the Babangida regime’s onslaught on the press—padlocking five media houses within a few months of annulling the June 12 election. Thus was the climate of fear under which street stories flourished and inspired the lead story in the *Newswatch* edition I am analyzing.

The lead story, anchored by Godwin Agbroko, who was later assassinated, is a nifty manual of style of sorts for the radical press’ adversarial narrativization of the June 12 debacle. Drawing from the tradition of new journalism, the story opens in a pulsating fictional mode typical of many of news magazines’ coverage of the June 12 crises (15).³¹ In the tale, street narrative culture and news storytelling converge in celebration of a story that was “everywhere,” to recall the revelation of the media executive reporting the submission of a reporter on the source of his story idea in Chapter One. Rounding off the thriller about the unbelievable invasion of the presidential chamber by Black Scorpion, Agbroko ruptures the narrative even as the reader had been absorbed into the sci-fi like story. He deconstructs the narrative, informing the reader that the story was a fictional account akin to the rumours that had become the past-time of Nigerians under Babangida. The most fantastic angle of the narrative is Black Scorpion’s (Brigadier Adegunle) recourse to a magical “air-force”—witchcraft—to appear in the Maximum ruler’s bed chamber. For Agbroko and his colleagues at *Newswatch* then, there was no better way to capture and examine the perversity

³¹ Godwin Agbroko, “Season of Rumour: Nigerians discover a new pastime: retailing of mind-numbing but fake stories,” *Newswatch*, August 9, 1993, 15-17.

and force of the national narrative obsession than to have a cover story on it, with the sweeping epigraph to this chapter as one of its memorable signposts.

In a playful reference to the kinds of street stories associated with Tai Solarin above—especially the *Ebony* magazine story—Agbroko observes that “with time, some of the rumours have begun to dignify themselves with “documentary evidence” (16). Indeed *Newswatch* offers a few of such street stories that had documented evidence to authenticate them in a way that recalls Smokey Joe’s citing of scribal authority to back up his narratives in my Introduction.³² So disturbed was the Babangida regime by these powerful street stories that as Agbroko informs, “Uche Chukwumerije, the information secretary [...] almost shouted himself hoarse, denouncing such rumours and forgeries to no effect.” (17). For Agbroko and for students of the street stories, the stories “serve a purpose for those Nigerians who retail these yarns among themselves...that of hitting back at Babangida and his administration without getting hurt” (17).

But in considering the numerous dispersed forms of political narratives of resistance in postcolonial Nigeria, especially along the binary of the “official” and “unofficial” patterns, a third category needs to be examined. So far I have granted agency for the generation of “unofficial” narratives to only ordinary people. This

³² See pp 16-17 of the *Newswatch* edition for examples of such street stories backed by documentary evidence that Agbroko and the magazine investigated and found to be untrue. It is significant that the target of the stories were the First Lady Maryam Babangida, and Babangida himself. In one story, Mrs. Babangida was the subject of a July 8 document, a letter to “her bankers in London, the Lombard North Central Plc, instructing them to transfer the mind-numbing sum of £66,500,000 from her fixed deposit account to the Union Bank of Switzerland, out of a total cash £72,524,000” (16). In the other, it was Babangida who suffered “a crude forgery of how he intended to perpetuate himself in office” via a document dated December 14, 1992, “Most Secret and Highly Classified (you’re your eyes only)” letter to Hosni Mubarak, Egypt’s president” (17). It has been suggested by analysts that such letters metamorphosed into the Internet scam letters genre (Apter 1999) referred to earlier.

does not totally represent the situation. For noting that “[s]ince 1960, the act of governance, administration has always been in secrecy,” Moshood Fayemiwo (2010), former publisher of *Razor* newspaper who was jailed in 1994 for “sedition” by the junta insightfully argues that “political actors” sometimes generate the “unofficial” street stories as a ploy for hoodwinking both the popular press and the people, and distracting them from focusing on the inconvenient or damning “official” story. Revisiting the contentious versions of stories peddled on Babangida’s annulment of the June 12 elections, Fayemiwo argues that,

There are two stories to every government decision and policy in Nigeria [...] Two levels of information exist in Nigeria, to create a façade and avoid public scrutiny. Political actors give us two stories, the official story and the unofficial story. And the Nigerian press goes with the official story. They are part and parcel of the official. That organized conspiracy was elevated to official pastime during the disastrous years called the IBB years. You know they always appeared on television or during their media chats with these ludicrous epithets: “We do not run our government on the pages of newspapers.” Remember? Even the so-called Obasanjo “elected government, you hear them telling Nigerians “oh this government is not run on the pages of newspapers.” Why should government not be run on the pages of newspapers? In a democracy? That is why you will know that there are two versions of stories. The truth, which only few people would

be privy to, and the official stories that they use the media to push out to the Nigerian Public. That was what happened on June 12.³³

Beyond government's commitment to secrecy and misuse of the media to propagate its "official" propaganda canvassed by Fayemiwo, there were extreme cases where government servants desperately faked existing radical publications outright in order to sell government's own version of street stories to the public. In the turbulent days of the June 12 struggle the favourite target of such counterfeiting attacks (which could be taken as the equivalent of contemporary hacking of websites) was *Tempo* magazine.

The Exodus

By promoting war and possible breakup of the country—perhaps as part of the campaign to make Nigeria ungovernable for the junta, a favourite slogan of the pro-democracy movement then—street stories forced urban citizens in Lagos and the Northern parts of the country, to embark on a mass exodus home after the June 12 election annulment. Worst hit was the Igbos who were afraid of a repeat of their painful experience during the Nigerian civil war of the 1960s. They were trapped far from home at the outbreak of the war. The 1993 exodus was documented as a subsection in the *Newswatch* cover story under the subtitle "The Exodus." Olatunji Dare (2010) captured the scenario succinctly as he wrote in his weekly column in *The Guardian* collected into a volume: "For several weeks, a massive population movement has been underway. The flow is from North to

³³ See Moshood Fayemiwo "IBB killed Abiola, Abacha, Idiagbon, Ige – Fayemiwo," <http://www.republicreport.com/bombshell-revelation-linking-ibb-to-mko-abiola-abachas-death%E2%80%9494reports/> Web. September 4, 2010.

South, and from South-west to South-east” (262). Dare believes that the “Rumours of war ha[d] been carefully planted and assiduously watered [by the military] through manipulation of the official press and the client media,” adding that he suspected “[t]he goal [was] to get the public thoroughly frightened that it will be only too glad to accept any arrangement as the alternative to war” (Ibid.). But as my opening sentence in this subsection would suggest, I do not share this hypothesis completely. For not all the reports on the “rumours of war” were planted by the autocratic military regime. Like other journalists in the struggle, I unwittingly and regrettably contributed to *The Exodus*.³⁴ For example, I entitled one cover story of *Classique* magazine at the time “IBB’s New Coup: Gani, Others, Prepare for War.”³⁵ Besides, at a meeting between Uche Chukwumerije, Secretary for Information in those locust years and members of the Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigerian, NPAN, in Lagos in August, 1993, the government propagandist-in-chief pointed out similar titles used by the Nigerian press and accused them of inciting the masses. According to Muyiwa Akintunde’s (1993) report of the meeting,

His [Chukwumerije’s] complaints bordered more on sensational headlines [such as] “Anarchy in the air,” “Nigeria may disintegrate if ...”, “Lagos

³⁴ Indeed *Newswatch* magazine used this as the title of one of its cover stories on the experience. See Mike Akpan’s “The Exodus,” *Newswatch*, August 9, 1993, 18-20.

³⁵ See *Classique*, July 12, 1993, 7.21 (23-31). Entitled “Chorus of War Songs” inside the magazine, I anchored the cover story with contributions from James Okoroma, Oma Djebah and Atim Mkpesit. Yet more representative headlines of the period included: “The New Hell: Nigerians in the grip of grave economic hardships,” *TELL*, May 17, 1993; “Nigeria: Waiting For the Worst,” *TELL*, July 26, 1993; “War Against Everybody: Babangida spits Fire with death Decree,” *TELL*, May 24, 1993; “Nigeria Boils: The People say No to Babangida,” *TELL*, July 19, 1993; “June 12: Rumbles in the Military.” *TELL*, November 1, 1993; “Nation in Chaos,” *Newswatch*, February 22, 1993; “Babangida vs The Nation: Battle Line Drawn at Ota,” *The Africa Guardian*, June 7, 1993; “Retired Generals vs Babangida: Why they are fighting,” *The Africa Guardian*, January 18, 1993.

erupts,” and “MASSACRE.” What worried him the most was what he called the “insidious campaign, targeted specifically at the armed forces.” He made references to three stories, including that on Abubakar Umar, a colonel and commandant of the armoured corp, who was believed to have quit the army to protest the cancellation of the June 12 polls. Chukwumerije claimed that the June 29 story was false. (12)

There could not have been a better way for the spokesman of the military then to conceive the verbal insurgence which street stories constituted than as “insidious campaign, targeted specifically at the armed forces.” In a country with massive rural-urban migration, especially to Lagos the commercial hub, thousands of citizens responding to the “narrative alarms” set off by the joint forces of the press and ordinary people in the streets, quickly auctioned or gave away their property, and hurriedly moved entire families to their places of origin in the rural areas to escape what loomed like an apocalypse. The war drums seemed deafening, much so that Stanley Macebuh, celebrated father of intellectual journalism in Nigeria, captured it in an opinion article entitled “War Games.”³⁶ Akpan notes in the *Newswatch* report on the exodus that:

War and secession have been freely mentioned in the last few weeks as both the federal military government and Abiola maintained hard lines on the political crisis. While the government insists on a fresh presidential election, Abiola says he is determined to keep the people’s mandate freely and expressly given to him, unless so withdrawn by them.” (18)

³⁶ See *The Sentinel*, August 8, 1994, No 24, 6.

Within that framework of that political impasse created by government's insistence on a fresh presidential election and Abiola's determination to keep the people's mandate, the critical press chose to support the people in the struggle to actualize the mandate and sack the military. And one way to frame the delicate situation was like a war situation, and ordinary people saw it that way too in street stories prophesying war.

Conclusion

The national crisis provoked by the Babangida regime especially through the nullification of the June 12, 1993 election has proved not only to be the turning point in Nigeria's recent political history, but also in its street narrative culture. Not only did the regime of the "Evil Genius" spark off unprecedented spate of political street stories, his regime ended on a blaze of internal exodus, a horrendous experience that left many citizens dying in road accidents, stampede and armed robbery attacks on their way home. The wretched roads to the East from Lagos in the West of Nigeria and from Northern Nigeria were crammed, with many returnees spending days on the road. The Nigerian exodus under Babangida was reminiscent of the often cited "The Invasion from Mars" in 1938, Orson Welles' radio broadcast, and a classical example that illustrates the Hypodermic theory of the media.³⁷

In engaging the Babangida dictatorship, the role of the Nigerian press triangulated between that of a lapdog, watchdog, and an attack dog. This

³⁷ See Barbosa (2005) at <http://www.floridabrasil.com/brazilian-soup-opera/28.html> for more details of the experience. Web. January 29, 2010.

perception of the press is evident from the experience of the pro-government stance of some, especially the public-owned media on the one hand, and those of the private media represented by the fiery investigative journalism of Dele Giwa and the adversarial journalism of the radical press on the other. Generally speaking, “[t]he Nigerian press agenda in the [late 1980s and] 1990s was to end military rule” (Aje-ori Agbese 2006: 68). It is not surprising, therefore, that in a private correspondence with Odia Ofeimun, poet and activist, Aje-Ori Agbese reports that Ofeimun asserts that: “The Nigerian media has had to play the role of political party, trade union, ombudsman and name it. Whatever is supposed to cleanse society and make it better, the press has taken on it” (69). The collateral damage, I argue, is that in pursuing this lofty agenda, the press in Nigeria sometimes compromised the ethics of the profession. Fictionalized accounts crept into news reports as news was shaped by the anti-military agenda and street forces, in ways that the *Newswatch* cover stories I discuss in this chapter highlight. As Agbroko has observed the “rumours flowed so freely, so fast and so thick[ly].” The SAP riots, the “*Ebony* magazine episode, and the June 12 riots—all fuelled by street narratives—relatively support the hypodermic theory of the media. In all of these instances, the masses were propelled by their desire to believe and act on the “oral bomb” (street stories) and media narratives, as well as by their wish to see the annihilation of the military oppressors.

The other strand of street stories that the draconian military regimes in Nigeria bred were those around fake deaths of some public personalities. Instances of this include the rumoured death in detention of physician, human

rights activist and a leader of the opposition against military dictatorship, Beko Ransome Kuti. This is reflected in the concluding section of the *Newswatch* cover story “Gossip Season.” How this idea operates in various versions in more recent Nigerian democratic history sheds more light on the kernel theme of the politicization of death in street narratives, and, to borrow from McNeece (2005), “the myriad ways by which diverse cultural substrata filter into these texts” through a process of “transfilteration” (518). And it is to this idea of the politicization of death in street narratives that I shall now turn.

Chapter Four

Riders to the Grave: Street Stories, Abacha, the Politics of Death and the State's Helmsmen

Stripped of its social base and its representative mechanisms, Nigeria democracy proved to be politics of illusion, depriving civil society of its president-elect and any effective participation or collective voice in national affairs. After June 12 [...] citizens took to the streets in defense of their citizenship. (Andrew Herman Apter 2005: 275-276)

The fact is that power, in the postcolony, is carnivorous. It grips its subjects by the throat and squeezes them to the point of breaking their bones, making their eyes pop out of their sockets, making them weep blood. (Mbembe 2001: 201)

By “depriving civil society of its president-elect and any effective participation or collective voice in national affairs” following the annulment of June 12 elections in 1993 as Apter notes in the above epigraph, the Nigerian state gave impetus to the citizenry to voice their discontent in subterranean street narratives. In other words, besides the spontaneous riots which Nigerian citizens in the urban centres, especially Lagos, engineered to resist despotism, other ways by which the “citizens took to the streets in defense of their citizenship” included underground street stories, and guerrilla news reporting by the pro-democracy, anti-dictatorship press. In this chapter I examine the regime of General Sani Abacha and the street stories it generated especially in relation to its two defining milestones. The milestones were the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, writer and environmental rights activist, and the arrest and detention of M.K.O. Abiola following Abacha’s sack of the Interim National Government (ING)

“contraption”¹ hurriedly cobbled together by a fleeing General Babangida as explained in the last chapter.

The popular theories, supported by media narratives of the circumstances that shaped the emergence of Abacha as Head of State, were two-fold. First, that Abacha, whom the radical press had dubbed “the Khalifa”—pejoratively, the anointed or successor—even before Babangida’s exit, had a secret deal with Babangida.² The deal was for Abacha to succeed Babangida as a reward for his loyalty, his role in the palace coup that brought the cabal to power in 1985, and for crushing the Gideon Orkar-led 1990 coup that nearly cost Babangida and family their lives and chased him out of Lagos, hitherto Nigeria’s capital, to the safer new Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. Many keen observers of Nigeria’s political crisis then believed that it was only a matter of time before the dark goggle-wearing General seized power.

Second, there were stories that the “president-elect,” Chief M.K.O Abiola, had sealed a secret deal with Abacha and his military chiefs to intervene in the political impasse by seizing power from the illegal ING, and handing over the reins to Abiola. This was the understanding, I believe, which inspired the Nigerian press to erroneously support the Abacha palace coup, and for which Uko (2004: chapter 10) argues that “the Nigerian press created Abacha [...] one of modern Africa’s nastiest dictators” through “an error of judgment and motivation”

¹ Nigerians so hated the short-lived ING that they often described it in pejorative terms that permitted them to call the President appointed by Babangida, Chief Ernest Sonekan, a “lame-duck president.”

² See Nduka Otiono, “Interim Govt: Abacha’s Secret Mission,” *Classique*, September 20, 1993, 13-15 and 20. Also see “Abacha’s Secret Deals with IBB,” *TELL*, December 27, 1993.

(111).³ After sacking the ING and quickly settling down to business—both literally and literarily as discernible from the size of his loot—by wooing the people for support, even courting the opposition through appointments as all coup plotters characteristically do, it soon became clear that Nigerian had been conned into the worst dictatorship in her history. To quote Uko (2004), “Abacha had no plans to hand the reins to Abiola. It was absurd for the Nigerian press and for Abiola to believe that Abacha would play the guardian angel to Abiola’s mandate” (113). But Abiola believed, even “offering several of his closest allies and advisers, including his vice-president elect, Babagana Kingibe, to the new government” (Falola and Heaton 2008: 230). While I have sketched in the preceding chapter some highlights of Abacha’s draconian rule, I need to emphasize in this section the two key actions that became the turning points in his political misadventure and in turn provoked some of the most memorable street stories in Nigerian history. First, if the murder of Dele Giwa has been Babangida’s Abbatross as I showed in the previous chapter, a combination of the vile hanging of the writer and environmental rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight other compatriots from Ogoni land in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, became Abacha’s.⁴

³ It was not only the press that supported Abacha’s intervention initially. Ike Okonta (2008) points out that when Abacha took power as head of state Saro-Wiwa “was not averse to courting this powerful figure in his [Saro-Wiwa’s] quest to achieve his goal of an Ogoni state within a confederal Nigeria” (246). Incidentally, as a journalist then, I played some role in the propagation of these ‘theories.’ Between two news organizations I coordinated and wrote cover stories pursuing a hidden agenda behind Abacha’s intervention, but nothing near the kind of “press invitation to Abacha” (113) to intervene which Uko identifies *The Guardian*, and “newspapers from the *Concord* group owned by Abiola” (112-113) as openly publishing.

⁴ The murder of Saro-Wiwa has provoked various studies some of which are listed in a comprehensive Bibliography in McLuckie and Gibbs (2000).

The second act was the incarceration of the presumed winner of the annulled June 12, 1993 presidential election, M.K.O. Abiola, sparking a chain of upheavals via the political impasse it created.

By these two actions—the execution of Saro-Wiwa and company, coupled with the arrest and detention of Abiola on charges of treason for declaring himself President— Abacha became the nemesis of the coup plot-loving Nigerian military after whose regime Nigerians were no longer ready to tolerate them in politics, and an embodiment of the despicable autocrat profiled by Mbembe (2001) in his study of representative cartoons (2001) in Cameroon:

The autocrat is a hole, a sort of bottomless, endless excess, with a voraciousness that is quite insatiable [...] He is, too, the opposite of asceticism, whether in matters of money or when possessed by the demon of fornication and gluttony [...] On top of unrestrained licentiousness is the unending exercise of brutality. (160-162).”

Mbembe appears to have had Abacha in mind in constructing what amounts to a template of power under postcolonial condition, as well as that of the quintessential autocrat wherever they exist in the world (as in the second epigraph above also). Abacha not only fitted the template, he was seen in that light and also constructed in that image in the core street and media narratives that proliferated during his four-year reign.

Before the execution of Saro-Wiwa some of Abacha’s worst critics gave him benefit of the doubt about his degree of cruelty despite the well-documented operations of his Strike-Force, a Special Security Unit commanded by Abacha’s

Chief Security Officer, Major Al-Mustapha, with Sergeant Barnabas Jabila Mshelia—nicknamed Sergeant Rogers or Rambo by the radical press—as the linchpin. (As a matter of fact, what was known then, and what influenced the production of both “public and hidden transcripts” (to echo James C. Scott again) of the Abacha era were only a fragment of the revelations confessed to by Sergeant Rogers still standing trial with other “resource persons” in the Abacha “elimination gang”).⁵ Among those who had given Abacha benefit of the doubt concerning Saro-Wiwa was renowned icon and President of South Africa then, Nelson Mandela. Mandela and other world leaders appealed to Abacha to spare Saro-Wiwa when the signs were writ large that he was going to have the environmental rights activist executed via the instrumentality of a kangaroo judicial system (tribunal) under which Saro-Wiwa was tried and sentenced for the murder of the “Ogoni Four,”⁶ his kinsmen, in order to send the strongest signal to the opposition that the maximum ruler was in charge. Pointers to that effect had

⁵ For more on Sergeant Rogers’ confessions and the activities of the Strike Force see Tony Amokeodo, “Mustapha Ordered Us to Shoot Abraham Adesanya — Rogers,” *The Punch*, Friday, 7 Mar 2008. <http://www.punchontheweb.com/Articl.aspx?theartic=Art200803074473145> Web. March 7, 2009. Also see “Tribulations & Travails - Assaults & Attacks,” http://www.ganifawehinmi.com/assaults_attacks2.php Newspaper reports on the subject catalogued on the Gani Fawehinmi website include: *Daily Times*, Thursday, 23 May 2002: back page; *The Monitor*, Thursday, 23 May 2002:1; *The Comet*, Thursday, 23 May 2002:3; *The Post Express* Thursday, 23 May 2002:40; *The Punch*, Thursday, 23 May 2002:1 & 9; and *Nigerian Tribune*, Thursday, 23 May 2002:1.

⁶ The “Ogoni Four” were kinsmen of Saro-Wiwa whom he had fallen out with because they were believed to have been compromising the struggle. They were murdered under controversial circumstances, and the Abacha regime found it expedient to try Saro-Wiwa for their murder and to sentence and execute him summarily, even when his lawyers led by the human rights activist, Gani Fawehimi, had pulled out of the case in protest against the flawed process of the trial. As Nwankwo (2002) puts it, “Gani Fawehinmi accused government of intimidation... What transpired at the tribunal could at best be described as a farce. To participate in the sham trial would be to confer legitimacy and credibility to it. To state that the conviction of hanging of Saro-Wiwa and his kinsmen were premeditated and politically motivated is to state the obvious. A United Nations fact-finding team alluded to the farcical nature of the trials when it demanded for the compensation of the “Ogoni Nine” and the abrogation of the decree that set up the tribunal that tried them” (141-142).

emerged more from Saro-Wiwa himself. In a letter to the press in 1994 published as “Message from Prison” Saro-Wiwa had also written: “To my children, I lay the responsibility, should anything happen to me...to ensure that justice is done to my memory as a man of peace and fighter for social justice and right” (*The News*, 8 August, 1994: 10). In further prophesying his unfortunate fate in his detention diary, *A Month and a Day* (1995), the fiery activist expressed his worst premonition of his end when he wrote: “The genocide of the Ogoni people had taken on a new dimension. The manner of it I will narrate in my next book, *if I live to tell the tale*” (238) (Emphasis added). To complete the foreboding and tragic prescience based on his understanding of the cruel mind-set of Abacha and his gang, Saro-Wiwa wrote his epitaph in what I have described elsewhere as a “scorching poetic quatrain”⁷:

Here stands the funny little sweet
The Nigerians loved to cheat
So much that e'en in death
They denied him six feet of earth.

The significance of Saro-Wiwa’s epitaph was manifest in the street narrativization of, or discursive practices around, the controversial circumstances of his death and burial. As Misty L. Bastian (2000) vigorously demonstrates, several versions of Saro-Wiwa’s last moments became the staple of talk-of-the-town narratives. But they all seemed to agree in according a supernatural or mythological exit to the heroic fighter

⁷ See Nduka Otiono, “Ken Saro-Wiwa: A Writer and His Communities.” *If I Live to Tell the Tale: Ten Years Later*. Ken Saro-Wiwa Foundation, Port Harcourt, 2005.

in a manner befitting a folk hero in the oral tradition/heroic epics, as expressed by Ato Quayson in *Postcolonialism* (2000).⁸ According to stories peddled in the streets then and legitimized by the popular press, as well as by Ken Wiwa (2000: 2), in five attempts to execute Saro-Wiwa the trapdoor at the gallows failed to work. So the hangmen had to try executing his kinsmen first. The same equipment worked. Thus seeing that his compatriots had been executed, Saro-Wiwa's "magical spirit" yielded, and so the trapdoor "accepted" him.⁹

Besides other sources which have circulated this narrative complete with its magical realist texture, Apter (2005) seeks a more "rational" articulation of the incident at the gallows: "Abacha's regime could not even properly kill a man [Saro-Wiwa] in the gallows," Apter (2005) notes, adding, "[i]mported and previously unused, not even this dreaded instrument of execution was correctly operated by the state" (270). But Ken Wiwa (2000) summarizes it in periodic sentences that allow the force of every sentence to sink into the reader, in one breath, both slowly and in a staccato:

He was hanged in Nigeria on November 10, 1995. On the morning of his execution, he was taken from his prison cell to a military camp in Port Harcourt, on the southern coast of Nigeria under armed escort to a nearby

⁸ See especially the chapter "Literature as a Political Act." Quayson also provides more insight into the significance of the circumstances surrounding Saro-Wiwa's "activism and death" in *Calibrations: Reading for the Social*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 57.

⁹ Wole Soyinka (2006) lends credence to the street narratives about this as he writes: "Saro-Wiwa's relatives were not even permitted access to his body. Some reports claim that it took four attempts to hang him, others said it took more. What is undisputed is that the initial attempts failed, that he was taken down from the scaffold while his companions were executed, so that he witnessed it all and then took his turn" (426).

prison. It took five attempts to hang him. His corpse was dumped in an unmarked grave; acid was poured on his remains and soldiers posted outside the cemetery. (2)

The passage so reads like a fragment from a horror novel that was it cited only in its street narrativization some critics may have found it incredible. But that was not all; Abacha's military government made a public showing of Saro-Wiwa's death and funeral going by jubilations reported in Government House, Port Harcourt, from where the state military Administrator Lt. Colonel Dauda Musa Komo ruled. The junta felt the need to convince any doubting Thomas who may have heard of the supernatural scene at the gallows from street stories or the press, that indeed, the man who had been nicknamed "the spirit of Ogoni land," was dead at last! Indeed as Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka authoritatively states in his memoir *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006),

The dismal proceedings of Kenule's murder in a Port Harcourt prison were videotaped on orders of the dictator, who held viewing sessions afterward with some of his officers, not all of whom knew in advance to what macabre feast they had been summoned. A witness has since revealed that one of the dictator's young aides fainted during a viewing. Abacha turned around and laughed. "Look at him," he mocked, "and he calls himself a soldier." (427)

Interestingly, in "On the Death of Ken Saro-Wiwa," a piece written in prison about five days before his execution and smuggled out to PEN

International¹⁰ Saro-Wiwa who had an uncanny capacity to laugh even in the face of tragedy predicted an even more dramatic death and funeral for himself. The piece, a medley of what reads like a journalist's report or sarcastic recreation of Saro-Wiwa's final moments is the kind of stuff that constituted the street stories around his death. Full of sarcasm, the activist joked that "Ken Saro-Wiwa would cap the mass burial ceremony" (138) after his execution along with other Ogonis, and that "as is usual in Nigeria, a contract was awarded for the burial of the little man," (Ibid.) a play on his diminutive size. "The officer who won the contract for supplying the coffin, to maximize his profit for the deal, decided to hire a carpenter to make it" (Ibid.). Saro-Wiwa continued. "He gave the coffin-maker precise instructions. The coffin had to be no more than five feet long and one foot wide. The shocked carpenter succeeded in making the coffin to specification. But, being a Nigerian, and therefore innumerate, he actually made it two inches shorter either way." He added: "This also saved money. Poor Ken was squashed into this contraption. And being used to protesting against injustice, his corpse squeaked and screamed. The officer who had won the contract for putting Ken in the coffin ran for his dear life" (138-139). And Saro-Wiwa would not spare the multinational oil corporations— "Shell¹¹ and Chevron, who have oil-mining leases covering the whole of Ogoni territory" (139). They "chose the exact spot where the funny little man was to be buried [...] The right size of hole was

¹⁰ Excerpts from this are published in *Another Sky: Voices of Conscience from Around the World* edited by Popescu and Seymour-Jones, Profile Books Ltd, 2007: 135-140.

¹¹ In accepting its complicity in the Saro-Wiwa and Ogoni Nine tragedy, Shell recently paid \$20m to settle the Ken Saro-Wiwa execution case. See <http://www.missionandjustice.org/shell-pays-20m-to-settle-nigeria-ken-saro-wiwa-execution-case/> Web. May 2010.

dug — tiny and narrow, no more than five foot by one. And the coffin was lowered, and wait for it, stood upright— to save space” (Ibid.).

Factional as the passage reads, it evokes the texture of the street stories around Saro-Wiwa’s final hours (part of which informs Gbenga Adeboye’s “Guess the Caller,” the digitized oral text that I analyze later), and contrasts with a more popular version of an aspect of the story which I had heard in Lagos the day after Saro-Wiwa’s execution while attending the national convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) of which Ken had been the President. The popular version was that Saro-Wiwa’s corpse was incinerated with acid after his execution. This version was also widely reported in the popular press, and given credence by Saro-Wiwa’s son and executor of his estate Ken Wiwa Jr in the quote from his autobiography above. It is also reinforced by the fact that when in 2000, Ken Wiwa Jr and other members of Saro-Wiwa’s family and Ogoni folks wanted to rebury him honourably, they could neither locate his grave nor his remains. Therefore they conducted a symbolic burial, as Timothy Hunt elaborates in the opening pages of his biography of Saro-Wiwa’s younger brother Owens, symbolically entitled *The Politics of Bones* (2005).

Explaining the title of the book Hunt writes: ““The politics of bones” is how Bill Haglund, a forensic anthropologist from Physicians for Human Rights, had wryly summed up the strange combination of silence, misdirection, myth, greed, and fear of the death and secret burial of Saro-Wiwa.” Hunt adds that all Owens’ fight to have his brother, Ken’s remains returned by Nigeria’s new democratically elected government “had come to was a symbolic funeral with an

empty coffin” (3). Besides, as *African Confidential*, the London-based influential weekly reiterates, “even in death Ken Saro-Wiwa was the subject of controversy [...] A funeral was celebrated but the bones of Saro-Wiwa and the eight other Ogonis have not yet been returned to their families, nor have the remains of the four Ogonis killed in mob violence in 1994.”¹²

The politicization of Saro-Wiwa’s death and bones, the ruthless image of General Abacha portrayed in the street stories and in media and in Saro-Wiwa’s own prediction in the above excerpts, cohere with the moralistic structure of traditional African oral narratives. It reflects the concept of evil versus good, and invests contemporary street narratives with the mythopoeic imaginary. Indeed the Ken Saro-Wiwa story which benefitted from the activist’s understanding of the need to “take the word to the streets” (Ken Wiwa 2000: 62) is one in which, true to some of the developments in the postcolony, reality imitates fiction in its tendency toward the fantastic. The stories around Abacha more than bear out a Nigerian city joke about spoiling one’s *bad* name. In Abacha’s case, additional demonization of his persona in popular culture was/is a favourite past time of cultural producers and denizens of the open parliaments of urban Nigeria, counterpointed in the present analysis by the apotheosis of Saro-Wiwa; so much that his son entitles the memoir around his father *In the Shadow of a Saint* (2000).¹³

¹² See African Confidential web site: <http://www.africa-confidential.com/book-review/id/3/In-the-Shadow-of-a-Saint> Web. October 31, 2010. Apter (2005) corroborates the view as he writes albeit with metaphysical overtone: “Their corpses were purportedly disfigured, literally defaced to prevent their resurrection into martyrdom as fearless critics of the vernal military regime” (258).

¹³ Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi offers a gripping analysis of the autobiography in relation to public discourses of the Saro-Wiwa the martyr in his essay, “Ken Wiwa and the Death of the Father,” *Mosaic (Winnipeg)* 41.1 (2008), 134-151.

Understandably, therefore, the obnoxious execution of Saro-Wiwa “brought the sheer brutality of the Abacha dictatorship to the forefront of international politics and prompted the Commonwealth to suspend Nigeria from its ranks”¹⁴ while ensuring the Abacha regime’s “descent into the status of international pariah” (Harold James 2001: 219). With such an unenviable status, and against the backdrop of the Third Wave of democratization across the world in the late twentieth century as astutely theorized by Samuel Huntington (1991)¹⁵, every kitchen sink thrown at Abacha and his cabal did not only stick easily, but was justifiable; every outlandish street story woven around him appeared plausible. And the streets hosted many such stories some of which were mediated by journalists a number of whom are also denizens of the inner city “watering holes,” as pubs are also called among some Lagos city dwellers.

I recall one such “watering hole” that we used to patronize in the 1990s while I was an editor with *The Post Express* newspaper in Apapa, the harbor area of Lagos where one was likely to meet Western sailors in pubs. Called Iya Ijebu after the proprietress of the *buka*, I heard several of such street stories there, with Iya Ijebu holding court occasionally while we—largely men—ate and drank. Like Smokey Joe, the middle-aged, affable woman would regale us with political

¹⁴ African Confidential web site: <http://www.africa-confidential.com/book-review/id/3/In-the-Shadow-of-a-Saint> Web. October 31, 2010.

¹⁵ Huntington defines a *wave of democratization* as “a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period of time” (15). He identifies the Third Wave as the changes that occurred between 1974 and 1990 during which “about thirty countries shifted from authoritarianism to democracy, and at least a score of other countries were affected by the democratic wave” (5). In discussing the authoritarianism prevalent in countries such as Nigeria during the Third Wave, Huntington observes that replacement of such totalitarian regimes “requires the opposition to wear down the government and shift the balance of power in its favor” (143). This is exactly what the Nigerian people did to the Abacha junta using street stories, among other creative tools.

narratives as she and her staffers worked like busy bees attending to customers coming and going. Amongst the stories she told was one based on an incident she said she would never forget: she nearly got killed during the June 12 presidential elections in Lagos at the Iyana Ipaja suburb of the city. According to Iya Ijebu, she was on her way home from Apapa having closed late from work as usual. Unknown to her there were riots by youth protesting the annulment of the elections and she and other commuters—mostly women—got caught up in the crossfire between gangs. After that experience, Iya Ijebu said, she swore never to participate in elections in Nigeria, cursing the rulers who not only disenfranchised citizens but also made their hard-delivered votes not to count. It would appear that Mbembe (2001) had in mind this kind of Iya Ijebu social space/cultural economy of narratives when he reports an aspect of the postcolonial condition in Cameroon:

When evening comes, the men may meet up in the corner bar. In this masculine world—albeit not always—men don't come simply to quench their thirst. They also come to laugh: "When something gets too much for me I just laugh." They talk endlessly, too. They pour out their feelings, and sometimes they fight [...] They make themselves understood from what is not openly said or shown. They endeavor, as it were, to make visible what, a priori, does not possess visibility. They also spread "rumor." You just have to make the best of things. If, to repress the population, 'the autocrat uses water cannon, tear gas, and guns, then he is resisted as best possible with the help of the "poor person's bomb," rumor

[...] Did you hear?” For it is enough to have heard the tale with one’s own ears for it to be true and for one to pass it on. “Yes, yes, I heard that, too. So it must be true!” (157-158)

Did you hear? In such contexts, the common pains of living in the postcolony are infused into the socio-political narratives the citizens—an odd admixture of ordinary people and working class types—share. They have common anxieties and common enemies and folk heroes along the “we and them” trope or along ethnic divides. For skeptics and those who “underestimated Abacha,”—as Saro-Wiwa’s wife declared in the short documentary film *Ken Saro-Wiwa: An African Martyr*¹⁶—and his capacity to descend to the pit of depravity, the execution of Saro-Wiwa convinced them that “the vampire state boldly emerged during Abacha’s destructive misrule” (Apter 2005: 270).

Besides the stories about Abacha’s cruelty which ensured that many journalists and activists who constituted an opposition to his draconian rule were either murdered or incarcerated, or the luckier ones driven into exile, another favourite theme of the street narratives was Abacha’s insatiable lust: for money (comparable to his military predecessor Babangida), and for women. In other words, stories abounded of Abacha’s Kleptocracy and sexual escapades. Media reports merged with street narratives that claimed that after his nocturnal debauchery, the armoured general was only able to maintain a four-hour-a-day work schedule, as it were, spending the greater part of the day sleeping. He was

¹⁶ Produced by Films for the Humanities in 1996, *Ken Saro-Wiwa: An African Martyr*” narrativizes Saro-Wiwa’s struggles and art through his own words and those of his wife. It showcases detailed interviews with the writer, environmental rights and political activist before his death, as well as editorializing the Ogoni crisis.

said to have developed a liver disease—“cirrhosis” was the name specifically wrapped around it—due to excessive drinking; some claimed he had contracted the AIDs virus, and that, that was responsible for his anaemic appearance as promoted by a controversial *TELL* magazine cover image and cover story on the subject.¹⁷ Indeed stories of Abacha’s illness constituted one of the favourite motifs or “lays” (to recall Albert Lord’s term in describing the composition of oral narratives) in the street stories about him.

While reactions to the Saro-Wiwa execution were still reverberating, Abacha had Abiola, the symbol of Nigeria’s hope for democratization, arrested for openly seeking to fulfill what he (Abiola), and the media, had baptized a “sacred mandate” that was “freely given by the people.” The need to maintain control in the face of growing opposition to his iron rule locally and internationally led Abacha and his cabal into committing more human rights abuses, and isolated him into a reclusive lifestyle that only fostered more street narratives and speculative reports in the press. The National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) of influential activists, labour unions and civil society became Abacha’s nemesis as it continued to mount opposition to his Kleptocracy and iron misrule, establishing in the process, an underground radio (Radio Kudirat). The virtual radio broadcast complemented the verbal munitions supplied both by the underground press with its guerrilla tactics, and the subversive street storytellers in the watering holes and other social spaces.

¹⁷ See the cover of the special edition of *TELL* June 22, 1998, “Death of a Tyrant.” Some critics of the magazine argued that the image of Abacha on the cover was doctored using Photoshop.

A gaggle of evening papers sprung up in Lagos to take advantage of the scenario, feasting on every imaginable talk-of-the-town story to sell fast in the rush hour traffic in an overpopulated Lagos city which Robert Kaplan hyperbolically describes in his tourist-sees-all diatribe against West Africa, *The Coming Anarchy* (2000), as a “city whose crime, pollution, and overcrowding make it the cliché par excellence of Third World dysfunction” (15).¹⁸ This was the context in which *Razor* newspaper emerged with Mashood Fayemiwo as publisher. Others pulp newspapers that sprung up then included *PrimeSunset*, a representative story from which boldly “testified” to the controversial trope of Abacha’s death by poisoned apples.

Desperate for survival, driven by lust for money both for his personal vaults across the world and to maintain his death squads and security apparatuses, Abacha ignored the convention that “[t]he doctrine of central banking held that monetary authorities should be independent of governments so that they would not need to respond to political pressures. They should run monetary policy in accordance, not with domestic priorities, but rather with the requirements of the international system.” (James 2001: 35) Instead, Abacha reportedly instructed the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) to print more money in the Idia Amin fashion,¹⁹ and maintained a parallel foreign exchange rate which enabled him and his cabal to sell foreign exchange officially obtained at a lower rate at a higher on in the

¹⁸ Comparisons of Kaplan’s book with a more a balanced visual study of Lagos in the documentary film *Lagos: Rich Man, Poor Man* (2004), immediately shows how jaundiced is Kaplan’s view of the city—despite its ugly sides. Besides, Kaplan’s qualitative comparative declaration about Lagos in relation to other cities is not backed by any empirical data, and is very typical of the sweeping generalization he adopts for the most part of the book.

¹⁹ *The Rise and fall of Idia Amin*, Dir. Sharad Patel. (1981).

“autonomous market” and to ship their loots abroad. The practice, with the international sanctions against the Abacha regime, bled the Nigerian economy and created more hardship leading to more strident anti government media and street narrative culture.

Abacha’s loot became the stuff of legends. If the citizenry thought they had an idea of the extent of his Kleptocracy while he was alive and so narrativized it in various city corners, the discoveries after his death left many speechless. The BBC gives an idea of the Abacha loot: “General Abacha, who died of an apparent heart attack in 1998, was accused of stealing some \$3bn from state funds in the oil-rich country.” It also reveals that “[b]etween 1999 and 2007 the government of Olusegun Obasanjo secured the return of more than USS450 million of “Abacha loot” from Swiss banks where the money had been salted away.”²⁰

²⁰ See “Switzerland to Give Back Abacha Millions,” *BBC News Online*, April 17, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1935646.stm> Web. June 2007. A 2006 report prepared by the World Bank with Cooperation from the Federal Ministry of Finance entitled “Utilization of repatriated Abacha loot: Results of the field monitoring exercise,” further reveals that: “On February 7, 2005 the Federal Supreme Court of Switzerland authorized the repatriation by Switzerland to Nigeria of funds deposited by the Abacha family in Switzerland. Switzerland is the first country to repatriate to Nigeria funds looted by earlier military administrations. The actual repatriation took place in two tranches – in September and November of 2005 (US\$461.3 mn) and (mostly) in the 1st quarter of 2006 (\$44.1 mn). The total amount received by the Federal Government of Nigeria was equivalent to \$505.5 mn. The last small transfer of \$5.2 mn was made in August 2006” (http://www.integrityng.com/Library/Abacha_Funds_Monitoring_1221.pdf, 5. Web. October 26, 2008). In the same vein, various reports by *Asia Africa Intelligence Wire* confirm other recovered Abacha loot. They include Britain’s repayment of “three million pounds to Nigeria believed to belong to the late General Sani Abacha and frozen by the Foreign Office since 1998.” The wire service adds that “Britain repaid the money last week [in December 2003] to the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission which had threatened legal action and accused London of failing in efforts to track down Abacha’s alleged billions worldwide. The money was seized by British customs officers from Alhaji Daura, a businessman who arrived at Heathrow airport in 1998 and who was accused [by] Nigeria of being a courier for Abacha.” See http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-19851183_ITM Web. May 12, 2007. The US is also implicated as *Asia Africa Intelligence Wire* also reports: “More than USD 700 million “stolen” by the late dictator Sani Abacha has been returned to the people of Nigeria, sending a signal worldwide that there is no safe harbour for stolen funds, World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz has said.” See: <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-136876143/washington-sep-28-pti.html> Web. May 12, 2007.

In contrast, typical headlines reporting the living conditions of Nigerians under his kleptocratic rule then were the following: “Hell of a Life” (*Newswatch*, August 1, 1994); “State of Emergency” (*TELL*, No. 38, September 19, 1994); “Chaos, Nigeria Grinds to a Halt. How the Military Wrecked Nigeria” (*TELL*, January 24, 1994); “Nigeria is Doomed,” (*The News*, November 28, 1994); “State Robbery, How Government Dupes Nigerians,” (*The News*, December 23, 1996); and “Cry, My Beloved Country” (*The Sentinel*, March 7, 1994, No. 2). The heart-wrenching narratives may be represented by the latter’s promo for the story: “The Nigerian citizenry is lying on an oil bed of nails. Hope and despair have become their faithful companions, as the dead-weight of woes increase. Nothing works...”

(3)

Death, the Tyrant and the Apple Theory

It was not unexpected that when the much-hated goggled General suddenly died on June 8, 1998 just before realizing his dream of metamorphosing into a civilian president,²¹ the street storytellers and their “collaborators” in the popular media and even in the diplomatic missions burst forth with new flashes like fireflies. There were jubilations in the streets of urban Nigeria and in the deeper recesses of the rural areas. Mikail Mumuni addresses this graphically in a story

²¹ Chris Ogbonda (2004) offers more insight into how Abacha set out to achieve this: “He deployed a combination of weapons including blackmail, threats, intimidation, harassment, brute force, and money to keep political institutions and foes under his control. This was why several presidential aspirants, including, Adamu Ciroma, Umaru Shinkafi, Bamanga Tukur, Solomon Lar and the so-called progressives announced that they had withdrawn from the transition program. General Abacha also funded and literally controlled the affairs of the five political parties set up for the promised transition: United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), Congress for National Consensus (CNC), Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM), National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN) and Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN). Thus, when local government and national assembly elections were held in March 1997 and April 1998 the winners were candidates that Abacha had cleared to win. By the end of April 1998, all the five registered parties endorsed General Abacha as the only candidate for the presidential election scheduled for August that year. The presidential election did not hold because Abacha passed away in June of 1998.”

bluntly entitled “Sani Abacha: Good Riddance” and published in *TELL* magazine’s special edition on Abacha’s death, *Death of a Tyrant* (*TELL*, No 25, June 22, 1998). The stark opening lines of the report speak volumes:

Those who referred to Sani Abacha during his lifetime, as the most hated head of state Nigeria ever had were vindicated last week Monday, when the general gave up the ghost. Immediately the news swept across the country, Nigerians who ordinarily by their cultural and religious inclinations do not jubilate over the death of people took to the streets congratulating one another and giving “thanks” to God for the demise of the dictator. Some even went as far as declaring surplus at beer parlours in this unusual gale of celebration which was not limited to any geographical part of the country. (21)

Iconoclastic writer Naiwu Osahon corroborates the celebration of Abacha’s death in a most revealing personal testimony. Osahon (2010) reports that he danced on the streets when he heard of Abacha’s death, confessing that he “almost went berserk with joy when the BBC first confirmed the news that Monday 8th June, 1998, in the afternoon.” And quite remarkably, as he “rushed to the street screaming the news [...] a mammoth impromptu party soon formed around [him] singing, “we don win o!” (meaning the people have won), along the streets...” Then refracting the same Nigerian cultural and religious inclination pointed out by *TELL* above, Osahon writes:

Of course, I heard someone say, even the devil deserves to be mourned at death but Abacha was worse than the devil. I asked my detractor, “would

we not have celebrated if he had been killed in a coup?" I insisted that hypocrites could mourn to their hearts' desire but that Abacha's death saved the lives of millions of Nigerians. That genuine patriots do not mourn just for the sake of being seen to be mourning.²²

Far from the "apparent heart attack" which the BBC mentions above as the official cause of Abacha's death, Karl Maier (2000) offers a sweeping overview of the popular narrative account of his death in the following passage:

Then a series of events unfolded that was so extraordinary that it read like a work of fiction. It began on June 8, 1998, when Abacha, on his customary nightly excursion into the pleasures of the flesh, expired while in the arms of a pair of Indian prostitutes. The official cause of death was a heart attack, although unsubstantiated rumors abounded concerning his demise. Everyone had a pet theory. Some said he was murdered with an untraceable poison by army officers who realized that he was steering Nigeria toward an upheaval that would consume them all. Others, including a fair number of Western diplomats, believed he had overdosed on Viagra, taken to fortify his body for the strain of his notorious sexual appetite. But many saw what had occurred as nothing less than, in the words of one Nigerian businessman, "a coup from heaven." (4)

Indeed "everyone had a pet theory" amidst the carnivalesque celebration of Abacha's demise. But the dominant "theory" was the one cited by Maier above: the maximum ruler, Grand Commander of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and

²² See excerpt published at <http://www.thenigerianvoice.com/nvnews/37128/1/general-sani-abacha-adapted-from-naiwu-osahons-boo.html> Web. November 2, 2010.

‘heroic’ veteran of many coup plots whose voice as coup plot announcer was unbeaten, died of poisoned apples in the hands of Indian prostitutes! There could not have been a more deserving anticlimactic way in the popular imagination for the tyrant’s reign of terror to end. No one cared about his autopsy report; the public was in no mood to have one. Establishment stories of his dying of complications related to heart failure were immaterial despite the fact that before his death, questions were raised about his health and well-being, the same way as Nigerians were later to do with President Yar’Adua.

Insightfully, in the September 15, 1997 edition of *TELL*, the magazine did a cover story focusing on Abacha’s health entitled *Abacha’s Illness Worsens*. According to Dele Omotunde (1998), Deputy Editor-in-Chief, the magazine “had hoped to focus attention on the need to take more than a cursory look at the physical and mental capability of the nation’s number one citizen.”²³ But instead, “a commando-style assault on the home of the magazine’s editor-in-chief” was government’s response. Still, an unrelenting *TELL* revisited the issue again a week before Abacha died, calling attention to his “anabolic muscularity” and “robust cheeks.” Omotunde revealed after Abacha’s death that those terms were “a-diplomatic way of saying that the dictator was on life-support, muscle-building drugs to sustain his military gait” (Ibid.). This analysis of the secretive dictator’s health—very much like that of Kim Jong Il, the North Korean reclusive leader—was further developed by Louisa Ayonote (1998) in the same edition of *TELL*. In the story “What Killed the General,” Ayonote, piecing together expert views on the possible causes of Abacha’s death, stated that “complications arising from

²³ “From the Editor,” *TELL*, No. 25, June 22, 1998, 7.

liver cirrhosis are believed to have dealt the dictator a mortal blow” (32). Unlike Yar’Adua, a much later successor after him whose long trips abroad for medical treatment became a national talking point, Abacha was said to have declined medical treatment abroad “for fear of being toppled” (Okafor 1988: 17).²⁴

Given the welter of circumstantial evidence pointing to Abacha’s death possibly as a result of ill health, and as the State officially declared, why have street stories insisting that he died of poisoned apples administered by Indian prostitutes persisted? Besides the answer proffered above, it seems to me that it is because only a humiliating death for the armoured General was logical as far his oppressed subjects were concerned. Even while he was alive, a news magazine headline had gushed: *Abacha on Fire: The Opposition Closes In*.²⁵ Amongst some of the most memorable print media focus on Abacha’s death were: “The Last Days of Abacha,” *Newswatch*, July 6, 1998, and a *Prime Sunset* report—both of which appear to point to Bayart’s (1993) declaration that “[m]istresses are one of the cogs in the wheel of the postcolonial state” (xviii).²⁶

²⁴ John Okafor’s “Dying for Security Reasons,” is one of *TELL* magazine’s cover stories on the death of the tyrant. See *TELL*, No 25, June 22, 1998, 17 for more. The story’s rider says it all: “For fear of being toppled, the late General Sani Abacha refused to be treated abroad and eventually paid with his life.” Similarly, following Abacha’s death, Mark Dowdney of *The Mirror of London* (9 June 1998: 10) profiled him accurately as an “[i]cy and unforgiving” man who “flouted world opinion in his quest for absolute power. He was last seen in public during a visit by the Pope in March [1998, about three months before his death]. But he showed little mercy as he followed in the blood-stained footsteps of previous military dictators.” More importantly, Dowdney joins the controversy around the cause of Abacha’s death as he writes: “Though suffering from heart trouble in recent years, Abacha was turned away by western countries where he sought help. But it is unlikely he would have gone abroad as he had become paranoid that his henchmen would depose him if he left the country.”

²⁵ See the cover of *TELL*, No. 23 June 6, 1994.

²⁶ Not only in the “postcolonial state” really. Examples abound of rulers from other parts of the world who shook their domains as a result of steamy liaisons with mistresses. One of the most celebrated cases is Lewinskygate which involved former US President Bill Clinton. There is also the December 30, 2010 conviction of former Israeli president, Moshe Katsav for rape, and the February 2011 indictment of Italy’s premier Silvio Berlusconi in prostitution probe following “charges that he paid for sex with a 17-year-old Moroccan girl and then tried to cover it up”

Not surprising then, referring to his passing away as “The Ultimate ‘Coup’ against Abacha” in the lead cover story in the same edition of *TELL* (No. 25, June 22, 1998: 8-16) which also promoted the ill-health theory about the general’s death, the magazine consolidated the popular conspiracy theory angle. The cover story had all the frills of the adversarial storytelling technique common in the radical media and on the streets. The reporter, Ade Olorunfewa—perhaps one of the numerous pseudonyms adopted by reporters to dodge Abacha’s killer squad or gulag—opens the story with a convincing omniscient voice as he constructs the last hours of the brutish general, complete with every imaginable detail and even slices of dialogue between a domestic staff and the tyrant’s wife:

General Sani Abacha the Nigerian dictator had a hectic time on Sunday June 7 [the eve of his death]. He had hosted Yasser Arafat, the leader of the State of Palestine and had endured the rigour of protocol [...] After the departure, a visibly tired Abacha retreated to his second-floor bedroom in the sprawling family apartment within the Aso Rock Presidential Villa complex. By midnight, Maryam, the dictator’s wife, was summoned from her bedroom. “*Oga* is not doing well,” she was told by fidgety domestic staff. She hurried to her husband’s side barefooted, her head uncovered. The reality starred her in the face. Abacha, after four years of playing god, was about to meet God.” (9)

Compared with Godwin Agbroko’s template narrative about Black Scorpion’s rumoured invasion of the same Presidential Villa while Abacha’s predecessor

(Colleen 2011). Additionally, Adesanmi (2010) has drawn attention to “the deuxième bureau concubinage system” in French culture, noting that “Western arrogance and conceit” lead to pretensions “that those things exist only in Africa.”

Babangida presided, one would be presented with what amounts to the poetics of the radical press narrative strategy during the anti-military years covered in this study: inventive, descriptive, lively, imagined dialogue, caustic humour, and in some cases, astonishing mind-reading. Witness the First Lady hurrying to the Presidential chamber barefooted, after a “fidgety domestic staff” had told her in street style, “*Oga* is not doing well”! But the next paragraph to the thrilling opener is even more arresting in its statistical and mythopoeic flourish:

Maryam knew the meaning of tragedy. She had buried a son in that house and she was not going to give up on her husband so easily. Phones flew to different parts of Abuja, the somnolent capital of Nigeria. And two doctors were soon by the bed side of the most hated ruler in Nigerian history. Since the dictator had been in poor health for many years, the presidential complex was fully equipped for emergencies. Oxygen tents were brought and the general was placed on life support machine. But nature was in a hurry and it wanted its decree obeyed. The tyrant with 1,000 sorcerers,²⁷ 5,000 bodyguards and 10,000 spies protecting him, was helpless before the decree of God. At 4.56 a.m. local time, Monday, June 8, the dictator

²⁷ Omo Omoruyi, one of Babangida’s top advisers and a former Research Fellow at the African Studies Center, Boston University, corroborates this reference to Abacha’s predilection to the occult. According to Omoruyi: “On why General Abacha had to go for Chief Abiola at precisely the same time a year later after the annulment one should not be dismissed as coincidental. It was a design as General Abacha was acting on some advice from the marabouts. Yomi Tokoya alluded to the influence of marabouts. The Commission should not treat this lightly. General Abacha’s regime was one governed by many marabouts from the Islamic world. Nothing happened by chance under the administration of General Abacha. Maybe this is what my friends call Allah’s wish. It is not; it is the work of devils. (See “Refocusing The Oputa Commission (1): ‘JUNE 12’”, The Omoruyi Papers. <http://nigeriaworld.com/feature/publication/omoruyi/080901.html> Web. Jan 2010. One of the chief marabouts identified by the critical press was the Sarkin Shasha of Ibadan, Alhaji Haruna Maiyasin Katsina.

lost his last battle. Abacha's brutal and brutish dictatorship had ended. For many years, he had made history. Now he is history. (9-10)

Through word play (especially on "decree"), imagistic language, and epithets, the writer embeds in this passage, the kind of stuff renowned Latin-American novelists such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez would craft,²⁸ serious markers of the military era in politics. More importantly, the passage shows that in addition to Comaroff and Comaroff's (1999) observation that the postcolonial social order instigates "an expansion that often breaks the conventional bounds of legality, making crime, as well as magic, a mode of production *open to those who lack other resources*" (289) [emphasis added], such recourse applies even more to the rich and powerful such as Abacha, who go to every imaginable extent to sustain their privileged status.

The magazine further reports that "one of those at the villa when Abacha died was Major Mohammed Mustapha, the faithful CSO [Chief security Officer] to the dictator, who also lives in the same sprawling battlement" (10). After overcoming the initial grief Mustapha was said to have "ordered the arrest of Abacha's cooks and stewards since the doctors allegedly said they suspected food poisoning" (Ibid.) as the cause of his death. The order to arrest Abacha's cooks and stewards as claimed in this version of the narrative on Abacha's death not only shows how ordinary people become victims in postcolonial power games, but also alerts us to how their presence in such hallowed corridors of power

²⁸ I am thinking here of the Nobel laureate's astonishing work, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and his own history and rigorously researched work as a newspaper man with the newspaper *El Espectador*—see especially *Clandestine in Chile: The Adventures of Miguel Littin*, Trans. by Asa Zatz. New York: Henry Holt, 1988, and *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*, New York: Knopf, 1986.

enables them to pick up privileged information which sometimes filter into street stories or serve the telling of “history from below,” to quote Ato Quayson (2000: 54). Needless to add, that such telling of history from below filters into popular cultural production as evident in the textual analysis below.

To go beyond the general character of the “kernel narrative” in the streets which Maier highlights, it is apposite to illustrate with a typical example of the kind of stories published by some of the evening tabloids such as the cover story of *Prime Sunset*²⁹ with the salacious cover banner: “ABACHA’S SEX SCANDAL,” and the riders: “How He Spent N5 million To Disvirgin³⁰ A Teenager, Useni’s Connection.” As limited copies of the short-lived newspaper which sold fast during rush hour evening traffic in Lagos is no longer available, perhaps I should quote at some length:

The last is yet to be heard about the sexual atrocities committed by the late Head of State, General Sani Abacha. Now, another one is here: He is understood to have paid a “token” N5 million [about about \$34,000] a few days before his death to disvirgin a Nigerian teenage girl! [...] The late Abacha was said to be immediately interested in the sexual status of the lady as a virgin having claimed that he had not come across such an opportunity in the last 25 years. The former head of state who was said to be an ardent user of traditional “burantashi” or the orthodox “viagra” was

²⁹ See the *Prime Sunset* edition, No. 133, Wednesday, September 9, 1998.

³⁰ Nigerian English, meaning: causing loss of virginity. For certain groups in Nigeria, sleeping with a young girl who had never had intercourse would imbue a man with supernatural powers and infuse fresh blood into him to make him look younger and to prolong his life. The corollary of such a superstitious belief would be the conviction amongst certain groups in South Africa that sleeping with a virgin is the vaccine/cure for HIV/AIDS.

already prepared for the Useni-arranged privilege. [...] It was learnt that having wacked the “apetiser” the late General Abacha decided to go for the “main dish” upstairs where an Indian lady was said to be waiting for him. After an “exotic session” a fully dressed late General Abacha, according to sources, was descending the stairs of the duplex completely fagged out when the unexpected happened. He clutched his heart and with a moan tumbled down. All efforts to revive him failed, thereafter, even at the Aso Rock clinic, where two medical experts were summoned to his aid to no avail. He was pronounced dead later. Competent sources said it was customary for the late General Abacha to “sample foreign delicacies” regularly through the connivance of his bosom friend, General Useni. Many of the late General Abacha’s sexual escapades were blamed for his late resumption at his desk whenever he felt like working at all. [...]

Various media reports have previously hammered on the presence of the Indian ladies at a guest house near Aso Rock in the early hours of the morning which General Abacha died. Up till now, there has not been any official statement to confirm or deny such media on “the last moments of General Abacha.” (4-5)

Although the story does not mention poisoned apple(s) from Indian prostitutes as the cause of Abacha’s death—only “an Indian lady”—the rest of the narrative mirrors the popular street version, replete with the sardonic humour, satiric resonance, and street lingo of the ‘original’ oral version which most Nigerian youth and older citizens are likely to be familiar with, and which serves as the

basis of the film text *Stubborn Grasshopper*. The vernacular imagery evoked by the loaded words in inverted commas, especially the one in local Hausa language (“burantashi”), shines through and further contextualizes the narrative as a progeny of a street oral narrative culture. With the anonymous by-line (By Our Reporter) with which the story is signed, and with a recourse to the journalistic license of withholding sources of information, the reporter assumes a communal oral voice—a voice of the people, that is—to lend authority to the narrative and in so doing, authenticity.³¹ He attributes his sources to “competent sources” [on the streets one nearly adds], and uses indirect phrases (such as “he was said to have”; “It was learnt that”; and “was reliably believed to have”) to achieve the communal oral voice. What is more, at a symbolic level typical of the proverbial nature of traditional oral narratives which inspires some of the street stories, the story of Abacha taking a teenager’s virginity conflates to the rape of an innocent nation, the leadership of which he seized in a palace coup in the first place.

Interestingly, General Useni had a different theory as reflected in the interview he granted a group of journalists after Abacha’s death and published in *Vanguard* newspaper. According to Taye Obateru (2008), the former Minister of the Federal Capital Territory and a confidant of Abacha who himself was nicknamed “Jerry Boy” as part of a discourse of promiscuity that encircles the Generals,³² “dismissed the ‘Indian apple theory’ surrounding the death of his

³¹ It is worth noting that anonymous by-lines are, of course, a signature of journalism especially as practiced by a section of the British press (emblemized by *The Economist!*). However, we must distinguish between the use of anonymity in the Nigerian oppositional press from that British tradition in the way the Nigerian critical press adopts it to shore up my sense of it as constitutive of a “communal oral voice.”

³² A source in the course of fieldwork told me that Useni, himself, had been the subject of a street story which alleged that he was HIV positive and was sustaining himself with AIDS drugs

bosom friend, Abacha, saying there was nothing like that.” Obateru writes that Useni tried to dispel the already entrenched rumour that the late Head of State, General Sani Abacha, died after eating an apple from some Indian girls, claiming that it “was strange to him.” Obateru further reports that Useni additionally asserted that, “he was unaware of the claim that his (Abacha’s) death was masterminded (sic) by some foreign interests opposed to his administration.” Obateru quotes Useni’s rhetorical efforts to dismiss the street story:

There are apples in Nigeria. Why do we have to bring apple from India? *These are just what some people were saying to discredit the administration.* There was no apple from India. I am an Indian-trained officer and I never saw apple there, so I don’t know what people mean when they talk about bringing apples from India. It was just a figment of some people’s imagination. [Emphasis added].

Obateru also informs that General Useni “confirmed that he was the closest to General Abacha,” but that “the claim that he was killed by agents of some foreign countries could also not hold since the autopsy did not reveal anything like that.” In a most revealing part of his report that bears out the human desire to believe which underpins the mythic imagination that feeds street stories, Obateru quotes Useni as asserting that: “Nigerians don’t believe that someone can die a natural death. So even if someone is sick and he eventually passes on, they will find a reason for the death. But I am not aware that anything like that happened, otherwise the autopsy would have revealed it.”

(retroviral drugs?) which “the white man” had discovered for AIDS but was hiding from Black people so that they would die. The informant further claimed that Useni was able to access the drugs because of his privileged socio-political status and stinking wealth.

Reacting to a similar narrative Useni gave to *The Sunday Punch* newspaper, Chika Onwudiegwu, former chief press secretary to Abacha's deputy, General Diya, stated that, "it was a pity that Useni wasted the golden opportunity given him to clear himself of the grave allegations that he had a hand in the 'mysterious' death of his bosom friend, Abacha" (22)³³ Onwudiegwu, aligning with the conspiracy theory around Abacha's death, stated that "it was a sad commentary on the running of the serious business of governance, and an assault on the sensibilities of Nigerians that their head of state would prefer the pleasure of foreign harlots, to attending to the people's problems" (Ibid.). And in a display of the power of street narratives to expose the behind-the-scene activities of the ruling class, a privileged establishment man Onwudiegwu reiterated the popular thread about Abacha's licentiousness thus:

It was an allegation widely and openly bandied at the time that Abacha spent the better part of the 24 hours of the day carousing and frolicking at the numerous Abacha guest houses, scattered all over Abuja. Abacha would come back in the morning and sleep off, thereby keeping the affairs of state on hold" (Ibid.).

Moshood Fayemiwo also interrogates Useni's version of the Abacha death story in an online interview he granted the Managing Editor of *Pointblank News*, Oladimeji Abitogun, in the US where he has been in exile. Premising his version on the context of the "official" and "unofficial" binary that defines political narratives in the postcolonial Nigerian public sphere, Fayemiwo rhetorically

³³ See *Sunday Punch*, Diya's Aide Replies Useni: You lied! 1997 coup was a contrivance," *Sunday Punch*, February 16, 2003, 21-22.

advances his story by urging his interviewer to “[r]emember there are two story lines to events in Nigeria. The official one that they dish out to you journalists which they use to hide the real truth, and the unofficial one which is the real thing but which would not be published in the newspapers. That is the real story which is usually unofficial.” To buttress his point, Fayemiwo cites the example of how government agents desperately denied his interviewer’s story that former President Yar’ Adua was sick, cautioning: “You cannot rely on government spokesmen or their ubiquitous press releases”—an unambiguous reference to the tendency of sections of the Nigerian press to depend on press releases/government gazettes for their reports, especially in more recent years.³⁴ Moving from the preamble, Fayemiwo offers an interesting alternative version to the Abacha death narrative.³⁵

Told by his interviewer that the Nigerian press may not have known about the version of the conspiracy theory around Abacha’s death that he had given, Fayemiwo retorted: “It is an international story,” but the Nigerian press “won’t publish this kind of story” because... “[even] if anyone gave it to them, they would be afraid and lamentably, they don’t have the resources to investigate.” Instead, argued Fayemiwo, “[t]hey would give you the official story that is the

³⁴ Such dependence on government sources is not peculiar to the Nigerian press. Indeed so pervasive is the compromising influence of government agents that it is the subject of the hilarious film *In The Loop* (2009), a satire on the media spins around the invasion of Iraq in 2003 directed by Armando Lannucci. Though fictional, the film is believed to have been inspired by Alastair Campbell’s controversial operations as Director of Communications and Strategy during British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s regime between 1997 and 2003,

³⁵ See Moshood Fayemiwo, “IBB killed Abiola, Abacha, Idiagbon, Ige – Fayemiwo,” <http://www.republicreport.com/bombshell-revelation-linking-ibb-to-mko-abiola-abachas-death%E2%80%9494reports/> Web. September 4, 2010. This interview deserves to be read at length in order to appreciate its details and its contribution to my analysis of the poetics/aesthetics of the Nigeria street narrative culture.

story everybody would run away with: ‘Oh, two Indian prostitutes.’ Where are the Indian ladies? It’s all rubbish.”

The text of the interview reinforces some of the stylistic devices of street storytellers noted earlier: the use of a conversational, oral style; use of repetitions for emphasis; and the application of an authoritative voice aimed at establishing the authenticity of the narrative. The existence of various versions of the Abacha death story alludes to both the oral provenance and to the somewhat *mysterious* nature or “crisis of representation” (Jameson 1984: viii)³⁶ of otherwise real time everyday social history/knowledge production in the postcolony. This has prompted Ihonvbere and Shaw (1998) to declare that “Nigeria’s contemporary history is characterized by illusion” (xvii), an idea also echoed by Apter (1999), and perhaps best captured by Ihonvbere and Shaw’s analogy “of the masquerade: a traditional yet “modernized” public celebration involving disguised dancers and [...] musicians” (Ibid.).

To return to the implication of Useni’s response to the people’s understanding of how Abacha died, I argue that beneath Useni’s denial is a some kind of confirmation, a recognition of the popular theory around the demise of the former Nigerian ‘strongman’ and Useni’s erstwhile soul mate. Two remarkable ideas in Useni’s defense stick out clearly and call for further discussion since they provide additional insight into our understanding of the politics of death and the postcolonial condition in Nigeria, and how Abacha’s case would not perfectly fit

³⁶ According to Jameson (1984), “the so-called crisis of representation,” implicates “an essentially realistic epistemology, which conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it—[and] projects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy, and Truth itself” (viii). But which, in reality, are complicated by “the *speculative* unity of all knowledge” (ix). [My emphasis]

into Useni's second "theory." The first is the idea that the street stories "*are just what some people were saying to discredit the administration.*" The second is that "*Nigerians don't believe that someone can die a natural death. So even if someone is sick and he eventually passes on, they will find a reason for the death.*" While I have already theorized why ordinary people would go to any length with street stories to discredit the ruling gang, I need to unpack Useni's loaded second "theory." Embedded in it is both the notion of wish-fulfillment which I introduced in the first chapter, and the mythological, if not superstitious/supernatural, world view³⁷ that still frames the perception of reality in Nigeria even in an age of high technology and globalization. The associated questions to ask are: Why do oppressed citizens reject death by natural causes for their leaders? Just before I probe the answers, may I observe that the question becomes more complicated when it is noted that instances abound where Useni's second assumption also applies to non-oppressors of the people as was the case with the activist Beko Ransome-Kuti with which I ended Chapter Three, and others respectively listed by Akin Obasa (2007)³⁸ and Justin Akpovi-Esade (2006).³⁹

³⁷ Anthony Giddens (2000) identifies a similar philosophy amongst other traditional cultures which "have denied the idea of chance happenings altogether" (41). Instead, the cultures use such superstitious interpretation of reality to "back up decisions of a more calculative nature" (41), as we might say rightly applies in the context of the people's interpretation of the circumstances of Abacha's death—a logic that apparently eludes Useni.

³⁸ Akin Obasa's interesting survey of such rumoured deaths is the cover story of *The News* magazine entitled "Diary of Fake Deaths" with the promo: "Nigerian politics has a rich history of rumoured deaths." See *The News* magazine online, March 12, 2007. <http://www.thenewsng.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=2416>

³⁹ Amongst these "others" in the political camp perhaps the earliest in contemporary history of false deaths was Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first ceremonial President around whom legends had been created and who had the unenviable record of being rumoured to have died twice. The list also includes the rumoured death of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, and the most

The complication in the idea of imagined deaths of celebrities is more evident in its occasional replication in the advanced metropolis of the Western world. A good example is the Canadian folk music idol Gordon Lightfoot. In its February 9-21, 2010 edition, *Metro* newspaper published a front page story captioned “Rumours of Gordon Lightfoot's death greatly exaggerated, says singer.” An anatomy of the rumour which gained viral momentum reveals that it started on the internet. According to the *Metro* newspaper report, the rumour “prompted the bemused folk legend to appear on a live TV news channel to dispute the reports” albeit with humour: “I don’t know where it comes from. It seems like a bit of a hoax or something [...] I haven’t had so much airplay on my music now for weeks.” The famous Canadian singer-songwriter’s publicist, Bernie Findler, said, “Lightfoot was in a dentist’s chair in Toronto when the rumours began to spread,” reports *Metro* newspaper.

Humorous as such hoaxes sometimes turn out whether in Nigeria or in the heart of one of North America’s most popular cities, a traditional way of understanding them is to recall the significance of the Evil Forest as the graveyard for the outcast citizen in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. So that contrary to the general contemporary view that Africans do not speak ill of the dead, in most traditional African societies such as Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart*, good men are wished peaceful death and evil men punished with shameful deaths and buried in the evil forest.

remarkable of them all: the many ‘deaths’ of Obasanjo’s successor, President Umaru Yar’Adua which I shall analyze presently.

Wale Adebani (2007) offers a fascinating perspective for theorizing the politics of death in postcolonial Nigeria. Beyond the significance of death as a rite of passage in African cosmology, Adebani compares the celebration of Obafemi Awolowo, a political figure regarded as an avatar of sorts among the Yoruba in Nigeria, to necrophilia. Adebani states that “death, burial and statue, are useful in the analysis of the social history of Africa” (8), and attempts to show why students of African politics should focus more on such simultaneously political, cultural and as well social, phenomena as death, burial and statue. The reason for such a focus is that “they provoke new thoughts and interpretations and fresh perspectives in understanding the ebb and flows of contemporary African politics as it feeds off ‘tradition’, ‘culture’ and the cosmology of the African peoples” (8-9).

Adebani’s focus on the god-like positive stature-in-death of Chief Awolowo around whom the legend of being seen in the moon constructed contrasts with the opprobrium associated with Abacha in life and in death. Generally, with Abacha dead or alive, Mbembe’s statement in my epigraph to this chapter finds eloquent metaphoric testimony.

Such was the grim image of Abacha that inflected terrible street stories about him as citizens sought to interpret/attack the incomprehensible late twentieth century cruelty that he exhibited against his own people. Much so that even lying harmless in death, it was risky for the coterie of beneficiaries of his iron rule to openly show compassion for him, contrary to local tradition which discourages speaking ill of the dead; and that for a man who was surrounded by

‘professional’ sycophants⁴⁰ otherwise called AGIP (Any Government In Power persons), some of whom organized carnivals to support his plans to transform into a civilian president. If Abacha and his cabal had thought that by such jamborees doing they would win the people’s voice wrapped in street narratives, they were mistaken. Like Babangida before him, Abacha also understood the significance of popular narratives produced and circulated in the street and in the media and the need to combat them. But unlike Babangida, he was too crude, preferring to chain the media houses and jail any imagined enemy in sight than the Maradonic dribbles of the his gap-toothed military predecessor.

Narratives using illness as metaphor for incapacitating an unpopular ruler were probably first deployed against a sitting Nigerian head of state during Abacha’s reign; the narrative weapon assumed more dangerous dimensions during the tenure of Yar’Adua. The weapon proved devastating in *willing* and accelerating the controversial death of Abacha—whether through cardiac arrest (justifiable by a theory that he was “suffering from heart trouble in recent years” as Dowdney (1998) writes); through complications from liver cirrhosis as believed by some; or through the conspiracy of fifth columnists and foreign

⁴⁰ Abubakar Umar, former Governor of Kaduna State in Northern Nigeria, a retired Colonel and one of the few openly progressive elements from the Nigerian military, refers to these sycophants in a moving letter to General Abacha at the peak of his political misadventure. Excerpts: “Once again, I appeal to you, sir in Allah's name to do what is right; it is very easy for leaders to become insulated from reality. Because of the vast resources under your control you will never be short of sycophants. Similar persons have advised people like the Shah of Iran, Ferdinand Marcos, Idi Amin, Jean Bokassa and Samuel Doe if such leaders stated that the sun rose in the west the sycophants would agree and go to any extent to convince others to follow suit. Please don't be misled by them. In your case you must know that apart from entertaining purely selfish motives in resolution of the [June 12] crisis your supporters see it as an opportunity to avenge a long standing perceived wrong done to them by some people.” See Abubakar Umar, “Umar's Letter To Abacha” in <http://www.dawodu.com/umar6.htm> Web. August 15, 2010.

agents as suggested by Useni; or through the more dramatic poisoned apples of Indian prostitutes as widely promoted in popular culture. However it is viewed, Abacha was as much a victim of his unstable health as he was of what McNair 2000 would call "auto-erotic asphyxiation" (58) or Kirk-Greene (1991) "verbal technology apparatus" (178). And the Nigerian presses and other popular culture producers as evident in the foregoing analysis —and in the following chapter— were happy to "cash" in on it, with all the meaning potentialities of the word *cash* intended. It is against this background that one understands the acknowledgement by Funmi Iyanda, broadcaster and freelance journalist that "the nation staggered out of the reality of Abacha's evil reign and lewd departure."⁴¹ It is in attempt to explain and confront the debilitating lifescapes foisted on the citizenry by the Abacha junta and his "lewd departure" that the kinds of "street stories" I have been discussing emerged as a potent socio-political and aesthetic popular culture construction in a predatory postcolonial state. The stories have become epistemic sites where everyday culture is not only produced,⁴² but also where cultural politics and identities are produced and "theorized" by ordinary citizens as represented by the Apple Theory.

⁴¹ See "Babangida Ke," http://fiyanda.blogspot.com/2006_11_01_archive.html Web. November 3, 2010.

⁴² The idea of "site" here must be seen to be relatively different from the traditional *performance arena* that John Miles Foley (1995) "designates the locus where the event of performance takes place, where words are invested with their special power" (47). The difference here is essentially that unlike the *performance arena* that is "a defined and defining site in which the enactment can occur again and again without devolution into a repetitive, solely chronological series" (ibid.) the sites where street stories are transacted are less formal and localised.

**The Tea Theory and the proverbial “corpse [that] does not hide itself from
the people who will bury it”**

The emergence of General Abacha as Head of State in November 1994 worsened the “June 12 debacle” (Dare 2010),⁴³ aggravated the political crisis, culminated in the arrest of M.K.O. Abiola and the Tea Theory narrative which shadowed Abiola’s eventual death not long after Abacha’s own demise, and spawned more sensational, speculative headlines/street narratives. As Daniel Jordan Smith (2007) has noted, “Babangida’s cancellation of the election just days after the vote, which led to five more years of brutal dictator General Sam Abacha, was viewed by many Nigerians as the ultimate 419, committed by the Nigerian leader most associated with the term” (22). Nigerians—especially in the Lagos-Ibadan media axis—resisted with virulent protests, the annulment, the Ernest Sonekan-led ING, and Abacha’s reign of terror. The resistance is best interpreted against the backdrop of the recent confirmation by the chief electoral officer then, Humphrey Nwosu in his book published fifteen years after, “MKO Abiola won the election with a total vote of 8, 323, 305 scoring a third of the votes in 28 states out of the then 30 states, while his rival, Bashir Tofa scored a total of 6, 073, 612 votes, with at least one-third of the votes cast in 23 states.”⁴⁴

The boiling political temperature of the time could be measured by the ominously alarming headlines of the leading critical print media—*TELL* and *The*

⁴³ See Olatunji Dare, *Diary of a Debacle: Tracking Nigeria's Failed Democratic Transition (1989-1994)*. Ibadan: Agbo Areo Publishers, 2010.

⁴⁴ Humphrey, Nwosu, *Laying the Foundation for Nigeria's Democracy: My Account of June 12 1993 Presidential Election and its Annulment*, Macmillan Nigeria, 2008.

News magazines.⁴⁵ Stanley Macebuh articulated the mood in the press at the time in his Publisher's column in *The Sentinel*, July 4, 1994: "Anyone who had enough patience to wade through the newspapers and the magazines last week [between the last week of June and the first week of July, 1994] would almost certainly have concluded that Armageddon was already upon us" (5).

Abiola rode on the crest of this popular discontent to declare himself President on the first anniversary of the June 12 elections in 1994 at the historic Epetedo Declaration, thereby signifying a battle line that General Abacha was only too happy to exploit to hammer opposition against him afterward. A flurry of dramatic activities ensued: Abiola was said to have gone into hiding to evade a manhunt by Abacha's security apparatuses; he soon reemerged in public, and told the crowd of about 5,000 Lagosians in attendance, as reported by Danlami Nmodu for *The Sentinel* ("The Secret Plan of Abacha and Abiola," July 4, 1994), that "the story of his going into hiding was the figment of police's imagination. Rather, he said, he had only withdrawn for a few days to plan his administration which would be characterised by unprecedented improvements in the fields of health and education" (14). But as Nmodu reported, Abiola's assertion that he had "deliberately withdrawn" contradicted an earlier claim by Kudirat, one of his wives. "She had said that Abiola was sick and recuperating. He would come into the open after recovery" (Ibid.). Yet another version was available as Nmodu

⁴⁵ Examples include: "State of Emergency: Abacha's Ploy to Stay for Four Years," *TELL*, No. 38, September 19, 1994; "Stalemate: What will the Army Do?" *The News*, 8 August 1994; "Nigeria is Doomed," *The News*, November 28, 1994; "Abiola Tackles Abacha: Forms Government, Cabinet List Out Soon, Asks Abacha to Pack Out," *The News*, 16 May, 1994; "Get Out Now," Soyinka Tells Abacha. *TELL*, June 3, 1996; "No Way for Abacha: Nigerians Say Enough is Enough," *TELL*, No. 8 February 24, 1997; "Kaduna Mafia Opposes Abacha," *TELL*, No. 13, March 13, 1997.

wrote: “At about the same week that Kudirat said this, the National Democratic Coalition [NADECO] in a statement said Abiola was fine and would reappear in no time” (Ibid.).

There was even more confusion from government circles; while the police announced that “Abiola was a wanted man and placed a price tag [ransom] on him” (Ibid.), Abiola paraded himself in Lagos despite the huge security presence in the city. “Still, government maintained Abiola was in hiding” (Ibid.). As Nmodu reiterated, “[i]t was learnt that while claiming ignorance of Abiola’s whereabouts in public, government was actually reaching out to him secretly. And this is the rub. Informed sources say there is more to the entire affair than meets the eye” (Ibid.).

Again the ubiquitous journalese, “informed sources,” which Peter Mass (1987) has critiqued as “fictive projections of the author” (290). Without having to review the entire high drama that eventually led to the arrest and detention of Abiola—which is available in many print media and scholarly literature—I could analyze the turns and twists in the narrativization of the political drama in the streets and in the press. Evident in *The Sentinel*’s cover story”/editorializing of the political developments of the time referenced above is the kind of *confusion* under which street stories thrive. Indeed in his Editor-in-Chief’s column, From the Western By-Pass, Stanley Macebuh affirms that, “Danlami Nmodu [...] set out in search of conspiracy, and arrive[d] at suppositions that are frightening, if true” (5). Such media reports as *The Sentinel*’s, typical of the journalistic practice of the era, stoked the fires of street stories. Fascinatingly, in-between that liminal sphere

of “informed sources,” the streets, the newsroom, oral-to-written mutation of texts, and the ambiguous power tussle/ negotiations between Abacha and Abiola, brewed that “conspiracy theory” of a deal between the two political gladiators.⁴⁶ It was not surprising therefore that during his address to the military community at one of Nigeria’s most important military formations, Mogadishu Barracks, Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, General Abacha, accompanied by his service chiefs and commanders, said:

I am here this morning to address you on some disturbing reports reaching my office. You are all aware that our intervention, once more into the governance of this country was what brought back peace and stability to our dear country. [...] I have received security reports that some politicians have been going to barracks with huge sums of money to entice you into open revolt against my administration. Whenever they come, please chase them away. How can people who “mortgaged our interests aspire to rule us?”⁴⁷

In the address, as Nmodu noted, “though not given to sophistry, Abacha attempted playing on words” (13). Abacha reveals his consciousness about the danger imminent in floating stories, and sought the cooperation of the military to stave off potential security threats.

⁴⁶The idea of a “deal” between Abiola and Abacha continued even after Abiola’s detention, hardening into a proposal that Abiola was going to be freed and co-opted into a government of National Unity. For more on this see Wilson Uwajaren’s cover story, “Let Abacha Go First,” Abiola Rejects Offer,” *The News*, 8 September, 1997, 20-25.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Danlami Nmodu, “The Secret Plan of Abacha and Abiola,” *The Sentinel*, July 4, 1994, 13.

Embedded in the full Abacha speech was not just the military-intervention-as-saviour trope which has framed many coup d'états in Nigeria, and for which Ndaeyo Uko (2004) vigorously implicates the press as a “promoter of military rule” in Nigeria, but also a conscious effort to arrest popular discontent against his government via the narrativization of the June 12 struggle on the streets and the radical press,⁴⁸ and by so doing, undermine the “sacred mandate” given to Abiola by Nigerians through the June 12 1993 presidential election which he scoffed at in the speech.

But did the despot win the narrative battle? Certainly not through the Apple Theory that frames his death. The execution of Saro-Wiwa and the imprisonment of Abiola—which in turn led to unprecedented tyranny to sustain his threatened hold on power, including through the so-called “phantom coups” (March 1995 and December 20, 1997)⁴⁹—marked the turning points in his four-year reign. The two acts compounded Abacha’s woes, and set the stage for his demise, even as the incarceration of Abiola also set the stage for the eventual death of the president-elect under controversial circumstances.

⁴⁸ Uko (2004) throws more light on the point being made here as he argues: “The press suffered much more under the Abacha regime, not essentially because he was stronger than the press. He was no mightier than the press but he did have a higher moral authority. The press had laid down its moral authority in two ways. First the press that invited Abacha to rule the country had no moral right to ask him to leave immediately. Second, the press used immoral and mendacious means to fight Abacha. [...] With a morally bereft and selfish press to contend with, the Abacha regime won an easy victory. But the victory was only symbolic because the valiant warriors of the Nigerian press, oblivious of the agenda of their swashbuckling commanders, fought unrelentingly until the enemy dropped dead” (122-123).

⁴⁹ See Uko (2004: 142) for more on the 1995 phantom coup under the pretext of which Abacha arrested former Head of State later President, Olusegun Obasanjo, and General Yar’Adua, amongst others including journalists who were for the first time in Nigerian history, charged with being “accessory after the fact of treason.” In the second round, Abacha dealt with Oladipo Diya, his own deputy, and a band of senior military officers.

How did M.K.O. Abiola, winner of the popular June 12 1993 presidential election in Nigeria, *really* die on July 7, 1998 in his fourth year in detention? That this question is still being asked over a decade after Abiola's death testifies to what I would call the overarching "narrative complex" that confronts such a seemingly innocuous question, and to the politics of death under the postcolonial condition in Nigeria. As Dare (2010) puts it: "Even those who do not usually subscribe to conspiracy theories saw in the circumstances of Abiola's death the markings of a final solution of sorts to "the problem of "June 12" (351). Two versions of the kernel story of his death exist in the street and in the press, both of which point to some kind of grand conspiracy to eliminate him as a solution to the June 12 political gridlock: the first and more dominant theory was that Abiola died from poisoned tea; the second, a more recent "revelation" by Abacha's Man Friday, Major Mohammed Al-Mustapha, is that "Abiola was beaten to death."⁵⁰ The circumstantial evidence lay in the fact that the crisis had already claimed the life of the tyrant, Abacha, who is believed to have plotted the mysterious death of the powerful political godfather from Northern Nigeria, General Yar'Adua. Abacha had had General Yar'Adua killed via a forced lethal injection administered on him at the Abakiliki prison where was serving 25-year jail term for an alleged role in the 1995 phantom coup plot.

From the complex web of gruesome developments which was believed to have jolted a powerful Northern military and political clique, Ayodele Akinkuotu,

⁵⁰ See Blessing Eghagha and Yetunde Oyebami, "Abiola was beaten to death, says Al-Mustapha," *The Guardian*, Thursday, May 29, 2008, Front page news.

anchoring *TELL* magazine's cover story (June 21, 1999) on "Abiola's death: The Great Conspiracy," frames the overall background to Abiola's death this way:

The thinking of those behind the scheme was that once the two "political adversaries" [Abacha and Abiola] were out of the scene, the political crisis that had bedevilled the country, following the annulment of 1993 presidential election, would be ended, and a fresh start would be given the country to move forward. So very sadly, the June 12 crisis was reduced to a contest between Abacha and Abiola. The fact that one was a usurper and ran a rogue regime while the other legally won a presidential election and had a legitimate mandate to rule was ignored. [...] They carried out the first leg on June 8, 1998, when Abacha "dropped" dead while in the company of two Indian prostitutes. (18)

The June 12 crisis was not just limited to Abacha and Abiola in high political circles thereby igniting diabolical schemes for eliminating the duo, it provided the fodder for street stories to feed on, and for the press to 'cash' in on. Akinkuotu further writes that two days after Abiola wrote two letters (to his lawyer Gani Fawehinmi and Abraham Adesanya, deputy leader of the National Democratic Coalition, NADECO), denying ever renouncing his mandate as Kofi Anan, then UN Secretary General who had met with Abiola in detention with the approval of the General Abdulsalam Abubakar regime that succeeded Abacha's, had announced, Abiola died. "His dying was not without some drama," declares Akinkuotu. "Just as Abacha passed away while cavorting with two prostitutes, Abiola, who for the past four years then, had been in solitary confinement, was in

the company of top American diplomats [Thomas Pickering, William Twaddel and Susan Rice], who had come to mediate in the June 12 crisis when he collapsed. He died shortly thereafter at the Aso, Rock clinic.” (21) Explaining further, Akinkuotu states: “[a] day earlier, he had met with two of his wives and eldest child. They were with him into the wee hours of the morning of Tuesday, July 7, 1998. According to one of the wives, Doyin Abiola, the visit was “ordered” by Aso Rock. The gesture came from the blues, for it was nearly three years since any member of Abiola’s family set eyes on him”(Ibid.). More importantly, the *TELL* narrative also states that during his detention, Abiola lived on routine of a meal a day comprising a breakfast of bread and stew. But up to about 4pm on the day he died while meeting with Pickering and his delegation, he had not had his breakfast. “Was the denial of breakfast to him premeditated so as to make him hungry enough to want tea?” (24) Akinkuotu rhetorically asks, implying that the tea was poisoned. In an interview granted Laolu Olusina of *Insider Weekly*, Abiola’s personal physician for two decades, Ore Falomo, gave a vivid account of Abiola’s final moments:

As soon as he tasted the tea, he started coughing. This was an *eye-witness* account by those who were there, I was not there. Then the cough was becoming unusual and they asked him if he was alright. He said yes, but I think I need my cough mixture. With that, one of the two Nigerians turned out to go for his cough mixture. Then Abiola said, oh my chest. Then they asked if he had chest pain. He said he had and he pointed to his chest. You see all these were taking place within five minutes and he called back on

the man who had gone out and said please bring back my cough mixture. [...] By the time they went for these two things the pains became so bad and Abiola began to sweat and he said, please excuse me, will like to use the toilet, and so he went. (33)⁵¹

Falomo further avers that when Abiola was taking too long in coming out from the toilet, his guests knocked on the toilet door and asked if he was alright, to which he replied in the affirmative. “And then he came out and was feeling uncomfortable,” continued Falomo. Afterwards his guests sent for a doctor, “and by the time Dr. Wali came in, we have it now on good authority, that Abiola had now suffered what we call heart attack, and they quickly bundled him to the car, not even the ambulance and headed for Aso Rock Clinic. But we have it on good authority that he was dead before they got to Aso Rock Clinic” (33).

Falomo’s emphasis, to quote him, on “*eye-witness* account by those who were there, I was not there” foregrounds the centrality of oral narrativity in the construction of social reality within the realms of street narrative culture and the popular press. It also calls attention to the overlapping conflict between the oral and the written, as well as their interrelatedness. In revisiting the “grand conspiracy” Tea Theory of Abiola’s death in the *Insider Weekly* (No 9, July 16, 2001) interview three years after the tragic end of the president-elect, Falomo uses the refrain: “according to the fact we now have” and “we have it on good authority” (33) to further buttress the oral provenance cum authority of a theory

⁵¹ Other related stories in this edition of the magazine included: Ben Charles Obi, Jnr. and Obiora Chukumba. “Those Who Poisoned Abiola.” *Insider Weekly*. No 9, July 16, 2001. 30-35 and Tony Egbulefu’s “Those Who Killed Abacha, Killed Abiola.” *Insider Weekly*. No 9, July 16, 2001. 34.

that some may consider mythical in the face of forensic opposition, but which echoes Joe Klein's declaration that "facts are powerless in the face of a potent mythology."⁵² And in elaborating his belief that witnesses to the "execution of that inglorious [...] and [...] most dastardly act of eliminating Abiola" (33) would testify before the Justice Oputa Panel which was sitting at the time (July, 2001)⁵³, Falomo emphasized the oral nature of the testimony—"You will hear"—not the 'authority' of print evident in the tonnes of newsprint which had circulated the conspiracy theory. So serious were these circumstantial evidence that the United States government did not gloss over its diplomatic implications. Thus, so "frantic in its denial of any complicity in the death of Abiola" was the US government that "[i]n a faxed statement dated December 20, 2000 and sent to media houses from the U.S. Consulate office in Lagos, Nicole Theriott said any suggestions that the United States government officials had anything to do with Abiola's death "are ridiculous and lack substance."⁵⁴

The suspicious circumstances surrounding Abiola's death and the postmortem were all that were needed to fuel the Tea Theory about his death which has persisted despite the official autopsy report produced by a team of pathologists from Canada. According to the *TELL* story, "[t]he preliminary report of that team led by James G. Young, chief coroner, Province of Ontario, Canada,

⁵²Joe Klein, "Sarah Palin's Myth of America," *Time* magazine
<http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1840388,00.html>
Web. September 10, 2008.

⁵³ The Justice Okwudifu Oputa *Human Rights Violations* Investigation Commission (HRVIC) or simply the *Oputa Panel* was established by former President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 and operated between 2000 and 2001. Its task was to investigate, through Public Hearings held in Abuja, Lagos, Kano, and Port Harcourt, human rights violations in Nigeria between 1966 and May 28, 1999, in a manner akin to the South African truth and reconciliation committee.

⁵⁴ Blessing Eghagha and Yetunde Oyebami, "Abiola was beaten to death, says Al-Mustapha," *The Guardian*, Thursday, May 29, 2008, Front page news.

was that his death was due to “natural causes.” The final autopsy carried out in Canada did not deviate from that line” (24). In the narrativization and the politics of Abiola’s death there was conflict between the popular Tea Theory and the official “scientific” or forensic version. And one may ask: Why has the official narrative of the cause of Abiola’s death not gained traction on the streets of Lagos and in other parts of the country, and in the media? Corroborating the Tea Theory which is widely circulated on the streets, on the Internet, and transformed into other popular culture formats.

The second ‘theory’ about Abiola’s death propounded by a man believed to be the arrowhead of the Abacha junta and the fallen general’s Chief Security Officer, Major Hamza Al-Mustapha, offers more reasons why the official toxicological explanation of Abiola’s death has been rejected by ordinary people. Blessing Eghagha and Yetunde Oyebami of *The Guardian* have reported, based on a 14-paragraph affidavit deposed to by the incarcerated intelligence officer at a Lagos High Court, that “Abiola died as a result of severe beatings he received from agents of the state after he was denied medical assistance by those in whose custody he was” placed. *The Guardian* also reports that Al-Mustapha “further claimed to be in possession of audio/video tapes and other documents showing, among others, how Abiola was beaten to death. These tapes, he averred, “are part of the items contained in the eleven Ghana-must-go bags confiscated by the State Security Service” from the house of Brig-Gen. I. Sabo (Rtd.), the former Director of Military Intelligence (DMI) in whose care he claimed to have left them” (Ibid.).

Back grounding their news report, Eghagha and Oyebami state that it was “not the first time Al-Mustapha would be alleging that the late Abiola was actually killed,” and that on Thursday, November 23, 2000 during a session of the Oputa Panel, Al-Mustapha “pooh-poohed the official claim declaring that Abiola was killed [died by natural causes]. But then he declined to name the culprits, saying that they would be revealed in due course.” The reporters recognized that the “startling submission” by the former Chief Security Officer (CSO) to the late Gen. Sani Abacha “deepened the mystery surrounding the death in detention of the presumed winner of the 1993 general election, Chief Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola” (Ibid.). Indeed it did.

Conclusion

Although the submission, under oath, by such a highly-placed intelligence officer in the military as Al-Mustapha questions the “Tea Theory,” it nevertheless justifies the conspiracy theory around Abiola’s death. The submission also impels the theory, and attests to the fact that the jury is still out on Abiola’s case even a decade after his tragic end, and so, more street stories will grow out of it.

It is logical, therefore, that the conspiracy story has enjoyed patronage by no less an accomplished intellectual than the Nigerian playwright, Nobel laureate for Literature, and political activist, Wole Soyinka. “I’m convinced that some kind of slow poison was administered to Abiola,” Soyinka was quoted by Reuters wire service⁵⁵ as telling an audience at the Emory University, Atlanta, US, where he

⁵⁵ See “Abiola was poisoned to death: Wole Soyinka,” Reuters, Online, <http://www.expressindia.com/news/ie/daily/19980718/19950434.html> Copyright © 1998 Indian Express Newspapers (Bombay) Ltd. Web. March 7, 2010.

was a professor after being exiled from Nigeria to escape Abacha's hit men. His reasons for this conviction included the "suspicious" timing of Abiola's death and the knowledge that "previous political prisoners were given lethal injections against their will" (Ibid.)—a reference to the suspected mode of death of retired General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua in detention.

The participation of such a distinguished intellectual as Soyinka in the transmission of street stories immediately indicates that its purveyors and audience transcend class or social hierarchy. Street stories are in this sense like traditional folktales which are transmitted across age groups and social strata; from the matriarch and patriarch through the youth to children—they all participate in sharing the tales. But unlike in traditional oral settings in Nigeria where print was absent and the storyteller depended on memory to recall relatively ossified folktales or heroic narratives, we now have the privilege of print and audio-visual technologies of globalization as forms of archives to perpetuate contemporary narratives. That notwithstanding, in both worlds of primary and tertiary orality Bruce Jackson's (2007) discussion of memory in "The Fate of Stories" continues to ring through with regard to the accuracy or otherwise of things remembered: "We ordinarily think of memory as a condition rather than a process... You don't have to lie to get history wrong, all you have to do is... put total confidence in the innocence and infallibility of memory" (26-27). He also contends that "Memory melds things, tunes things up, rounds the edges, provides connections. Memory is an artist, not a computer" (28).

My alignment with Jackson's perspective on memory is to emphasize the point that beyond their function as a record of the social history of the people, street stories are an *art* whose various versions of contemporary "politics of survival" (Ajayi 1968: 199) and aesthetic dynamics are informed by a common narrative impulse. It is this shared cultural heritage that defines the urban narratives, and particularly endears them to a broad spectrum of the citizenry in the postcolonial field as I posit in this chapter. The characters in the urban narratives may no longer be the heroic figures—indeed they are anti-heroes—or animals of the traditional oral narrative and folktale respectively, but they share the stereotypical parallel between Good and Evil evident in the former. The setting may have shifted from the pastoral and natural/supernatural scenes of the traditional narratives, but the same themes of power struggle, greed, brutality, and tricksters define the ancient and modern narratives. Whether it is Babangida's tortuous regime or Abacha's cunning and brutal dictatorship, or the destruction of real or perceived enemies by both—as evinced in the fate of Dele Giwa, Ken Saro-Wiwa and M.K.O. Abiola—the stories explore the often inscrutable human drama. That the people now characterize their leaders as predators in street stories as opposed to the apocryphal stories they told to acclaim the profile of the first generation of political leaders as we saw earlier in the study is an indication of their sense of betrayal by the military elite which foisted their authority on them. With the return to democratic rule after Abacha's death the battle of narratives changed gear. It is this new dispensation that I will now examine.

Chapter Five

From “Baba Go-slow” to “Baba No-show”: Yar’Adua and the Politics of a Death Foretold ¹

Obasanjo: ‘Umaru [Yar’Adua] are you dead?’

Yar’Adua: ‘I am alive’

Obasanjo: ‘What are you doing?’

Yar’Adua: ‘I am laughing.’

The President, looking directly at the crowd: ‘He is laughing ha! ha!! ha!!!’²

In the last chapter we witnessed the politics of death in street stories within the framework of military dictatorship in postcolonial Nigeria. During Abacha’s brutal regime, his experiences, and those of Saro-Wiwa and Abiola established how complicated an otherwise natural rite of passage as death can be in the context of postcolonial political oppression and the citizens’ desire to fight back through punitive narratives. More so given that as Adesanmi (2004) clearly states, “[a] people’s oppression always exists in its undeniable, concrete materiality” (52). In Abacha’s case, a shameful death was not only wished him, a narrative embodying that was constructed to explain his untimely demise. In the case of Saro-Wiwa and Abiola, the state is projected as a demonic undertaker that cuts short the lives of progressive elements, and in the controversial

¹ See Andrew Walker, “Nigeria’s ‘Baba-go-slow’ one year on,” BBC Online, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7420327.stm> Wednesday, 28 May 2008. Web. June 2, 2008. Besides Walker’s piece, this caption is partly derived from a reader’s response to the article by Sonala Olumhense, “As the Yar’Adua Era Ends”

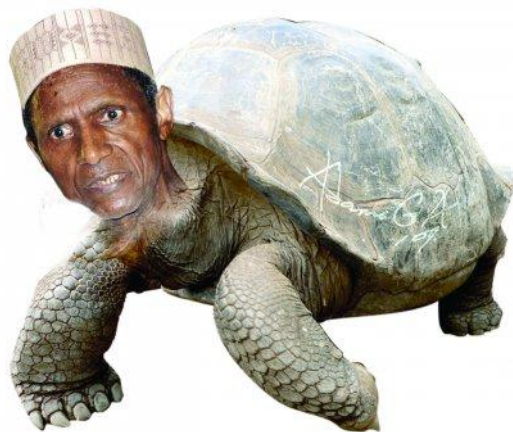
<http://www.saharareporters.com/column/yar%E2%80%99adua-era-ends> submitted by one Elmango Meat on January 10, 2010: “‘Baba go Slow’ in my opinion has become ‘Baba no Show.’” A complementary photoshop image reflecting the go-slow theme had been circulating online, showing Yar’Adua as part tortoise, part human. The choice of tortoise as the animal to associate with him, and not a snail hacks back to the influence of the oral tradition in the popular imagination.

² “Nigerian press on death rumour,” BBC Online. Thursday, 8 March 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6430467.stm> Web. March 19, 2007.

circumstances of Abiola's death, whether the subject had a pre-existing medical condition prior to death, or not. In this section, I shift the discussion of the theme of politics of death in street narratives to Nigeria's contemporary democratic dispensation.



Plates 4A and 4B: Yar'Adua cartooned as Baba "Go-Slow"



Although my main focus in this chapter is the Yar'Adua Presidency, it is important to preface the discussion of the politics of death and illness within

Nigeria's latest attempt at democracy with the return of former Head of State (1975-1979) and retired general, Olusegun Obasanjo, as civilian president of the Fourth Republic on May 29, 1999. The reason for this prelude is because street stories about Obasanjo's sudden death accompanied Yar'Adua's emergence as president based on the February 1999 general elections after 15 years of military rule in Nigeria. Barnaby Phillips (2010) apprehends the development in a report entitled "Obasanjo quells death rumours" and filed for the BBC: "Nigerian President-elect Olusegun Obasanjo has appeared on national television to prove to viewers that he is still alive - and to put an end to riots sparked by rumours of his death. He told the state-run Nigerian Television Authority: "As you can see, I am perfectly well." Phillips further reports that "[i]t was not clear what had provoked the rumours, but they spread quickly to two districts on the city's [Lagos] edge, with looters smashing shop windows and stoning passing cars in Ikeja and Agege." Phillips concludes that "[t]he rioting appeared to subside quickly, after repeated radio appeals for calm and after soldiers and riot police had moved into the streets."

At best, the people's attitude to the emergence of a retired general and former Head of State as the new president can be described as ambivalent. This ambivalent feeling of some citizens being happy about the new democratic project in a post military era, and others wishing the "president-elect" dead may appear incomprehensible. But for a people buffeted by tyrannical governance by

the military, any vestiges of the past whether transformed from *khaki* to *agbada*,³ to use a street argot, was unacceptable and so punishment by death for the symbol of the status quo was desirable. Ndaeyo Uko (2004) captures the ambivalence logically:

Sadly, the Nigerian press and public may now abhor military rule, but they still lean back to support the platoon of former military dictators trying to rule the country again as politicians. General Obasanjo served a first term as civilian president (1999 -2003) and got reelected in 2003. His most prominent opponent in his bid for reelection was former head of state General Muhammadu Buhari. General Babangida lurked in the shadows warming up for the race in 2007 [and even more forcefully in 2011].

Uko further notes that Domkat Bali, “one of the cleaner generals whose reputation was based on professionalism rather than coup plotting” (124) and a former Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces, challenged the press and the country to save the new democracy from former generals. “They are condemning the military, yet they are rallying round the military people to become their presidential candidates,” (Ibid.) said Bali. Uko further quotes him: “My worry is that these people are free to contest to be president, but my grudge is that the Nigerian public is saying no, the military men are bad. I was part of them, the bad military. They go back and back the same military people to become their president, why?” (124-125)

³ Literally, from military uniform represented by the *khaki* to civilian toga symbolized by the *agbada*, Yoruba word for local flowing gown associated with Yoruba big men as well as Northern Nigerian ones, but generally used by Nigerian politicians irrespective of ethnicity.

This feeling of ambiguity of everyday people to the “militicians” as they are sometimes called in the streets,⁴ informs a few of the street stories, and was most obvious in the narrativization of the health of Obasanjo’s successor, Umaru Yar’Adua. The violent response to the rumoured killing of President Obasanjo could be read in the context of the frustrations⁵ that escorted the torturous political transition process that finally culminated in Obasanjo as elected president after Abiola’s annulled mandate. But I am not exploring the Obasanjo case at length here. In recognizing it, I mean to call attention to how pervasive the politics of death is, a trope that shapes public engagement with the country’s presidents through street stories. My focus in this section is on Umaru Yar’Adua whose short-lived term in office best illustrates post-military politics of death and how illness functions as a metaphor in the street narrative culture in postcolonial Nigeria.

The earliest signal that Umaru Yar’Adua’s health status would dominate public discourse emerged in the course of the presidential campaign. At the June 12 Cultural Centre in Abeokuta, South-western Nigeria, in March 2007, Yar’Adua’s absence to address a political rally as the presidential flag-bearer for the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) aggravated street stories and confusing media reports⁶ about his health and ‘death’ in Germany. The climax of

⁴ *TELL*, June 21, 1999, 23

⁵ See James C Scott (1999: 213) for the kind of “frustrations engendered by domination” which I am thinking about here.

⁶ A BBC report at the time sampled versions of the stories from as many as six national newspapers on the subject; see “Nigerian press on death rumour,” BBC Online. Thursday, 8 March 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6430467.stm> Web. March 19, 2007. A similar report was also posted by *New York Times*: http://www.thetimesofnigeria.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1923 Web. March 9, 2007.

the development was the point when in order to debunk the street stories about Yar'Adua's death the then sitting president Obasanjo phoned Yar'Adua, and they had the absurd exchange reproduced in a BBC online article from which I excerpted the epigraph⁷ to this chapter.

In a clear evidence of the ease with which such popular stories transfigure into multiple versions as they travel in the communicative or transmission chain, Reuben Abati (2007) offers a scintillating analysis of the episode, spotlighting the same telephone conversation in his column in *The Guardian* (Lagos) thus: "Umar, how are you? What is your message for Nigerians?" To which Yar'Adua responded in the affirmative, "I am alive and well. It is a false alarm," and an exuberant Obasanjo confidently justified Yar'Adua's candidature to the people.⁸ But Abati goes beyond his *version* of the telephone conversation; the following long excerpt from his perceptive essay vividly tells the rest of the story:

Wednesday, March 7 would go down in history as a very important moment in Nigeria's preparations for the April 2007 elections and for a rather curious reason. It was the day when a rumour, taken off the wings of what seemed like a truthful report in the news media assumed a life of its own, and was soon stretched most imaginatively by the Nigerian public, into something dramatic, nationalistic, and for the moment, demonstrating the power of the spoken word, and also, the people's

⁷ Ibid. Not content with this effort to dispel the street stories, then Secretary of the ruling party, PDP, Chief Ojo Maduekwe, gave a press conference posted on Youtube: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-1683191839542529714&hl=en> Web. September 2, 2010.

⁸ See Reuben Abati, "A rumor that shook the nation," *The Guardian* (Lagos), Online, http://positivenigeria.org/PositiveNigeria/view_editorial.aspx?id=18 Web. December 20, 2007.

anxieties about the character of Nigerian politics. The day had hardly begun when the phones began to ring mine and others, indeed nearly every available phone in the country. The phone companies must have made a lot of profits from the incident. *“Is it true?” we all asked “What?” “That Yar'Adua is seriously ill and has been flown abroad?”*⁹ The health of the PDP Presidential candidate, Umar Yar'Adua, the outgoing Governor of Katsina State, Obasanjo's anointed successor was the issue of the day. The newspapers had reported, quite prominently on page one that the gentleman whose health had been a subject of much speculation and analysis had slumped suddenly on Tuesday and had to be rushed into an air ambulance to Germany. *There was a kind of death-wish in nearly all the reports, both spoken and written.* One newspaper even offered a copious analysis of the kidney and its functions. *The Nation* newspaper went a step further by asking the question: "If...who steps in?" You can fill in the gaps. (Ibid.) [Emphasis added]

Abati's article provides three key points related to my study that need outlining here. First, it foregrounds the centrality of street narratives to everyday life in postcolonial Nigeria as I emphasize throughout this study. Second, it demonstrates its complex circulatory process between orality and print media. Third, it underlines the political consciousness of everyday people and their keen interest in narrating the nation in relation to the health of her number one citizen. Quite understandably, then, Abati further writes that in response to

⁹ This emphasis is in the original.

the news of Yar'Adua's sudden collapse[,] [b]efore noon, the country had been littered with all kinds of experts on the nature of the human kidney, instant medical doctors who offered free opinion about how delicate the kidneys are. *There were different versions of how the man slumped and how he was rushed out of the country.* He sneezed. He inhaled dust. He could not breathe properly... [...] The Yar'Adua incident brought out a part of the Nigerian character: *our love of rumour, our imaginativeness, and the malicious character of Nigerian politics.* Any attempt to preach that people should be cautious and not kill a man before he really dies was met with the retort that “*in this country there is no smoke without fire.*” When the evening papers hit the streets, they *added more fuel to the speculations.* *Breaking News*, published by the Daily Independent, announced that Adamu Muazu and Babangida were already being considered as replacement for Yar'Adua. (Ibid.) [Emphases added]

The emphasized parts of the excerpt demonstrate the character, complex role, and significance of street stories in the socius. It also points to its democratic potential for the freedom of expression on important national matters by everyone.

The thematization of Yar'Adua's health in contemporary Nigerian politics via *different* versions of the kernel story was informed by the fact that as governor of Katsina State in Northern Nigeria, Yar'Adua's health status had become a matter of growing concern for citizens of the state, and this information

had sneaked into the popular press. It was not surprising, therefore, that it persisted during his short-lived tenure, exacerbated by his recurrent trips overseas for medical treatment despite the State's efforts to camouflage the real reasons for such trips under pretexts of officialdom.

Thus in August 2008 the street stories again claimed that Yar'Adua had died after going into a "coma" following a "renal transplant." As Yar'Adua's tenure advanced and his health condition forced him away from office more often to rest and to seek further treatment, no official cover-ups would abate the street narratives. His illness, like Abacha's, had become synonymous with the comatose state of the country with regard to socio-political development or the expected "dividends of democracy," to use a Nigerian catch phrase. So dominant was this theme of physical and metaphoric illness in public discourse that Yar'Adua had the unenviable distinction of being Nigeria's first head of state rumoured to have died *thrice*. (Zik, as a former president and an elder statesman, was twice a victim of such unfortunate street stories.)¹⁰

The recurrent street stories about President Yar'Adua's "death" were fuelled by not only his poor health, for which Nigerians would naturally sympathize. In my view it was also stimulated by two other factors: a public desire to asperse a "handpicked" successor to Obasanjo that emerged as President from heavily flawed elections, and the president's poor performance and failure to deliver on a self-given seven-point agenda or "dividends of democracy" which

¹⁰ For more on this see the cover story of the publication, "Zik's 'Second' Death," *Media Review*, May-June, 1996,

forced some critics to describe his political trajectory in office in the metaphor of Lagos rush-hour traffic: “From Baba Go-slow to Baba No-show,” that is, from a slow-pace president to a standstill president. The politics of Yar’Adua’s emergence and the people’s ill-feelings about it are better appreciated against the background of his emergence from the ashes of Obasanjo’s attempt, like his military predecessors (IBB and Abacha), to elongate his full tenure through another convoluted and dubious hidden agenda—in Obasanjo’s case, a “Third Term” scheme that produced interesting conflicts between street narratives and official story (position);¹¹ a case of the masses reading the president’s lips or body language. In other words Yar’Adua’s ill health and rumoured death became a case of wish-fulfillment for “divine justice” for perceived wrong-doing and a snail-paced leadership.

Aware of the dominant narrative about him and his health condition, Yar’Adua and his spin doctors struggled to insert an opposing voice into the street stories. Responding to the question “Why is Yar’Adua’s health so important to Nigerians?” Abati (2007) explains that “there was first a feeling of disappointment, a sudden realisation that both the President and Yar’Adua himself might have been lying to Nigerians.” Abati recalls that:

¹¹ For more insights into the intriguing narrative battles around Obasanjo’s aborted Third Term agenda, see the following articles, including a Wikipedia entry: Christian Ita, “3rd Term: Now the plot thickens...,” *Sunday Sun*, February 26, 2006. 10; Kristina Nwazota, “Third Term Rumors Spark Political Debate in Nigeria,” Online, *NewsHour*, February 21, 2006, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/obasanjo_02-21-06.html Web. October 12, 2008; “We’re Watching Nigeria Over Third Term–US.” *Daily Independent*, March 17, 2006; “President of Nigeria loses bid for a 3rd term,” *International Herald Tribune*, Tuesday, May 16, 2006. <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2006/05/16/news/lagos.php> Web. October 24, 2008; “Third Term Agenda,” *Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_Term_Agenda Web. October 15, 2008.

When questions were first raised about Yar'Adua's health, the President [Obasanjo] had played the role of a medical doctor by certifying him fit for the job. "I know all about Umar's ailment," he said, "and it has disappeared since 2001. It was a miracle. So those calling him a sick man are the ones who are sick. After all, only God can tell who is sick or not. I wonder how somebody can open his mouth and say that a human being created by God is a sick man. I am sure he has proven to those who say he cannot stand stress that all that is not true" (Ibid.).

And that was not all about a miraculous healing, an appeal to Nigerian's fanatical religious fervor. In a memorable response which was to replay itself later, Yar'Adua the presidential candidate boasted: "I am fit and healthy. I will invite them (opponents) to a game of squash. If they can play 12 straight sets with me, they are welcome" (Ibid.), and with an ironic twist Abati added: "Nobody took up the offer. Nobody was bold enough to assist the Katsina man to commit suicide" (Ibid.).

Such was the sarcasm, ironic and sometimes humorous tone with which the street narratives were delivered. While Yar'Adua's health matters worsened while in office, presidential public relations handlers went into overdrive gear to project him as a gentleman who meant well, and who was committed to following "due process" and "the rule of law" rather than being "slow." They assured a cynical nation that the president was *deliberately* slow or taking his time in order to get things right.¹² For his part, Yar'Adua was so harried by the politicization of

¹² Segun Adeniyi, the president's Special Adviser on Media and Communications once used the metaphor of mountain-climbing to defend the presidents slow pace: "When you start up the

his health and how negatively it impacted governance that he personally joined the narrative fray again, this time with a touching autobiographical slice that had a tragic prophetic ring about his end to it:

I had a reaction to a drug which was the case. I had malaria, I took Metakelfin, it did not go, I got my doctor who brought another doctor from JB Clinic and they gave me a new drug, the malaria went, but the following day, I woke up with a swollen face. So they gave me what they called term steroid, it did not work and I went to the National Hospital where they ran test and they decided that I go to my doctors in Germany. I have my record there since 1986. In 2000 I had kidney problem. My record is there. I got there and in three days my face became normal. So you see, the press statement by my Special Adviser (Communications) was not believed, same thing the other time, when I was campaigning then during my campaign they ran an x-ray and the doctors said my aorta was inflated and they termed it critical, because they said it can burst anytime. That was how I was referred to the hospital in Germany and they brought an air ambulance because they wanted a doctor to be with me. When I got there, they prepared the theatre for a major operation, but they decided to run another test and shortly after the result was out and they said my aorta was normal. It is amusing because you can have a medical problem

mountain you never know what to expect: sudden change in weather, lost or broken equipment, mistakes in maps, an injury." [...] any leader desirous of success should look at it from the perspective of someone climbing a mountain, in which case the purpose and advantages become clearer. Planning for these eventualities, according to Sullivan, will allow a leader to deal with all the issues and still reach his objective in spite of temporary setbacks while a lack of planning could spell disaster as our experience in Nigeria has shown" ("Yar'Adua Not Slow, Says Aide." *Vanguard*, 29 May 2008).

anytime. I am an ordinary person and I am as ordinary as any other Nigerian. I can fall sick, I can get well, I can die, I can die tomorrow, I can live to be 90, I am pleased to be president, but I am an ordinary person.”¹³

But the public comprising more “ordinary” people than the president did not find the health issue that “amusing” and were not going to allow President Yar’Adua to have the last word on the subject; his health was certainly beyond a matter of wish-fulfillment and conjecture which everyday people constructed in street narratives in the postcolonial city. So seizing on an excellent opportunity offered by the Abuja-based *Leadership* newspaper which published a headline story entitled “Yar’Adua Sick Again,” purporting that the president had fallen “critically sick” again and consequently had “not attended any public function in the last two days,”¹⁴ President Yar’Adua directed his lawyers to sue the newspaper over what his media adviser, Segun Adeniyi, described as a false report, providing the president’s schedule as alibi for the two days referred to by *Leadership*. In the press statement issued on the subject Adeniyi lamented that: “The President has graciously tolerated over twenty months of false rumours, speculations and innuendoes about his health, but the *Leadership* newspaper report of today (November 8, 2008) crosses all acceptable lines of professional ethics, decency,

¹³ See “My battle with ill-health – Yar’Adua,” *Daily Sun*, Friday, May 30, 2008. According to the newspaper, Yar’Adua made the revelation at “a two-hour live presidential media chat to commemorate Democracy Day [May 29], the president explained how he had been managing his ill-health, dismissing widespread fears that he was medically unfit.” Not surprising therefore that diplomatic cables leaked by Wikileaks provide more sombre picture of Yar’Adua’s pathetic health condition. (See Wikileaks Discloses Yar’Adua’s Kidney Transplant Information; Confirms Abba Ruma As Organ Donor, <http://www.saharareporters.com/news-page/wikileaks-discloses-yaraduas-kidney-transplant-information-confirms-abba-ruma-organ-donor> Web. January 23, 2011.

¹⁴ See Chesa Chesa, “President’s Health: Yar’Adua Sues Leadership Newspaper,” *Sunday Independent* Online, November 09, 2008. Online, <http://nigeriavillagesquare.com/forum/main-square/26569-president-yaradua-sues-abuja-newspaper-alleged-libel.html> Web. November 14, 2008.

decorum and respect for others' rights and feelings" (Ibid.). Significantly, Adeniyi was reportedly of the view that "the propagation of spiteful and malicious falsehoods must not be allowed to become *an acceptable weapon of political opposition* in our country" (Ibid.) [Emphasis added]. The emphasis on "the propagation of spiteful and malicious falsehoods" possibly becoming "*an acceptable weapon of political opposition* in our country" not only shows how the phenomenon of street stories troubled the State, it highlights its capacity as a weapon of political opposition, a weapon of the weak as James C. Scott (1990) would say.

The Yar'Adua Presidency's strategic act to punish and possibly intimidate *Leadership* (and by extension other newspapers) through the libel suit neither deterred public interest, nor Nigeria's media focus on the subject; instead it seemed to backfire, and escalated the production and circulation of more street stories about him. Barely one month after the libel threat, *The Guardian* (Lagos), "following speculations about ill-health that trailed his 17-day absence"¹⁵ from the country in 2008 on suspicion of receiving treatment abroad for his then formally unidentified ailment, published a strong editorial on the subject. The influential Nigerian daily noted that the return of President Umar Musa Yar'Adua to the country was "obviously a big relief to Nigerians" who came "short of writing the president's obituary" with "nation-wide speculation" that "painted a rather dreadful picture with insinuations that the President was undergoing surgery for kidney transplant, or receiving intensive medical treatment for renal

¹⁵ "The President's health and an anxious nation," *The Guardian* editorial, Tuesday, September 16, 2008.

failure in Saudi Arabia.” The newspaper further noted that although Yar'Adua's return “hale and hearty [was] comforting, [...] it was “not sufficient to assuage the nation's apprehension over the health of its number one citizen.” The newspaper worried that the president's absence created “a state of flux,” and generated fears “about national stability and security.” It believed that “[p]erhaps this would not have been the case if there had been a Freedom of Information Law in place to compel public officials to say nothing but the truth.”

But if the 2008 episode was enough to create “a state of flux,” and generated fears “about national stability and security,” the extended 93-day affair of 2009/2010¹⁶ came close to creating a national emergency. As Caroline Duffield of the BBC put it, Yar'Adua's “absence created widespread alarm in Nigeria, prompting his deputy, Goodluck Jonathan, to assume executive powers,”¹⁷ and also inspired a flurry of street stories that left some with a feeling of déjà vu akin to the Abacha era. So that an interesting point of convergence between Abacha, Abiola cases and that of Umaru Yar'Adua, president of Nigeria from 2007 – 2010, is the theme of illness as metaphor. With Yar'Adua, the politicization of illness was publicly recognized in a statement credited to Reverend Joseph Hayab,

¹⁶ According to *The Punch*, “Yar'Adua spent 109 days on medical trips in 32 months. The paper adds: “The number of days he has spent in Germany and Saudi Arabia on medical grounds is almost a quarter of the number of working days he has spent as president.” See Emma Anya, Tony Amokeodo, Niyi Odebo and Nnaemeka Meribe, “Yar'Adua spends 109 days on medical trips in 32 months.” *The Punch*, Monday, 1 Feb 2010, <http://www.punchontheweb.com/Articl.aspx?theartic=Art201002015134781> Web. February 6, 2010. Interestingly, while Yar'Adua was 78 days away from home Niyi Osundare, award-winning poet, public intellectual and Professor of English declared that Nigeria was “the first democratic country in the world whose government was administered for 78 days by unelected members of its Executive Council.” See “The Lesser Evil” *Newswatch* Magazine Monday, 15 February 2010: http://www.newswatchngr.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=1799 February 18, 2010.

¹⁷ See “Analysis,” BBC Online, Friday, 2 April 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8600639.stm> Web. April 5, 2010.

Secretary of the Kaduna State branch of the Christian Association of Nigeria, CAN in discussing Yar'Adua's condition. "The man is sick. Period. Let us not politicize his ill-health," Hayab was quoted as saying.¹⁸

But the president's health condition began to degenerate thereby producing more farcical narratives in the 'corridors of power' as well as on street parliaments and in traditional and new media to explain it.¹⁹ Exhausted by the hide-and-seek game around the president's health umpired by his official handlers, Presidential doctors announced on November 26, 2009 that Yar'Adua was suffering from pericarditis, an inflammation of the lining around the heart, thereby confirming the street stories that had trailed him from the electioneering campaign days, including a suspicion that he had been suffering from kidney problems.²⁰ Notwithstanding the announcement, "[f]rom Nov 23, 2009 when he was flown abroad to Feb 24, 2010 when he was brought back in an air ambulance in the dead of the night the sickness of the deceased leader was shrouded in secrecy as if he was an ordinary Nigerian" (Yusuf 2010: 21). The secrecy surrounding the president's health bred more fairy tale-like street narratives guessing at, and trying to unravel, his actual condition like explorers of dark secrets of some lost world. Adam Nossiter of *The New York Times* puts it this

¹⁸ "Nigeria clerics meet ailing President Umaru Yar'Adua," BBC Online, Friday, 2 April 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8600639.stm> Web. April 5, 2010.

¹⁹ For a more detailed feature on the various Nigerian newspapers false reports of President Yar'Adua's death see "Nigerian press on death rumour." BBC News Online. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6430467.stm> Web. December 20, 2007.

²⁰ *Sahara Reporters* had first revealed this on 15th April, 2008. The report declared that Yar'Adua's "real ailment ... [was] known as 'Churg-Strauss Syndrome', a disorder, according to medical journals, 'that causes inflammation in blood vessels (vasculitis), which restricts blood flow to various organs.'" The report added: "The disorder is believed to have damaged Yar'adua's kidneys before it was properly diagnosed." See "Yar'adua Didn't Hand Over to Jonathan before Departing to Germany," Online, <http://www.saharareporters.com/news-page/yaradua-admits-suffering-acute-pericarditis-churg-strauss-syndrome?page=4> Web. May 5, 2008.

way: “The condition of Mr. Yar’Adua, 58, has been kept a close secret since he left the country, leaving Nigerians to speculate on the seriousness of his ailments, which are reported to include heart and kidney problems.”²¹ Hence false stories of Yar’Adua’s death filtered from beer parlours and bus stops into the popular press and vice versa in a complicated circulatory mix that made it difficult to identify which came first—the street stories or the media narratives. Or to put it in Baudrillardian sense, “the masses simulate the media which in turn hypersimulate the masses” (Lash and Urry 1994: 137).

In response to the increasing wild stories about President Umaru Yar’Adua’s poor health or ‘deaths’, the Nigerian government began to administer oaths of secrecy to key officials. But the street stories became even stronger, travelling the postmodern viral media in unending news circles or loops, and assuming frightening dimensions. It was not astonishing therefore that Nigeria Governors’ Forum (NGF) reacted to media reporting of their role in resolving the political logjam arising from the president’s incapacitation in the following words:

We believe that neither our media nor our country is ennobled by journalism that constantly seeks to undermine and cast aspersions on the genuine and patriotic efforts of our leaders at serving our country and moving it forward. Therefore, we once again call on editors and media managers to be wary of false and speculative reports that some of their

²¹ Adam Nossiter, “Nigerian President Is Back, but Deputy Stays in Power,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/25/world/africa/25nigeria.html> Web. February 24, 2010.

reporters often disguise as facts in the name of digging up the news behind the news.²²

Although the media did not feel like it was on trial as it had been during the years of military dictatorship, still it would not be deterred, and neither was the public: the frontline news organizations which identified with the masses in the struggle to end military dictatorship continued to cast their sympathies with them in the more challenging post-military regime where the enemy line had become fuzzy unlike during the “*Them*” and “*Us*” social division of the military era. Hence notwithstanding the complex ideological muddle faced by the main news organizations, remnants of the old ideological commitment survive in some of the media houses.²³

The official attitude to the press is further reflected in government’s response to the ongoing campaign for Freedom of Information Bill by the Freedom of Information Coalition. In a seemingly open, democratic dispensation, government was increasingly demonstrating intolerance of freedom of expression

²² See Chuks Okocha, “Govs: No Deal with Jonathan• We acted in Nigeria’s best interest.” ThisDay Online newspaper, <http://www.thisdayonline.com/nview.php?id=166592> February 16, 2010.

²³ The ideological commitment of sections of the media was partly the reason why in late 2008, Editors of *Insider Weekly* magazine were h(a)unted by the democratic government in Nigeria, their offices were invaded by State security agents, and their production materials seized or destroyed. In an interview he granted me in August 2008, Mr. George Mba, one of the magazine’s top editors who was incarcerated during the years of military dictatorship, linked the assault on *Insider Weekly* media house to a news story on the controversial death of the winner of the annulled June 12, 1993 presidential election in Nigeria. The *Insider Weekly* news story re-visited the Tea Theory story, claiming new evidence to prove that, indeed, Chief Moshood Abiola, the acclaimed winner of the June 12, 1993 election was killed in the presence of US agents through a poisoned cup of tea while in detention. It is interesting to note the resurrection of the cup of tea motif in a context different from the Buckingham Palace experience of the Emir or pioneer leaders of the Federal Republic of Nigeria at Independence.

by the media houses which the Governor's Forum criticized.²⁴ Yet the uncertainty around the president's health and wellness was so severe it finally resulted in some kind of national emergency; more so because the president travelled abroad again for medical treatment without formally handing over to the vice-president, Goodluck Jonathan, as many had interpreted the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Section 144) as stipulating. The result was three-fold: First, a constitutional crisis and a power vacuum that threatened Nigeria's current fledgling democracy. Second, struggle for political control of the country. Third, it generated more street stories with Yar'Adua as the principal character projected, in the words of Sonala Olumhense, as becoming: "instead of being an object of sympathy, [...] the target of derision; instead of being an object of inspiration, [...] the subject of mistrust; instead of being a beacon of hope, [...] the symbol of despair."²⁵

Again as in traditional oral narratives or the standard morality tale, characterization in the street stories followed the Good versus Evil binary which interestingly parallels the common framing of popular culture "in a dichotomous manner" as articulated by Nadine Dolby (2006), referencing McCarthy et al. (1999). In such narratives there is no room for the complex, rounded character/protagonist associated with modern fiction. Instead, there are flat or "wooden" characters whose 'clear-cut' image categorizes them as either good

²⁴ A ray of hope that government was succumbing to pressures from the popular campaign for the Freedom of Information Bill emerged in the dying days of President Goodluck Jonathan's tenure (first quarter of 2011) as the Nigerian parliament passed the bill and sent it for the President's assent. It is instructive that the Bill has passed through three parliamentary sessions in twelve years.

²⁵ Sonala Olumhense "As the Yar'Adua Era Ends"
<http://www.saharareporters.com/column/yar%E2%80%99adua-era-ends> Web. May 25, 2010.

men or evil men. This classification had been the case with Babangida, Abacha on the one hand, and on the other Saro-Wiwa and Abiola; now it extended to Yar'Adua, although relatively speaking, Yar'Adua could be said to have enjoyed a modicum of positive assessment or public sympathy.

The “confounding maze of intrigues woven around the president’s illness”²⁶ and his absence from the country without official leave (AWOL) as well as the opposition narratives spurned by the people demonstrate yet again the power of street stories in everyday life in postcolonial Nigeria. While state officials peddled a cocktail of false narratives to cover up their principal’s debilitating condition, ordinary people and the press persevered in producing narratives that sustained the motif of the president’s incapacitation, and by so doing, mounted pressure on the former to come clean with the truth. Such a battle of narratives seemed unprecedented in its longevity in Nigerian history. For the three months the president was away in Saudi Arabia, the ‘battle’ raged. It was not surprising, therefore, that at the February 3, 2010 meeting of the Federal Executive Council (FEC), the highest ruling body in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dora Akunyili, Minister of Information and Communications, dropped what has been described in sections of the Nigerian press as a “bombshell” over the controversial protracted illness of Mr. President, Umaru Yar'Adua. In an unexpected five-page “shock and awe”²⁷ memo to her colleagues in the chamber

²⁶Lanre Idowu, “Media And Society: The Fading Presidency,” *Next*, March 3, 2010. Online http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Opinion/5534711-184/media_and_society_the_fading_presidency.csp Web. March 4, 2010.

²⁷SaharaReporters, the online newspaper, used this expression made popular by President George Bush in his infamous description of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, to describe the memo. See “Dora Akunyili’s “shock and awe” memo: Yar'Adua's kitchen cabinet faces tough week ahead,” Online, February 4, 2010 <http://www.saharareporters.com/news-page/dora-akunylis-shock-and->

of power at Aso Rock, Abuja, Akunyili, an outstanding woman in Nigeria's male-dominated political terrain who had established an international reputation fighting fake drug merchants/cartels as Director-General of the National Food and Drug Administration Commission (NAFDAC), addressed her colleagues on the "need to do what is morally right and constitutional for the President to officially hand over to the Vice President to function as Acting President." On a strident note she added: "If he does not, we can evoke whichever aspect of the constitution that should make the Vice President an Acting President."

Akunyili's brave turn-around memo came as a 'bombshell' against the backdrop of her role as the anchor-person of the executive council's hitherto insistence that the incapacitated president was fit to rule,²⁸ and that there was no power vacuum in the country nearly two and a half months after the president was flown to Saudi Arabia for intensive medical care. For a president whose health had been the subject of street stories and media narratives/cartoons, and Internet discussions, the Federal Executive Council had been ridiculed by the public in such public texts, and the Minister of Information and Communications rhetorically characterized the situation in her historic memo:

We...need to save ourselves from shame because our stand is becoming very embarrassing. He (President Yar'Adua) has been away for about 70

[*awe-memo-yaraduas-kitchen-cabinet-faces-tough-week-ahead*](#) For a full text of the memo see "Akunyili's Memo," Leadership (Nigeria) Online, Thursday, 04 February 2010, http://www.leadershipeditors.com/ns/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11590:akunyilis-memo&catid=51:cover-stories&Itemid=101

²⁸ A "Yar'Adua Illness Timeline" posted on the BBC web site lists 27 January, 2010 as the date "Cabinet declares president fit." See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8501301.stm> February 6, 2010. It should also be noted that the cabinet first declared that the President was not incapacitated on December 3, 2009.

days now, even if he returns tomorrow, is it not better for him to rest and recover before taking over from the Vice President?” (Ibid.)

In an apparent response to the oral traditional framework of the public circulation of the president’s controversial health condition, Akunyili cited “a local proverb, “a goat does not get strangulated (sic) by the rope used in tying it when an adult is present,” to concretize her argument on the need for FEC to act, adding: “We are all in a better position to know that the polity is overheated to a frightening level. Posterity will judge us harshly if we do not positively intervene to resolve this *logjam*. (My emphasis)

Akunyili’s memo underscores the potency of street stories as a tool for political resistance, and their capacity to fuel mass action as evidenced in the peaceful demonstrations against the government in Lagos and other cities across the world. The protests were ignited essentially by the implications of the uncertain health status cum rumoured death of the president for Nigeria’s stability. More so against the setting of the international pressure brought on the country by being put on a terrorist list consequent upon the Christmas 2009 aborted terror strike by Nigerian-born “underpants bomber”, Umar *Farouk* Abdulmutallab. Expectedly, in her memo, Akunyili noted:

There has been persistent agitation by the public for members of the Federal Executive Council to do something. Nigerians expect us to rise to this challenge...The looming crisis in the system is over boiling. Our hard earned democracy is being threatened by the day... The name of our

President and all his achievements are being rubbished by this unfortunate *debacle*. (Ibid.) [Emphasis added]

It is instructive that the Information Minister used the action words “logjam” and “debacle” in her memo to describe the precarious political situation in Nigeria at the time. Scholars familiar with Nigeria’s turbulent history, especially around the annulled June 12, 1993 Presidential elections, would easily recall those two words used in describing the post June 12 political situation and the so-called lame-duck Interim Government that finally culminated in General Sani Abacha as Maximum ruler, to borrow the appropriate epithet used by the radical press to define him. In entitling her memo “If we fail to act now, history will not forgive us,” Akunyili gestured to the tension or opposition between official *history* and the people’s ‘unofficial’ *street-story* in relation to the president’s prolonged absence from the country.

The tendency of ‘official history’ to deceive the people is expressed in Murtala Aleem’s reportorial collage, “The Lies they told about Yar’Adua,” (*TELL*, April 19, 2010: 22) and in Dayo Aiyetan’s report that at one of the Federal Executive Council meetings, Yeyale Ahmed, Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), “declared that there was no need to deceive Nigerians further because it was obvious that the president was incapacitated” (35). The drama at the meeting as reported by Aiyetan, proves how ridiculously fictional even the State’s version of social reality can become. According to Aiyetan,

the pro-Yar’Adua group opposed the suggestion. Aliero told the meeting that he learnt that Yar’Adua was already on his feet and going through

daily exercises. Dukku corroborated this and said that Turai Yar’Adua, the First Lady, had told her that the president was exercising 25 minutes every day. It was obvious that this choreographed falsehood had been adopted as a strategy by the pro-Yar’Adua group to stall any action against him. Many ministers who knew the truth about the president’s health condition, were shocked that the group would descend to the level of peddling such lies at such an august gathering (35-36).²⁹

A rush of activities rolled in quick succession in the first quarter of 2010 when Yar’Adua was finally flown back to Nigeria in a way that some Nigerians began to see the presidential health crisis as a real (reel) life Nollywood movie. Indeed, in a telephone discussion with me in May 2010 acclaimed novelist Chinua Achebe described the Yar’Adua illness and rumoured death episodes as “cinema.” And a commentator on *Sahara Reporters* responding to an article by Okey Ndibe saw it as “a [... tragedy being turned into [a] soap opera”³⁰ Again, it was as if real life events were imitating fiction, leading one to invoke again that mythopoeic afflatus which serves even the most privileged Nigerian in the art of storytelling. Analyzing the major scenes of the ‘soap opera,’ Lanre Idowu (2010) rightly noted that “a familiar pattern [was] beginning to emerge. The February 24th return of Yar’Adua to Abuja by his minders remind[ed] one of the January 12th interview arranged for him on the BBC. Both were desperate moves designed to confuse the public” (Ibid.). The familiar pattern in the two incidents went beyond the

²⁹ See “End Game for Yar’Adua,” *TELL*, March 1, 2010

³⁰ See “Yar’Adua’s death and debt to history,” *Sahara Reporters*, Online. <http://ns1.saharareporters.com/column/yar%E2%80%99adua%E2%80%99s-death-and-debt-history> Web. May 12, 2010.

desperation which underscored them; it included the dramatic force with which they were orchestrated, as widely reported in the Nigerian press.

The familiar pattern also included another intervention by the US in the political drama as had been the experience during the June 12 impasse. In January 2010, US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of African Affairs, Johnnie Carson, visited Nigeria to undertake what Elor Nkereuwem reporting for *NEXT* describes as a “broad spectrum feel of the political temperature in the light of the succession politics now frantically apace in Abuja,” adding with reference to the underpants bomber terrorist incident that: “The US diplomat [was] also expected to seek reasons for the delay in debating the anti-terrorism bill that has been with the National Assembly for the past four years.”³¹ Carson’s visit was soon followed in March with a statement entitled “Political Situation in Nigeria” and issued by the US after Yar’Adua’s commando-style return to Nigeria. Worried by the dangerous implications of the Yar’Adua health crisis for Africa the Obama administration averred: “In a modern democracy, senior cabinet members and legislative leaders have a right to know the health status of their president and so do Nigeria’s citizens.”³² About the same time, the European Union also issued a

³¹ Elor Nkereuwem, “US official arrives Nigeria over political crisis,” *Next*, Online.

<http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5510044-146/story.csp> Web. January 11, 2010

³² According to a full text of the Statement issued by Philip J. Crowley, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs and published on the US government official website www.america.gov, the US was worried that: “Nigeria is very important to the region, the continent, and to the United States, yet it remains unsettled as a result of President Yar’Adua’s uncertain medical condition. Since his return home from Saudi Arabia, President Yar’Adua has not been seen publicly or met with members of his cabinet or any of his country’s key political leaders, generating additional unease about the stability of the country and physical capacity of the president to lead the government.” It continued: “As Nigeria deals with its current political crisis, it is essential for the country’s leaders to avoid any actions that will imperil Nigeria’s last ten years of democratic progress as well as the accomplishments that have been achieved under civilian rule. Nigerians have a right to expect their civilian and military leaders to work through their country’s democratic institutions, ensuring that the good of the many triumphs over the ambitions of the

statement on the same subject. According to media reports, Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the Commission, in a statement assured that: "The EU acknowledges the challenge posed by uncertainty in the political process in Nigeria at the present time, and commends the will of the democratic institutions of Nigeria to remain faithful to the principles of democracy, responsible governance and the rule of law."³³ The statement was a reiteration of the January 29, 2010, governments of the EU, US, the UK and France joint statement on Nigeria which diplomatically addressed Yar'Adua's ailment as well as the violence in Jos, the amnesty deal in the Niger Delta and issues of electoral reform.

Clearly, the international interest in the politics of illness and death had been partly provoked by the "fighting words" (James C Scott 1999: 185) embodied in the Nigerian street stories and the "Save Nigeria" Enough is Enough protests³⁴ across three continents—Africa, Europe, and North America—as well as in the popular press. It demonstrated the capacity of the narratives as agents of political dissidence, and possibly, disorder and anarchy, the recent January 2011 example of the popular uprising in Tunisia referred to in Chapter Two, and similar popular insurrections in Egypt, Libya, and parts of the Middle East being so fresh in the mind. With the Yar'Adua health crisis, we witnessed yet again (as in the

few" (<http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2010/March/20100305104903xjsnommis0.5133173.html> March 4, 2010.

³³ See Catherine Ashton, "Statement by the spokesperson of HR Catherine Ashton, on Nigeria," <http://www.delnga.ec.europa.eu/press%20release/2010/PressReleaseHighRepresentativeCatherineAshtonNigeria2.pdf> Web. August 14, 2010.

³⁴ See "Yar'adua Must Go!-Mass protests in Lagos-Photonews," *Sahara Reporters*, Online, January 21, 2010, <http://saharareporters.com/news-page/yaradua-must-go-mass-protests-lagos-photonews?page=1>

June 12 struggle), a situation where everyday people combined “verbal resistance with practical struggle” as theorized by James C Scott (1999: 188). The Save Nigeria Group’s practical mobilization probably forced the Yar’ Adua Presidency to arrange a controversial BBC interview with the sick president on the eve of the Abuja protests. So intertwined with the street narratives were the protests that as James C Scott (1999) has astutely argued, “it is impossible to separate veiled symbolic resistance to the ideas of domination [through street stories] from the practical struggles to thwart or mitigate exploitation” (Ibid.). True to Scott’s theorizing, we see here that “[r]esistance, like domination, fights a war on two fronts. The hidden transcript is not just behind-the-scenes griping and grumbling; it is enacted in a host of down-to-earth, low-profile stratagems designed to minimize appropriation” (Ibid.). In other words, with the street protests which attracted international media coverage and called more attention to the Nigerian Presidency health cum political crisis, “the discursive practices offstage” (James C Scott 1999: 191) represented by the street stories, found their way “onstage” at the seat of power in Abuja and in international circles.

The interest of everyday people in negative stories about their leaders requires further theorizing here. Besides the wish-fulfillment of evil for oppressive leaders, the interest can also be tracked in the negativity which defines news in mass communication. Amongst journalists, it is generally believed that “bad news is good news.” Golding and Elliot (2000) throw more light on this concept: “News is about disruptions in the normal current of events,” (636) declare the authors, emphasizing the description of news as “a social surveillance,

registering threats to the normal fabric of society and explaining their significance” (637). And then gesturing toward the psychological dimension of news consumption they echo Brucker’s (1973) view that, “a basic principle of journalism [is] that the bigger, the more off-beat, or the more bloody the spectacle, the greater the news value” and that “[t]his is not because newspaper men are more ghoulish or less sensitive to the finer things of life than their fellow men,” but a reflection of “the ineluctable fact that readers will flock to a story that has shock value but ignore one that is routine” (637). The morbid interest in the illness and death of the heads of state within the postcolonial condition in Nigeria could therefore be also read from the “off-beat” definition of news.

Stuart Hall et al deepen this “off-beat,” sanguinary perception of news in the essay “The Social Production of News” (2000) when they note that, “[t]hings are newsworthy because they represent the changefulness, the unpredictability and the conflictual nature of the world” (646). This conflictual nature of the world is evident in the framing not only of media reports but also in ordinary people’s natural “political struggle to impose a definition on an action and to make it stick” (James C Scott 1999: 206) through street narratives. The “us” and “them” social division in the narrativization of social reality in the postcolony necessitates a calibration of the battle of narratives in this dissertation, around the concept of “primary and secondary definers of social events” (Hall et al 2000: 648), and “the hierarchy of credibility” (Ibid. 649).³⁵ Hence the heavy stream of hegemonic discourse poured by the Yar’Adua inner cabal proved incredible and incapable of

³⁵ I use the two phrases here to refer to the invisible struggle to define social reality waged by street storytellers, news reporters and the State, and the levels of credibility evinced by the various groups.

reversing the tide of public opinion embodied in the street narratives, a typical scene of which is graphically captured by [mypenmypaper](#).³⁶ Victims of official secrecy and misinformation about their president's health condition, the people appropriated the primary role of definers of the current events while the State became the secondary definers, uncomfortably responding to damaging stories circulating on the streets of Lagos with its heavy media presence. Understandably, attempts to control the dominant narrative about the President's condition so turned into such a ludicrous babel of falsehoods as noted already in Murtala Aleem's collection referred to above that Nasir El Rufai, former Minister of Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory and member of the Presidential economic team from 2003 to 2009, declared: "Yar'Adua's inner circle has shown itself quite adept at spreading falsehoods—misinforming and misleading Nigerians into mass violence if necessary—to preserve its hold on power"³⁷

Beyond the trading of accusations of peddling of false narratives between the state and the people, the babel became most strident after December 10, 2009 when a US online publication, *American Chronicle* published a seemingly authoritative report announcing: "Yar'Adua is dead." The news story credited "authoritative sources at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre" where Yar'Adua was hospitalized as its source. The publication provided details

³⁶ [mypenmypaper](#) presents an interesting 'transcript' of a scene at a Lagos bus-stop where ordinary people engage in a discussion of the fate of the president in the context of conflicting reports about his illness. See "Yar Adua is sick – I listened to some people talking at a bus stop." <http://mypenmypaper.wordpress.com/2009/11/25/yar-adua-is-sick-i-listened-to-some-people-talking-at-a-bus-stop/> Web. November 30, 2009.

³⁷ See "Time for a New Nigerian President," *Foreign Policy*, April 2010. Online http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/04/01/time_for_a_new_nigerian_president?page=0,0 Web. September 10, 2010.

of time (3.30pm) when the president presumably died, and even claimed that at the time of his death he was surrounded by a childhood friend, Nigerian Member of Parliament, and by his wife and the First Lady, Hajia Turai Yar'Adua, who "wants to keep the news secret for the next few days for personal reasons." The story which enjoyed instant viral circulation on the internet and on the streets of Lagos, much so that I received several "have-you-heard" phone calls from friends and relations scattered in various parts of the world that December 10, 2009. My mailboxes equally were crammed with forwarded mails on the subject. But the report soon proved to be false. www.huhuonline.com, one of the more serious online Nigerian new media, followed up on the *American Chronicle* report. Deploying the kind of new technology associated with the new media, the online publication (www.huhuonline.com) contacted Tanimu Yakubu, Chief Economic adviser to President Yar'dua, via text message on a cell phone. According to the online site, Yakubu replied: "U re making me to break my silence on not responding again to recurring death wishes for President Umar Musa Yar'Adua. I confirm that the story in the hyper link you referred me to is yet another death wish for President Umar Musa Yar'Adua. President Umar Musa Yar'Adua is alive. Watch out for a proof shortly." www.huhuonline.com further reported that Mr. Yakubu took up the lead on the Nigerian Member of Parliament referred to in the *American Chronicle* story and identified him as Mall am Shehu Inaja Imam, a Honourable Member of the Federal House of Representatives representing Faskari Federal Constituency in Katsina State, and explained that: "This gentleman was in Nigeria on the day he was wished (sic) to have witnessed the

President's death!" Continuing, as www.huhuonline.com reports, Yakubu "once again [...] confirm[ed] that President Umar Musa Yar'Adua is alive, feeling much better, mentally alert and home bound very soon by the grace of the Almighty God."

The "proof" that Yar'Adua was "alive, feeling much better, mentally alert and home-bound" that Yakubu promised the online media manifested in two forms. The first was the January 12, 2010 controversial BBC broadcast of an interview with a man believed by a cynical Nigerian public to have imitated the voice of an incapacitated president whom the press and street storytellers cum historians had affirmed had suffered brain damage;³⁸ the second proof was even more elaborate: an under-cover-of-darkness smuggling of the president into the country in March 2010. Once he was back home, the babel hit the highest decibel, with members of the president's "kitchen cabinet" trying to out-perform one another in their display of loyalty. Led by the Attorney-General Chief Mike Aaondokaa, they revisited the Abacha style of hosting of solidarity visits to the State House, Abuja. Only what was missing this time was the video-show which Abacha and his henchmen had staged to convince the influential presidential visitors about the veracity of the alleged Oladipo Diya coup plot narrative they were selling to them. Like their predecessors in Aso Rock, the Yar'Adua cabal and allies appeared clearly familiar with the power of oral circulation of narratives, and what James C. Scott describes as "the geometrical progression of

³⁸ See "Yar'Adua is brain-damaged," NEXT, May 6, 2010, Online, http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/News/National/5509847-146/yaradua_is_brain-damaged__csp, May 6, 2010.

serial telling, which may reach thousands in a short time” (162). The series of carefully staged solidarity visits and the discordant notes on the president’s condition that emanated from them added to the babel. In ““The Yar’Adua we saw” -- Abuja Chief Imam,” Emeka Mamah, reporting one such controversial visits (April 1, 2010) by three powerful Islamic clerics based on a BBC Hausa Service interview, showed how ridiculous the presidential health drama had become, with the clergy being part of the cast. Mamah reports that the Chief Imam of the National Mosque in Abuja, Ustaz Musa Mohammed and leader of the delegation, described the President they saw as being dressed in jumpers and a cap to match. The Imam then went on to offer what amounted to a counternarrative to the dominant street narrative about Yar’Adua:

In fact contrary to rumours that he was seriously ill, we saw that he had improved tremendously and we believe he could be able to resume work any moment from now. When we were ushered in, we met the President and his wife seated side by side while his ADC standing, to his left side. He shook hands with each one of us beginning with Ibrahim Datti Ahmed, then myself and the other. We then proceeded to the prayer session where we all rose up our hands and prayed with the President. After, he shook hands with us again and we left at exactly 6:13 pm. We were all happy with the situation we met the President because he has gained enough strength that would enable him to resume work.³⁹

³⁹ Emeka Mamah, ““The Yar’Adua we saw” -- Abuja Chief Imam.” *Vanguard Online*, Apr 3, 2010, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2010/04/the-yaradua-we-saw-abuja-chief-imam/> Web. April 4, 2010.

The counter narrative framework of the clerics' visit was further highlighted by one of the delegates, Ibrahim Datti Ahmed, chairman of the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria. He revealed in a BBC Focus on Africa program that the purpose of the visit to the president which lasted 10 minutes only "was to see if he actually exists," adding, "[b]ecause there is a lot of speculation in the Nigerian press, that the president was not even in the country, that the president may have died or was not there."⁴⁰ Ahmed admits that Yar'Adua "was pale but certainly he was far, far better than what we had been led to understand."

In another counternarrative pattern, the Kaduna State CAN Secretary, Reverend Joseph Hayab decried the politicization of religion, and challenged the drama around the Islamic clerics' pilgrimage to Aso Rock, contending that their

coming out to make a mock announcement of the thing [Yar'Adua's condition] belittles the status of a whole president of the country, making it look like a religious affair and I see Yar'Adua above this. Yar'Adua is the president [...], and [an] issue concerning Yar'Adua should be seen as a Nigerian issue, not a religious issue. [...] Those who are managing Yar'Adua seem to be blinded and don't seem to understand how sensitive Nigerians are. And they are playing this game. But there is no crime for the family to call religious leaders to pray for him. The only problem is the information we received that they confessed that they saw Yar'Adua, sitting down and never said a word. Who knows whether someone has been masked like him and sat in the chair where Yar'Adua was supposed

⁴⁰ "Nigeria clerics meet ailing President Umaru Yar'Adua," BBC Online, Friday, 2 April 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8600639.stm> Web. April 5, 2010.

to sit and they presented him like Yar’Adua. They give room for this kind of doubt [...] Don’t forget, last week there was rumour that Yar’Adua was going to appear in the mosque and he never appeared in the mosque. This is pure propaganda.”⁴¹

It is not surprising that Hayab invoked the metaphor of the masquerade in his riposte to the story of the three ‘wise’ clerics who visited President Yar’Adua; it is yet another evidence of the traditional oral culture which informs street narratives in Nigeria. In the culture of masked performances, as Okpewho (1992) has noted, “the most conspicuous index of the ritual character [...] is the separation between players and audiences (271),” adding that, “in most traditional dramatic performances, masquerade drama is organized as theatre-in-the-round, with the performers surrounded by, and enjoying occasional impromptu verbal communication with, the crowd of spectators” (Ibid.), as the Yar’Adua scenario relatively illustrates. Also, the association of masquerades with spirits in the Nigerian—and I believe African—culture strengthens its symbolic use in this context. It cogently references the popular kernel narrative’s imagined transition of the president through death to the land of spirits as believed in African world view. Thus, in that single metaphor of the masquerade, Hayab underscores the alienation of Yar’Adua and the cast of Islamic clerics from the people, and the gravity of the president’s condition. Such is the often overlooked depth of meanings sometimes embedded in street narratives in postcolonial Nigeria.

⁴¹ Noah Ebije, “Visit to Yar’Adua: Muslim clerics want to divide Nigeria, says CAN,” *The Sun* online, <http://www.sunnewsonline.com/webpages/news/national/2010/apr/05/national-05-04-2010-001.htm>, Web. April 6, 2010

Although the oral tradition may not be replicated in its ancient forms at the village square, an increasingly urbanized younger generation are finding ways to reinvent tradition, adjusting its symbols and aesthetics to serve new social needs in a globalized world.

Also chagrined by the absurd turn in the “presidential drama,” Wole Soyinka inserted himself into the narrative. In a characteristically blistering satiric manner, Soyinka said: “the clerics that have visited him [Yar’Adua] have been very modest in their report. One said he couldn’t speak while another said he heard him grumble, but both agreed he could not use his hand” (Okulaja 2010). And then the Nobel laureate added the clincher: “It is time a committee of Nigerian doctors actually sees Yar’Adua and examine that his hand was truly raised and as well examine if the hand can be used properly.”⁴² As Ayo Okulaja further reported, the eminent public intellectual and activist requested, playfully of course, that there should be no limit to the group of people allowed to see the ailing president. “There is a kind of insolence going on around the precincts of Aso Rock and, as privileged groups are now allowed to see him, I am going to send an application as a follower of Orisa demanding that Sango [Yoruba traditional] worshippers also want to see him now,” Okulaja quoted Soyinka as saying, adding that Soyinka “then alleged that *the president is a victim of spousal abuse* and referred to him as President “Yar I do or die.”” [Emphasis added] The

⁴² Okulaja reports that Soyinka made the demand [April 7, 2010] at the Civic Centre, where he delivered a lecture titled “Leadership and Followership as shared responsibility” at an event organized by the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG). See “Soyinka wants Orisa worshippers to visit Yar’Adua,” *Next* online, http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5551095-146/soyinka_wants_orisa_worshippers_to_visit.csp Web. November 15, 2010.

pun on the president's name should not be lost; it addresses the farcical desperation by the ruling cabal to cling to power at all costs. This act not only alienated the president and his handlers including his wife, it generated more stinging narratives seeking to explain the parlous state of affairs at the presidency.

Street Narrative Culture, Politicization of Illness, Gender and Political

Control

Soyinka's reference to Yar'Adua's wife as an agent of "spousal abuse" at once draws attention to the marginalization of women in these stories *narrating the nation* on the one hand, and on the other, their often negative representation when mentioned at all. It should be recalled that in the 'Apple Theory' women were represented as chattels, temptresses and agents of (the general's) death.

In the street stories and in the popular press narrativization of the Yar'Adua illness and eventual death, his wife, Turai, has been cast in the stereotype of Lady Macbeth—an ambitious, archetypal witch, for whom all that matters is political power and material gain while her husband is dying. The propriety or otherwise of this characterization of Turai may be a matter of perspective, but generally discernible within the patriarchal nature of postcolonial Nigeria.⁴³ A thread on this theme on the social networking site Facebook that I followed after the death of Yar'Adua showed a polar division along largely gender lines. While most of the male contributors shared Soyinka's interpretation, most of the female contributors sympathized with Turai, seeing her as a pathetic,

⁴³ James Tar Tsaaio (2010) offers remarkable insights into the nature of this patriarchal society in his essay, "In the Name of the Father...Masculinity, Gender Politics and National Identity Formation in Postcolonial Nigeria," *Le Simplegadi*, 2010, 8, 8: 36-47, Online, <http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi> Web. November 24, 2010.

confused wife under the influence of a male-dominated political clique manipulating her love for her husband and the desire to protect his estate for their own selfish ends (Akinbajo 2010).⁴⁴ In that vein, the version of the same story that claimed that “Presidency sources [said] he [was] in a mobile intensive care unit and his wife, Hajiya Turai control[led] access to him,” and that, “Jonathan met with Turai, who told him it was the instruction of the doctors that people should not come round him because of the medication he [was] receiving and the kind of environment they want[ed] to keep him in” (Ibid.), sounds persuasive.

Read from the latter point of view, we will be better positioned to appreciate the sacrifice of Kudirat Abiola, the political amazon and wife of M.K.O. Abiola assassinated by Abacha’s hit squad. One of the very few women accorded significant, albeit small space, in the male-dominated political arena and contemporary narrative of the nation, Kudirat was martyred for her struggles toward the actualization of “the sacred mandate,” a symbol of patriarchal power; her refusal to persuade her husband to accept Abacha’s proposal for conditional release from detention was assumed by some as being partly responsible for Abiola’s extended incarceration and eventual death. Surely, some analysts of the Nigeria political crisis might justifiably consider as tenuous, the comparison of

⁴⁴ See Idris Akinbajo, “Inside the Turai Coup,” NEXT, Online, http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5532304-146/inside_the_turai_coup_.csp Web. November 21, 2010. The promo for this story reads: “The Nigerian Presidency is held hostage by four un-elected men who, working in concert with Turai Yar’Adua, the President’s wife, almost executed a military-type coup against the nation, NEXT investigations reveal.” It claims that the team is led and coordinated by Yusuf Muhammed Tilde, President Umaru Yar’Adua’s Chief Security Officer (CSO), whom NEXT quotes an Aso Rock intelligence source as stating that “he has become to Yar’Adua and Turai what Al-Mustapha was to Abacha (former head of state).” Other members of the team are listed as Mustapha Onoyvieta, Mr. Yar’adua’s Aide de Camp (ADC); Abdurahman Dambazau, the Chief of Army Staff; and Abdul Mustapha, the commander of the guards brigade responsible for security at the presidential villa.

Turai's commitment to her husband with Kudirat's. Reasons for such a position would include the widely circulated story that Turai and associates in the Yar'Adua cabal so held the sick president hostage that she denied the president's mother and daughter's access to him.⁴⁵ Add to this, similar alleged denials to the Vice President-tuned-Acting President, Goodluck Jonathan, and other key government officials, under the pretext that President Yar'Adua had "decided not to meet to meet with any state official in an official capacity for now."⁴⁶

But arguably, the politicization of the president's illness in street and media narratives was beyond the 'machinations' of the First Lady, Turai. Besides the hidden and public transcripts on the theme enacted by postcolonial Nigerian citizens on the streets, the post-Yar'Adua politics of succession has proven that , also at the heart of the matter are wider regional and ethnic interests around the controversial rotational presidency arrangement of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) which some Northern elements insist is in their favour. It is from this perspective that I prefer to read Soyinka's call to Nigerians to tackle the

⁴⁵ The popular press was awash with news stories relating to the First Lady, Turai refusal to grant Yar'Adua's mother, and other close relations and aides, access to him. See amongst numerous others: Shehu Usman, "Yar'Adua's mum weeps," *National Daily*, Online, http://www.nationaldailyng.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=527:yaraduas-mum-weeps&catid=99:current-cover&Itemid=489; Danladi Bature, "Turai, daughters clash over Yar'Adua," *National Daily*, Online, http://www.ngnationaldaily.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=399:turai-daughters-clash&catid=99:current-cover&Itemid=489; Taiwo Adisa, "Northern monarchs, leaders give Turai options •Move Yar'Adua to Germany or Katsina' •President's mother at Villa, prefers Katsina," *Nigerian Tribune*, Friday, 05 March 2010, Online, <http://www.tribune.com.ng/index.php/front-page-news/2209-northern-monarchs-leaders-give-turai-options-move-yaradua-to-germany-or-katsina-presidents-mother-at-villa-prefers-katsina.html> November 15, 2010; "Nigeria media focus on power play since Yar'Adua's return," *Afrique en ligne* (Actualités Africaines: Economie Politique Finances Sports), <http://www.afriquejet.com/news/africa-news/nigeria-media-focus-on-power-play-since-yar%27adua%27s-return-2010022844918.html> Web. November 21, 2010.

⁴⁶ See Emeka Mamah, "The Yar'Adua we saw" -- Abuja Chief Imam." *Vanguard* Online, Apr 3, 2010, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2010/04/the-yaradua-we-saw-abuja-chief-imam/> Web. April 4, 2010.

Yar'Adua cabal just before his death after 35 months in office. In the moving speech entitled “Between a Humane Dignified Resolution and a Yar'Adua-Or-Die Cabalism”⁴⁷ and delivered at a press conference in Lagos on April 30, 2010, Soyinka stated that “There [was] a very macabre game going on, which [was] to use, in [his] view, a helpless individual in a political manipulation.” The Nobel laureate affirmed that he was “speaking as a human being, not as a political activist, agitator or whatever,” and not “even as a citizen, but as a human being” (Ibid.). He passionately declared:

I find myself revolted by the use to which President Yar'Adua is being put by a group that is known generally, I believe, as ‘the cabal.’ I think they are not faceless; a number of them have been mentioned by the media, and *they are very good at planting rumours and stories in the media, to ossify the situation in Aso Rock right now, especially as it concerns the health of the President.* [...] It is this use to which inert human being—health wise—is being put that I find really disgusting, a process that I think should be terminated as quickly as humanely (possible), but as resolutely as the situation demands. I think there was one recent story ... in which it was said that the President had been seen at his desk receiving his family and so on and so forth. *We all know that these are fabrications*, and I think it's about time that we got to the bottom of the motivation behind this kind of activity, and put an end to it. One of the reasons I want to speak in my

⁴⁷ See Armsfree Ajanaku Onomo, “Nigerians Must Tackle The Cabal, Says Soyinka,” *The Guardian*, May 1, 2010.

personal capacity is that I am actually appealing to groups like Save Nigeria Group, Citizens Forum, civil rights organizations and humanitarian organizations to intervene and stop this very dark tragic-comedy.” [Emphasis added]

The recurrent emphases on rumours/fabrications in narrating the nation evident from Soyinka’s submission implicates both the continued social relevance of orality and the popular press as purveyors of history-in-motion, and the narrative impulse which ensures that versions of the same kernel story in circulation compete in the postcolonial street. At work in the Yar’Adua context therefore is an opposition between the public narrative insistence on unraveling his, and symbolically, the country’s health status on the one hand, and on the other, the “clandestine defiance” (James C. Scott 1999: 190) not by the subordinate classes as Scott imagines it, but in a reversal of roles, by the inner cabal, led in the public imagination by the First Lady and the then Attorney-General, Mike Aaondokaa.

The negative portraiture which women, including Turai, have generally suffered in the street narratives and in the media is a reflection of the exclusion of women from, and male dominance of, the social space and the popular media, despite the generally assumed numerical advantage of women in Nigeria. This exclusion or subordination of women could be associated with African tradition which coheres with “[t]he gendered character of the early public square” (Craig Calhoon 1999: 3) or the original patriarchal character of the public sphere as “a domain of universal reason, in which men are suited to participate, but from

which women must be barred because of their ‘emotional’ or ‘irrational’ character.”⁴⁸

The kind of gender politics obvious from the street narratives and the social reality in Nigeria has however not gone unchallenged. A November 2010 press statement issued by the Women Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON), a coalition of about seventeen women organizations working on Nigerian women political empowerment project, notes that the implication of the poor representation of women is “the systematic exclusion of half of the population” from public service, and a reflection of the “selfish political manifestation by the male hegemony in Nigeria.”⁴⁹ That hegemony is at the heart of the stereotypical characterization of women in the street narratives—where they are granted recognition at all. WOCON has embarked on practical actions to promote women’s political rights, and ensure a better deal for a gender that is doubly oppressed in the context of masculinist postcolonial tyranny.

⁴⁸ *The Polity Reader in Cultural Theory* 1994: 18. For a (feminist) critique of this conceptualization of the public sphere especially from Habermas’ point of view see John Thompson, “The Theory of the Public Sphere: A Critical Appraisal,” *The Polity Reader in Cultural Theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, 91-99.

⁴⁹ The press statement, a copy of which a friend sent to me, further provides startling statistics on the gender imbalance in Nigeria’s political affairs. It states that “women are still underrepresented in decision making positions in the country and for example constitute less than 8% in elective positions at all levels of Governance” despite Nigerian government’s “commitments at local and international levels such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA) which provides for the Affirmative Action Policy and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Goal 3 on gender equality and women’s empowerment and a National Gender Policy.” WOCON further states that: “Presently out of the 469 members in the National Assembly 434 are men which is over 92% and only 33 of them are women making the women about 7 % of total number of the national Assembly Legislators who will be automatic Members of the National executive Committees of all the Political parties. In addition, there are no female past Presidents or former Presidents or Vice Presidents and amongst the 36 Governors, we do not have a single woman, the proposed amendment also included all the political appointees majority of whom are men as delegates to the Party congresses.”

Beyond Talk: From Storytelling to Political Action

The practical actions undertaken by female activists to redress the gender imbalance and social injustice visible in the lived everyday experiences in Nigeria and not only in the street narratives find theoretical corroboration in James C. Scott's masterpiece, *Domination and the Art of Resistance* (1999). According to Scott, by providing "a number of firsthand accounts, summoning witnesses to give personal testimony" (206) we can appreciate that politically charged moment when hidden transcripts cross the threshold to open resistance (Ibid.: 207). And given the narrative network traversed by street stories and the broad coalition of its bearers—from ordinary people to Nobel laureates—"[i]t would be more accurate," as Scott advocates, "to think of the hidden transcript as a condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it" (1999: 191). The practical political action to protest the state of anomie in Nigeria organized by the groups referenced by Wole Soyinka above—Save Nigeria Group, Citizens Forum, civil rights organizations and humanitarian organizations—avow that the street narrative culture transcend symbolic verbal resistance to the realm of action. The protests had been ignited by the fact that President Yar'Adua's health status was not only unclear but his whereabouts remained "a jigsaw puzzle" as *TELL* magazine put it.⁵⁰ Practical action taken by concerned citizens besides the protest marches included a court case which was filed on December 23, 2009 urging Yar'Adua to step down, followed by two more suits by January 5, 2010. In the

⁵⁰See Adejuwon Soyinka, *TELL*, Monday, March 15, 2010. http://www.tellng.com/contentdisplay.aspx?page_id=10&id=103

words of Scott (1999) then, “[t]he logic of symbolic defiance is thus strikingly similar to the logic of everyday forms of resistance” (196).

But it needs to be pointed out that contrary to Scott’s hyperbolic claim for hidden transcripts as reflecting a level of “tactics and strategy” the street stories are no products of *concerted* efforts by the postcolonial subject to deploy them as weapons against the State in the same way as trade unions plan subversive acts for example. The stories may appear powerless in their dispersed forms in the postcolonial street and in their mutated forms in popular cultural production such as the press and audio-visual formats, but aggregated they become “a powerful straw in the wind” (Ibid.: 227), with an often underestimated capacity to cause social upheaval. It is this understanding that informs Scott’s (1999) acknowledgment of the fact that part of the potency of each oral performance is that it “can be nuanced, disguised, evasive, and shaded in accordance with the degree of surveillance from authorities to which it is exposed,” so that “it is the particularity and elasticity of oral culture that allows it to carry fugitive meanings in comparative safety” (162). The examples of the military era in Nigerian politics where the state functioned as an undertaker and ruthlessly targeted purveyors of “seditious” street narratives that challenged their legitimacy justified the peddling of such stories. As Scott (1999) explains, “[t]he realities of power require that [subversive or incendiary narratives] either be spoken by anonymous subordinates or be protected by disguise as rumor, gossip, euphemism, [...] that dares not speak in its own name” (156). Under the military, what I call narratives of

negation took various “forms of disguise”⁵¹ including guerrilla tactics. But in the post-military civilian era as witnessed in the Yar’Adua presidency, citizens enjoyed relative freedom of expression without fear of incarceration or assassination; “relative freedom” because there have been instances of the Gestapo-style storming of media houses common under the military in the present civilian dispensation, and some controversial assassination not directly linked to the State. They include the shutting down of the Lagos-based Channels Television in September 2008 by agents of the State Security Service (SSS) for broadcasting a false “newsflash” purportedly sent to by Nigeria’s official news wire service, News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), announcing that “President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua may resign after carbinate (cabinet) reshuffle, on health ground.”⁵² According to *ThisDay* newspaper report on the matter, in dispelling the rumour, presidential spokesman Segun Adeniyi urged his “colleagues in the media to be much more alert to the antics of persons and groups who have now made it their business to spread baseless rumours and untruths about the President in furtherance of their selfish schemes and ambitions.” But one must think beyond “the selfish schemes and ambitions” which The Presidency erroneously believes drive such “unpatriotic stories” constructed “by mischief makers,” to borrow the words of NAN Managing Director, Oluremi Oyo, in vehemently disowning the

⁵¹ James C Scott (1999) offers interesting theoretical grounds for comprehending these “forms of disguises” in the subsection of his book so named. See p.138ff

⁵² See Ike Abonyi, Chuks Okocha and Juliana Taiwo, “SSS Shuts Down Channels TV: President won’t quit, says spokesman •NAN disowns report,” *ThisDay*, September 17, 2008. <http://www.thisdayonline.com/nview.php?id=122743>, Web. September 18, 2008. Describing the hoax as the “the third significant rumour about Yar’Adua since last year – the first being that he had died in Germany during the presidential campaign. Last month, he was rumoured to have died having gone into “coma” after undergoing a “renal transplant”” *ThisDay* also reported that presidential spokesman, “Mr. Olusegun Adeniyi, emphatically denied the rumour, saying it was the handiwork of those who do not wish Nigeria well.

story “in its entirety,” to reflect on why some individuals and corporate citizens readily believe the street stories; more so given that in this case, the “poor grammar, as indicated in the wrong spelling of “cabinet” could not have been that of NAN,” as Mrs. Oyo points out. The essential reason is a combination of factors which include the general street philosophy that “there is no smoke without a fire” (to recall Abati) and consequently, no rumours without some iota of truth; wish-fulfillment of punishment for an illegitimate and inept postcolonial regime, and the plain aesthetic satisfaction derived from the human narrative impulse especially in relation to a people whose oral narrative culture, is still very central to everyday life in the postcolonial city despite the sweeping currents of technology and globalization.

Add to these reasons Mbembe’s chilling theoretical postulation on power in the postcolony in the epigraph above. To challenge, survive or heal this debilitating postcolonial condition, subjugated citizens often resort to the cathartic force of telling stories in the streets and in the media against the “power bloc” (Hall 1994: 465). In recognizing the psycho-social power of such storytelling, I imagine narrative in Fredric Jameson’s (1984) sense, “not merely as a significant [...] field of research, but well beyond that as a central instance of the human mind and a mode of thinking fully as legitimate as that of abstract logic” (xi). Perhaps it is this insight that has attracted citizens of the calibre of a Nobel laureate for Literature to the street narratives.

Interestingly, the best illustration of the exercise of relative freedom of expression being a part of the healing process referred to above, and which has

encouraged the flourishing of contemporary subversive street stories, is Soyinka's narrative performances. In exile during the Abacha years, Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999 has empowered him (and other influential vocal citizens) to freely engage in mobilizing hitherto hidden or marginal discourses into the public domain, and into political action; even more recently spearheading the formation of a political party, the Democratic Front for People Federation (DFPF).⁵³

Conclusion

The kind of political action engineered by Soyinka, and others described in this study, is driven by the realization that “[i]f ideological sedition were confined to the ephemeral forms of gossip, grumbling, rumor, and the occasional hostility of masked actors, it would have a marginal life indeed,” to quote James C. Scott (1999: 156-157) again. It is not surprising therefore that “[c]itizens revolt have been a regular occurrence in Nigeria since independence in 1960,” as Ike Okonta (2008: 243) observes, adding that, “[t]he Tiv revolts of 1964 and the Agbekoya farmers uprising in Western Nigeria in 1968-69 are just two examples of politically marginalized and exploited citizens [...] revolting against their subject status” (Ibid.).⁵⁴ The people's protests against the State either under military rule or under democratic governance follows in that tradition, especially when it is realized that the contemporary citizens' forebears relied more on oral

⁵³ See *Sahara Reporters* “Why I Formed New Political Party—Soyinka,” <http://www.saharareporters.com/news-page/why-i-formed-new-political-party-%E2%80%94soyinka> . Web. July 21, 2010.

⁵⁴ This historical event has inspired a 2002 film production by Yomi Ogunmola entitled *Ogun Agbekoya (Farmers' Revolt)*.

communication for mobilization in the 1960s. But in our time, globalized postcolonial subjects have sought to reinvent tradition in various technological formats and in the radical ideas that govern their narrative protocols. Which is why when Yar'Adua died, Sonala Olumhense declared that “[p]ublic officials must resist the temptation to interpret the destiny of a nation in terms of their privileged benefits.” He added, echoing my earlier deconstruction of public discourses against Abacha when he also died, “[a]nd while we may never speak ill of the dead, we must never neglect to speak the truth about our country. The truth about my country is that I fully regret the Yar'Adua presidency.”⁵⁵

To reiterate my earlier point about the mutation of the street stories into other formats of popular cultural expression, I would like to invoke Appadurai (1996) apt declaration that “[t]he imagination—expressed in dreams, songs, fantasies, myths, and stories—has always been part of the repertoire of every human society, in some culturally organized way” (53). In this chapter, I argue that while the imagination may be populated by these “dreams, songs, fantasies, myths, and stories” (Ibid.) which are part of the repertoire of everyday life and are most expressed in street stories in the postcolonial city, the repertoire, or “hidden transcripts”, emerge more from the “collective unconscious” than from a deliberately “organized way.” Their emergence as “public transcripts” and tools of political resistance is explicable because the cultural field is “defined by [the] struggle to articulate, disarticulate and rearticulate texts and practices for

⁵⁵ See “The Yar'Adua We Knew,” *Reporters*, Sunday, 13 June 2010.

particular ideologies, particular politics.”⁵⁶ In other words, the postcolonial citizen who peddles subversive street stories in the open parliaments of Lagos is not always conscious of the fact that aggregated the stories become potent tools of dissidence, sometimes leading to violent protests. It is for this reason that James C. Scott (1999) thinks in terms of the State versus “the cumulative petty stratagems of its subjects” (200), and avers that “[f]or a social science attuned to the relatively open politics of liberal democracies and to loud, headline-grabbing protests, demonstrations, and rebellions, the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups is, like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum” (Ibid.). Part of my objective in this study has been to further visualize or unpack the emancipatory potentials of such struggles through analyses of the *loaded* verbal and media texts produced by the subordinate classes, and sometimes by the potentate using them as tools of subterfuge to hoodwink or compromise their subjects.

Having examined the verbal and print media forms of these travelling texts and how ideologically seditious against the State they can be—especially when activist-journalists, socially committed individuals and civil society groups seize the momentum to champion practical action such as the SAP riots, the June 12 riots, the IBB Must Go riots or the Yar’Adua Must Go peaceful protests—I shall now closely study the transmutation of the street stories into, and their function in, those elements of popular cultural production, essentially in film and popular music which I have been promoting in the preceding chapters.

⁵⁶ John Storey, revisiting Stuart Hall’s definition of ideology within cultural studies. See “Introduction: The Study of Popular Culture within Cultural Studies,” John Storey, Ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Hertfordshire, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, ix.

Chapter Six:
Street Stories: Representations in Nollywood and Popular Music in an Age of Globalization

In broader ideological terms, in African cinema there has been a deliberate attempt to use the medium as a “voice of the people.” (Ukadike 2003: 126)

I don't see how [...] African music can be about what doesn't affect our lives now. Our music should not be about love, it should be about reality and what we are up to now. – Fela Anikulapo-Kuti (Collins 2009: 135)

In the last chapter I examined street stories under the democratic dispensation in Nigeria as a way of comprehending their provenance, mode of circulation, and role in the democratization and narrativization of the nation. Thus far I have focused on how orality cum street narratives mediate, and are mediated by, the print media in their production and circulation, and how they define the postcolonial condition both under military and democratic rule in Nigeria. In this chapter, I focus on the transposition of some of the key popular political narratives from the streets and the popular presses (or oral and literate modes) into what Anthony Giddens (2000) has succinctly described as the “global electronic economy” (21). I identify the key themes that the cultural producers engage, then analyze selected texts to illustrate how they appropriate street stories and the “popular social grammar lived by the subaltern” (Ogola, Schumann and Olatunji 2009: 203). A key aspect that I track in this chapter is how Nigerian popular culture producers, driven by oral tradition, postcolonial politics of repression and

corruption, as well as by African modernities and globalization, deploy small media technologies to tap into “the fluid lines between fact and fiction” (Daniel Jordan Smith 2007: 228). In tracking the most representative or “exemplary narratives” (Haynes 2000: 32) in filmic and popular music texts within postcolonial urbanism in Nigeria, I relate them respectively to fundamental scholarship on orality, film, and popular music. I also relate them to the exemplary artistry and performance tradition championed by leading Nigerian cultural producers. For popular music for instance, the late Afrobeat King, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti whose declaration in the second epigraph above provides telling insight into the kind of cultural politics that have influenced much of contemporary Nigerian music. Taken together, I argue that certain exceptional Nollywood films and popular music are extensions of the oral tradition and the street narrative culture which also shape the practice of journalism.

Certainly, we can extrapolate the complex symbiotic relationship between street narratives and the popular press that I discussed earlier and which Daniel Jordan Smith highlights below as a foundation for developing this chapter. Drawing from his fifteen years research experience in Nigeria, Daniel Jordan Smith states that he has “wondered whether the rumors about corruption [he had] heard in popular discourse were generated through equally unsubstantiated newspaper stories, or whether the newspaper stories were themselves simply a reproduction of a widely circulating rumor that made it into print” (228). This is the chicken-and-egg dilemma which encircles us throughout this study. Here, we encounter a similar symbiotic relationship in film and popular music; whereby,

orality and street narratives influence the production of popular film and music especially given the insights respectively offered by Ukadike and Fela in the epigraphs, and popular film and music in turn influence the production of street stories. Hence we must take seriously, Daniel Jordan Smith's critique that "[w]hen the media function similarly to rumors giving voice to popular interpretations and discontents, rather than documenting evidence—they often become just another vehicle for the symbolic expression of frustrations about corruption, without offering any leverage to effect change" (228). For one can extend Smith's critique to Nollywood film and contemporary Nigerian "yabis" or trenchantly critical verbal cum musical performance on account of my interest in their narration of the nation. But as I demonstrate in this chapter, Nigeria's Nollywood film producers and the socially-conscious popular music performers do not only appropriate the controversial "popular discourses" expressed in street stories and the news media, but actually interpellate both the street oral storytelling and news media processes in their narrativization of contemporary social reality. And so to evaluate their texts purely on their contents would be to miss the point like the "folklorists who," to recall the epigraph from Luise White (2000) in Chapter One, "struggled to disaggregate rumour from legend [and] ended up struggling over the relative importance of the truth of stories compared to the importance of how or why they were told (56).

Even then, the works of the critical Nollywood film and popular music producers are driven by the make-believe consciousness with which documentaries are constructed as exemplified in the texts selected for close

reading here: Simisola Opeyemi's *Stubborn Grasshopper* and Tunde Kelani's *Saworoide* (for film); Sonny Okosuns' *Hidden Agenda* and Gbenga Adeboye's *Pasan Oro* (for music or neo oral performance). Besides, if we must be reminded, my interest in these street stories, whether in oral circulation or in print and electronic formats, transcends their often contested facticity. I am equally interested in their aesthetic appeal, their resonances as narratives in the literary sense not just as socio-anthropological and historical documents; the various "texts" can be seen as "performances of different interpreters" (Zumthor and McGarry 1984: 36). Given that "[t]he text cannot be considered in isolation from its historical conditions of production and consumption [,] and that "an analysis of media ideology cannot rest with an analysis of production and text alone" (Morley 2000: 472), a brief background to the film and music texts selected for this study deserve to be sketched out first before the analysis.

Nollywood and the Negotiations of Orality and Street Stories

The name "Nollywood" which refers to the Nigerian video film phenomenon is believed to have been "invented by a foreigner" and "apparently first appeared in an article by Matt Steinglass in the *The New York Times* in 2002" (Haynes 2005).¹ There are essentially two theories about the rise of Nollywood. One theory traces it to home video recordings of rites of passage such as birthdays, funeral ceremonies, etc., which were facilitated by the emergence of

¹ This was closely followed by Norimitsu Onishi, "Step Aside, L.A. and Bombay, for Nollywood. *The New York Times*, (2002, September 16. p.10), and a host of others listed in an entry on Nollywood in Wikipedia, "Cinema of Nigeria", (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_Nigeria)

modern video cameras in Nigeria.² As more professionals edited these home videos into neat narrative packages, and they became more popular especially with urban folks, it showed the possibility that the video cameras could be used to tell fictional stories which could be widely sold on VHS tapes at the beginning and later in compact discs.

A second theory traces the rise of Nollywood to the 1992 “accidental” decision by an Igbo merchant from Eastern Nigeria, Ken Nnebue, to make better use of excess video tapes which he imported and sold, by recording fictional films on them.³ His generally acknowledged first experiment⁴ of the value-added video tapes, *Living in Bondage*, incidentally became the hugely successful blockbuster that inspired the rise of Nollywood movies and altered the history of cinema in Nigeria.⁵ Since then, Nollywood has become an international phenomenon, grudgingly recognized by mainstream film establishment—in scholarship and

² Karin Barber (1997) briefly discusses this, noting that this informal, ground-level use of the technology familiarised and popularised the idea of local video production. Barber (2000) also corroborates Kelani’s point (cited in fn 4) that Yoruba video drama was being produced several years before *Living in Bondage*.

Also see Stella Chinyere Okunna, “Small Participatory Media Technology as an Agent of Change in Nigeria: A Non-existent Option?” *Media, Culture and Society*. SAGE Publications. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi. 17 (1995): 618-620.

³ See Kaia Niambi Shivers, “Negotiating Identity in Transnational Spaces: Consumption of Nollywood Films in the African Diaspora of the United States.” <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/events/MeCCSA/pdf/papers/Shivers%20-%20Negotiating%20Identity%20in%20Transnational%20Spaces.pdf> Web. December 12, 2010.

Jahman Anikulapo (2010) also provides related background information to the emergence of Nollywood, asserting that “Nollywood was actually a reaction by people who had nothing to do with film” (250).

⁴ Tunde Kelani has argued that *Living in Bondage* “was certainly not the first successful Nigerian home video,” adding that, “Ken Nnebue made “Aje Ni Iya Mi” (My mother is a witch) first. That was the first successful home video, in the Yoruba language. Others followed after this breakthrough.” See Trenton Daniel’s “Nollywood Confidential, Part Two,” <http://www.internationalreportingproject.org/stories/detail/nollywood-confidential-part-two/> Web. January 15, 2009.

⁵ For a more comprehensive history of film in Nigeria, see Balogun (1987), Ekwuazi (1991), Larkin (2000, 2008), Owens-Ibie (2006), Haynes (2007), and Adesokan (2009). The following documentaries also provide more insight into the Nollywood phenomenon: Ben Addeman and Samir Mallal’s *Nollywood Babylon* (2008); Franco Saachi’s *This is Nollywood* (2007); and Jamie Meltzer’s *Welcome to Nollywood* (2007).

film festivals—in the Western world. As Mark E. NeuCollins, adjunct Assistant Professor of Art at The University of Iowa School of Art and Art History puts it in his paper “Contemporary African Cinema: The Emergence of an Independent Cinema in Nigeria,” the Nigerian film lives “on the far fringes of the Western cinema consciousness” as a consequence of issues of technical quality (Larkin 2008) and other reasons including its “snob[bery] of well-meaning ex-colonial paternalism” (Ibid.). But notwithstanding its denigration as an emerging filmic tradition, Nollywood has surpassed Hollywood as the world's second largest film producer according to a May 5, 2009 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report.⁶ Providing more insight into the significance of the Nigerian cinematic practice, UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura observed that “[t]his new data on film and video production provides yet more proof of the need to rethink the place of culture on the international political agenda,” adding that: “Film and video production are shining examples of how cultural industries, as vehicles of identity, values and meanings, can open the door to dialogue and understanding between peoples, but also to economic growth and development” (Ibid.).

It should be noted, however, that before the rise of Nollywood Nigerian cinematographers such as Ola Balogun, Eddie Ugbomah, Ladi Ladebo, etc., had produced feature films on celluloid, and some of them continue to do so. The initial efforts included: Chief Eddie Ugbomah’s oeuvre of over thirteen celluloid

⁶ “Nigeria surpasses Hollywood as world's second largest film producer – UN,” UN News Service, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=30707&Cr=nigeria&Cr1=#> Web. December 12, 2010.

films⁷ including *Death of a Black President* (1983) and *The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi* (1977); Ladi Ladebo and Jab Adu's *Bisi Daughter of the River* (1976), Francis Oladele's adaptation of Wole Soyinka's play *Kongi's Harvest* (1970) based on his play of the same title. As Haynes 2000 recalls, there were also "a few of the classic Yoruba films by Hubert Ogunde [...] Moses Olaiya Adejumo (Baba Sala) [...] and] Ade Folayan/ Ade Love's *Taxi Driver*)" (12). Besides these fictional films, there existed documentary films on the increasing corruption in public service in the Second Republic especially, exemplified by *Nigeria: A Squandering of Riches* produced by Adegboyega Arulogun and narrated by Onyeka Onwenu, and Wole Soyinka's *Blues for a Prodigal* (1984)⁸—an audio corollary to which was Soyinka's phonograph recording (LP), *Unlimited Liability Company* released the same year (1983), and which in his words, "was made [...] at the height of the profligate rule of the National Party of Nigeria" (2006: 415).⁹

Besides the docu-films by Soyinka and others, the staple of local feature films, as well as imported Westerns, Bollywood and Hong Kong martial arts films which preceded Nollywood as internationalist Third World entertainment, seen all over the third world regardless of language, and established their presence in Nigerian cinema houses of the time such as Odeon. These cinema theatres were literally sacked by the "indigenization decree of the 1970s which forcefully divested foreign investment into local hands and restricted foreign exchange

⁷ For more on Chief Ugbomah described as "the most prominent independent filmmaker in Nigeria" see Ukadike (1995: 167 ff).

⁸ For more on this film see Dapo Adelugba's "Wole Soyinka's 'Blues for a Prodigal': A Review." *Africa Media Review*, 3. 2 (1989): 67-75.

⁹ Karin Barber offers a brief discussion of this work in her essay "Popular Arts in Africa." *African Studies Review*, 30.3 (Sept., 1987): 3.

remittances” (Emeka Mba 2009: 10), as well as by the economic down-turn of the 1980s exacerbated by the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and rising insecurity in night life in Lagos and other cities. Instead of screening films, those cinema houses (and disused warehouses) in Lagos and elsewhere in the country were taken over by mega-Pentecostal churches, while some Pentecostal churches have produced movies (Hackett 1998; Oha 2001; Ukah 2003). This is significant because Pentecostalism and Nollywood are two facets of Nigeria's multi-layered socius. Some of the street narratives I theorize here and which circulate in the urban sphere are actually actuated in Pentecostal imaginaries where the adversarial circumstances of the everyday are refracted as the handiwork of malevolent powers, principalities, and dominions. Nollywood feeds off these texts by processing them as film script, and indeed many Nollywood films feature church scenes where such principalities are exorcized. So, ironically, Pentecostalism has denied Nollywood a “home” in big theatres! Besides, the churches provide commodious spaces for auxiliary ‘spiritual’ parliaments where the largely youthful congregation often dissect and re-circulate street stories and seek divine intervention against the negative forces associated with postcolonial governance. Much so that a leader of the Save Nigeria Group protests against the politicization of Yar’Adua’s health referred to in Chapter Five was a new age Pentecostal pastor, Kunle Bakare.

Indeed SAP, and to some extent Pentecostalism, not only sacked the cinema house culture at the time—they are returning now with the establishment

of ultra modern Silverbird Galleria¹⁰ and others—they also shaped the emergent Nollywood films with their small media orientation and their focus on the “occult economy” associated with the socio-economic tsunami SAP inaugurated. But even with this focus on the emerging sociology of wealth in the urban centres, Nollywood films are rooted in that “overtly judgemental and didactic” tradition which Akudinobi (1997: 93) has identified as generally characterizing early African cinema.

But beyond its focus on the get-rich-quick schemes of young upwardly mobile youths, some Nollywood films that followed the trail blazed by Ken Nnebue have demonstrated courageous political orientation in their thematic thrusts, especially against the backdrop of the pestilential regimes of Generals Babangida and Abacha, and their civilian collaborators. Given their obvious socio-political leaning, some Nollywood producers have wittingly or unwittingly shown familiarity with the Onitsha Market literature cultural revolution—which I discussed briefly in Chapter One¹¹—and the influential manifestoes of Third Cinema articulated by Latin American theorists, Fernando Solanas and Octavio

¹⁰ These theatres are located in the cities of Lagos, Port Harcourt and Abuja, and owned by Nigeria’s showbiz and media impresario, Ben Murray Bruce and family. Interestingly, Bic Leu, a US Fulbright Fellow “researching the social impact of Nollywood” at the University of Lagos reports that in September 2010 foremost Nollywood director, Tunde Kelani, “launched the Lagos City Cinema Project by submitting proposals to build small cinema houses in 10 local government areas, with the ultimate goal of building one in each of the 57 local government areas.” Leu also reports that Kelani is already “solicit[ing] government and private sector sponsorship to fund a series of free mobile cinema screenings throughout Lagos State.” (See “Tunde Kelani looks to reinvent Nollywood,” <http://readingnollywood.wordpress.com/2010/12/08/234next-tunde-kelani-looks-to-reinvent-nollywood/> Web. December 16, 2010.

¹¹ More on this association can be found by reading Emmanuel Obiechina, “The Impact of the Newspaper and the Cinema on Onitsha Market Literature,” *Radical essays on Nigerian Literatures*. G.G. Darah, Ed. Lagos: Malthouse Press. 2008. 273-284, and Adewale Maja-Pearce, “Onitsha Home Movies.” *London Review of Books*. 10th May, 2001. It should be noted that Obiechina’s work was first published in 1971 in the volume: *Literature for the Masses: An Analytical Study of Popular Pamphleteering in Nigeria*. Enugu: Nwankwo-Ifejika and Co. Publishers, 1971.

Getino, and Julio Garcia Espinosa in the late 1960s, and later modified by Teshome Gabriel (1982), Mike Wayne (2001), and Guneratne and Dissanayake (2003).

Despite the chequered history and critiques of the theories of Third Cinema, the radical perspectives of its chief proponents have had far reaching consequences for the art in the developing world especially. In many ways—thematic, aesthetic, and ideological for examples—the basic precepts of Third Cinema have shaped the production of the socially-conscious Nigerian films which borrow heavily from street stories in oral circulation or in the news media especially of the print category. But given that no Nollywood professional has, to my knowledge, so far confessed to being guided by a rigorous programmatic Third Cinema ideology—indeed lots of the producers, like Ken Nnebue, are business men who have not necessarily had the kind of critical education that would expose them to such film studies theories—it can be argued that the affinity between Nollywood cinematic practices and the principles of Third Cinema are coincidental. As Tomaselli, Shepperson, and Eke (1995) have stated, “[m]uch African cinema is Third Cinema in nature, if not in direct derivation” (24). The affinity is attributable to a shared postcolonial experience and the curse of dictatorship and impoverished economies. In any case, as Getino posits, “the value of a theory is always dependent on the terrain in which the praxis is carried out” (quoted in Guneratne and Dissanayake 2003: 11). Hence during a group conversation that Trenton Daniel had with some Nollywood stars, the issue of Nollywood’s cultural genealogy led notable Nollywood personalities Ajoke

Jacobs (aka Joke Silver) and Zeb Ejiro to acknowledge the influence of the two cultural traditions—Onitsha Market Literature and unwittingly, Third Cinema. While Jacobs argues that Nollywood moviemakers’ approach to film draws from Onitsha Market Literature via “the whole gatecrasher, seven-day shoots, just slapping something together...” strategy, Ejiro describes it in Third Cinema terminology: “It’s called guerrilla moviemaking.”¹²

Persuasive as my suggestion of ideological coincidence between Nollywood and Third Cinema may be, I also believe there is a more dynamic theoretical proposition going on here that we need to note. This is related to Nfah-Abbenyi's (1997) proposal that African texts (fiction, films, etc.) should be read as “fictionalized theory and as theorized fiction” (120, 149). In other words, every African text is at once theory and fiction. They come complete as already theorized fiction and that is why we sometimes see parallels between these works and theoretical propositions from non-African contexts. Theorized fiction is a dynamic of the text, totally beyond the will and competence of the producer. Hence, the moment Ken Nnebue actuates a text from a purely business

¹² See Trenton Daniel’s “Nollywood Confidential, Part Two,” <http://www.internationalreportingproject.org/stories/detail/nollywood-confidential-part-two/> Web. January 15, 2009. Ejiro provides more insight into the profile of the producers cum major financiers He describes them as marketers, a cartel that sees the films “just [as] a product”, adding that: “They control the distribution of tapes every week, from here [Lagos] to Onitsha. They are not professionals, but they have the money. They might see a girl and say, “She is a celebrity, she is a face, her face is going to sell my movie.” They don’t know if she can play the role – it doesn’t matter.” Maja-Pearce (2001) shares this view as he writes: “the home videos, like the [Onitsha market] chapbooks, are commodities, after all, and the producers, who also deal in water pumps and generators, are simply traders looking for quick returns on their outlay” (24).

perspective, theory is already in motion irrespective of his ‘deficient’ non-indigenous¹³ theoretical base.

Furthermore, scholars including Ukadike—as in the above epigraph—has argued that indeed, “[s]ince its inception, African Cinema constituted itself as an instrument of social and political (re)construction fashioning its role as holding a mirror up to society, perhaps in honour of the functionality of art in most African societies” (91). For his part, Jonathan Haynes who has provided perhaps the most programmatic engagement with Nollywood’s political film (see Haynes 2003; 2006 and 2007), traces the rise of the political film genre to “the military dictatorship of Ibrahim Babangida” (2007:7). Haynes also offers what one might consider to be a magisterial overview of Nollywood and politics:

The video boom began under the military dictatorship of Ibrahim Babangida and flourished under his even more murderous successor Sani Abacha, which encouraged filmmakers to shy away from directly approaching political topics (see Haynes, “Mobilizing”), but after the end of military rule in 1999 there began to be more films overtly concerned with national politics (Haynes, “Political”). Among the most impressive examples are Sam Onwuka’s *Stubborn Grasshopper*, a thinly disguised representation of the Abacha regime, and his *Oil Village*, a thinly disguised representation of the judicial murder of the writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and the political crisis of his small ethnic minority, the Ogoni. Kelani’s *Saworoide* and *Agogo Eewo* take an allegorical approach

¹³ “Non-indigenous” because much of the films made in Nollywood are informed by indigenous knowledges, folkways and folk life, and contemporary urban realism.

but are direct and trenchant in their handling of contemporary politics. (The military man in the former looks very much like Abacha; the king in the latter is unmistakably the current President, Olusegun Obasanjo. (7)

It is the “functionality” (Akudinobi) and “voice of the people” (Ukadike) inclination of the films “overtly concerned with national politics” (Haynes) that particularly interest me here, as do the theoretical politics of “art cinema” (Wright 1995: 62) as opposed to “artless” or profit-driven video film ascribed to Nollywood. This is why Akin Adesokan’s (2007) additional insight into this cinematic art is germane to my discourse of the political Nollywood film and I quote:

Although they are basically drama, the video films are fashioned from different visual, literary, musical, and dramatic forms. [...] They engage in benign incestuousness with other video films and *contemporary forms like the print media, especially the tabloid genre identified as soft-sells, which focus on fantastic stories of popular appeal. They recycle stories, well-known motifs*, and theatrical set-pieces, partly because they rely on actors with tested idiolects, and partly because of their subsistence on a strong tradition, which views success in the marketplace as proof of artistic sophistication. (62) [My italics]

My appreciation of the association between Nollywood films and “the print media” which as Adesokan elaborates, “focus on fantastic stories of popular appeal” and “well-known motifs” which they recycle, has influenced the choice of

texts for analysis in this chapter. Larkin (2000) reiterates this association as he states that: “Nigerian video films borrow from state media and from the transnational flows of Indian and American films, Nigerian romance magazines, folklore and rumors, but can be reduced to none of them” (238). My choice of texts for analysis here has also been influenced by the definition of *political film* by Mike Wayne (2001). According to Wayne, “all films are political, but films are not political in the same way” (1). Wayne extends his conception of political film to include films which “in one way or another address unequal access to and distribution of material and cultural resources, and the hierarchies of legitimacy and status accorded to those inequities and differentials” (Ibid.). While sympathizing with this somewhat all-embracing definition of political film, however, my concept here covers films that obviously focus, almost exclusively, on political leadership—more specifically, in the context of postcolonial governance in Nigeria. In other words, I pitch my interpretation of political film more with Haynes’ (2006) idea of films dealing with politics in the “narrow sense of state power or close analogies to it” (514).

Of all the films produced so far in Nollywood, perhaps Simisola Opeoluwa’s *Stubborn Grasshopper* (2001) and Tunde Kelani’s *Saworoide* (2000) best illustrate Nollywood’s versions of political film.¹⁴ A third choice which I

¹⁴ In addition to the examples of Nollywood political films listed in this section others include the following with the concept of governance advertised in their titles: *Government House* (featuring the big stars Kenneth Okonkwo and Onyeka Onwenu), *Queen of HASO Rock*, and to borrow from Adeoti (2009): “Yomi Ogunmola’s *Alaga Kansu/Local Council Chairman* (2002), Abiodun Olanrewaju’s *Akobi Gomina I & II /The Governor’s Heir* (2002), and Jide Kosoko’s *Your Excellency* (2003)” (35). Adeoti further informs that his paper which explores “politically engaged films produced in Yoruba language after the return to civil rule in 1999 [...] mentions twenty-nine films” (35).

wanted to include, *Maradona: IBB Must Go* (1993), which focuses on the ignoble dictatorship of General Babangida and which I cited earlier in this study has proved most difficult to find in the streets of Lagos or in archives. But Haynes' (2003) study of the film gives us considerable insight into the film and its relevance to our study in a way that might suffice for my present discourse.

According to Haynes, the video

was released in 1993 in response to the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election by the military ruler Ibrahim Babangida. The film is a fierce denunciation of the annulment and of the whole political regime, employing a number of Yoruba and transnational cultural forms: the chanted poetic form *ewi*, skits by artists from the Yoruba travelling theatre tradition, the televisual forms of music videos, news broadcasting and call-in shows, and the resources of print journalism.¹⁵

Regrettable as the unavailability of this unusual hybrid video may be, the two films I have selected for analysis also represent, I believe, the full range of Nollywood's intervention in the political process in Nigeria, incorporating contemporary urban street stories and the mass media, as well as integrating news reporters as characters in the respective films. In focusing on Opeoluwa and Kelani's filmic experimentation with discourses of power and the media in Nollywood, I am guided by Bassett's (2007) thesis that "[n]arrative is at the heart of the operations of everyday life and everyday culture within a world where

¹⁵ See abstract for the paper, "Mobilising Yoruba Popular Culture: Babangida Must Go," *Africa*, 73 (2003). Quite instructively, Haynes concludes that "[t]his film demonstrates the political potential of the video film, but also the limitations of the video distribution system."

digital technology is becoming pervasive,” and that “[t]o consider contemporary narrative formations *is* to engage with contemporary techno-culture” (8).

Given the complex connection between technology and narrativity either in film or in popular music, it is important to further clarify the premise of my textual analysis in this chapter by considering their location in oral tradition and modernity. In doing this, I would like to note that while significant literature exists on the relationship between orality and African cinema—Diawara (1996, 1988, 2009), Barlet (1996); Cham (1982); Thackway (2003); Murphy (2000); and Tomaselli, Shepperson, and Eke (1995) — there is paucity of scholarship on the ways in which genres of everyday culture steeped in orality, such as street stories and the popular press, have shaped African cinema in the age of globalization and small media. Consequently, it is that lacuna that I am committed to filling in this chapter.

Tradition and Globalization: From Oral to “Small Media”

Although the terms “tradition” and “globalization” tend to have varying contextual applications, we generally have an idea of what we mean when we use them. The same might not easily be said of the term “small media”, a relatively more recent terminology. To illuminate the full range of its application to this study because of its relevance to my analysis here, I find Paul Tiyambe Zeleza’s (2009) discerning analysis of the role of media in social developments in contemporary Africa relevant. Zeleza proposes a “tripartite typology” (20) of media forms comprising “mass communication media, interpersonal media, and what Debra Spitulnik (2002) calls ‘small’ media” (20). Zeleza believes that this

tripartite typology “has more explanatory power” than the more common “official” and “unofficial” (“formal and informal”) which I have generally used so far, and which I find more useful for my purposes in this study.

However, I need to modify Zeleza’s definition of the concept of small media (“which are also sometimes referred to as ‘personal’, ‘popular’, or ‘community’ media” (Ibid.)) as “a hybrid of the two modes—mass and interpersonal media—[which] occupy an intermediary portion between them” (Ibid.). Rather than focusing on the *scale* of the media format in relation to “production, distribution and consumption” (Ibid.), as does Zeleza, I use the term to focus mainly on “smallness” in terms of portability and versatility of the media technology used in contemporary popular cultural production. This, for me, differentiates Zeleza’s acknowledgement that “small media blend old and new technologies, which gives them an innovative and transitory edge, a textual and iconographic intertextuality of different communication media, thereby making them a dynamic, fluid, multi-sited and multi-media phenomenon and process” (Ibid.) from Larkin’s (2000) use of the term to merely contrast it with “the older ‘big’ mass media of cinema and television and radio stations” (219).

In my context, “small media” represents more than the typology of media genre that Zeleza and Larkin identify—in Zeleza’s words: “posters, flyers, graffiti, cartoons, underground cassettes, independent videos, internet listserves, web pages, jokes, parodic or cynical genres (for example, poaching and reworking slogans of state or corporate power), rumours, and radio trottoir (‘pavement

radio')”¹⁶ (20). Small media also represents the new ‘small’ technologies—getting even smaller by the day—used in producing or reproducing and circulating these genres, and which Larkin (2000) rightly notes, “are more decentralized in their ownership” which “makes them more like unofficial forms of popular culture, from rumors to jokes and mimicry, in that they create cultural and political spaces of communication that are outside of the control of the state and corporations” (219).

The explosion in the use of small media technologies or “modern paraphernalia” (Giddens 2000: 24) in the transmission of street stories in the postcolony—sometimes only in vignettes—have ramifications which although not commensurate to those highlighted by Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1995) in their study of Iranian revolution, need further elaboration.¹⁷ The example of the GSM rumour scare in Nigeria during which ordinary people in the cities were caught in a frenzy of some rumoured killer numbers from which

¹⁶ Stephen Ellis (1989) defines this as “the popular and unofficial discussion of current affairs in Africa” (321). Also see Willems (2010: 58 n. 12).

¹⁷ The significance of small media technology for cultural production is reflected in Amina Koki Gizo’s report entitled “Writers, Film-makers Defy Censors.” According to Gizo: “The [Kano] censors board and the film industry underwent an even more dramatic transformation in August 2007, when a private mobile phone video of a popular Hausa actress and her lover having sex was leaked to the public. The actress, Maryam ‘Hiyana’, and the man who had surreptitiously recorded the video immediately went into hiding. Within days, hundreds of black market entrepreneurs in Kano, the centre of the Hausa-language film industry, were charging thousands of naira to see what was being called ‘the first Hausa blue film.’ Outraged religious and political leaders called for an indefinite suspension of the Kano film industry and the mass expulsion of other performers suspected of ‘improper’ behavior.” (See <http://ipsnews.net/africa/nota.asp?idnews=43857> Web. February 18, 2009.) In a different development, Willems (2010) citing Maikinen and Wangu Kuria (2008) reports that: “During the eruption of violence following the December 2007 elections in Kenya, government issued a media blackout on live radio and television broadcasts for a number of days. According to government, the emotions demonstrated during live broadcasts would ‘incite further violence.’ In response, Kenya’s blogosphere and mobile phones filled an important gap in information flow through their continued reports and their dissemination of latest news on the post-election violence” (51).

anyone who received any calls would die¹⁸ easily comes to mind. And more insight into the consequences of digital communications revolution could be drawn, albeit from a positive angle, from the SMS revolution as articulated in Sokari Ekine's *SMS Uprising: Mobile Activism in Africa* (2010). The centrality of modernity and globalization to life in Africa is manifest in the kinds of audiovisual cultural artefacts or "new infrastructure for society" (Van Dijk 2006: 1) available to a broad spectrum of people in urban Lagos, especially at the Computer Village and GSM Village in Ikeja, capital of the city. What is more, the rapid development is represented by the proliferation of Broadband or cable network digital delivery of films on personal computers or on cable television channels such as MNET's Africa Magic¹⁹ and Hi-TV's Hi Nolly. So that the traditional video/music cassettes and compact discs/ DVDs used in transmitting street narratives are now relatively competing with the cable networks, smart phones, tablet PCs such as ipads, and other hi-tek mobile electronic devices as primary sites for the circulation of such narratives. Some of these find their way into Facebook and other new (social) media sites/networks in a viral chain in line with McNaughton and Lam's (2006) acknowledgment of how "a simple onpost may convert a 'confidential' interpersonal exchange into a matter of public record" (7). And as Belcher (1999) has noted:

¹⁸ For more on the GSM killer numbers see Jane-Frances Agbu's "From 'Koro' to GSM 'Killer Calls' Scare in Nigeria: A Psychological View." *CODESRIA Bulletin*, Nos. 3 & 4, 2004. 16-19. Also see Sola Fanawopo, "It's all a big hoax." *Daily Sun*, Monday, July 26, 2004. <http://www.sunnewsonline.com/webpages/features/cybersun/2004/july/26/cybersun-july26-002.htm> Web. October 29, 2007.

¹⁹ This has become so popular that the South Africa-based company has introduced special indigenous languages (Yoruba and Hausa) channels streaming the films. It also screens films from the emerging Tanzania and Ghana video film industry.

Modern technology and marketing forces are now complicating the situation. Modern music competes with traditional forms; [...] The radio may have replaced the nobles as a source of patronage; performers no longer aim to become the pampered dependents of the local chief but to become jet-setting rock stars. But epics have found a niche: they circulate widely in cassette²⁰ form as a sort of cottage industry”²¹ (xxi-xxii).

So central to the popular cultural imaginary have these small media technologies become in urban Nigeria that specific Nollywood films focusing attention on how they redefine people’s social identities and lives have been produced. Zeleza (2009) emphasizes such redefinition of identity when he states that “the media constitute a process of performing social identities and identifying social performances” (20). The Nollywood film which perhaps best exemplifies the point being made here is *Recharge Card*, a 2006 comic film written and directed by Amayo Uzor Phillips.²² The film uses the paradigmatic experience of an average family to show how the process of globalization represented by Global System for Mobile (GSM) technology and redefines postcolonial urbanity and social reality. It buttresses Giddens’ (2000) declaration that: “Globalization is political, technological and cultural, as well as economic. It has been influenced above all by developments in systems of communication” (28). Further describing globalization as “a complex set of processes [30], not a single one,” Giddens

²⁰ For more insight into the significance of such “cassette technologies” see Larkin (2000: 218), and Peter Manuel *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (1994).

²¹ Stephen Paterson Belcher, *Epic Traditions of Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999) xxii,

²² *Recharge Card*, like the related movies *The GSM Connection* and *GSM Wahala*, is a satirical articulation of the obsessive level a dysfunctional which GSM technology introduced to Nigeria took some of the citizens to, with Mr. William personifying modernity gone awry.

(2000) astutely argues that “[g]lobalization is the reason for the revival of local cultural identities in different parts of the world” (30-31).

In Nigeria, this revival, more of a redefinition really, of local identities is evident in Nollywood’s negotiations of orality and street stories on the one hand, and on the other, its engagement with postcolonial governance, and its increasing popularity at home, in the African continent and in the African Diasporas.²³ Besides the influence of Onitsha Market Literature and “guerrilla moviemaking” associated with Third World Cinema which I identify above, the greatest source of oral traditional influence on Nollywood has been attributed to the popular Yoruba travelling theatre sometimes confused with the *alarinjo*.²⁴ Notwithstanding those influences, the popularity of Nollywood films is so remarkable that they speak to what Giddens (2000) calls “reverse colonization” and Driscoll (2004) “reverse postcoloniality”, suggesting that non-Western countries influence developments in the industrialized West—with Nollywood adding to the examples of, say, the “latinizing of Los Angeles, the emergence of a globally oriented high-tech sector in India, or the selling of Brazilian television

²³ See Steven Gray, “Nigeria on Screen: Nollywood Films’ Popularity Rising Among Émigrés,” *Washington Post*. May 3, 2003.

²⁴ For more on this see Adesanya (2000) and Tunde Kelani’s submission on the notion in the conversation with Trenton (2003), which Ajoke Jacobs challenges. Remarkably, Karin Barber’s (2000) identification of the metamorphosis of some of the plays (by Adejobi Company) in this tradition into “openly political videos” further indicate how far the tradition may have affected some Nollywood film-makers such as Kelani. See chapters 5 and 8 of the book, *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theatre*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2000, including footnote 2 on p.453. I should quickly point out that the phrase “Yoruba travelling theatre” is usually used to mean the modern (20th century) popular theatre companies that travelled by truck and performed on stages in schools, church halls, community centres, and hotels. This is a very different form from the *alarinjo* troupes, which were the entertainment wing of *egungun*, the ancestral masquerade association. The *alarinjo* troupes performed in the round, usually on specific occasions, and were associated with ancestral powers. Some scholars have over-emphasised the continuities between the two forms, as well as the continuity between video drama and both *alarinjo* and the popular travelling theatre.

programmes to Portugal” (Giddens 2000: 34-35). Various studies have highlighted some of Nollywood’s transnational influences, especially in African diasporas in the Americas, Europe and the West Indies (McCall 2004; Haynes 2007; Adejumbi 2007; Cartelli 2007; Shivers n.d.; Onuzulike 2009). Indeed as part of Nollywood’s strategy to penetrate those far-flung places, producers have begun to produce transnational movies, leaving Lagos, which as Oha (2001) notes, “has played a prominent role in the production of video films as visualizing products” (195). And an interesting parallel to the newsstand street parliament that I discussed earlier emerges from what Oha (2001) describes as “a widespread and thriving network of video rental shops and communal viewing centers in Nigerian cities” (196), and which Larkin (2004 and 2008) deal with extensively. Indeed much of the tie between Nollywood cinema and street stories is based on their common orientation as “oral-derived texts” (Foley 1995: 82). When Olaf Moller (2004) points out in his critique of Nollywood movies that they are “always ending with a moral so heavy you would need a crane to lift it”²⁵ what he failed to appreciate was their indebtedness to traditional oral narratives, also evident in the street stories.

The recourse to small media is part of the desire of the postcolonial Nigerian citizen to participate in what Lister et al (2003) describe as a “new technoculture” (3) which encompasses the technological and cultural processes taking place in our time. Plausibly then, Nollywood is essentially a youth cultural

²⁵ See Olaf Möller, *Nigerian Videofilm Culture: A Homegrown Hybrid Cinema of Outrageous Schlock from Africa's Most Populous Nation*. *Film Comment*. 40.2 (Mar/Apr 2004): 12-13. <http://www.filmlinc.com/fcm/3-4-2004/nvideo.htm> Web. December 13, 2009. All other references from this essay are to this web publication.

phenomenon; for it is amongst the youth that the interest, if not obsession, with global flows and technology is most concentrated. Hence Ugor (2009) sees Nollywood as “a new social space for youth to retell their postcolonial struggles” (4). I shall now closely examine the selected texts to see how these postcolonial struggles are articulated within the ambit of specific socio-cultural aesthetics.

From Street to Screen: *Stubborn Grasshopper* and the ‘Apple Theory’

Generally, the tendency for scriptwriters and film producers to turn everyday socio-political experiences on the streets into grit for cultural production is universal. In postcolonial Africa, the people’s political experience has provided the raw materials for certain feature and documentary films as suggested above with examples of Wole Soyinka and Onyeka Onwenu. Seen against the foregoing, the interest in political narratives in Nollywood becomes even more logical. Intervening in the discourse, Pierre Barrot (2008) hyperbolically posits that: “Hollywood accustomed people to revisiting, for example, the assassination of John Kennedy, but in most African countries the idea, of a dramatized version of a coup d’ etat is unimaginable, in the interests of national security” (44). And just when one is thinking of examples that contradict the claim—Ugbomah’s *Death of a Black President* (1983) which dramatizes the assassination of General Murtala Mohammed in the Major Dimka-led coup plot of 1975 in Nigeria; Sharad Patel’s *Rise and Fall of Idia Amin* (1981), and the crude live filming (“documentary”) of the murder of former Liberian warlord, president, and “[o]ne of many US-

supported tyrants in Africa, Samuel Doe, who ruled Liberia from 1980 to 1990”²⁶

—Barrot adds that:

Nigerian filmmakers have even broken this taboo: in *The President Must Not Die*, Zeb Ejiro took his own head of state hostage, and before this Teco Benson, in *State of Emergency*, [...] Nigerian directors are not afraid to broach any subject, no matter how sensitive. [...] The freedoms expressed through Nigerian video production are exceptional in the African context. Despite the democratization of the 1990s, one is still struck by the amount of political and social control, and the level of moral conservatism. (44)

Barrot further acknowledges that “[t]he degree of freedom achieved by Nigerian films and the audacity shown by the producers is a result of the method of broadcasting,” and that “[m]ost are never screened publicly, many are never shown on television.” He concludes that “[d]estined for home consumption, they can side-step the rules that burden other media” (46). But do they really? The example of Gbenga Adewusi, the producer of the video *Maradona: Babangida Must Go*, contradicts the assertion as I shall demonstrate presently. But for now

²⁶ See “Iconic Photos: The Torture of Samuel Doe” at <http://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2009/07/03/the-torture-of-samuel-doe/> Web. December 25, 2010. Besides the photograph of Liberian soldiers parading the naked body of Sergeant Doe, the web site provides the following additional information: “The gruesome incident was recorded by the INPFL on video tape. Journalists Stephen Smith of Liberation, Mark Huband and Patrick Robert of French photoagency Sygma (who took the above image of Liberian soldiers posing with the body of Doe)—who were present at the INPFL camp—were given the videotape. It was seen on news reports around the world and was a best-selling film in West Africa. *Now even two decades later, it is still doing the rounds in the markets of Monrovia*, Johnson sipping a Budweiser as Doe’s ear is cut off became almost an image transplanted from a Shakespearean play or from mediaeval times. Samuel Doe who staged a televised execution of the Tolbert government on a sunny beach became the first world leader to be tortured on camera before being executed and his body desecrated. It should have brought the nation full circle, but it did not. [Emphasis added]

let us focus on *Stubborn Grasshopper*, Simisola Opeoluwa's feature film based on the 'Apple Theory' around the death of Nigeria's cruelest dictator, General Sani Abacha, which I discussed in Chapter Four.

The 'Apple Theory', it should be recalled, states that Abacha died in the hands of Indian prostitutes who fed him poisoned apples during a sexual orgy.



Plate 5: Still frame from Stubborn Grasshopper showing Abacha being fed a poisoned apple.

Beginning with the metaphoric title, a play on the street stories about Abacha's infamous libido as he hopped from one woman to another, *Stubborn Grasshopper* invokes subversive humour to ridicule the brutish general. Like the other texts under study here which are also re-enactments of slices of contemporary Nigeria political drama, those familiar with the street narrative which inspired *Stubborn Grasshopper* would find it a relatively predictable movie because it is, as Haynes

(2007) describes it, “a thinly disguised representation of the Abacha regime” (7). Its “transcription” of the ‘Apple Theory’ illustrates not only how deeply street stories are etched on the public consciousness, but how far they have cast a spell on Nigerian cultural producers. Apparently conscious of the film’s disquieting fidelity to contemporary Nigerian political history circulating in the street and in the press, the producer and director post a cynical disclaimer on the narrative hopefully to indemnify them against litigation or repression: “All names of people, places, events and characters in this film are fictitious. Any resemblance to any person living or dead is not intended.”

The film opens with footage of a military drill against the background of mock martial music, heavy with African percussions, and grunts of soldiers whose silhouettes the viewer only sees as they march past. This fades into blaring siren and the rotating beacon of a security vehicle. A big motorcade of expensive high-end automobiles, largely SUVs and status-symbol Mercedes Benz cars, which form part of the paraphernalia of grotesque power in the postcolony, fill the screen. Those familiar with this typical spectacle (of what is better known as “power show” in Nigerian street argot) exhibited by very important personalities in Lagos and other cities, would immediately recognize the significance of the blaring sirens and the motorcade. Another scene shows people at a polling booth casting their votes in an apparent election process. This is followed by the appearance of a General whose physical appearance and name, General Badmas, immediately suggests a semblance to General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida. Soon

after, another General, Abba, obviously modeled after Sani Abacha, appears. We soon see General Badmas cast his own vote too.

These opening montages are followed with the first of a series of “people’s parliament” in the film, at a beer parlour²⁷ reminiscent of the “open parliament” at newsstands. The composition of the group—citizens from Nigeria’s various ethnicities—immediately conjures up the kind of cultural politics that divides the nation, and which frames the film. As a matter of fact, but for the setting, the parlour assembly evokes a feeling of déjà vu in relation to Nigeria’s National Assembly in Abuja, complete with its occasional boisterousness. An argument ensues; about the favourite candidate to win the election. The Hausa man, Bala, roots for his kinsman who is a candidate. The Yoruba man, Tunde, supports his fellow Yoruba presidential candidate, while the other two—an Igbo man, Chuks, and a minority Efik/Ibibio man, Etim—appear as spectators.

The rest of the film reminds one of the titles of Isidore Okpewho’s essay on fieldwork methodology in oral literature, “Towards a Faithful Record,” because of its fidelity to the public script that has been in circulation in the streets and on newspapers and magazines. So close to this public transcript is *Stubborn Grasshopper* that summarizing the plot could conflate to repeating the national political narrative around June 12 that I have explored in the preceding chapters. At the risk of that, I would attempt a quick summary of the rest of the film’s plot.

²⁷ The setting reminds me of Island Vision Productions’ *Bar Talk*, directed by the Jamaican-born, US-based television producer Courtney Bennett, complete with drama and endless chatter on various subjects. According to Courtney, “The Bar Talk series [...] came about while sitting in a local Bar in Jamaica and hearing some of the patrons have a great time telling each other jokes” (Davidson 2003). But in the Nigerian context, the critical emphasis is on political *talk*.

Following the election in the country Wahala (Nigeria) at the opening of the film, the military high command led by General Badmas (Babangida), annuls it, with pressure from his colleague, General Abba (Abacha). Abba reminds Badmas that both had a deal for Abba to succeed Badmas. As an escape route out of the political logjam created by the annulment, General Badmas appoints an Interim National Government led by Chief Salenko (Sonekan), which is soon sacked by General Abba. The latter becomes head of state and woos the opposition symbolized by the president-elect Chief Kash (the billionaire M.K.O. Abiola). General Abba tricks Chief Kash into supporting him in return for which Chief Kash will succeed him. More political resistances from the people who clamour for the actualization of the December 6 (June 12) election follow, provoking General Abba into more brutal repressive acts of survival. Chief Kash discovers General Abba's treacherous plot to perpetuate himself in office and desperate, he seeks the support of Chief Nze (Chief Nzeribe) of the dubious Association of Better Wahala, ABW (Association of Better Nigeria) which was instrumental to annulment of the election in the first place. Encouraged by Chief Nze, Chief Kash declares himself president, and sparks off more vicious responses from General Abba. The opposition, led by WADECO (NADECO) and comprising Chief Kash's wives seek to make Wahala ungovernable for General Abba through a series of street protests which in turn are crushed with military fiat, and political assassinations by the Strike Force led by Sergeant Jaguar (Sergeant Rogers) and coordinated by Major Terror (Mustapha), the then Chief Security Officer (CSO) to the dictator. A chain of political crises and a reign of terror follows,

culminating in the final scene where General Abba is poisoned under controversial circumstances with apples administered by prostitutes.

Sewed into the fabric of the fast-moving episodic narrative of the film are details torn from the street stories around Abacha's bloody dictatorship, only this time, the story is told with a camera lens as it pans from one episode to the other, sometimes in very effective juxtaposition of the good, the bad and the ugly. Interestingly, in the film's multilayered narrative points of view, it is not just the moviemakers' lens that tells the story only. Constant news reports from the press, especially Wahala Television Authority, WTA, a spoof of Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), and some newspapers including *The Punch*, offer alternative narrative voices. So central is the role of the press in the lives of the people and the world of the film that one of the most memorable scenes from *Stubborn Grasshopper*, for me, is the newsstand scene complete with its evocation of the Lagos city "bus-stop parliamentarians,"²⁸ or the scene so graphically re-enacted by Garuba (2009:338 fn. 2). Beyond the cold representations of the newsstand as a social space or public sphere where street parliaments are staged, the film offers a telling dramatization of this kind of impassioned performance ordinary people enact on that space. In what appears as the most convincing scene in the film at the newsstand, a group of anxious citizens gathering to catch the latest news on the political crises in their country. The vendor, impatient with their none purchase of any of the newspapers they were freely browsing through—being

²⁸ *Vanguard* newspaper reporter, Mike Ebonugwo, has had a column that chronicles the open sessions of this parliament in Lagos. For examples see Mike Ebonugwo, "Jail term for mutilators of the naira," *Vanguard*, (Lagos) Friday, 22 February, 2008; and "From a year of despair to a new year of Hope," *Vanguard*, Wednesday, 07 January 2009.

members of the imagined 'Free Readers Association' I discussed earlier—takes a shot at them, and the following dialogue ensues:

“Give me my paper,” says the vendor, grabbing one forcefully from the hands of a 'free reader' surrounded by others. “You think I run a free library here?”

“How much is your paper,” the customer retorts angrily, cursing in Yoruba and adding: “You must be a fool to think I don't have money.”

“Fifty naira” says the vendor.

“I will buy you, and buy your paper,” the customer, still angry with the vendor's interruption of his the group's browsing of the paper finally adds.

Read from outside the urban Lagos context, one might wonder at the seeming acrimony in this exchange. But that would be misinterpreting the street drama, because embodied in the experience which the street parliamentarians would consider a light-hearted, everyday ritual are their everyday struggles to comprehend the larger grotesque political drama. Such drama often overshadows their postcolonial social realities within a framework of interaction between oral culture and print culture represented by the newspapers. There is ample evidence to prove that the film makers clearly recognize the significance of such symbols of globalization and modernity as the newspapers and television in such frameworks, and so insert newsstands and/or press interview scenes in the film texts. Indeed a certain degree of hyperconsciousness about these is implicated in the recurrence of the media trope in Nollywood films, as apparent in Haynes'

(2003) study of Adewusi's video *Maradona*, and in *Stubborn Grasshopper* and *Saworoide*.

The foregrounding of the media angle in *Stubborn Grasshopper* at once draws attention to other aesthetic strategies adopted by the director and producer to re-tell an otherwise common national story of the June 12 crises in Nigeria. Although the film may not make as strong a case for the influence of orality on Nollywood cinema as would *Saworoide*, it gestures toward it in its fidelity to street stories about the same subject and the characterization of the villainous central character, General Abba—bearing in mind that in dealing with historical material, cultural producers face the challenge of choosing aspects of that shared oral or written history to appropriate for their works of art.” The strategies include relatively complex remaking or fictionalizing of some aspects of the well-known national narrative. For example, there is no record that Chief Kash while working WADECO also had a meeting with Chief Nze and offered him a huge sum of money to buy his dubious service in desperation. *Stubborn Grasshopper* impresses me as being concerned about the need to increase the dramatic tension in the film, and to avoid the wooden characterization common in the oral tradition, and indeed some Nollywood films.

Still on orality and characterization, the film appeals to the trickster motif from the folktale tradition that uses animal characters. As mentioned earlier, it taps into the pre-existing metaphor of the grasshopper as a reckless insect that randomly hops around in a field or in the bush, the same way as General Abba hops from one woman to the other much so that in a brush with his wife, the First

Lady Sabina, she references his “life of degraded sexuality.” Although the insect is not well-known in African mythology in the sense that the tortoise, the spider or the hare are, viewers of the film can relate to the parallel between General Abba and a stubborn grasshopper, especially given his trickery of Chief Kash, and the mode of his disgraceful death. The insect also functions as a metaphor for a reckless ruler who reaps the fruit of his megalomania.

The trickster motif often associated with the tortoise is played out in the way General Abba deceives Chief Kash into supporting him on the premise that he would hand over the reins to Chief Kash. Cornered, Chief Kash accepts to nominate five associates into General Abba’s cabinet, and just before they part at the scene where this ‘deal’ is struck, General Abba, like the witches who told Macbeth he would be King hereafter in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, addresses Chief Kash as the president hereafter or the president in waiting.²⁹

Beyond the parallel between General Abba (Abacha) and the grasshopper that I have drawn, and the parallels between other ‘fictive’ characters of the film and actual historical figures that I have shown, the entire film is so constructed along such parallels that it is possible to find equivalences in real life of nearly all the principal characters in the film in a manner that qualifies it as an allegory of the most brutal chapter in recent Nigerian history. Throughout the film, efforts are made to cast the characters with real life people who correspond physically and rhetorically to the fictive parallel.

²⁹ This frame clearly fits into the order or “mortifies” that Isidore Okpewho, following Alan Dundes, outlines in his definitive book, *African Oral Literature* (1992: 176-178).

But then that fidelity to the master or kernel narrative in the street or print which informs the film then is not always sustained as suggested by Chief Kash's bribing of Chief Nze. This and other details of General Abba and family's lives dramatized in the film show that the moviemakers have taken considerable liberty in reconstructing the kernel narrative. Another example of such 'infidelity' to the public transcript is the film's construction of the relationship between Isah and Bello (Ibrahim and Mohammed); but the paternity question is lifted straight from the street narrative, and the unconfirmed story that their father was so vicious he staged a plane crash to punish Bello and his mother. Nevertheless, because many of the "episodes" re-enacted in the film have generally been floating in the air, to echo what the news reporter told Dan Agbese again, it may not be very productive attempting to match all the parallels or track their veracity. Yet another episode in this sense is Sabina, the First Lady's sending of hired assassins to eliminate Bose, her husband's mistress and rival. For me, and I believe for the moviemakers, aesthetic truth overrides historical accuracy in this context, just as I observed too, in relation to the yarns spun by the street storyteller.

It is not surprising, therefore, that despite the film's relative fidelity to real life story and characters, the makers omitted the supernatural or occult elements associated with Abacha through his sorcerers referred to earlier. Not only has such proclivity to the supernatural been theorized as part of the vulgarities of power in the postcolony as I demonstrated earlier in this study, it is a staple of Nollywood cinema, more evident at a more sophisticated level in Kelani's *Saworoide* and other films. The makers of *Stubborn Grasshopper* however make

up for this with the episode of the assassination attempt on the WADECO chieftain, Chief Fola (Abraham Adesanya). As Sgt Jaguar and his terror gang members with such evocative names as Tempest, Scorpion and Hurricane pumped bullets into the vehicle the elder statesman was being driven in, he casually picked up the shattered glasses and scoffed: “Look at young boys!” This was an apparent reference to his charmed, impregnable and supernatural life, a theme that Gbenga Adeboye further revisits in his oral performance, “Guess the Caller”

Associated with the trickster motif, the postcolonial power struggle and the “assassination industry” is the web of corruption woven into the narrative thread. Some of the best examples in the film are Major Terror’s constant bribing of the police chief with cartons of millions of Naira to oil the political assassinations, and Chief Kash’s bribing of Chief Nze with millions also. With the dictator and his cabal, there is hardly any difference between state funds and theirs; the culture of corruption is so pervasive one can understand how Abacha’s loot became a major issue after his demise. Just to sleep with prostitutes, he gives out twenty million naira, and on one occasion when the First Lady catches him “red-handed” she remarks: “This is how you spend the people’s money.” So that the death of the general in the hands of prostitutes is not only an appropriate disgraceful punishment for a brutish and extremely corrupt ruler, but in line with the moralizing tone of Nollywood cinema, another carry-over from the oral tradition.

Orality, therefore, operates at two levels in this film. First, the film is emplotted along the lines of street and media narratives on the June 12 political

saga with very minimal modifications of the kernel narrative. Second, the film is influenced by African oral tradition in ways that I have just explained following on critical insights provided by scholars highlighted in the first part of this chapter. What is additionally striking besides the role of orality in *Stubborn Grasshopper* is its reflection of gender politics in postcolonial Nigeria.

The film has an overarching patriarchal bent associated with questions of power in postcolonial Africa. Danae Clark (2000) offers interesting parallel for a feminist deconstruction of the film in her discussion of the theories of spectatorship with specific reference to *Cagney & Lacey*. Like Cagney and Lacey, the women in *Stubborn Grasshoppers* “not only act as subjects of narration”, or “become the fetishized objects of male desire” (349) or gaze, but take control, and redeem their nation from the clutches of a brutal dictator through a poisoned apple. When General Abba’s buddies and confidantes, General J.T. Goodboy (J.T. Useni?) and another member of the cabal learn that the head of state had perfected plans to sack them, they executed a palace coup against him. Realizing how nearly impregnable the head of state’s security, they recruit women, his Achilles heel, to execute the coup de grace. And the three girls, including an Indian—in line with the street kernel narrative—succeed without much ado.

The film’s discursive strategies therefore appear to deconstruct the representations, or stereotyping of women as *femme fatales* (with its echoes of the film noir tradition)³⁰ especially when tied to the archetypal image of the apple Eve fed Adam which, in Christianity, led to the Fall of Man. What is more, in this

³⁰ See Scott Snyder’s “Personality Disorder and the Film Noir Femme Fatale,” *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 8(3) (2001) 155-168, and Elizabeth K. Mix’s *Evil By Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale*, Urbana, Chicago: UP of Illinois, 2006.

context, the woman is exceptionalized as an Indian, clearly marked by the characteristic dot (black) between the eyebrows variously called *bindi* or *Bhrumadhya*. From the cover images of the CD/cassette (**Plate 4**) for the film to the final scenes of debauchery and the fateful apple, it is obvious that the director and producer of *Stubborn Grasshopper* pitches their interpretation of the controversial ‘Apple Theory’ episode in Nigerian history with the popular view that, as one businessman told Karl Maier, it was "a coup from heaven" (4); and women were the positive agents of change that God sent to deliver the nation to complete the religious allusion. In so doing, the film paradoxically affirms and deconstructs Bayart’s (1993) cynical announcement about mistresses being “one of the cogs in the wheel of the postcolonial state” (xviii).

But the film goes even beyond that in its portraiture of a more rounded image of women. It has both positive and negative female characters—from the female activists and members of WADECO, through Sabina, the First Lady, who both conjures the dynamics of “motherism”³¹ and the brutishness of a jealous lover who gets her husband’s mistress, Bose, choked to death by agents of the state, to the prostitutes who finally become the saviours of society. In-between the gender politics is the contentious notion of women being women’s worst enemies, as women also cause grief for other women—exemplified by General Abba’s mistresses or “babies” as he fondly calls them at some point.³²

³¹ I use it here in the sense of the radical African womanist theorizing by Catherine Acholonu in a book of the same title: Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, Owerri, Nigeria: Afa Publications, 1995.

³² Though the portraiture of women through General Abba and company’s handling of them as objects of desire resonates with bell hooks’ (1993) disavowal of Spike Lee’s “replication of mainstream patriarchal, cinematic practices that explicitly represent woman (in this instance Black woman) as the object of phallogocentric gaze” (298) in *She’s Gotta Have It*, the director and

But the question begging to be asked at this point is: Why it has to be Indian women that are believed in the popular imagination to have been the agents of death or salvation — depending on one’s ideological position here — in both the street and popular media narrative on the ‘Apple Theory’? The answer may be located in the influence of Indian movies and by extension on the public imagination. For in his study of the influence of Indian films in Northern Nigeria Larkin (1997) observes that “for over thirty years Indian films, their stars and fashions, music and stories have been a dominant part of everyday popular culture in northern Nigeria” (406). He argues further that: “The popularity of Indian film in Nigeria highlights the circulation of media within and between non-Western countries, an aspect of transnational cultural flows that has been largely ignored in recent theories of globalization” (407),³³ *Stubborn* appeals to the techniques of

producer of *Stubborn Grasshopper* manage to rise above such biased, masculinist representation. Coincidentally, Adeoti (2009) has identified Jide Kosoko’s *Your Excellency* as another relevant Nollywood title that portrays the theme of *woman to woman* as part of the obstacles to women’s social progress (with reference to politics), but actually rises above that. In his words, “The film centres on a woman, Mopelola Adeboye, who overcomes all odds created by her opponents and becomes the governor of a state, a rare feat in a male-dominated political universe” (51). Yet another significant Nollywood film that Adeoti identifies as having a similar pro-feminist orientation is Olanrewaju’s *Akobi Gomina 1 & 2*, which according to him, “subtly make[s] a case for greater participation of women in public affairs and condemn[s] men’s obsession with power and wealth.” Adeoti concludes that: “There is a convergence of purpose in the two films (*Akobi Gomina* and *Your Excellency*) especially in challenging values of patriarchy and seeking the expansion of the public sphere to accommodate greater participation of women. Their simplistic treatment of politics and their resolution of knotty sociopolitical problems through *deus ex machina*-like interventions notwithstanding, they belong to a genre that provides fictive re-definition of power relations in contemporary social formations; in them, women leave the margin to occupy the centre stage of power” (Ibid.).

³³ Analysing the relationship between Hausa *littatafan soyayya* (love stories) in soyayya books, videos and Indian films, says Larkin, “gives insight into the local reworking and indigenising of transnational media flows that take place within and between Third World countries, disrupting the dichotomies between West and non-West, coloniser and colonised, modernity and tradition, foregrounding instead the ability of media to create parallel modernities. Also see Larkin’s “Itineraries of Indian Cinema: African Videos, Bollywood, and Global Media.” *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*. Eds. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003. 170-92.

documentary film—in fact it can be called semidocumentary but only in relation to its fidelity to the constellation of street stories that coalesce into the ‘Apple Theory’. Here, we do not see “a camera that explores rather than broadcasts” to appropriate a germane phrase from Dudley Andrew (2000: 230). Instead, we see a camera that succumbs to the allure of representing “reality” as articulated by ordinary people in the street and in the media.

Regrettably, the acting is amateurish in parts and the sound track less than noteworthy for the greater part of *Stubborn Grasshopper*. The amateurish acting by the large cast of “waka pass”³⁴ specialists in Nollywood is relatively redeemed, however, by the convincing performances of the better known Nollywood actors and actresses such as Lanre Balogun (Chief Kash); Eucharica Anunobi (Mrs. Kash)—who sometimes overacts in this film; Clem Ohaneze (Major Terror); Sam Onwuka, the scriptwriter and producer who plays Sgt Jaguar. Besides the aforementioned, there are stellar performances by some not so well-known actors. These actors include Ikenna Onyeaghalu (General Badmas) and Sam Obiekheme (General Abba); occasionally, however, they fail to imbue their very important roles with the kind of authority required of them.

It is evident that *Stubborn Grasshopper* was shot on the kind of shoestring budget that is associated with Nollywood productions. This appears to have robbed the film of the kind of fullness in sets, sound track, technical finish, and all of those shortcomings for which Nollywood films have been critiqued. But then

³⁴ An approximate meaning of this common term used in the production process in Nollywood is available from Babawilly's *Dictionary of Pidgin English Words and Phrases*: “To act as extra in Nigerian movie. i.e., to have a walk on role” (<http://www.ngex.com/personalities/babawilly/dictionary/pidginw.htm>). Web. Dec 12, 2010.

in guerrilla film production, aesthetics tend to suffer on the altar of expediency. More so, when the making this highly political film was a dangerous assignment—even when it was released after the reign of military dictatorship in Nigeria. Haynes (2003) has drawn attention to the factors encouraging the proliferation of non-political films as “profiteering” and “the precariousness of [videofilm] financing: though made on shoestring budgets, video films are still relatively major investments for those involved, and few producers could survive the total loss consequent on having a film banned” (78).³⁵

Therefore, the boldness, the courage, as well as the daring filmic experimentation with the ‘Apple Theory’ undertaken by the film makers in undertaking this dangerous project override the shortcomings. Both Sam Onwuka and Simisola Opeoluwa—respectively producer and director of *Stubborn Grasshopper*—swing a common story between melodrama and biting satire that reveals a keen ear for everyday speech and the street practice of naming as tools for ridiculing the ruling elite. Besides the other names highlighted above, the story is set in a country called Wahala, a Yoruba word for “trouble” but which has been appropriated into mainstream urban pidgin. General Abba’s buddy who connives to plot his demise is ironically named J.T. Goodboy, while the president-elect is called Chief Kash, a pun on the word cash and a derision of the wheeling and dealing super-rich class that he represents. Other characters are given generic names—Prof Nobel (Wole Soyinka); Oilman (workers in the critical energy

³⁵ Haynes (2003) instructively adds that: “The silence of other film makers is remarkable in contrast to the role of Nigerian print journalism--the other great chronicler of this terrible period of the nation's history--which constantly tested the limits of the military regime's tolerance, at the price of many arrests, detentions without trial, beatings, assassinations, seizures of equipment, and closures of media houses” (77-78).

sector of the country); Corporate Man (workers in Nigeria's complex corporate world); News reporter, Correspondent and Reporter (journalists), etc. Named this way, there is no respite for anyone—the spectator, the subjects and the potentate—in this farcical political drama. Barrot (2008) must have been thinking about this context of Nigerian films such as *Stubborn Grasshopper* in declaring that:

Even though Nigerian video production also calls itself 'an entertainment industry', it does not have the same aesthetic quality as 'telenovelas', and it does not turn its back on the ills of Nigerian society. On the contrary it delights in them, exploits them, denounces or exorcises them; whatever the problem, it is dealt with in the greatest detail. (59)

Stubborn Grasshopper exemplifies this theory, and it is indeed surprising that given its significance within the Nollywood corpus and to national life, the film has received virtually no critical attention as a whole beyond the short remarks on it by Jonathan Haynes recalled above. Understandably, however, this loud silence on the film in Nollywood or African film scholarship is attributable to the scarcity of the film in the markets referred to in my Introduction and to its seemingly limited circulation from the very beginning possibly due to expected hostile activities of the powerful men it lampoons. But regrettable as this, and the film's shortcomings are, they do not diminish its significance, and the filmmakers' heroic attempt to contribute to salient public political discourse, the redefinition of Nigeria's contemporary history, and the refinement of the people's identities and

subjectivities toward a better understanding of “where the rain began to beat us,” as Achebe (1975: 44) would say.

The Griot as Moviemaker: Kelani, Street Stories, and the Nigerian political project

When in 1992 Tunde Kelani decided to establish his film production company, Mainframe Productions,³⁶ in Oshodi, Lagos, he had foresight that a visual culture revolution was afoot in Nigeria. That was on the eve of the release of Ken Nebue’s pioneering blockbuster video film *Living in Bondage* (1993) which is now considered the official film that inaugurated Nollywood. Armed with a diploma in filmmaking from the London Film School which he earned in 1978, and a remarkable experience as a cinematographer with professional credits in early indigenous cinema productions and the Nigerian Television Authority, Kelani knew he had all that was required to be an important part of the Cultural Revolution,³⁷ including a solid grounding in Yoruba tradition and the popular travelling theatre which was to shape much of his work and a significant percentage of contemporary Nigerian popular cultural production. “Mainframe,” the name of Kelani’s production company was, therefore, not accidental or merely arrogantly chosen; it was chosen with the conviction of a man who had mastered his art and was sure to be the *main* attraction in the unfolding action. Since then, Kelani has released one blockbuster after the other—including the hugely

³⁶ Before Mainframe, Kelani had co-founded a production company called Cinekraft with his friend Wale Fanu. According to Kelani, “Cinekraft provided technical backing to most of the films produced by independent producers, mainly from the traditional traveling theatre groups who were following in Ogunde’s footsteps” (Haynes 2007: 10).

³⁷ Adesokan (2009) actually contends that Kelani preceded Nebue as standard bearer for the Nollywood phenomenon.

successful double-barreled political film *Saworoide* or *Brass Jingle Bells* (1999) and *Agogo Eewo* or *The Gong of Taboo*³⁸ (2002)—and conducted his business and art in ways that stand him out of the Nollywood all-comers crowd. Discussing his theory that “traditional Yoruba theater is the foundation of the Nigerian film industry,”³⁹ Kelani reveals traces how “Many of the directors” who “spent time traveling with the drama companies throughout the southwest of Nigeria, [...] “drifted into television, and eventually [...] migrated into filmmaking, mainly 16mm filmmaking – I must have shot twenty of those films myself.” Kelani further claims that unlike many of his colleagues in Nollywood he has “never taken any money from any marketer” because “[i]f you take money from a marketer, you have lost creative control – it is as simple as that. There is no way I cede creative control until the product is ready. One needs to define one’s relationship with the marketers.” Besides these core professional commitment, Kelani has taken on the role of a visual culture activist through his Lagos City Cinema Project, with which he hopes to “build small cinema houses in 10 local government areas, with the ultimate goal of building one in each of the 57 local government areas.”⁴⁰

Given Kelani’s outstanding achievement, it is difficult to ignore him and his work in any study of Nollywood. His representative political films, *Saworoide* (1999) and its sequel, *Agogo Eewo* (2002) provide points of departure from the less aesthetically ambitious cinematic strategy of Onwuka and Opeoluwa’s

³⁸ Adesokan (Ibid.) translates it more literarily as “The Sacred Gong” (401).

³⁹ See Trenton Daniel’s “Nollywood Confidential Part Two” (2009).

⁴⁰ See Bic Leu “Tunde Kelani looks to reinvent Nollywood,”

<http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/ArtsandCulture/Film/5646223-147/story.csp> Web. December 5, 2010.

Stubborn Grasshopper. But due to space constraints as well as *Agogo Eewo*'s relatively less political parallelism of the Nigerian political process⁴¹ I shall focus specifically on *Saworoide*.

Saworoide has a more complex plot even if, like *Stubborn Grasshopper*, it narrativizes the Nigerian political crisis, including the military dictatorship of Sani Abacha (called General Abba in *Stubborn Grasshopper*, and Colonel S. A.—suggesting Sani Abacha—Lagata in the latter). The complex circular narrative structure of the film depends on a formula in oral literature called the ring or

⁴¹ For more on this see Haynes (2007). According states “as a matter of fact” that he “think[s] the film *Agogo Eewo* is really not about Obasanjo, but there are similarities about political and social happenings between Jogbo and contemporary Nigeria” (13).

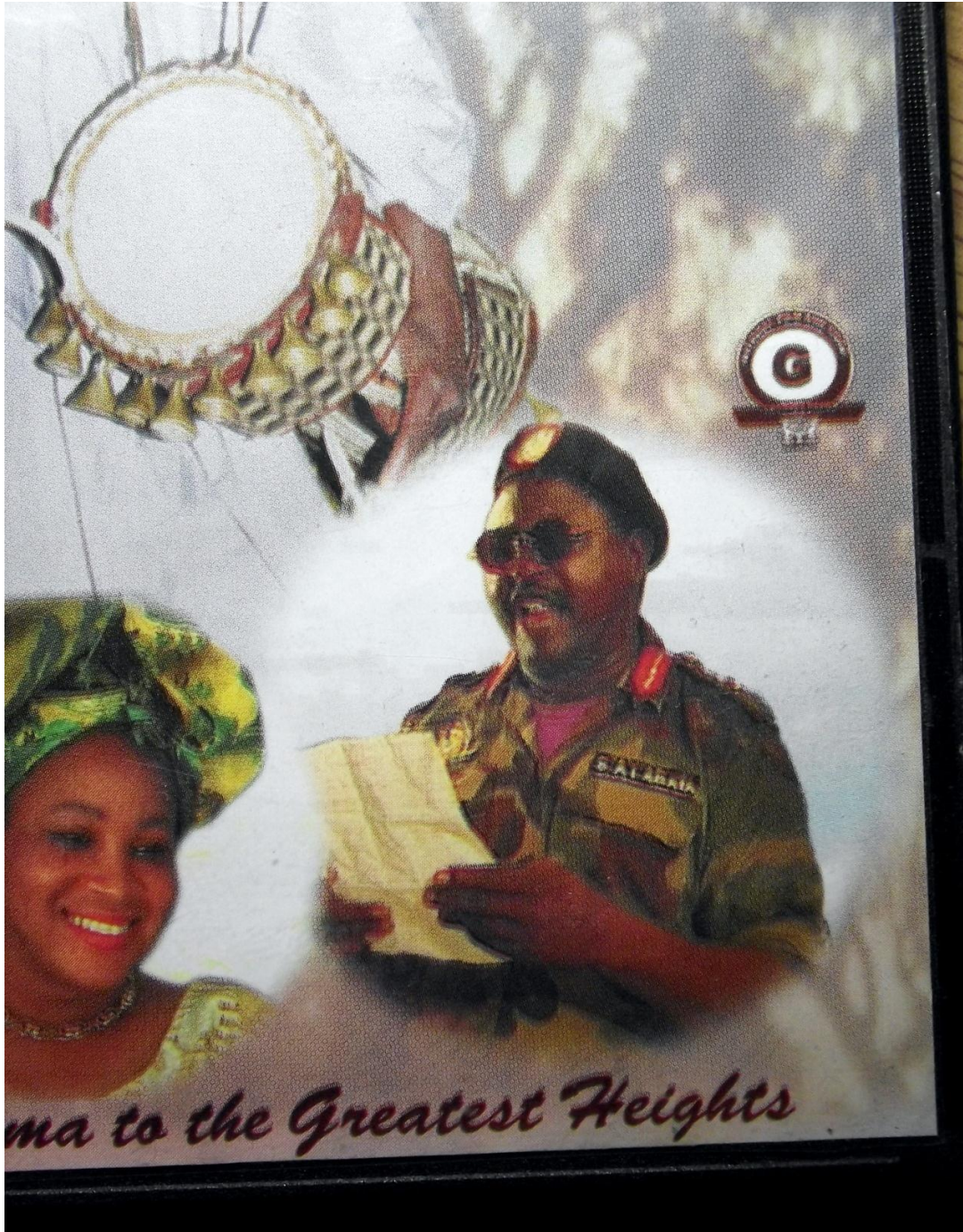


Plate 6: Close-up still shot: Cover of Saworoide showing Lagata (right) reading his rough regime-change speech.

annular device.⁴² Applied to *Saworoide*, the cyclical story ends the same way as it began—with the legend of the powerful ancestral drum Saworoide. To summarize the plot, it is the story of the politics of Jogbo where the king dies and a king-elect, Lapite, ascends the throne. The king-elect defies tradition and inflicts a reign of corruption and despotism against his subjects, deploying the military, led by Lagata, to assassinate or suppress elements of opposition against his despised reign. Bearer of tradition and Jogbo's official drummer, Anagalu, survives an assassination attempt and goes into exile with the heir to the throne. Youth activists led by Ageku (Yomi Shodimu) determined to stop the reign of terror and environmental devastation perpetrated by unconscionable international capitalist loggers—read multinational oil companies operating in Nigeria—march on the palace and seize the crown. Desperate, the king turns to Lagata, an ambitious military officer who looks very much like General Abba (Abacha) of *Stubborn Grasshopper*—both physically and in a shared love for alcohol as Abacha was portrayed in the street stories discussed above. Ironically, Lagata takes advantage of the mission assigned to him despite the blank cheque he had collected from the corrupt Lapite. Casting suspicion of the threat to his throne on Arase, the prince, and Arapa his illegitimate daughter and 'princess,' the king plans to eliminate them. But the queen, Arapa's mother had eavesdropped on the

⁴² In her discussion of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, Langen (1993) throws more light on what we mean by this device. "In classical and medieval works," she writes, "we find such figures used in the service of literate communication as well, and literary criticism has employed a variety of names for them: "ring composition," "frame," "envelope," "chiasmus," etc. I prefer to talk about circular and concentric figures because in oral and oral-derived literatures these figures are not just "the repetitious arrangement of narrative elements within a relatively static structure" (Tonsfeldt 452), but rather ways of developing an idea or of revealing complications in the relations between topics" (11).

conversation and despatches her daughter and the prince just before Lagata strikes. He overthrows the king at the same ceremony where the latter was to reaffirm his authority with the return of the crown seized by the irate youth activists but recovered by Lagata and his hit squad. But shortly after seizing power, justice is done as the narrative returns to the beginning with the focus on the mystical Saworoide drum; Ayangalu fulfills tradition and beats the drum leading to the supernatural death of the usurper, Lagata, while the prince is safe with Arapa, thereby laying the foundation for the sequel, *Agogo Eewo*. Now, let me add some flesh to this skeleton of the narrative as I analyze the more aesthetically fulfilling film. Because the opening scenes are so important to the foundation, overall structure and aesthetics of the film, I will pay closer attention to this section and zip through the rest, only highlighting the most significant moments.

The film opens with a panoramic view of a town, Jogbo, enveloped in fog at what looks like dawn. The rusty roofs in the long shot add to create a feeling that the unfolding story happened in the distant past. Rather than the usual trailers previewing/promoting all sorts of films, Kelani offers a preview of *Agogo Eewo*, the sequel to the present film, with words rolling out on the screen:

Arese and Arapa discover truths about themselves

With Lapite gone and Lagata dead who fills the vacant stool?

Find out for great revelations. Watch out for *Agogo Eewo*

Saworoide...the story continues

...everything we touch becomes interesting

The emphasis on writing *text* on screen as a complement to the visual drama of the film is thus laid out very early, and followed through with the careful subtitling of the film delivered in Yoruba language. These opening words enable the filmmaker to establish a broader context for *Saworoide*, while at once drawing the spectator into the world of oral tradition that shapes it through the revelation of the action we are about to watch without necessarily ruining the element of suspense, but instead, whetting our appetite.

As the first scene of the film proper unfolds, the spectator is left in no doubt that he/she is encountering a different kind of film, a film more culturally grounded than *Stubborn Grasshopper*, with Kelani paying delicate attention to the overall aesthetics of the film. The traditional talking drum, with textual accompaniment rolling on the screen, adds to the enchanting poetic atmosphere building up in this storyteller's film: "This is the parable of the Drum as the voice of the people", the words roll out with the deliberate capitalization of "D" in the word *drum* for emphasis. And as the drummer beats the royal drum one can only compare one's feeling to experiencing *sound poetry* at its best, with the drum reiterating my earlier submission about its role (and that of the agogo—gong—in the title of the sequel) as a tool for (or a symbol of) communication in traditional or pre-modern Africa. The storyteller in the film continues to 'write' on the screen: "It is the story of the pact between the ancient community and the kings that ruled over it..." Then the scene opens to a death chamber, and introduces us

through a dying old man's flashback, to how Saworoide, the sacred brass⁴³ drum, was created in the past under mystical conditions, and returns to the present time, the death bed of the patriarch of the community. To instigate the flashback and this transmission of oral tradition from an older generation to the younger, one of the old man's children requests: "Father you must not leave us without any guidance. We would be lost."

"There'll be a pact between the people and their kings," the old man replies, and gives further guidance: Fashion out a brass crown, drum, jingle bells, and a small container—all of which are traditional totems of power, not armies and guns which the king-elect later deploys. As part of the rituals required, an Ifa priest, traditional Yoruba diviner, has a role to play. At the Ifa divination scene, part of Kelani's deliberate artistic construction of the narrative along the line of oral tradition and to reflect his immersion in the Yoruba travelling theatre tradition, we encounter oral poetry at its best as the Ifa priest (Akinwumi Isola) chants in a coded incantatory language accessible to only the initiates⁴⁴: "White cloth longs for indigo dye/ first part of a statement cries for the second..."

Despite the fantastic metaphysical angle to the narrative, very much in tune with the Yoruba world view and the popular travelling theatre, the scene is made more convincing through the natural golden monotone ambience of cinematic art to enhance the temporal location in the distant past. As the narrative

⁴³ Beyond the sanctity of the brass drum in the mythopoeic framework of its creation here, Okpewho (1998) points out in a related milieu of ancient Benin kingdom that "the premium put on brass should also be seen in the context of the power dynamics of the time" (70)

⁴⁴ For more on Ifa divination system see Wande Abimbola, *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976; T. Ogunode, *Three Yoruba Divination Systems and Ebo*, New York: Oluweri Publications, 1994; and Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama, *Encyclopedia of African Religion, Volume 1*, SAGE Publications, 2009, 86, 335.

of the ritual process of enthronement of Jogbo kings rounds off and the old man breathes his last, pronouncing his final word, “Saworoide!” the spectator realizes Kelani’s appreciation of culture and storytelling as ritual process that can be captured in the cinema medium. The funeral ceremony that follows completes the rite of passage and transmission of tradition that overshadows this filmic allegory, or in Kelani’s terms, “parable” of leadership in both traditional and postcolonial Africa.

The cue from the filmmaker to read *Saworoide* as a parable eases the burden of interpreting the action of the film summarized above. This enables the viewer or critic to comprehend the film’s complex temporal and spatial settings, with tradition and modernity complete with the popular press paradoxically in conflict and yet mixing seamlessly in the dramatic action and aesthetic flourish of the film. This way, Kelani proves the argument of some critics that tradition and modernity can exist in a syncretic⁴⁵ fashion in African cinema.

Let me explain. Hardly had the funeral ceremony of the late king and a representation of an old order or epoch been over than an agent of the king-elect, Lapite (Kola Oyewo) appears in a revealing conversation with the wise, old man by the palace entrance. The new king, determined to enrich himself using the instrumentality of his privileged position, is exploring ways of doing so against the backdrop of tradition. The old man, symbolizing tradition, tells the king’s agent: “Who loves the good life should not aspire to be king. The king serves the people, not the other way round. No king of Jogbo can be rich like modern kings.”

⁴⁵ Karin Barber (1987) has noted that “Popular arts are seen as a hybrid, distinguishable from traditional arts by their syncretism” (10).

Surprised, Lapite's agent replies: "Why? Is it a curse?" The old man explains that there are certain mysteries of the community unknown to even her chiefs, and tells the king's agent some salient ones concerning the origin of Jogbo, which it should be noted, he says he "unraveled with age and interactions with the elders." In this statement is embedded part of Kelani's objective with his work: to educate the increasingly alienated younger generation about their traditional values, history and culture.⁴⁶ It is against this backdrop that the conflict in *Saworoide* unfolds; the king's agent tells the old man that the tradition "has to change" because the king-elect is his friend and "he needs to make money." As he departs, the old man ruminates prophetically: "They don't understand, but tomorrow they will."

As the narrative shifts to Lapite's palace, Kelani foregrounds the relationship between the *oral* ancient and the modern through the modern setting, with tomes—World Book Dictionary—very visible. The growing conflict in the film is further symbolized by the new king's derision of Asabi, his fat wife—who he describes as being "decrepit and shapeless" — and his preference of a slimmer, younger First Lady-to-be, Tinuola (Bukky Wright).⁴⁷ The rest of the story follows the bifurcated moral logic of greed and evil versus good and traditional values. In

⁴⁶ It is for this reason that Tomaselli et al (1995) make a case for such culturally grounded films, arguing that they "recover memories which have been partly destroyed by colonialism and neo-colonialism. Most specifically, griots serve to recover and preserve for exhibition in film, that which has been alienated from the present generation because of the disruption consequent to imposition of modernization policies. In this sense, these filmmakers are also travellers between generations, and as griots they are the intergenerational counterparts of the medieval European troubadours who travelled in a more literally geographical sense" (23).

⁴⁷ Here, Kelani succumbs to stereotyping identified by Obiechina (2008) as being the result of the influence of Western cinema in Onitsha market literature. As Obiechin puts it, it represents: "a change in the direction of beauty. Film actors and actresses are now the models of beauty for boys and girls. The older generation of African men preferred their women big-framed [...] but 'modern' young men prefer their women slim, petite and excitingly made up" (281) as we indeed see Tinuola obsessed with in *Saworoide*.

other words, as Babawale and Ogen (2007) puts it, “Sycophancy, deceit and lying” is made to “drive its perpetrators to destruction. Honesty, sincerity and obedience pay. Power must not be abused because it is transient” (25).

Thus like *Stubborn Grasshopper*, *Saworoide* has a strong moralizing tone, and also draws from history of Nigeria’s contemporary political experience. But unlike Onwuka and Opeoluwa, Kelani is far from being faithful to that history—oral or written. As a parable of Nigeria’s recent political history, as some critics⁴⁸ have generally agreed, it is problematic finding extended parallels between the characters in *Saworoide* and the political actors in real life the way I was able to do with *Stubborn Grasshopper*. Nevertheless, one might take Lapite to represent Salenko (Sonekan), head of the Interim National Government (ING) in *Stubborn Grasshopper*, and Lagata, as General Abba who tricks his way into office through a palace coup. Besides the centrality of the press in both *Stubborn Grasshopper* and *Saworoide*, the two films draw from the characterization of General Abacha in street stories and the popular imagination as an alcoholic. Finally, the activists who organize protests against the state are the equivalent of the civil rights groups who championed the opposition against the ING and the military in the 1990s in Nigeria, a theme that comes into bolder relief in Sonny Okosuns’ “Political Game” which I shall analyze presently.

⁴⁸ For Haynes, “Kelani’s *Saworoide* and *Agogo Ewo* take an allegorical approach but are direct and trenchant in their handling of contemporary politics. (The military man in the former looks very much like Abacha; the king in the latter is unmistakably the current President, Olusegun Obasanjo.)” For Olaf Moller (2004), “*Brass Jingle Bells* (*Saworoide*, 99) and its sequel, *The Gong of Taboo* (*Agogo Ewo*, 02). Neither is terribly representative of the video film norm, which usually shies away from direct political engagement.” (*Saworoide* and *Agogo Ewo* were made years apart: the first in reaction to Nigeria’s military dictatorship, the second one as an expression of hope for the new democracy.)”

In camouflaging his critique of contemporary Nigerian politics, Kelani, like other artists, is determined to avoid censorship⁴⁹ capable of aborting their creative dreams and ruining their investments; the film thus is an allegory of Nigeria's contemporary political history without being overtly so like *Stubborn Grasshopper*. However, the filmmakers' share an unmistakable interest in deploying street stories about the anti-heroes and oppressors of the people, and in aligning themselves with the desire to punish the cruel rulers through narratives. In doing this, they recruit the press or print as an important complement to street actions and site for the struggle. As in *Stubborn Grasshopper*, *Saworoide* features vox populi by the press; but rather than have a one-way traffic media-audience pattern of news reporters simply interviewing their subjects, Kelani stages a news conference during which members of the ruling class including the king are lampooned and embarrassed with hard questions that implicate them in corruption. Additionally, the youth leader of the opposition against the state here resorts to printing and distributing fliers—a genre of small media—to drive the campaign against the decadent state effectively. In response, the king becomes more repressive.

By drawing from hidden and public transcripts of Nigeria's political experience and encoding them within oral traditional framework, Kelani pays tribute to the centrality of orality in Africa's socio-political experience and

⁴⁹ While I am thinking here of the brutal kind of censorship that Gbenga Adewusi suffered with the radical video *Maradona*, it is interesting to note that Kelani's *Agogo Ewo* suffered a milder form of censorship from the Nigerian Censors board who forbade it from television broadcast: more on this shortly. Meanwhile for a fuller picture of the censorship scourge see Paul Ugor's revealing essay, "Censorship and the Content of Nigerian Video Films," *Postcolonial Text*, 3.2 (2007): 1-22. <http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/518/403> Web. January 14 2009.

cultural heritage. Together then, the video culture and musical performances of the type I analyze in the final subsection of this chapter deepen our appreciation of the symbiotic relationship between street stories and cultural artefacts, and reflect that complex combinative interaction across popular culture platforms which this study tracks. How these cultural artefacts mediate, and are in turn mediated by street narrative culture, remains very complex and delicate as evidenced by this encounter with *Saworoide*. The influence of orality and the Yoruba travelling theatre tradition is manifest in the robust “musical leitmotifs”⁵⁰ and dance performances that punctuate and enrich the narrative. So rich is this immersion in culture that in Nollywood, Kelani exemplifies the kind of cinematic practice located in orality for which the late Senegalese “cinematic griot” (Andrew 2000: 228), Sembene Ousmane, was the godfather. Even Kelani’s use of the metaphysical trope or “magical realism”⁵¹ does not descend to the putrid pits that have encouraged the theories of occult economy in Nollywood and the postcolonial space as whole. Once asked, “Is the presence of the camera in your

⁵⁰ See Thackway (2003: 81). Indeed Melissa Thackway’s compelling analysis of elements of orature in Francophone cinema in this section of her book can easily be extrapolated for our discussion of Kelani’s cinematic practice. Most of the features of orality she identifies in the francophone cinematic practice also exist in Kelani’s *Saworoide*. These include: (a) “Circularity”, by which Thackway means “opening and closing with the same shot, whose symbolic meaning [...] becomes [more] apparent when it is seen a second time” (Ibid. 79). For this, the symbolism of the drum mystery in *Saworoide* as it opens and closes the film comes to mind. (b) Repetition; call and response (Ibid. 80). This is most evident in the incremental or structural parallel which shows the old man in *Saworoide* singing the refrain about the bird that perches on top of the tree gathering information. (c) “The quest for self-knowledge” (84) during which “[e]lderly characters often appear at critical moments of the quest tales to help [the] protagonists” (86). This is reflected by Arese’s great escape and quest to reclaim the crown. (d) “Magic realism” (Ibid. 91), which in the context promoted by Thackway and I subscribe to it, is related to, but different from, the genre popularized by the Colombian writer and journalist Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It refers to marvellous (magical) realism associated with the mysterious (supernatural) resonance of the African drum, *Saworoide*, and its fatal remote attack on Labata.

⁵¹ So central in Nollywood is this element of the supernatural that it is the subject of a fascinating essay by Hope Eghagha: “Magical Realism and the ‘Power’ of Nollywood Home Video Films.” *Film International*, 28: 71-76.

film, for instance, *Saworoide*, a commentary on filmmaking?” Kelani replied: “In *Saworoide*, the camera complements a traditional acting style, Yoruba travelling theatre” (Mahen and Reddy 2003: 108), adding that “a shift in language is a matter of expediency” (Ibid. 110), a reference to the occasional code-switching in the film.

Kelani could not have put his stylistic experimentation in this film in a better way. For as Diawara (1988) has forcefully argued, “[w]hile Western directors often achieve recognition by letting the story tell itself, African directors, like the griots, master their craft by impressing the spectator with their narrative performance” (13). Diawara (1988) further elaborates the point being made here from a related angle in his celebration of African films with griots as moviemakers:

In oral tradition, it is through the griot's point of view that one sees and realizes the universe around one. In film, the camera replaces the griot as the director's eyes and constructs the new images of Africa for the spectator. It is in this sense that one says that the African film-maker has replaced the griot in the *rewriting* of history (12). [Emphasis added]

Clearly, Kelani is in the forefront of a mytho-folkloric interpretation of modern Nigerian history which has been a central focus of this dissertation. Although *Saworoide* is dedicated “To those who fought gallantly to restore democracy in our land,” it does not pretend to seek the kind of historical exactitude based on street narratives which we witness in *Stubborn Grasshopper*.

Instead, the spectator experiences Kelani's "logocentric distortion of the events he historicizes,"⁵² in a way that underscores the creative modes in which street stories can be represented, to appropriate the words of Anthony Guneratne (2003: 5). Shedding more light on his strategy in *Saworoide* Kelani informs that he liked the approach of his collaborator on the film project, Professor Akinwumi Isola, "especially with reference to its political and social angles," adding that it was "a risky project with the military dictator Sani Abacha still in the saddle of governance" (Haynes 2007: 12). Kelani further reveals that "[th]e screenplay was ready and in fact predicted Abacha's death because like Lagata in [the] story, Abacha conveniently died a mysterious death before we started our production" (Ibid.). For Kelani, Abacha's death was convenient because he worried about the dictator's possible grave response to the film if it was released in his lifetime: "You know the character in the film was sounding quite like him, and only God knows what would have happened," Kelani said, offering more insight into how the dread of censorship and loss of investment which I referred to above framed the construction of *Saworoide*:

We had produced *Saworoide* as nothing more than a sort of passive observation of those dictatorship days. Because [...] the Nigerian film industry is a private enterprise, all the producers would just produce very safe stories, family issues, comedies, and love stories, but nothing about politics for fear of jeopardizing their investment. So everybody played it

⁵² See Anthony Guneratne (2003: 5). I have borrowed insights and vocabulary from the section of his introduction to the book that discusses "some of the films that emerged in the Latin American cradle of Third Cinema, films which took direct aim at the Eurocentric erasure of the distinction [...] between history and reality" (5).

safe. *Saworoide* was a tame attempt to document the evil of military rule. You know the print media on the other hand did very well because they openly criticized dictatorship. Of course some journalists had to go into exile and all that. But none of the filmmakers would dare that, so everybody just seemingly turned a blind eye and just went for their businesses. Abacha's death has been reduced to nothing more than a passing observation, or a slight documentation, if you like. (12)

Understandably, therefore, in exploring the politics of the time the multilayered film text becomes an amalgam or total theatre of sorts—narrative, riddles, proverbs, drama, music, song, dance, polemical commentaries, press interviews, etc.—and “both historical certainty and textual veracity” (Ibid.) become secondary concerns. The kernel narrative about Nigeria's political crisis undergoes, through Kelani's lens, what Guneratne (2003) would call “an anti-adaptation” and “mock-documentary” (6) interpretation that immediately shows the aesthetic poverty of *Stubborn Grasshopper*. Kelani uses what Obiechina (1992) sees as “narrative proverbs”⁵³ and Guneratne (Ibid.) felicitously dubs “allegorical portmanteaus” (6). Kelani, like China's Chein Kaige discussed by

⁵³ Emmanuel Obiechina, “Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel,” *Oral Tradition*, 7.2 (1992): 197-230. http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/7ii/3_obiechina.pdf Web. November 2, 2009. I am extrapolating the term from the following context where Obiechina applied it in the study of African novels: “Reflecting a habit of orality in life and literature, the novelists [filmmakers such as Kelani too] introduce oral stories—myths, folktales, fairy tales, animal fables, anecdotes, ballads, song-tales, and so on—within the narrative matrices of their works, in the development of their plots and themes, and in the formulation of their artistic and formal principles. These embedded stories are referred to as narrative proverbs because they perform organic and structural functions of proverbs in oral speech and in creative literature” (199). Mbye B. Cham (1990) shares a similar view, inverting the words in the term as “proverb-narrative” which he defines as “a narrative which is a dramatized illustration, so to speak, of a proverb” (267).

Guneratne, resists the “temptations of overt historicization and foregrounds individual consciousness in depicting [Nigeria’s] coming to terms with historical ruptures” (Ibid.). It is in so doing that *Saworoide* not only provides us an alternative handle on the uses of street stories and the popular press in Nollywood, but together with *Stubborn Grasshopper*, shows us a more composite picture of the centrality of orality and myth in the African imagination, everyday life and social construction of identities and subjectivities.

But to get a more ‘complete’ picture of the popular cultural formations and trajectories traversed by street stories in postcolonial urban Nigeria, I shall now examine our last cultural construction, popular music, with the lyrics of the old man’s song and the chorus in *Saworoide* serving as an apposite transitional anchor: “These chiefs are reckless/ Once in power they steal and steal/ They take bribes/ While the people suffer/There must be repercussions.”

Performing the Nation: Music, *Yabis*,⁵⁴ and Hidden Agenda

The old man’s song in *Saworoide* at once calls attention to the social functions of songs and music not only in traditional Africa but also in contemporary urban life. Perched on a corner of the palace like “the bird perched

⁵⁴ I had briefly introduced early in this chapter this term used in everyday pidgin conversation in Nigeria or in popular music as a trenchantly critical verbal cum musical barb aimed at poking fun at someone, a group or an institution. In the narrower context of this chapter, I align my usage of the term with the definition offered by Michael Olatunji (2007; 2009). According to Olatunji *Yabis* is “a biting satirical song that is deliberately composed with the aim of correcting an atrocity, a misdemeanour or sacrilege committed by either an individual or a corporate body within a particular society” ((2007: 27; 2009: 214). The term is sometimes called “yap” as used by Fela in *The News* magazine interview with him, 5 April, 1993, 26-35. For more on the term see Olatunji’s “Yabis: A Phenomenon in Contemporary Nigerian Music,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 1.9 (2007), and “Popular Music, New Media, and the Digital Public Sphere in Kenya, Cote d’Ivoire, and Nigeria,” co-written by him, George Ogola and Anne Schumann, *African Media and the Digital Public Sphere*, Eds, Okoth Fred Mudhai, Wisdom J. Tettey, and Fackson Banda. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 203-222.

on top of a tree,” to echo his favourite refrain, he “gathers information pretending to be sleeping.” The Old One is a seer and a songbird; the wise one, voice of the people and conscience of the community. His song, informed by his ‘street’ observations, is a trenchant critique of the ruling class represented by the corrupt king and his chieftom. In the song, the Old One *performs* his nation, a protest tradition that some popular artists in postcolonial Nigeria have sustained, oftentimes, at great personal risks. But within the historical context of the film, the seer and the political filmmaker are not any different. Part of the significance of the role of the Old One (also known as Opalaba) in the film is indicated by the fact that besides “music reinforce[ing] thematic concerns” in the film as Adeoti (2009: 49) appropriately observes, “[l]ong after its release [...] songs in [*Saworoide*] became popular songs, reverberating on the lips of people on the street, well beyond the screen” (Ibid.). Adeoti adds that: “These songs include[d] Opalaba’s refrains: ‘*ko i ye won, yoo ye won l’ola*’ (‘they do not understand yet, they will understand tomorrow’) and ‘*Oro l’eye ngbo, oro l’eye ngbo, eye o deede ba l’orule o, oro leye ngbo o*’ (‘the bird is eavesdropping, the bird is eavesdropping, the bird is not perching on the roof for fun’)” (49).

Such rootedness in oral performance in Africa therefore recommends the adoption of tools of Performance Studies for analyzing music cum song texts in postcolonial Nigeria as signified by the title of this subsection.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind, Fabian’s (1990) cautionary words concerning such framing of “the concrete political and economic conditions that reign” (19) in the postcolonial situation as “performance.” According to Fabian (1990):

⁵⁵ This is partly borrowed from Askew (2002).

There is nothing in the postcolonial situation that would make ethnology by and of itself more humane, playful, or fun, or that would make “performance” a more germane concept to describe its nature. No, the kind of performances we find in postcolonial situation have become for the people involved more than ever ways to preserve some self-respect in the face of constant humiliation, and to set the wealth of artistic creativity against an environment of utter poverty. All this is not to be dismissed off-hand as escape from reality (19).

Put differently, popular music artistes in the postcolonial world can hardly afford to be politically neutral as Fela suggests in the epigraph above and in Grass (1985: 142), or to fit into the art-for-arts-sake dictum in which many of their Western counterparts indulge.⁵⁶ Thus to ascribe the word ‘performance’ to the socially conscious postcolonial artiste’s work may amount to reducing it to the kind of bare entertainment value vested in the literal application of the word amongst “Hollywood-hooked [...] and escapist entertainment-seeking” (Tomaselli et al 1995: 32) audiences. So I use “performance” here in the context of the Old One’s song which is related to the definition of the term in the second part of the quote from Fabian: performance as survival. This interpretation assumes greater significance when considered against the framework of “performance” developed

⁵⁶ My reference to Western artists here is without prejudice to the obviously political works of musicians such as John Lenon, Bob Dylan and the African American hip-hop artistes about whom Tricia Rose has so eloquently written in two volumes: *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994, and *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters*, Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2008. Furthermore, I should note that Jean-Michel Valantin (2005) as promoted on the blurb of his book, has provided remarkable insights into the “consistent collaboration between the US Department of Defense and film Hollywood studios” toward projecting “the ideological and political thinking of Washington”

by Askew (2002). Building on Foucault's assertion that "power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and that it only exists in action"⁵⁷ Askew argues that "Performance, like power, is not a product that can be given, exchanged, or recovered," adding that, "[i]t always necessarily is a process that is subject to on-the-spot improvisation, varying expectations, the vagaries of history and context, multiple associations and connotations, and remembered or projected meanings" (291).

The above preamble would become clearer with concrete examples below. But to go beyond the traditional context provided by the Old One's song, and advance to analyzing the representative texts selected for this part of my study, we need to reference, I believe, the work of the Nigerian maverick artiste who most defines the contemporary protest music tradition as it relates to my thesis. He is Fela Anikulapo-Kuti described with flourish by Waterman (1998) as "composer, and bandleader, ideological bricoleur, political gadfly, child of colonialism and father of Afro-beat, a.k.a. 'he who holds Death in his pocket'" (1), on whose life and works scholarship abounds.⁵⁸ The sheer volume of scholarship on Fela, as he is simply called; the army of imitators that his invented musical form has attracted; and the award-winning 2010 Broadway musical hit on his life and work, testify to his towering position in world music.⁵⁹ Even neologisms such as

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Colin Gordon. Ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. 89.

⁵⁸ They include: Labinjoh (1981); Moore (1982); Olorunyomi (2003, 2005); Schoonmaker (2003a and b); Idowu (2002); Olaniyan (2004); Durotoye (2003); Olatunji (2007); Veal (2009); Collins (2009).

⁵⁹ Additionally, Julio Punch, webmaster of The Shrine, The Unofficial Website for Fela Kuti and Afrobeat Music informs that: "Chiwetel Ejiofor will be playing Fela in the biopic on the life of Fela Kuti. The movie will simply be called *Fela*. UK director Steven McQueen has signed to

“Felasophy”⁶⁰ and “Felabrations” (Collins 2009: 139)⁶¹ have emerged to describe Fela’s protest music *philosophy* and its passionate celebration by devotees of the Afrobeat cult he created with his Afrika Shrine night club as base in Ikeja, Lagos, before his death on August 2, 1997, and now sustained by his Crown Prince Femi Anikulapo-Kuti at the New Afrika Shrine on another location also in Ikeja, Lagos.

Back in the early to mid 1990s while working as a journalist in Lagos, I was one such devotee of Afrika Shrine where Fela presided as High Priest and folk hero over carnivalesque performances that left one utterly fulfilled musically, spiritually and socially. Every performance was a hybrid of sorts: of Afrobeat music which Olorunyomi (2003) rightly says is “not simply a musical rhythm but a rhythm of social dissent achieved in song and lyric, and also in culture and political action” (157); of a musical yabis repertoire which comprises “strident political commentaries, rude jokes, parodies and an acerbic sense of humour and satire” (Olorunyomi 2005: 26); of worship which included blood-chilling rituals with a live chicken sacrificed to the gods before a starry-eyed youthful congregation of ‘worshippers.’ Although Fela once told an interviewer that he

direct a biopic on the life of Fela Kuti. Filming will start this year [2011] in Nigeria and other locations.” (See http://www.afrobeatmusic.net/html/hot_news_html Web. January 6, 2011.)

⁶⁰ Indeed there is rash of Internet listings on this term, virtually all of which are linked to Fela’s philosophy. Amongst them is a ten-minute documentary on Fela with this title on Youtube. See “Felasophy: A Film Documentary on Fela Kuti - Feat: Sandra Izsadore, Seun Kuti, Baba Ani.” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8aK9cVg2bU> Web. December 12, 2010. Significant others include the title of a collection of artwork for by Fela’s designer, Lemi Ghariokwu, showcased as part of “About Art’s Own Kind Exhibition” at Rich Mix Café and Mezzanine, London June-July 2009, <http://artsownkind.wordpress.com/about/> Web. December 12, 2010; and a blog with the name “Felasophy” at <http://felasophy.wordpress.com/> Web. December 12, 2010.

⁶¹ Similarly there is a rash of listings under this term on the Internet, virtually all of which are committed to celebrating and promoting the music and radical socio-political ideology championed by Fela. They include “Felabration, an annual festival dedicated to the promotion of Afrobeat and African culture and to the preservation of the legend and artistry of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti” (<http://www.felabration.net/>), and a Facebook social network account (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=175616319185>) Web. December 12, 2010.

plays a unique, inimitable kind of music, and that music for him was a “mission” not “entertainment,”⁶² every visit to The Shrine on club nights then was an “edutainment” (entertainment-education also known as “infotainment”) trip. Between his stirring Afrobeat vibes, Fela kept the spectators up-to-date on important current affairs stories around the world, but more specifically in Nigeria. His performances represented the most complex interface between orality, media scripts and street stories—for Fela referenced African oral tradition, breaking news on corruption and injustice in Nigeria and other parts of the world (or institutions including the United Nations), and made news himself. The Shrine was unique as a social space for symbolic spiritual worship, youth escapism—contrary to Johannes Fabian’s thesis above—and street parliament where the hottest news or rumours in town were produced, exchanged and interrogated by socially-conscious citizens or international denizens of The Shrine—for it often attracted tourists from various parts of the world.

As for melding art and politics, Fela’s musical compositions and yabis style remain the best examples of how the popular arts could *perform, narrate,* and *critique* the nation. His music albums are like personal essays and chapters of contemporary Nigerian history as they deal with various aspects of Nigerian life—social and political. A certain mythical, even mystical, quality or aura surrounded Fela, his work, and The Shrine, as he would regale us those days with stories of his exploits with witches and wizards in the astral world. Not surprising, Michael Veal (2009) in his “semi-biographical narrative of Fela’s life”

⁶² See “I am a Survivalist,” (A Prison Interview), *The News*, 5 April, 1993, 31.

(11) emphasizes “the mythology that inevitably accompanies the music” (6), and powerfully captures “Fela’s *running commentary on various public events as they unfolded*” (xi) [emphasis added], or as Veal puts it elsewhere in the book, “his fearless running critiques of corrupt dictatorial regimes, and the political orientation of his popular art all contained critiques crucial to the survival of healthy African societies” (18).

Since various studies listed above provide a comprehensive study of Fela’s ingenious musical form and bohemian lifestyle which are beyond my focus here, suffice it to state that my interest in briefly ventilating them in this chapter is to provide context for my analysis. In doing this I draw inspiration from John Collins’ “central concern [with] how Fela transposes earlier forms of aesthetic experience, and in what ways such transformations express a ruptured cultural continuum from folk aesthetic to popular aesthetic practices of urban, industrial life” (159). This much should be already evident in the ongoing brief introductory to Fela’s ambitious appropriation of traditional African musical and spiritual tradition, as well as news stories, into a new popular cultural artefact that is at once socially relevant and aesthetically fulfilling to many. By the time he died of AIDS, Fela had established, by the force of his originality, iconoclastic lifestyle, and prolific productivity, a reputation as one of the cultural idols of the 20th century. So creative cum productive was Fela that in addition to his stunning oeuvre, he left scores of unrecorded or yet-to-be released compositions, including the typically-entitled-in-Nigerian-pidgin Afrikan Shrine hit, “Chop and Clean Mouth Like Nothing Happened, Na New Name for Stealing,” (roughly translated

to: “Eat and clean up or pretend that nothing happened, is the new name for stealing”). Veal (2009) says that in this composition:

Fela sang as a tortured modern griot—recounting not the glorious deeds of national heroes, but rather the villainy of their progressive routing of the country’s resources, culminating in the country’s forced acquiescence to the demands of the IMF and its controversial programs. (231).

Needless to emphasize: the association of Fela with griots is important for my project. The reason being that the satirical song tradition can be found in many Nigerian cultures often associated with festivals or mask performances. Amongst the Igbo, the word *njakili* (critical barbs or yabis) is used to describe the everyday version of the genre used in ordinary conversations, while in my western Igbo hometown, Ogwashi-Uku in Delta State, the satirical songs are associated with a carnivalesque annual festival called the Inne Festival. Similarly, Michael Olatunji (2007) informs that “among the Egbado people of the Yoruba of Nigeria, the phenomenon is known as *Efe* [...] which integrates masks and dance, [and] provides an ample opportunity for its performers to criticize, deride, and ridicule any individual member or an organization (of whatever status)” (2). With Fela, however, the tradition assumes a radical, re-invented dimension as no ruler was sacrosanct enough not to be challenged or “yabbed.” In fact describing what he called the Third Revolution as “a direct one, nack the nail on the head straight,” Fela bragged that he could criticize any leader.⁶³ “Me I fit yap anybody even Babangida,” he further told *The News* magazine, adding: “I yapped [President]

⁶³ See “I am a Survivalist,” (A Prison Interview), *The News*, 5 April, 1993, 30.

Campaore straight to his face in Burkina Faso. I yap Obasanjo, Abiola, Yar’Adua, name them. Na straight I go hit them gbosa” (Ibid.). True to Fela’s words, his discography boasts various highly critical/satirical songs against neocolonialists, wonky policy makers, and multinational corporations; also against different Nigerian heads of state—military or civilian—and their corrupt, political brigands or “Vagabonds In Power” (VIP), as he entitles one of his long-playing albums with characteristic pun and satire. Other compositions laced with strident critiques of power included *Army Arrangement* (1985), *Authority Stealing* (1980), *Zombie* (1976), and *Beast of No Nation* (1989) which censured the United Nations veto vote principle.

Understandably, nearly one and a half decades after Fela’s death, Nigerians still miss him (his funeral was reportedly attended by over one million people), wishing that he were still alive to give voice to the voiceless, to critique contemporary political misadventures. While he lived, many devotees went to the shrine anticipating his comments/critique of socio-political developments of the day in ways that recommend his work, and those of the other artists discussed in this section for the kind of theorization that Winston Mano (2010) has theorized in his essay with the revealing title “Popular Music as Journalism in Africa: Issues and Context.” Fela’s political activism was not limited to his musical works; he was equally committed to “walking the talk”; he created political organizations: Young African Pioneers organization, YAP; Movement Against Second Slavery, MASS; and Movement of the People, MOP, a political party under the banner of

which Fela tried to contest the 1979 presidential elections but was disqualified by the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO).

Having provided a reasonable contextual background for my analysis, I would now explore how Fela's extremely political music project (for which he was jailed many times and for which his Kalakuta Republic commune was burnt and he lost the sound track of his incomplete biographical documentary film *The Black President*), has defined,⁶⁴ and been extended by, the work of two of his compatriots "in the emancipatory message music genre in Nigeria" (Akpan 2006: 103) who reflect differentiated dimensions of the same political yabis culture—Gbenga Adeboye and Sonny Okosuns.

Gbenga Adeboye: Street Stories, "Tongue Lash" and Dictatorship in Hell

It is not fortuitous that the title of the album from which the track for our study here is taken is *Pasan Oro (Tongue Lash)*, and the track itself is called "Guess the Caller." The album's title immediately situates the work in the critical yabis tradition promoted by Fela. But beyond that, it coheres, like Felasophy, with the shared fundamental elements of African oral tradition which Haynes had identified in varying degrees in Gbenga Adewusi's work. In other words, beyond Fela's exceptional achievement and influence, Nigerian artistes such as Adeboye, Okosuns and Adewusi draw from the same cultural pool—barring differences arising from specific ethnic origins: Okosuns coming from the minority Ishan

⁶⁴ I must quickly add that I am wary of the controversy around influence studies, and would rather not be drawn into it here. By Fela's example influencing or defining the works of his contemporaries or successors, as respectively represented by Sonny Okosuns and Gbenga Adeboye, I am taking liberty with the overwhelming centrality of Fela's work in contemporary popular music in Nigeria and beyond, and the near inevitability of other Nigerian artistes being directly or indirectly influenced by his compelling work.

ethnic group of Midwestern Nigeria, and the other three originating from the Yoruba group of Southwestern Nigeria. But they are united in their interest in continually encoding current events, particularly political developments, in popular song texts, as Waterman (1999: 20) observes is part of role of “the popular musician as mediator” dating back to the politics of the First Republic in Nigeria in the 1960s.

Regrettably, not much biographical information is available on Prince Alhaji Pastor⁶⁵ Olugbenga Elijah Adeboye as he did not make it into national or international limelight as Fela did. He was born on September 30, 1959 in Gbongan in western Nigeria, and died on April 30, 2003 of kidney-related ailment at St Nicholas Hospital, Lagos.⁶⁶ Adeboye was a versatile artiste—broadcaster, comedian, musician, and master of ceremony extraordinaire. His long credits included about nine albums on cassette, (now on CDs), a popular radio programme, “Gbenga Adeboye in the House,” the final name for a program that underwent metamorphosis from its original 1981 name, Funwotan, and later Gbenga Adeboye in the Mix on Radio Lagos which he started working with under interesting circumstances.

⁶⁵ Titles are fashionable in the Nigerian entertainment industry, with artistes bearing titles such as Commander, Sir, King, Prince, Chief, etc., to reflect their real or imagined social status in society. Gbenga Adeboye’s titles are unique in their comic overtone: for indeed it is awkward (perhaps abominable to the faithful), for one person to bear both a Christian and Muslim title; this points to some of the unique traits of the artiste.

⁶⁶ I am indebted to three internet sources for this biography: Dare Lasisi’s “Tribute to Prince Gbenga Adeboye (1959-2003)” at <http://nigeriaworld.com/articles/2003/may/262.html> and an anonymous post on My Space (<http://www.myspace.com/142014953>) which closely reads like Lasisi’s tribute. Lasisi, a Nigerian-born, London-based journalist actually told me in a telephone conversation that his work was plagiarized. I have sourced more biographical information from a January 1, 2011 conversation with Lasisi, as well as from an article by Ogbonna Amadi and Fred Iwenjora entitled “Musicians wax album for late Adeboye,” *Vanguard*, Saturday, May 10, 2003.

As his bosom friend, Lasisi informs me, Gbenga Adeboye, the son of an Apostolic Church pastor, was visiting Lagos with his father for an annual convention when he listened to an oriki-based program on Radio Lagos. Disappointed that the performer was not as good as himself he made his way to the radio station to see the station management. On seeing him he boldly told him he could perform better than the anchor of the oriki-based program, whereupon, giving him benefit of the doubt, the manager on duty challenged him to prove it. “Once Gbenga performed it, you know he was so gifted, the manager hired him there and then” as a freelancer.⁶⁷ There was no question of his educational level, Lasisi added, “in any case, Gbenga was qualified.” Adeboye had attended Apostolic Primary School, Odo-Okun Modakeke, Ile-Ife. He later moved on to Oramiyan Memorial Grammar School, Ife, before going on to the Teacher Training College, Ipetumodu (Amadi and Iwenjora 2003). While freelancing at Radio Lagos where he launched *Funwontan*, his very popular programme targeted at the station’s Yoruba listening audience, Adeboye “got a job as a ticketing clerk at the Nigeria Airports Authority (now Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria, FAAN)” (Ibid.). For his exceptional oral performances on radio and other media, Adeboye earned various celebratory monikers chiefly “Funwotan” (Yoruba word meaning “hit them” or literally “give them all”); “talking machine”; “talkaholic”; “humour merchant”; “king of comedy” and Jengbentiele 1 of Africa—an unofficial chieftaincy title suggesting Adeboye’s symbolic invincible powers or

⁶⁷ Dare Lasisi graciously discussed his friend Gbenga Adeboye with me in two separate telephone interviews and several emails in the first week of January, 2011. Being Yoruba like Adeboye, he also provided context for my appreciation of Adeboye’s work. His familiarity with the text was evident in his impromptu recall of several lines during our conversations.

indestructibility. Yet issues of Adeboye's locality, limitations of operating essentially in the Yoruba language, and not necessarily having a national media platform circumscribed his achievement. Sadly, the politics of a national media platform is intricately tied to the complex dimensions of censorship and the politics of circulation of popular cultural artefacts in the postcolony. Even when television and radio stations are notorious for copyright violations and none payment of royalties to artistes whose works sustain their stations, they hardly grant airtime to the kinds of subversive productions I focus on in this study. Punitive measures from advertisers and media moguls whose interests are often tied to those of the corrupt repressive state and the related corporate world, serve as deterrents. But these limitations notwithstanding, Adeboye easily established a cult-like image within his narrow, largely ethnic-oriented fan base in the Lagos-Ibadan axis. Lasisi told me that as a way of testing his popularity Adeboye once sent out a text message to his friends, entertainment reporters, etc., announcing his own death. And as Lasisi writes in the tribute to Adeboye on his death, the oral artist "had the rare privilege, like the great Zik, of Africa of reading his Obituary twice in [his] lifetime before finally kissing the dust six feet below the earth surface" (Ibid.).

It is not so hyperbolic, after all, that in reporting Adeboye's funeral using the traditional Yoruba oriki style which Karin Barber (1991) has written about, Lasisi wrote in his blog:

Your fans, associates and friends trooped out en masse to pay you your well-deserved last respect similar to the honour given to the Chief Priest of

the African shrine and Afrobeat legend, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, and Pillar of sports in Africa, Bashorun Moshood Abiola, before your body was finally lowered six feet below the mother earth on 14 May, 2003.⁶⁸

The comparison to Fela and Abiola, two illustrious sons of the Yoruba—and Nigeria—is not lost on one. It speaks to the highest esteem at which Adeboye was held. A further proof of this was the waxing of a special album to celebrate him after his death. The 2003 album featured some of the leading lights of the Yoruba musical world such as Fuji artiste, Wasiu Alabi Pasuma, and Gbenga Adewusi. The production “also [had] on parade, musical heavyweights like Yinka Ayefele, Lanre Atorishe and members of the Federation of Independent Broadcasters Association of Nigeria (FIBAN)” (Amadi and Iwenjora 2003). The *Vanguard* reporters further inform that Gbenga Adewusi, coordinator of the album project, stressed that the album was the musicians’ “own way of saying bye to a fallen and deserving colleague, one whose contribution to the development of the entertainment industry is unparalleled” (Ibid.). And if any further proof of Adeboye’s “unparalleled” artistry was needed, Lasisi offers more revealing insight into Adeboye’s verbal dexterity in his tribute, as he recalled a particular performance he (Lasisi) witnessed:

[Y]ou were the anchorman/MC at the colourful event organized at the “earthly paradise” of the celebrant at Ikoyi, and the king of Afrobeat, Femi Anikulapo-Kuti also performed at the birthday bash that attracted “who is who” in Nigeria. You [so] held the invited guests, mostly super-rich Nigerians and government officials, spell-bound with your ever-fresh rib-

⁶⁸ See <http://www.myspace.com/142014953> Web. September 20, 2010.

staining jokes that it nearly escaped my mind to accomplish interview appointments with some of the invited guests as a bloody reporter!! At the event, a thought suddenly flashed through my mind thus: 'so the rich also laugh to the point of crying!' You caused it, making the rich to fall to the edge of their seats at the 'eat-till-you-die' birthday party. (Ibid.)

It is this wealth of humour, also celebrated by Obadare (2009) that Adeboye brings to bear on his album *Pasan oro (Tongue Lash)*, especially on the hit track “Guess the Caller.”⁶⁹

A memorably dramatic, and perhaps most caustic satire against General Sani Abacha existing in popular culture in Nigeria, “Guess the Caller” is Adeboye’s imagined unusual telephone conversation with the dead dictator serving time in Hell. A hybrid of sorts that combines yabis, spoken word, sing-song, occasional musical accompaniment, techniques of radio drama, etc., “Guess the Caller!” is not only different in Adeboye’s corpus, it shows the multi-talented artiste at his creative best. But given Jonathan Haynes’ (2003) overview of the work of the other Gbenga (Adewusi) who interestingly enough has been described as Adeboye’s “foremost friend”⁷⁰ by prominent Nigerian Entertainment journalist and editor at *Vanguard* newspaper, Ogonna Amadi, it appears that Adeboye borrowed the style for “Guess the Caller” from Adewusi. But beyond that, in

⁶⁹ I first learnt of *Pasan Oro* through Mike Jimoh, a friend and colleague who worked with me at the arts and culture desk of *The Post Express* newspaper in Lagos at the turn of the 1990s, and was interested in reviewing it. We searched for it all over Lagos and found a miserable cassette copy in a remote dusty shop in the suburbs of Lagos. Regrettably, I lost the copy, and had a hard time replacing the cassette. A friend and radio deejay in Lagos managed to track for me, a reproduced CD copy in 2009.

⁷⁰ See Ogonna Amadi and Iwenjora, Fred. “Musicians wax album for late Adeboye,” *Vanguard*, Saturday, May 10, 2003. <http://news.biafranigeriaworld.com/archive/2003/may/10/0085.html> Web. June 11, 2010.

locating Adewusi's yabis ideology cum aesthetics within Yoruba *ewi* culture, Haynes (2003) provides an illuminating outline of a common cultural thread which links both Adeboye and Fela's poetics that needs to be quoted at length:

The video *Maradona* was preceded by an audio-cassette tape of Adewusi performing a diatribe against the annulment [of June 12 election] in the chanted poetic form known as *ewi*, which exaggerates the tonal patterns of Yoruba and adds rhythmic emphasis and a loosely co-ordinated musical accompaniment. Adewusi was working in a modern line of *ewi* performance disseminated by the mass media. Olanrewaju Adepoju, one of the founders of this modern tradition, was the first to employ musical accompaniment and the first to establish his own record label (Waterman, 1990: 18-19); he also pioneered the application of the form to national politics in the 1970s and 1980s, supporting the Yoruba leader Chief Obafemi Awolowo against the government of President Shehu Shagari, which led to his frequent arrest. [...] During the 1993 crisis, at the same time Adewusi made his cassette, a number of popular Yoruba performers (notably Fuji musicians) released radical songs denouncing the annulment, and a *ewi* was also produced by Gbenga Adeboye. These could be heard everywhere in the streets, taxis, bars, and homes of western Nigeria. (79)

This extended quotation reiterates the notion that the Yoruba culture-rooted artistes recognized here borrowed from the same tradition at varying degrees or style inaugurated by Olanrewaju Adepoju. But greater illumination of Adeboye's debt to the tradition via Adewusi's stylistic approach emerges from Haynes'

further analysis of Adewusi's other work, *Gongo so ni Nigeria* ("There is turmoil in Nigeria"). According to Haynes (2003):

At the beginning the ewi performance is also cast as a television call-in show, 'Hello, Olodumare' (the Yoruba word for God), with Adewusi talking to God on the telephone, complaining about Nigeria's problems. He avails himself of the bard's traditional freedom to mock, insult, and curse. (80)

Haynes (2003) informs, too, that the musical video alludes to many scandals including "Babangida's wife's alleged involvement in cocaine smuggling" (one of the floating street stories I discussed in Chapter Three, and that "The [agitprop] video is so permeated by documentary news footage that Adewusi appears as a kind of newscaster (80)" Haynes (2003) also adds that:

The second of the two ewi [sections of the video] also makes abundant use of political cartoons and frequently shows magazine covers or newspaper headlines from the opposition press—*The News*, *Newswatch*, *Tell*, *Punch*, [...] *African Guardian*, and Abiola's own paper, the *Concord*--as it recounts the scandalous situations they covered so bravely. (81)

What emerges from Haynes' discussion of Adewusi's works, therefore, is the artiste's well-laid out plan for a trilogy. While Adewusi executed the first two parts—*Maradona: Babangida Must Go* and *Gongo so ni Nigeria* ("There is turmoil in Nigeria") — respectively covering the Babangida dictatorship and the Sonekan Interim National Government—he did not accomplish the third sequel meant to focus on the Abacha regime which, as Haynes reports, Adewusi had told

him in a personal communication in Lagos in 1997 he would do. The reasons for Adewusi's back-down and subsequent exile included the repression he suffered on account of the initial videos as Haynes (2003) reports; he was arrested in 1993 and fled abroad when he was released (84). Adewusi further testifies that "it was too dangerous for video marketers in Lagos to display it." And Haynes informs that although "[a] poster for the video (under its alternative title, *Babangida Must Go*) still adorned the offices of Bayowa Films Production in Lagos [Adewusi's production company] all copies of the film had been removed to safety elsewhere (Ibid.)"

Evidently then, Gbenga Adebayo seized the opportunity created by Adewusi's success with the uncompleted trilogy to produce and release *Pasan oro*, an audio cassette (and later in compact disc)—a diatribe against the Abacha regime in the Yoruba *ewi* tradition blazed by Olanrewaju Adepaju and reinvented by Adewusi. In Adebayo's hit track in the album, "Guess the Caller" the oral narrative, trapped in new media technology (audio cassette and compact disc), and following Adewusi's footsteps, reconstructs recent social history in a mythical fashion. He adopts the telephone conversation motif, and like the singer of tales "builds his oral performance on the stable skeleton of narrative" (Lord 1964: 99) as he appropriates details from the print media reports of salient episodes during General Abacha's reign of terror from 1995-1998.

The plot is simple: The composition opens with the Nigerian national anthem as if the president were about to make a state of the nation broadcast; this is quickly followed by the familiar greeting associated with presidential

broadcasts or coup announcements in Nigeria: “Fellow Nigerians.” A cacophony of voices in major Nigerian languages respond, and Adeboye’s voice follows, seeking prayers against bad dreams, and declaring that it was only last night that he received in his dream, a phone call from a man who refused to disclose his identity. Then unrolls the narrative: stretching suspension of disbelief or marvelous realism to its utmost limits the telephone conversation ensues between Adeboye and a character he claims was yet to reveal his identity, but which the primary audience familiar with the kernel narrative could easily make out to be Abacha in the precincts of Hell. With the character confirming that he was speaking with the right person (Gbenga Adeboye), he unleashes a list of complaints about his ordeal in a hell-hostel which he shares with other criminals; notorious armed robbers such as Babatunde Folurunso, Laurence Anini, Oyenusi,⁷¹ etc., who “use the power of seniority” to torture him regularly. They would beat him with “two ways adaptor koboko” (horse whip), pierce him with a knife, and strike him many times with “iron rod before one very black man [the devil] would beat me and peffer⁷² [pepper] my body and put me near fire”; they would also send him to run errands. It was one such day while on errand to fetch water for them from Heaven’s Road with a bucket that he had the opportunity to use a public telephone to call Gbenga Adeboye to complain. He informs Adeboye that his enemies are “very many in [the] heaven area”—an allusion to victims of

⁷¹ In this densely allusive narrative, these names refer to some of the deadliest armed robbers in Nigerian history. Oyenusi, it should be noted, had been the subject of a thriller, *The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenuzi* by the cinematographer Eddie Ugbomah.

⁷² Adeboye so simulates the speech pattern of the speaker who belongs to the Hausa ethnic group of Nigeria with their phonetic challenge of pronouncing certain English consonants which do not exist in the Hausa language.

his brutal dictatorship who often see him and taunt and torture him too. The rest of the narrative comprises Abacha's nasty experience of retributive justice, as the major victims of his dictatorship now in heaven decide to exact vengeance on him. The roll call includes Ken Saro-Wiwa, M.K.O Abiola, Kudirat Abiola, Elegbede⁷³, and great nationalists and statesmen such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, "Baba" [Alfred] Rewane, Obafemi Awolowo, etc. As Abacha informs, they would not realize they were old men and so would join Kudi (Kudirat Abiola) to throw stones at him. As he delivers his lines, harsh siren sounds accompany the statements intermittently.

Following reports of episodes in street and media narratives of the time, Adeboye includes in his unusual narrative style, how Saro-Wiwa avenges his incineration with acid after his execution as discussed earlier. Saro-Wiwa chases Abacha with a noose to hang him, and pours acid on his legs in the process. Abacha references Sergeant Rogers who he would send to torture Kudirat for insulting him in the Afterworld, and echoes the part of *Stubborn Grasshopper* where junior officers would deal with such seniors as Oladipo Diya.

The catalogue of woes which the ex-dictator confesses to suffering in "rotten English" like Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy but inflected with Hausa language are apparent from his following statements: "People like Elegbede, Omatsola chasing me about with bombs; Baba Michael Ajasin cursing me with *arugbon*, *ekpe* (voodoo) every morning before 8 a.m.; MKO Abiola trying to force me to drink one cup of tea which I told MKO I suspect that tea [of being poisoned]. Since

⁷³ An Air Vice Marshall who was Elegbede was shot dead by gunmen on June 19, 1994 at a checkpoint along the Gbagada/Owonshoki expressway in Lagos.

which time you know tea? Won't you do your *Concord* paffer again? When did you become a tea *mai shai*? (Hausa: tea brewer/vendor?]; Ken Saro-Wiwa go carry one rope dey pursue me to put it on my neck, and he carry one small bucket wey I no know wetin dey inside...”

And that is not all: Yar'Adua would follow him about with one long injection—an allusion to the rumoured mode of Yar Adua's death through HIV-infected injection—which Abacha, code-switching between Hausa and pidgin, rejects, and declares that he was not sick—“no headache, no fever”—and so did not require any injection. Also General Idiagbon—strong as if he was on shots of energy-giving injections administered on soldiers—beat him (Abacha) so much he confronted him, asking rhetorically if it was he (Abacha) or Babangida who sent Idiagbon to Saudi Arabia during which the coup plot that toppled Idiagbon was executed. At this juncture, the voice from hell says: “Hello, hello, hello” as if, as Adeboye suggests, the telephone connection had snapped—clearly, a side-kick to Nigeria's erratic GSM service which nearly drives Mr. Williams (Mr. Ibu) mad in the Nollywood film *GSM*, referred to earlier.

On resuming the conversation, Abacha seeks to know what is happening on earth; he enquires about his successor, Abubakar, and is disappointed that he had handed over to a democratic regime led by Obasanjo, and ironically declares: “Over my dead body”—an expression of hubris by a man who was not only dead and incapacitated but was in hell. Abacha also asks about his henchmen such as Brigadier Marwa, former Governor of Lagos State. At this point, the storyteller makes direct reference to the role of street stories in postcolonial governance as

Abacha says: “Some people dey spread the rumours say when it remain five days [to the end of his reign] he spend 560 million [naira]. God go bless her.” In response to the wrong ascription of female pronoun to man Adeboye asks: “Him or her?” To which Abacha retorts: “Wetin concern me with English? We dey talk about money and power you dey talk about English.” (What is his business with the correct English expression when he was more concerned with money?) Here the sarcasm reminds one of a similar scene in *Stubborn Grasshopper* where Abacha shuns his speech coach who was teaching him pronunciation before an important state broadcast. Adeboye here appropriates the street discourse about Abacha’s aversion to any intellectual exercise or standard. Rather ridiculously, Abacha prays Allah (God) to “just give me seven days make I go complete all uncompleted projects!”

The roll call then continues: he asks about Sgt Rogers, and critical members of the opposition such as Gani Fawehinmi about whom he declares: “I hate him”; [Frank] Kokori, [Olisa] Agbokoba, Fredrick Faseun, “stupid boy” [Femi] Falana, Beko [Ransome-Kuti], Mayegun, Opadokun, [Chris] Anyanwu, Wole Soyinka, Lam Adesina. He qualifies all of them as “so so people wey dey trouble my life” and asks if they were in jail? To which Adeboye answers in the negative, to Abacha’s frustration. Abacha asks of the NADECO chieftain, Abraham Adesanya, and is told: “He is Ok.” Thereupon he says the old man had supernatural powers that enabled him to defy the rain of bullets on his car by Sgt Rogers and members of the Strike Force. “I trust him [Adesanya]” says Abacha,

“Mai magani ... The man get juju o... Too much. He waste our bullet. Millions of bullet.”⁷⁴

The rest of the narrative reels out more names along a bifurcated format that separates Abacha men from members of the opposition. Another salient point is Abacha’s enquiry about the musicians who played for him at the Two million Man March: “What about my musicians wey played for me?” he asks to loud background music in the form of leading Afro-juju musician Sir Shina Peters’ style “Tell them I miss them,” Abacha adds, then shifts his attention to his family and more money matters: “What about my wife and my fat account? The money still dey?” he asks, eager to confirm that his loot was still intact.

To return to that overstretching of the desire to believe, Adeboye here interjects that he did not know who he was speaking with. To which Abacha responds in a way that further enables the storyteller to lampoon him ironically for his conceit that Adeboye ought to have recognized his voice and speech mannerisms: “You no know my voice? Kai, shegay, Gbenga Adeboye, damburugba! [Hausa: exclamation of surprise and swearing.] If you no know my voice u no recognize me? If you no know my voice you no fit judgement with my statement?”⁷⁵ Moving beyond the conceit, Abacha plays the sympathy card,

⁷⁴ This episode reminds one of the visual versions in *Stubborn Grasshopper*, where the NADECO chieftain was picking up shattered pieces of glasses as the Strike Force rained bullets on his car. The interest in this episode in these popular cultural productions is attributable to its dramatic quality, the element of the supernatural which not only derived from the oral tradition but which the audience loves, and the fact that the hero defies the autocrat in spite of the latter’s intimidating apparatuses of violence.

⁷⁵ One only needs to listen to Adeboye’s delivery of these lines in the unmistakable Hausa intonation, and speech mannerisms of Abacha to appreciate the artist’s exceptional performance skills. This is an instance when Ruth Finegan’s declaration concerning transcripts of oral performances rings loudly: “the bare words cannot be left to speak for themselves” (*Oral Literature in Africa* 1970: 15).

echoing the street celebration of his death: “That’s how I hear the day wey I die, all of you including those who no sabi to drink, drink, take celebrate.” Then he ends on a cursing note: “God punish you all one by one.” He hardly completes the statement when he comes under attack again from his victims, and resumes drawing attention to the weapons the opposition is unleashing against him: “Hai, wait, see dem don dey come again dem with cutlass, *jigga*, shovel, tea, whistle needle, bucket, tea...the wound they inflicted on me last week never heal, dem wan put another one.” [The wound they inflicted on him last week hasn’t healed they are inflicting fresh ones!]

As the story winds down, Abacha calls attention to Fela holding him from escaping so that he can receive maximum punishment from his victims. Adeboye at this point switches to the voice of the late Afrobeat King, singing one of his most acerbic verbal attacks on the military: “Zombie!” Leading the final onslaught on Abacha is Saro-Wiwa, bearing a bucket that a deluded fallen dictator still commands him to open. But it is too late as Saro-Wiwa pours acid on Abacha who screams, pointing to the skeleton on the burned part of his body—his leg.

While Abacha’s voice fades, Abiola’s rises, so ingeniously imitated by Adeboye complete with his stammer and proverbial manner that echo Chief Kash’s speech style in *Stubborn Grasshopper*. In the short telephone exchange that sharply contrasts with the preceding caustic section on Abacha, Abiola asks Adeboye not to mind the “*were*” (Yoruba for “mad man”) and “the stupid man”—that is Abacha. Abiola follows with a torrent of proverbs. Here, the storyteller uses Abiola’s closing statements delivered in a mixture of Yoruba and English to

moralize on the story. The narrator combines wisecracks from both traditions (Yoruba and English) in a series of quotations from sources as wide as the English playwright and poet, Ben Jonson (“As a man brews so shall he drink”) ⁷⁶ and Euripides, the great Greek dramatic poet. The series of pithy sayings that he delivers include: “He who makes a law to destroy a cause, by his own law shall he surely die”; “There is no need to hang for the last judgement, it takes place everyday”; “It is better to do good because God gives each his due at the time allotted” (Euripides). Abiola ends on a triple note: First, he informs Adeboye that he is enjoying [in heaven], that Nigeria’s foremost female activist Funmilayo Ransome Kuti (Fela’s mother), would not let him go close to women there, a veiled critique of Abiola’s alleged passion for women as a polygamist. Second, he sends a goodwill message to Nigerians, asking Adeboye to tell them he loves them all. Third and finally, Abiola jocularly tells Adeboye that the currency used in heaven is not the same as that used on earth and so he wouldn’t be able to send him some money, but directs Adeboye to reach out to his sons, Kola and Deji for patronage.⁷⁷

In this intricately plotted, deftly performed narrative that borrows extensively from street stories around Nigeria’s 1990s political crises cum tyrannical reign of Sani Abacha, the dialectical relationship between citizens and

⁷⁶ *Every Man in His Humour* 2007 [1598], Act II, Sc. i.

⁷⁷ We might read this statement as an indication of the warm relationship between Adeboye and Abiola, and the latter’s possible role as Adeboye’s patron while he was alive. Indeed, Adeboye’s friend, Lasisi, informs me that he once attended a party hosted by Abiola for his son Kola, where Adeboye was the Master of Ceremony and cracked some jokes that so delighted Abiola he acknowledged it openly. Seen from this perspective, it is possible to see Adeboye’s satire against Abacha as born out of righteous activism and a desire to avenge the travails of a billionaire patron in the hands of a cruel general. More so when it is realized that Abiola was a celebrated philanthropist and art patron. The same dual consciousness may have informed Okosuns’ critique too.

postcolonial dictatorship clearly emerges. Although the narrative is a rehash of salient episodes in Nigeria during that period as evidenced in the preceding chapters, and my cross-references to *Stubborn Grasshopper* here particularly bear out, Adeboye manages to sustain the audience's attention, forcing us to laugh in spite of ourselves and in spite of the grim socialities he performs.⁷⁸ There-in partly rests Adeboye's success, for as Obadare (2009) notes concerning "Guess the Caller,"

Those who listened to this broadside invariably quivered with laughter, clearly enjoying Adeboye's caricaturing of Abacha's tyrannical era. It was not just a telling critique/reminder of Abacha's tyranny; it was also, among other things, a discourse, a 'communication', as well as a celebration of the relief that was felt by Nigerians in the light of the sudden, if totally gratifying, collapse of Abacha's homicidal authoritarianism.

There is no gainsaying the fact that Adeboye set out to celebrate the collapse of the evil regime. Like a griot, he raises a shared experience beyond the common fare, drawing as it were, from the Yoruba worldview which Wole Soyinka has pointed out, recognizes that: "[p]ast, present and future being so pertinently conceived and woven into Yoruba world view, the element of eternity which is the god's prerogative does not have the same quality of remoteness

⁷⁸ Interestingly, Obadare (2009) ruminates that "Most accounts of the grim existential reality in African countries conclude by noting that, even amid the all-pervading gloom, the African's zest for life remains palpable. This seemingly unquenchable gaiety is noted, for instance, in people's capacity for humour and laughter. A 2003 *New Scientist* survey of over 65 countries adjudged Nigerians to be the happiest people in the world. How is this seeming paradox, of vivacity amid anomie, to be explained, and of what sociological import, if any, is it? Why does laughter constantly reverberate in spaces and places where everyone (including those laughing) agrees there is little or nothing to laugh about?" (243)

which it has in Christian or Buddhist culture” (*Myth* 143). Thus, Adeboye collapses the ‘distance’ between the living and the dead in a way that evokes the “sense of order and continuity of experience” associated with “Yoruba world-view, like that of many other African peoples” (Oladipo 2002: 157). He deploys his polylingual and polyvocal gifts as do all great oral artists in a way that unwittingly acknowledges Pittam’s (1994) thesis that “[w]hen we use voice to communicate we are engaging in social interaction” (1).⁷⁹ Adeboye’s appropriation of contemporary socio-political realities transcends the yabis tradition most eloquently exemplified by Fela’s works,⁸⁰ and coheres with a strategy also used by artistes who perform in other musical genres in Yoruba culture such as “Fuji,” and thrive more in the city (Olorunyomi and Osha 1999). Quite instructively, Funsho Aina informs us in his essay, “A Passion for Sleaze,” that “Fuji musicians pick their lyrics from slangs that are being uttered in motor parks, brothels and the markets, hence the sleazy nature of the music.”⁸¹ Rooted in the same culture that produces Fuji and Juju⁸² music and being a prominent member of the artistic community as evident in the participation of members of this community in his funeral ceremonies,⁸³ Adeboye appreciated the significance

⁷⁹ Chukwuma Azuonye (1980) has theorized in his study of Kaalu Igirigiri, an Ohafia Igbo singer of tales, that “whether or not the singer employs the services of a chorus-man, he will normally make use in his performance of four distinct voices recognized by the hearers as one of the chief means of highlighting specific types of themes” (52). As if describing Adeboye’s performance, Azuonye states that: “[t]he narrative voice [also known as “the basic voice”] is interspersed by the lyric, the invocative, and the oratorical voices” (53).

⁸⁰ Indeed one of Fela’s regular club nights at Afrika Shrine that I used to attend in the early nineties was called “Yabis Night.”

⁸¹ See Funsho Aina, “A Passion for Sleaze,” *Tempo* magazine, July 25, 1996. 18-19.

⁸² For more on Juju brand of music see Waterman 1999, 1994, and Barber and Waterman 1995. A contrastive feature of this brand is that it is often used in praise singing.

⁸³ See Ogbonna Amadi and Fred Iwenjora, “Musicians wax album for late Adeboye,” *Vanguard*, Saturday, May 10, 2003. <http://news.biafranigeriaworld.com/archive/2003/may/10/0085.html> Web. June 11, 2010.

of embedding street stories in his performance for political ends. Besides, he understood the commercial value or of such experimentation; so that one can say that his art was driven by social consciousness as well as the desire to profit from his work. The clearest proof of this hypothesis is the fact that Adeboye seized the opportunity of the envisaged success of his album *Pasan Oro* due to the topicality of its hit track “Guess the Caller” and unusual style, to insert commercials advertising his services. Aware of the potential of this gimmick to put off the audience, he adopts an arresting preacher-man’s style, opening the insert with “Glory be to God in the highest...” and then having a female accompanist translate his English expressions into Yoruba as is the standard fare under that gospel genre in Nigeria. The feeling one gets listening to him is like watching an interesting television program or listening to a compelling radio program that is punctuated at critical moments with commercial breaks. In order to achieve this effect, Adeboye clearly understood his medium, the message and how to manipulate the performance and production process. For as McCaffery (1984) has argued,

Realizing that the tape recorder provides the possibility of a secondary orality predicated upon a graphism (tape; in fact, is but another system of writing where writing is described as any semiotic system of storage) then we can appreciate other immediate advantages: tape liberates composition from the athletic sequentiality of the human body, pieces may be edited, cutting in effect, becomes the potential compositional basis in which time

segments can be arranged and rearranged outside of real time performance” (90).

Adeboye exploits this process to produce virtuoso performance in *Pasan Oro*, aware that as Okpewho (1979) remarks, “one must distinguish the ‘traditional’ context from the recording studio” (59). Adeboye’s use of “cassette technology” for packaging and circulating his subversive political discourse is informed by the fact that, in Haynes’ (2003) words, “[c]assette technology has enormous radical potential—because it is so cheap, mobile, and dispersed, the state apparatus can hardly control it” (77). But the state apparatuses appear to have succeeded in driving *Pasan Oro* underground, or even driving it out of circulation. Adeboye’s close friend and journalist, Dare Lasisi told me in a private correspondence that he had heard unconfirmed claims that copies of the work were seized and others bought off the shelves when it was released around 1999,⁸⁴ and Adeboye was scared to reproduce more copies before his death. But since Adeboye’s death, *Pasan Oro* and his other works have been repackaged into compact discs either by the administrators of his estate or Nigeria’s indefatigable criminal piracy network.⁸⁵

The continued interest in Adeboye’s works point to their relevance and his competencies in socio-linguistic terms⁸⁶ as well as to the fact that his artistic and

⁸⁴ Regrettably, all efforts to establish the date *Pasan Oro* was released did not yield a positive result. But Lasisi, Adeboye’s friend and a close follower of his career, told me it may have been released in 1999. The current affairs references in the work also suggest 1999 as the possible release date.

⁸⁵ As a matter of fact, although copies of the repackaged *Pasan Oro* are not easily available, I managed to get two different packaging of the same work in Lagos; one produced and marketed by Queen Omolara Adeboye Productions run by Adeboye’s widow, the other produced somewhere in the Ketu suburb of Lagos.

⁸⁶ See Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981. 227.

business ingenuity combined to establish him as one of the most sought-after artistes in his community, in life and in death. His grounding in the culture of his people, and his mastery of “forms of talk”⁸⁷—radio talk in this instance—required in his artistic production have combined to make his work, of all the texts studied in this project, the one that most approximates traditional oral performance in Africa. In performing the nation in “Guess the Caller” Adeboye deploys appropriate textual strategies, performance aesthetics, and accompanists who interject apt words or phrases at apposite moments in a complex interactional framework to aid the oral artist and to drive the narrative. Beyond the traditional setting of the oral performance in Africa where the artist performs before a general audience, in “Guess the Caller,” Adeboye’s primary audience appear to be his accompanists—one of whom he calls Shina; they serve the dual roles of accompanists and accomplices in the conspiracy theories the narrator explores in the narrative. It is therefore partly the interaction of sensibilities between the narrator and the accompanists as experienced in the responses of the latter throughout the narrative that encourages me, following Dennis Tedlock (1977), to see Adeboye’s performance as ethnopoetics or dramatic poetry.⁸⁸ Thus, the general audience’s reception of the final text in its recorded format is, to appropriate Nick Stevenson’s (2002) words in relation to the encoding and decoding of media discourse, “dependent upon cultural and political dispositions, their relationship to the wider frameworks of power and access to mass-produced technology” (42). To fully comprehend the process, let us now examine Sonny

⁸⁷ Ibid. Also see note referencing Chukwuma Azuonye (1990) above.

⁸⁸ I borrow insight and phrases here from Okpewho’s introduction to *The Oral Performance in Africa*, Ed. Isidore Okpewho, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 1990, 3.

Okosuns' contribution to the political project of resisting military dictatorship through a deployment of street narratives into popular musical performance.

Sonny Okosuns: Hidden Agenda, Street Stories, and Battle of the Song

While not much of music can be heard accompanying Gbenga Adeboye's "tongue lashing" in "Guess the Caller" save occasional sounds of sirens and drums—especially in the section on 'Abacha's musicians'—Sonny Okosuns' related adversarial composition against General Babangida's annulment of the June 12 election at once points to his admirable credentials as a musician of note. Compared to Adeboye's musically austere performance and inclination toward "the tale is the thing" performance approach, Okosuns' delivery of the anti-June 12 annulment compositions in *Hidden Agenda* justify Okpewho's (1979) observation that "[t]he traditional bard is to a large extent a music man [...]; side by side with his responsibility to keep faith with words is the desire to deliver a good musical performance" (59).

The two artistes similarly invest their performances with political discourses plucked from the street and popular press in a way that calls to mind Ogola et al's (2009) observation that "[l]argely located within Africa's conurbations, urban popular music gradually became the legitimate site for reflecting and engaging with the anxieties and dilemmas of Africa's postcolonial existence" (204). But then there are differences in the two artistes' treatment of those street political discourses, anxieties and dilemmas, attributable of course to their varying backgrounds and competencies. While Adeboye began as a broadcaster, comedian and master of ceremonies (also known as "talk machine")

and ventured into music along the line, Okosuns was exposed early to music both at home and at the church as a chorister, after the family moved from Benin City where he was born on January 1, 1947, to Enugu where they worshipped at the Holy Ghost cathedral.⁸⁹ Okosuns was born in Benin to parents who were traditional musicians and church-goers. He was also exposed early to the theatre, making his first appearance as an artiste as an actor at the age of 18 with the Eastern Nigerian Theatre.⁹⁰ Even though he dropped out of school after his primary education, he reportedly succeeded in bagging three honorary doctorate degrees as well as being honoured with five chieftaincy titles.⁹¹ His passion for music got the better part of him as he taught himself to play the guitar, and struck out for a career in music in his youth. While he grew up under parents who were traditional musicians, Okosuns confesses that: “in the early days when [he] was learning to play the guitar,” he was one of the many Nigerian youths “who were growing our hair and moustache to look like Cliff Richard and Elvis Presley...and we were wearing tight trousers designed to look like Elvis though we were

⁸⁹ A different source claims that Okosuns “singing career began as a chorister in the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim” (See “Sonny Okosuns (1947 - 2008)” Thursday, June 05, 2008, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NaijaExcel/message/798>, originally published at [http://www.guardiannewsngr.com/editorial_opinion/article01//indexn2_html?pdate=050608&ptitle=SonnyOkosuns\(1947-2008](http://www.guardiannewsngr.com/editorial_opinion/article01//indexn2_html?pdate=050608&ptitle=SonnyOkosuns(1947-2008) Web. September 20, 2010.

⁹⁰ See Graeme Ewens, “Obituary: Sonny Okosuns (1947 - 2008),” *The Guardian*, (UK) Monday, 4 August, 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/aug/04/popandrock.nigeria> Web. May 15, 2010. I have pieced together Okosuns biography from three *other* internet sources: Rohan B Preston, “Okosuns’ Backbeat Drums up Talk of Revolution,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 12, 1994, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1994-07-12/news/9407120285_1_reggae-backup-singers-contemporary-african-music Web. March 2009. Douglas Martin, “Sonny Okosuns, 61, Musician With Message, Is Dead,” June 25, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/25/arts/music/25okosuns.html> Web. August 11, 2010; and “Sonny Okosuns (1947 - 2008),” *The Guardian* (Lagos), Thursday, June 05, 2008. See: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NaijaExcel/message/798> Web. September 20, 2010.

⁹¹ Mohammed Murtala Kamara, “Nigeria’s icon Sonny Okosuns dies,” *AfricaNews*, 27 May, 2008, http://www.africanews.com/site/list_messages/18501 Web. March 12, 2009.

black.”⁹² Exposed to both Western and African traditional music forms, Okosuns produced a unique blend of music that not only paid tribute to the double heritage, but so became his signature that anyone familiar with this style could identify it whenever they overheard any work by him playing. He developed his unique style succinctly described by Martin (2008) as “a catchy, rock-inflected cocktail of funk, reggae, Afrobeat and more” from playing with various local bands and groups such as Postmen (1962), Paperback Ltd—of which he was the band leader (1972), before finally arriving at the signature name for it, Ozzidi, as both the new name of the band and “a personal pan-African philosophy of liberation” (Ewens 2008). So impressive was this style that the jury is unanimous on its verdict about it: Jon Pareles reviewing a 1988 live performance of the Ozziddi King in the US was quoted as saying that Okosuns delivered his freedom songs “with a soul singer’s gritty urgency” (Martin 2008); Rohan B. Preston reviewing another performance of Okosuns for the *Chicago Tribune* on July 12, 1994 was struck by the “insurrectionary raunch” of his tunes which “were often as incendiary as they were danceable,” adding: “Surprisingly, the dance aesthetics of his international mix did not detract from his political potency.”

It must be noted that the programmatic route to his epiphany with *Ozziddism* included a period of ‘tutelage’ under the Nigerian legendary guitarist, visual artist, showbiz showboy and self-styled Ekessa (music) King, Sir Victor Uwaifo. Clearly, Uwaifo’s style rubbed off on Ozziddi King in his evolution of a new, revolutionary persona and a musical form that blended his traditional Ishan

⁹² “Sonny Okosun—Power to the People,” a short documentary posted on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Weq4v99v2Mg> Web. December 12, 2010.

sounds, “reggae and soft rock-inflected form of highlife”⁹³ Throwing more light on the evolution of Okosuns, *The Guardian* (Lagos) writes that “‘Ozzidi’ [was] described as ‘a style of music that was [Okosuns’] own vision’ by former and widely respected music producer, Odion Iruoje,” and that “Ozzi also means, in approximate terms, ‘the message’ in Igbo language.” The paper also reveals that:

The philosophy of Ozziddism was encapsulated in Okosuns’ first album of the same name released in 1976. Thenceforth he became, by popular acclaim, the ‘Ozziddi King.’ He lived up to this acclamation with the release of several successful albums including *African Soldier*, *Third World*, *Fire in Soweto*, *Revolution*, and *Liberation* in which he condemned and praised as need be, the acts of persons and authorities here and elsewhere. (Ibid.)

Okosuns use of the Igbo language to coin his own personal philosophy as a messenger of truth and change, as well as the name of his band, was only part of his larger gift as a polyglot. Like Adeboye who spoke various languages—Yoruba, English, Arabic, Hausa—Okosuns “sang in his parents’ language Ishan, as well as [in] Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba” but “made his mark with English-language songs such as *Fire in Soweto* (1978), *Papa’s Land* (1977), *No More Wars* (1981), *Mother and Child* (1982), *Togetherness* (1983), *Which Way Nigeria?* (1984) and the compilation *Liberation*” (Ewens 2008).

As the titles of the hit albums suggest, Okosuns music is unapologetically political, and to complement the battle songs which he deployed in the campaign against apartheid, and later against Nigeria’s corrupt rulers, he adopted costumes

⁹³ Ibid.

inspired by Zulu warriors of South Africa together with heroic dance steps. Not surprising, therefore, the song “Fire in Soweto” became “an underground hit in southern Africa during the late 1970s, and although EMI did not promote it, they sub-licensed it to the London-based Oti label, which established it as a pan-African bestseller” (Ewens 2008). Cognizant of this fact, Martin (2008) in his Obituary for Okosuns entitled “Sonny Okosuns, 61, Musician With Message, Is Dead,” and published in *The New York Times*, emphasizes that: “Mr. Okosuns popularized liberation music well ahead of any of his countrymen. But his message was not radical, like that of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, a dissident songwriter who directly challenged the government.” Okosuns shared more than a revolutionary temperament with his contemporary and compatriot, Fela; he also shared at least three other things with the Afrobeat King: first, the same album cover designer, Lemi Ghariokwu, who designed the radical cover of *Hidden Agenda* featuring a faceless General bearing a box draped in map of Nigeria with the inscription “HIDDEN AGENDA” literally leaping out of the front-end of the box. Second, they both operated a commune-style private residence for household members and devotees, including homeless, less privileged youngsters from “all walks of life,” to use an apposite cliché. Third, like Fela too who married 27 women simultaneously (Collins 2009: 72)⁹⁴, Okosuns was reported to have also had “complicated involvement with many women, at least two of whom he

⁹⁴ Collins states that although traditional polygamy is recognized in Ghana and that Fela conducted the well-publicized customary multiple marriage in Lagos on February 20, 1978, it was not “intended to provide a harem” (72) but to enable Fela to return to Ghana with the women (his band girls) as official wives. The women had been refused entry by the Ghanaian military government of General Acheampong because of Fela’s anti-military stance and music; afterwards, “Fela was completely banned from entering Ghana until Flight-Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings and his Armed Forces Revolutionary Council overthrew the unpopular Acheampong-Akuffo regime in mid -1979” (74).

married—and these simultaneously” (Martin 2008), and was said to have given “his surname to many of the children but did not legally adopt them” (Ibid.).

In recognition of his outstanding protest music, productivity—he waxed about 39 albums—and showmanship, Okosuns earned international recognition, touring the world, meeting world leaders and playing with some of the most celebrated musicians of his era. These included Bob Dylan, Miles Davis, Bruce Springsteen, Rubén Blades, Run-D.M.C., etc., with whom in 1985 he performed on “Sun City,” a benefit project in support of the fight against apartheid. Okosuns remarkable anti-apartheid repertoire and political activism earned him a special invitation to perform at the inauguration ceremony of Nelson Mandela’s as president of a free South Africa in 1994.

But with the end of apartheid, and the reign of brutal dictatorships in Nigeria, Okosuns warrior spirit appeared to be disillusioned, and as Martin (2008) writes, “Okosuns found his popularity ebbing, but he reinvented himself as a gospel performer called Evangelist Sunny Okosuns.” Although he made good in his new calling—“[h]is 1994 album *Songs of Praise* sold almost a million copies” (Ibid.) and won several awards—he could not shut his eyes against Babangida’s political shenanigans. And so just before he released *Songs of Praise* he produced his most directly confrontational political music album, *Hidden Agenda* (1993).

Hidden Agenda is a six-track album that represents Okosuns impassioned intervention in the political turmoil created by General Babangida’s annulment of the June 12 presidential election in Nigeria—an unfortunate historical experience that I show in this dissertation as having the most sustained influence on the

country's street narrative culture, popular press, and cultural production. In this album, Okosuns discards his cautionary gloves and chooses to confront the military dictatorship with bare verbal knuckles. For Okosuns, the annulment of the people's mandate freely expressed through the ballot box was too much of a betrayal to endure without a fight. And so for the six tracks of the album he not only chooses explicit titles, he adopts an unprecedented style to engage the subject matter in the hit track "Political Game" which is my focus on here. Other tracks in the album are: the title track "Hidden Agenda," "Miracle of June 12," and "Political Game," on side A. On the flip side are: "Cry My Beloved...Country; "New Nigeria" and "Let's Be Friends."

Right from the cover of the album, "the Ozziddi King cum evangelist makes no pretense about his "message" or *ozzi* in this somewhat proselytizing work, driven by Okosuns well-known pro-human rights and justice ideological bent as well as his affiliation to the winner of the June 12 election, Abiola. The faceless soldier in the ceremonial green uniform of the Nigerian army—decked in a way that places him in the rank of a general—and bearing a curious gift box symbolizes the military regime of General Babangida carrying the "hidden agenda" which I introduced earlier. The "hidden agenda," it should be recalled, was the widely-held belief that Babangida had a secret plan (agenda) to manipulate the torturous transition process to end in naught, or better still, in his self-succession as president for life. This "agenda" was given concrete shape in street narratives and media discourses in urban Lagos, gaining not just currency but morphing into an epidemic which provoked more political resistance to the

wiles of the self-styled “evil genius”, aka Maradona. So central to the history of the times therefore is the odious term, *hidden agenda* that Okosuns decided to reflect the urgency of his message within the context of the June 12 election annulment and the crisis that ensued, and to use his music to evangelize and win disciples against military dictatorship.

Okosuns’ passion is evident in the fast tempo of the musical accompaniment to his spoken words, not so much lyrics in this context. In the title track, “Hidden Agenda,” his trenchant voice rings through as he seeks to locate the hidden agenda in the middle of Babangida’s phoney “a little to the right,” “a little to the left” of the centre ideology around his creation of the two official political parties for the 1993 elections after sacking hitherto independently formed parties. Okosuns compares Babangida’s political transition process from military to democratic rule to *abracadabra*⁹⁵ (magic), a ploy to “suppress” and to “oppress” the people, and calls for total resistance and retaliation against the people enemy: “It is time to fight” and so the militant chorus: “If you box me I box you/ If you con me I con you,” and so on so forth. While calling for mass action, the political oral poet laments to an alternating Call and Chorus (response) of “Fire” from his female accompanists:

OKOSUNS: Nigeria is now burning on fire. CHORUS: Fire

Democracy is now burning on fire

Justice is now burning on fire

Truth is now burning on fire

Someone chase the devil away

⁹⁵ Ideophone—evoking magical or mysterious ways; a the-more-you-look-the-less-you scenario.

Someone chase out the Satan

June 12 was an election we shall overcome

Deepening meaning with parallelisms and incremental repetitions, some of the oral artist's most potent stylistic devices, Okosuns affirms that "the Miracle of June 12 would never stop to manifest", and references the unprecedented 14 million votes believed to have been cast for M.K.O. Abiola of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) by Nigerians irrespective of ethnicity, religion or creed. It is for these reasons that the election has been generally described as the freest and fairest in Nigerian history, an opportunity for a new beginning in a federation threatened by the confederal battles of the constituting nationalities, including the minorities, for separation.

Significantly, Okosuns declares that "Nigerian press has testified to it," that is, to the Miracle of June 12. The reference to the role of the press at this juncture provides an excellent bridge to transit from a general discussion of the other tracks in the album to the hit track, "Political Game." For it is in this track that Okosuns' wholesale appropriation of street and media narratives around June 12 circulating in Lagos and other parts of the country into his art is most apparent. Aware of possible reprisal from the autocratic state against his person and his work in the form of censorship or arrest as Fela and other civil rights activist had suffered, and the need to evade it as much as possible, Okosuns here makes a lightly veiled attempt to camouflage the dirty "game" and his insurrectionary inclination.

Okosuns creatively deploys the technique of radio commentary and the extended metaphor of soccer, Nigerians favourite sport, to show how much the military under Babangida reduced the country's destiny to a play thing. The choice of soccer as a stylistic device for narrating a critical national is thus a strategy by Okosuns to command the attention of a broad spectrum of the citizenry, knowing that the game defies age grades, gender, and social class. Okosuns constitutes the two teams vying in the symbolically named "Presidential Cup Match" with remarkable knowledge of the dramatis personae in the Nigerian political crisis. The teams are emblematically named Democracy United and Interim Bombers football clubs. The teams are composed along the bifurcated Evil versus Good division that we have so far witnessed in characterization in the street stories, the popular press coverage of the political crises, the representative film texts *Stubborn Grasshopper* and *Saworoide*, and Gbenga Adeboye's quasi-musical telephone conversation with General Abacha in Hell, "Guess the Caller." The familiar 'good' guys and members of the opposition make up Democracy United team, while the usual suspects or villains constitute Interim Bombers.⁹⁶ Against the backcloth of the allegorical parallels of the political game in relation to the historical traumas enshrined in the narratives of June 12 that it deals with, one would think that those familiar with this history would find the work too predictable. But this is not quite the case. As in Adeboye's "Guess the Caller" and other related cultural texts I have analyzed so far, Okosuns "Political Game" is refreshing not so much for its jaded thematic thrust, as in its uncompromising

⁹⁶ There is however a problem with this binary as some of the characters over the period of the crisis crossed from one group to the other, often driven by an opportunistic mentality.

experimentation and unusual aesthetic amplitude and dramatic fervour. In fact, it manages to pull off a surprise, nay absurd, ending with Maradona, captain of Interim Bombers in a crude breach of sportsmanship aborting the game and displacing the referee rather than concede defeat after Abiola telegraphic goal. In ending the match this way, Okosuns drew from a street rhetoric that referred to “IBB’s (Babangida’s) constant shift of the goal post” as part of his ‘hidden agenda’ and convoluted transition program.

A veteran of the protest music tradition, and as one versed in traditional oral performance Okosuns primes his audience for the narrative trip. He prefaces the racy ‘game’ cum commentary with an invitation in the title (and first) track of the album, “Hidden Agenda” to whoever did not know “the hidden agenda” to come and experience it. He compares it to “American wonder,” an urban Nigerian street reference to the astonishing technological advancement or modernity achieved by the US in an age of globalization: “the more you look the less you see.” When he gets to the game proper, the final rituals of beginning the tale become more urgent. “Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,” he greets, stylistically trying to bridge the temporal/spatial setting between him and the virtual audience hearing him on cassette anywhere in the world, “and welcome to this match of the century between Democracy United and Interim Bombers.”

Continuing the introduction, Okosuns adds: “This Presidential Cup Match is coming to you live and direct from the Nigerian Political Stadium, the largest in Africa. My name is Sonny Okosuns. I am your commentator for this great battle of the titans.” For me the “titans” here are beyond the very important players on

the pitch; they include the invisible contenders of the version of the narrative that the oral artist is about to tell. At this juncture, listening to the build-up of the narrative against the background of the pulsating rhythm of the musical accompaniment jolts one into realizing that each line of the narrative fits into a breath group in the same the oral artist organizes his imagined verse lines, sometimes rolling out like a prose poem:

We have over 14 million spectators and special invitees from all over the
world

Waiting and watching anxiously for the kick-off

Before the kick-off let me quickly run through the team list for the two
sides

Then he runs through the list for Democracy United first, from jersey number 1 to jersey number 11 for the full team, and then players on the reserve bench. “Jersey number one goes to Anenih”—chairman of the Social Democratic Party from which Democracy United is largely constituted—says Okosuns calmly, adding others in the numerical order: Lamidi Adedibu, Sam Mbakwe, Balarabe Musa, Femi Falana, Sule Lamido, Beko Ransome-Kuti, Gani Fawehimi, Kingibe—assistant captain and vice-presidential candidate to Abiola in the June 12 election; “MKO Abiloa is wearing jersey number 10; he is captain of the team; he has scored goals throughout this season both at home and abroad.” Iyorchia Ayu is wearing jersey number 11. On the bench are: Abubakar Rimi, “who got wounded in the last match”—that is, disqualified from contesting after Babangida cancelled the initial rounds of preparations for the elections, saying then: “We

know those who would not succeed us but we do not know those who would succeed us.” Bola Tinubu is there too—“very energetic, is running around there, jogging.” Okosuns completes naming the rest of the bench: Anaekwe, AC Agu—Agu is the assistant goal keeper; Lateef Jakande is the Coach, and Manager is Jonathan Zwingina.”

Done with naming the Democracy United squad, Okosuns adds: “Now we move on to Interim Bombers”: Number 1 Jersey is Kusamotu Hamed (the Chairman of the National Republican Party, NRC, which has morphed into Interim Bombers; Clement Akpambgo is number 2—he was the Attorney General under whose guidance the legal frameworks that nullified the election were engineered; Mohammed Bello—also from the judiciary, was the Chief Justice of the Federation then—is wearing jersey number 3; Sylvester Ugo—NRC vice-presidential candidate is wearing jersey number 4. Okosuns’ introduction of Bassey Ikpeme⁹⁷ with a different qualification—“this is the first time I am seeing a woman taking part in a big international match like this. I wonder why they are fielding her. Oh well, I think she is a good player too”—raises questions about gender politics in the society. Other members of the team are: Bashir Tofa—NRC Presidential candidate, “wearing jersey number 6; Chukwumerije, described by Okosuns with an arresting stutter as one who “was wearing...number 9 in the last

⁹⁷ Kunle Amuwo, Nigerian political scientist and Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Ibadan, states that: “Mrs Justice Bassey Ikpeme, the Abuja high court judge who gave relief to the ABN and thereby rose from obscurity to notoriety, was rapidly evacuated out of the country. Made a judge barely six months before, she had worked as a lawyer in the chambers of Akpambgo, the regime’s Justice Minister. A senior military officer rewarded her “courage” with 10,000 US dollars while the regime allegedly paid her 5 million naira (See “General Babangida, Civil Society, and the Military in Nigeria (4): Anatomy of a Personal Rulership Project,” February 2002. http://www.nigerdeltacongress.com/garticles/general_babangida_civil_society%204.htm Web. December 11, 2010). Also published in a book, Amuwo (1995).

match is now 7; he is a fantastic left footer”; then there is Arthur Nzeribe, in Okosuns’ words, “who was the captain of this team but he is not the captain now because Maradona is the captain now, and he is also Coach. Aikhomu—Babangida’s deputy—is wearing number 9; IBB is wearing number 10, also known as Maradona is also the coach; Ada George is wearing number 11.” He continues with the lineup: On the reserve bench are: Yusuf Tijani, then Sonekan, “who is also a fantastic player and an assistant coach”; Sarumi—“he was a member of Democracy United but now he is with Interim Bombers.” Then Nduka Irabor—“he is not actually qualified to be here but I wonder why they are fielding him.” a subtle reference to the role he allegedly played in drafting and circulating the unsigned memo that annulled the June 12 election.⁹⁸ Okosuns then completes the line up by introducing the two linesmen—Wole Soyinka, “fantastic linesman; he is well-known all over the world; and Pascal Bafyau, president of Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) “who is trying to make a name for himself as a good linesman.”

As the match is about to kick off, the tempo of the background music increases a bit, heralding Okosuns’ remark that, “At the centre of the match today is Humphrey Nwosu...he is the referee of today’s match. Any moment from now

⁹⁸ Amuwo (2002) recalls the ostensibly funny circumstances involving Nduka Irabor as follows: In the midst of the ensuing confusion, a sheet of paper, with no letter head, containing a grave message, but undated and unsigned was faxed to all media houses: it was ostensibly passed round State House correspondents by Nduka Irabor who had virtually, by then, taken over image-making and press relations of the presidency from the general’s Chief Press Secretary, Duro Onabule. The regime’s -- or Transition Council’s -- Information Secretary, Uche Chukwumerije was not aware of the curious circular; he threatened a journalist who showed him the circular a court action for rumour-mongering. A few hours later, he was defending the annulment at a press conference in Aso Rock” (Ibid.).

the match will start, and indeed the Interim Bombers kick off with Maradona leading the pack.

What follows is the game proper as all the motions and ding-dongs take place on the pitch and I would skip those details. In reproducing details of Okosuns line up for the match, my intention is to show how comparable the dramatis personae in the dispersed narratives of the Nigerian June 12 political drama are, even as we move from one popular culture format to the other—from the popular press through Nollywood film to popular music. The commonality in characterization is proof of the endemic nature of the street stories about this important chapter in Nigeria’s political history, how the stories circulate, gaining and losing details as they are transmitted from one person to the other across multiple popular culture platforms.

Determined to perform the nation in a most convincing manner, Okosuns deploys his creative arsenal from a variety of sources. Moving from the griot’s tradition in the construction of the story as I suggested earlier, he borrows from the modern radio commentary style⁹⁹ popularized in Nigeria by the late maestro of the genre, Ernest Okonkwo of Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), famous for some of the lines Okosuns appropriates at key moments in the “tension-soaked match” as “the versatile sports commentator whose voice ruled the [Nigerian] air waves for several decades”¹⁰⁰ would say. Amongst Ernest

⁹⁹ Karin Barber (2009) has rightly pointed out that “however it is taken, no oral performance broadcast on national media can be a simple continuation of the mode of local, face-to-face performances” (5).

¹⁰⁰ *African Concord*, Volume 5, Issues 9-21, Concord Press of Nigeria, 1993. Most Nigerians who grew up while Okonkwo was active on radio in the 1970s and 1980s would remember the soccer commentator whose artistry continues to be celebrated, including this indirect tribute by Okosuns. There is a string of remembrance gestures on the internet further celebrating Okonkwo, some

Okonkwo's memorable lines Okosuns deploys is the description of the ball landing on the chest of "indomitable" Adedibu, "standing there like a rock of Gibraltar"; Okosuns also deploys Okonkwo's characteristic line: "he beats one, he beats two... what is he gonna do?"

At the point where the game reaches its climax, Okosuns' voice simulates the tempo; he becomes breathless, and uses technology to simulate Wii Sport-like computer-generated humming sound of fans and spectators in a crowded stadium. When Abiola dribbles his way and scores the thundering voice of Okosuns shouting "it's a goooaaalll" sends some chills down one's spine as if one was watching a real game. At this point, the commentator returns to the singer of tales' narrative mode as he introduces the twist in the tail, chanting the sequence:

What a fantastic goal!

It is fantastic because it was scored at the dying seconds of the game

Precisely sixteen seconds to the end of the match

It is a goal and the end of the match

Oh no... I can see a big drama happening there

I can't believe my eyes...

Maradona has grabbed Nwosu on the neck

And he is slapping him

And he has pulled out a red card from his own pocket

calling for posthumous national honours for him. See for example, the thread on the article "Ernest Okonkwo - The Anchorman That Could" originally written by Iwedi Ojinmah and published at <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/suya-spot/ernest-okonkwo-the-anchorman-that-could-15.html> Recently, Nigeria's notable television drama and Nollywood celebrity Amaka Igwe celebrated Ernest Okonkwo on the social media, Facebook, by inviting memorable lines of Ernest Okonkwo that his fans could recall. Neddless to add: The harvest was stunning, justifying why Okosuns aligned his critical project with Okonkwo's art and game.

And issued Nwosu with a red card
And is pushing him out of the field
And Nwosu is dragging him and pushing him round
Nwosu is going...
Oh, this is the first time I am seeing this kind of thing--
A player issuing a red card to the referee
And the referee is obeying
Referee is mov... [STUTTERING] moving...away from the field
I can see someone is running into the field
From the reserve bench of Interim Bombers
And that's Sonekan
Ah, what is he coming to do?
And Sonekan has stopped, he is discussing with Maradona
He has taken the whistle from Nwosu

And then Okosuns' voice begins to fade as he delivers the final lines:

Oh no, NEPA has taken light
Can you hear me out there?
I think this is a part of the hidden agenda
Already the match is over... [*Voice fades completely*]

By deploying at the end of the text a popular expression—"NEPA has taken light"—used especially in urban Nigeria to describe perennial power outages from the national electric power authority from which the acronym NEPA¹⁰¹ was derived, Okosuns works the metaphor of energy crisis to its limits. It captures the

¹⁰¹ It has been rechristened PHCN (Power Holding Company of Nigeria).

dead end that the annulled June 12 elections plunged the nation into, as well as the challenges confronting citizens of developing countries as they struggle to access the very basic infrastructures for globalization such as energy, and reliable modern technologies such as mobile telecommunications (GSM). At another level, the power outage symbolizes the absolute failure of postcolonial governance in ways that Larkin (2008) has eloquently articulated.¹⁰² The gravity of the situation is supported by Okosuns' use of the technique of piling through the repeated use of conjunction: "and," as well as the use parallel structures as he builds up momentum just before the deflating, closing power outage of the game.

But Okosuns does express optimism for Nigeria's redemption in the two remaining tracks of the album: "New Nigeria" and "Let's be Friends." With the chorus "Sailing along, we go to new Nigeria" in the first of the two songs, and Okosuns vision of a new country where adversaries work together for a common good, and where the likes of Saro-Wiwa would emerge President of the country, the Ozziddi King and evangelist imagines an alternative reality that is better than the nightmare that life under callous dictators and their civilian collaborators has been.

Clearly, Okosuns *Hidden Agenda* shows what happens to narrative as it travels across multiple cultural formations; from the street to the popular press; from the popular press or the street via small media technologies back to the street, and to global new media and liminal cyber sphere such as YouTube, where mixed-media texts enjoy further transnational, transborder circulation. In fact, there is a sense in which the stories sometimes circulate in a typical "give-and-go

¹⁰² See especially the concluding chapter.

sequence” or “tip-tap” fashionable in soccer, to extend the football metaphor used by Okosuns in “Political Game.” This complex circulatory process has raised hopes for the “emancipatory potential of popular cultural forms” (Henderson 2010: 252). Which is why I share Mamadou Diouf’s interest in “narratives competing for hegemony in the public space,” and how these “stories relate to the past, how they are constructed by individuals and communities, and how [they] confront, negotiate, and/or keep attempting to contain, reorient or subordinate other stories to their own narrative(s).”¹⁰³ The political crises in Nigeria in the period under review provide an excellent example of this related but contradictory liaison in popular culture. And I shall quickly demonstrate this before concluding this study.

The State Strikes Back: Dictatorship and small media ‘Coup-optation’

Given the degree of agency we have granted socially conscious postcolonial urban subjects in their desire to resist oppression and domination by the state, it is easy to gloss over or downplay the ways and means by which the state ironically works to co-opt the same popular culture artefacts and their producers into subverting the wishes of the people and maintaining the status quo. We had encountered an example of this (in Chapter Four) in Wole Soyinka’s authoritative report of the Abacha regime’s filming of the execution of

¹⁰³ See the interview Diouf granted Moses Ochonu, “Beyond Western Recognition: History, Memory, Responsibilities,” *The PONTAL Quarterly Forum*, 2, (Nov 2007). <http://www.projectponal.com/pqf/dialogue.html> Web. Dec 29, 2007. Ogola et al (2009) also lend their voice, noting that “[t]hese popular cultural forms often provide spaces for political engagement and remain strategic spaces for dissent,” they “are not exclusively a province of either the subaltern or of subversion.” For indeed “[i]n many countries, they are exploited by both the subaltern and the potentate,” so that “[t]hus shared, they simultaneously contest domination and affirm it” (203).

Saro-Wiwa. Thus it is not only “in the interest of a hegemonic power to suppress dissent through the elimination of narratives that challenge its authoritarianism” (Akoma 2000: 147), it is also in its interest to dominate the public sphere and shape public discourses by exploiting the relatively new apparatuses of popular culture and globalization. In the Nigerian context, the state and her agents did not need a fecund imagination to achieve this objective. They simply took advantage of the small media technology which was gaining grounds through the nascent Nollywood film of the 1990s on the one hand, and on the other, through popular music with its constellation of emergent stars hankering after material success. In other words, it is not only everyday cultural producers in the postcolony who have the prerogative to “creat[e] ... cinematic art based on the philosophy that film and politics are inextricably interwoven” (Ukadike 2003: 126). Under the Abacha regime, Nollywood entered the State House and the video camera there became a potent tool, not just for routine surveillance as is generally recognized with state security, but more. It became a tool for a different kind of home video film aimed at hunting, haunting and *coup-opting*¹⁰⁴ real and perceived enemies of Abacha’s totalitarian regime, and perpetuating its hegemonic control.

¹⁰⁴ As in using coup scare to co-opt or subdue uncooperative, not-so-loyal officers in the army and the opposition as a whole. In fact, during Abacha’s maneuvers toward self-succession through the ballot box, military personnel and public servants were compelled to show proof of their loyalty by wearing badges bearing a portrait of the autocrat. Also, TV sets bearing his image were reportedly shipped in from South Korea (some say Europe) at the time. As Anderson (1997) puts it, “Those supporting the idea of General Abacha continuing in power beyond the scheduled date for handing over to a civilian president are already doing everything they can to show their support for him. Businessmen seeking government contracts, pragmatic politicians and the conservative classes, who believe General Abacha's continued hold on power is a *fait accompli*, already walk around Abuja sporting General Abacha key-chains and lapel-pins. The General's critics say it's all a crude propaganda effort to boost the General's image. Whatever the case, the launch of Abacha TV has led to the question of what's coming next.” (See Hillary Anderson, “‘Abacha TV’ named after Nigeria's leader,” BBC Online, Friday, November 14, 1997. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/despaches/africa/31645.stm> Web. January 5, 2011. This was further proof of how much the regime understood the role of technology in the narrative battle.

The case against the top hierarchy of the military alleged to have participated in plotting the controversial 1997 coup d'état which the press dubbed a "phantom coup" was 'proved' with a strange film show inside Aso Rock Villa, the seat of power in Abuja. At the height of public cynicism about government narrativization of the alleged treasonable coup plot in the media, various groups of Nigerians, including the Nigerian royalty, were invited to Aso Rock to witness the plot as recorded in a short "documentary film." Abacha's Chief of Staff, Al-Mustapha, was said to have secretly recorded the seditious maneuvers of the implicated Generals, including Abacha's Deputy, Lt Gen. Oladipo Diya. In one scene, according to media reports based on interviews with the high profile Nigerians who were privileged to be 'entertained' by the Aso Rock film show, General Diya lay prostrate on the floor, weeping and pleading with Abacha to forgive him when he was shown the visual evidence of his complicity in the alleged coup plot. In other words, the short documentary video film about the coup plot was produced to feature aspects of the alleged plot and to include another filming of the response of the principal suspects while viewing, and after viewing the film. Such a layered presentation reminds one of the uses of "lays" by the oral artist discussed earlier in this study. Besides, in an interesting twist, the theme of the Aso Rock film seems to parody African film makers' adaptation of orature's common 'quest' motif, "where the protagonist," as Thackway (2003) has noted, "faces a series of challenges before accomplishing a specific task" (84). While the quest motif is clearly established in Kelani's *Saworoide*, in the Aso Rock film the quest is for power too and the obstacles to be overcome by the

protagonist are as daunting and as dangerous as those faced by the prince in *Saworoide* or Odysseus with the Cyclops during his homeward journey after the Trojan War in Homer's *Odyssey*.

The historic Aso Rock film resonated again after Abacha's death. Sola Odunfa, reporting on the Justice Oputa-led Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission sittings of 2000 in Lagos for the BBC,¹⁰⁵ which I referred to earlier, states that the five weeks of testimony "proved to be the dominant public attraction in the city." Enamored of spectacle and stories concerning the political elite, the testimonies became even more of a hit with everyday people in Lagos and other parts of the country via television. The intense public interest in the testimonies was partly fuelled by the fact that, as Odunfa reports, "[t]he dramatic video film shot secretly as General Diya knelt and wept before General Abacha to seek forgiveness was shown to the public for the first time at the commission." As Odunfa reports, "General Diya tried to denounce it as fake but his feeble effort was greeted with jeers from the gallery." But "[f]ormer minister Major-General Abdulkarim Adisa, for his part, admitted that he wept and prostrated, begging for pardon before a junior officer." More importantly, Odunfa affirms that: "The spectacle of the two weeping generals has since become the subject of scathing media commentaries on the calibre of some of the military officers who ruled Nigeria for 28 years." Not to mention open street parliamentary sessions on the subject as the people discussed "the news behind the news" arising from the Oputa Panel.

¹⁰⁵ For full text of the report see "Nigeria's weeping generals," BBC Online, Monday, 18 December, 2000, <http://cdnedge.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/1076194.stm> Web. November 4, 2009.

The “Aso Rock film show” as it came to be known, like the partisan, sometimes cloned newspapers and magazines which were produced by the junta to elicit public support, is affiliated to similar *works* by some of the junta’s promoters. Let us quickly consider two of them. First, the Yomi Tokoya episode. One of the most memorable aspects of the Oputa Panel sittings which contributed to its being called a comic show¹⁰⁶ by sections of the media and the public was the scene where one Yomi Tokoya was on the spotlight. According to *The Comet*¹⁰⁷ newspaper report on the panel’s proceedings, “Mustapha, who held the audience [...] spell-bound for close to two hours [regaling them with the machinations of Tokoya], said the government should be wary of the likes of Tokoya because he is an apt totem of those Nigerians called AGIP (Any Government In Power).” The former Chief Security Officer to General Abacha narrated how Tokoya, the founder of a pro-Abacha self-succession group, General Sani Abacha Movement for Peaceful and Successful Transition Programme (GESAM '98), composed a song in honour of Abacha and packaged it in an audio tape which he played in special circles. A notable internet public commentator recalls the Tokoya episode this way: “It took the Oputa Panel to shock Nigerians with the details of how Yomi Tokoya became a spy on Abacha's payroll [and recorded] “the sonorous music album which lyrics basically called on Nigerians to accept an Abacha life rule.”¹⁰⁸ So miffed by this obsequious act was Justice Oputa that he declared that,

¹⁰⁶ See “Tokoya's Comedy at Oputa Panel” ThisDay, September 8, 2001.

¹⁰⁷ Although the newspaper is now defunct, details of the report filed by Bukola Ojeme and Wahab Gbadamosi was originally published as “Abubakar was involved in 1997 coup, says Mustapha,” *The Comet*, Thursday, June 28, 2001, can be found at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Naija-news/message/1435> Web. June 7, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Emmanuel Onuoha, “Re: The Problem with the Igbos,” <http://nigeriaworld.com/articles/2007/jan/041.html> Web. August 12, 2010.

with opportunists and sycophants such as Yomi Tokoya in the corridors of power in the country, he wept for Nigeria. In weeping for Nigeria on the matter the revered retired judge and father of one of Nigeria's most radical musicians, Charlie Boy, drew attention to the abuse of public trust and the *art* of deception through popular culture committed by political monkeyshines.

A second part of the counter-narrative strategy to elicit public support for the junta, and dress Abacha with popular appeal in the streets and win the people's endorsement of the tyrant's self-succession bid, was the Two Million Man March carnival referred to earlier. Coordinated by Daniel Kanu, the organizers recruited some leading Nigerian musicians to perform in Abacha's honour in Abuja—which Gbenga Adeboye alludes to in “Guess the Caller,” thereby calling attention to the “political economy of popular music” (Storey 1996: 93).¹⁰⁹ Writing on the relative success of the state-sponsored music carnival strategy which targeted the Nigeria youth, who consume popular culture productions most, a journalist gushed:

But if I were asked to consider the sea of heads at the rally as a basis for judging its *success* or failure, I would sincerely state that even if Satan had organised the rally, the mere fact of the presence of such a galaxy of musicians and other artists, alone, would have attracted so much people [...] I realised during the Abuja carnival that many of the youths who came to the FCT were lured by the prospect of watching, live, for the first

¹⁰⁹ John Storey (1996) explains this by calling attention to Peter Golding and Graham Murdock's (1991) view on its “focus on the interplay between the symbolic and economic dimensions of public communications [including popular music]. It sets out to show how different ways of financing and organizing cultural production have traceable consequences for the range of discourses and representations in the public domain and for audiences' access to them. (15)

time, such big names as Baba Fry-O, Ras Kimono, Shina Peters and Mike Okri, among other top artists who were earlier advertised by the organisers.¹¹⁰

Thus, the public sphere serves the interest of both the oppressor and the oppressed; like the media, as Zeleza (2009) puts it, it has “the capacity for perpetrating both good and evil, ignorance and fairness, development and destruction” (32). In other words, “the postcolonial relationship [between state and the subjects] is not primarily a relationship of resistance or collaboration but can best be characterized as cohabitation” (Mbembe 1992: 4). The recourse to what James Winter (2007) rightly calls “[c]anned content” (xiii)¹¹¹ of popular culture for propagandistic purposes rearticulates my notion that popular culture provides a site for the formation and contestation of contemporary Nigerian subjectivities and identities. Aware of this fact, Nigeria’s foremost civil rights group, The Democratic Alternative (DA), joined the popular cultural production contestation in the political struggle. Besides numerous publications against tyranny while concurrently championing several street protests, DA produced audio CDs as part of the campaign against the General Abacha dictatorship. Although the insurrectionary CDs did not enjoy the kind of wide exposure that the Aso Rock film, Yomi Tokoya’s composition, and the Daniel Kanu-coordinated Two Million Man March music carnival had, it struck a vital symbolic chord

¹¹⁰ Tom Chiahemen, “That Great March in March, *The Post Express*, March 3, 1998. <http://www.dawodu.com/aluko7.htm> Web. December 2, 2009.

¹¹¹ By this he refers to “films, documentaries and regular television programs” (*Lies the Media tell Us* xiii). For more on the various ways in which the term is used see the subsection of that James Winter’s book, “The Notion of Reflexivity, Verbal Art as Performance, and the Study of Reflexive Language”, p. 90ff

about the creative opposition against tyranny on several fronts and the struggle to control the narrativization of the unfolding national history.

Conclusion

One of the biggest challenges facing artists under the kind of suffocating postcolonial condition experienced in Nigeria is how to engage sociological realities without compromising the artistic integrity of their works by turning the texts into cheap propaganda either against or for the state. The two-pronged options available to the artist is reflected in the radical tendencies in the counter hegemonic texts produced by the film makers and musicians as discussed in this chapter, and in the pro-establishment activities of the other camp represented by their performance at the Two Million Man March carnival. Either way, it is like walking on a trip wire. One way the progressive artists have tried to cope with the dicey situation is to invent refreshing strategies and symbols for performing the nation. So that even when they are working with recognizable conspiracy theories, characters, and episodes in contemporary Nigeria history already textulized in street stories and the popular press, the audience is not bored by their creative efforts.

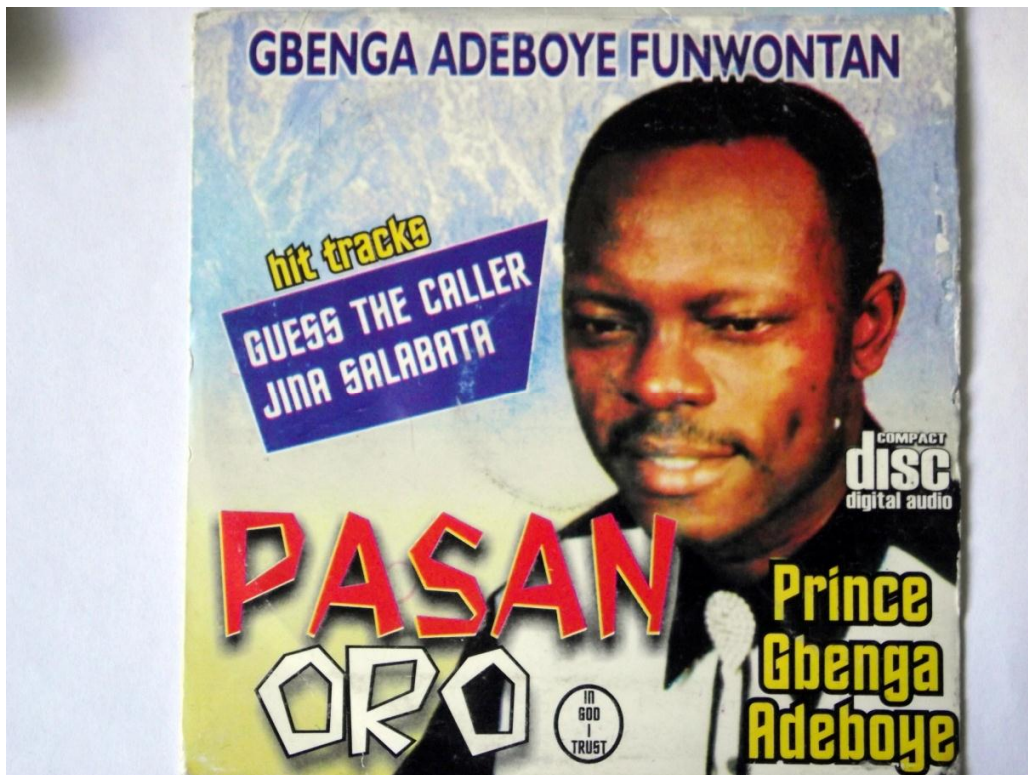
The two most visible stylistic devices which the progressive cultural producer has deployed are orality and subversive humour, for as Mbembe (2001) has noted, “[t]he potentate’s absolute can only be accomplished in caricature” (165). From *Stubborn Grasshopper* through *Saworoide* and “Guess the Caller” to *Hidden Agenda*, one is never in short supply of these two devices. Besides their aesthetic value, they serve as potent tools for overcoming censorship, while their

reproduction in small media technologies enables their producers to reach a wider audience in an age of globalization.

Cognizant of this possibility, the state has also turned to culture to sustain hegemonic control. In recognition of the conflictual nature of the cultural texts in the postcolony, Karin Barber (2009) points out that “authoritarian governments which formerly attempted to control the media through monopoly and censorship are now less able to do so” although “the threats to freedom of expression and the impediments to a genuinely popular media, operating in the interests of the people remain” (16). But that notwithstanding as Barber adds, cultural producers are still able to enact the kind of “acerbic criticism, hilarious mockery and mesmerizing tales of wrongdoing in high places” that I analyze, through “popular media” (Ibid.). What is more, these performances “quickly spread from one medium and genre to another creating a politically charged super-medium continually refreshed by gossip” (Ibid.). This chapter, I believe, clearly demonstrates this theory. And considering the implications of the transmission of the popular culture texts across global networks for the cultural economy of the producers and the people, we should place at the back of our minds as I conclude this study in the next chapter, the socio-political significance of street stories.



Plates 7 and 8 – Top: Sleeve design of Okosuns' cassette. Bottom: Cover design of the CD version of Adeboye's cassette.



Conclusion

Street Stories in the African Postcolony: Nation and Narration in an Age of Globalization

[I]t is important to recognize the extent to which African cultural innovators have seized upon the possibilities of the media to revitalize their traditions and generate new forms. (Karin Barber 2009: 3)

Although different disciplines with diverse epistemological and methodological groundings interlace in this study, I have united them with the central theme of “street stories.” This subject is so significant in everyday life and contemporary humanistic studies that my study refocuses attention on them, especially in the context of contemporary postcolonial African politics. Street stories matter to the state and citizen-subjects of the postcolonial state in Africa, and paradoxically, they matter more in an age of globalization when conventional wisdom suggests that advances in science and technology could be coterminous with the death knell for orality. But my study demonstrates that *street stories* are indeed a remarkably protean, malleable, and mobile cultural phenomenon. Their adaptability is evidenced in their seamless flow from the oral tradition through image/music/text¹ to new forms of tertiary orality where instantaneous modes of communication have created a global viral media and public sphere that facilitate

¹ I am echoing here Roland Barthes’ book with the title *Image/Music/Text*, trans. S. Heath New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. I am thinking of the connection between my application of these tripartite fields and Barthes’ foregrounding of the complex interrelationship between the kinds of texts I discuss—photographs, cartoons, film; popular music; and (newspaper) texts. In adopting the three fields of reference—Image/Music/Text—I recognize “their ontology of the process of signification” (32) cum connectedness, and what Barthes calls their “structural autonomy” (15).

the exchange of stories in real time and space, and across multiple popular culture platforms. This understanding is the wisdom in the above epigraph from Karin Barber (2009).

This study testifies to the notion that not only have “African oral narrative traditions [...] always constituted a seemingly inexhaustible source of inspiration and models for many African artists” (Cham 1990: 267) and the popular press, but they have also propelled “African cultural innovators [into] seizing upon the possibilities of the media to revitalize their traditions and generate new forms” (Karin Barber 2009: 3). More than that, the study periscopes a relatively marginal genre of everyday life—street stories—and demonstrates how a broad spectrum of citizens of postcolonial urban Nigeria have imbued it with new powers and relevance, and adapted it to serve socio-political goals. Although the degree of success of the cultural producers’ application of the oral tradition in new socio-political and technological contexts varies, the human impulse for storytelling and the desire to believe would continue to guarantee that as new technologies of life and communication are invented (with about 44 million Nigerians on the internet),² their relevance would relatively depend on their capacity to serve as vehicles for ferrying little genres of everyday life, such as street stories, across time and space. Notably, these street stories are embodied in oral and scribal texts, narratives, popular press, popular music, and image texts such as photographs,

² The Internet World Stats puts the figure as at February 2011 at 43,982,200, representing 28.9 % of the country’s population and 39.6 % of users in Africa. See Internet World Stats, “Internet Usage Statistics for Africa (Africa Internet Usage and Population Stats),” <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm> Web. February 10, 2011.

posters, and cartoons—especially the sort produced by E.B. Asuquo of Nigeria’s *Business Day* newspaper.³

A close reading of street stories reveals the value of this narrative genre in the social and political life of the people, and demonstrates that they may be the best examples of how the popular arts in Africa particularly *perform, narrate, and critique* the nation. The street stories share kinship with the “little examples from Nigeria’s vast and varied treasury of oral literature”⁴ that Chinua Achebe discusses in his essay “What has literature got to with it?” which inflects the significance of storytelling. The “little stories” show, to appropriate Achebe’s words, “how such stories can combine in a most admirable manner the aesthetic qualities of successful work of imagination with those homiletic virtues demanded of active definers and custodians of society’s values” (9). This very much describes the broad double significance of street stories as evident from this study.

The genre of street stories also illustrates what Berger and Del Negro (2004) have identified as “[o]ne of the advantages of the literatures on everyday life” which is “to draw our attention to forms of expressivity that have been undervalued or neglected” (22). Berger and Del Negro are right too in adding that: “To further these programs, we must rethink our traditional notions of folklore, common culture, and the aesthetics of everyday life, and embark upon a critical inquiry into the ways in which everydayness, expressivity, and practice

³See *Business Day* “Cartoon Gallery,” http://www.businessdayonline.com/NG/index.php?option=com_phocagallery&view=category&id=1&Itemid=658 Web. January 2, 2011. Asuquo’s cartoons present one with an opportunity for further research on how street stories travel in such image media. This is one of the reasons why the largely political cartoons have become a hit and enjoy viral status within Nigeria’s virtual communities on the Internet, especially on social network sites such as Facebook.

⁴ See Chinua Achebe, “What has Literature got to do with it?” *Radical Essays on Nigerian Literatures*. G.G. Darah. Ed. Lagos: Malthouse Press. 2008. 9.

itself are constructed by us and by the people and texts we study.” Consequently, I have reconceptualized the roles of such everyday genres as rumours, gossips, myth, et cetera in the democratic process following the years of military dictatorship in Nigeria. More so, given our recognition of what Mamadou Diouf calls the “oral nature of many ‘archives’ and ‘testimonies’ in Africa.”⁵ I have excavated otherwise glossed-over marginal texts and cultural productions, and examined them to comprehend their artistic merit and how the street stories they recycle influence postcolonial politics and social order, or in Bhabha’s (1994) words, the kinds of “cultural strategy and political confrontation constituted in obscure, enigmatic symbols, the manic repetition of rumour, panic as the uncontrolled, yet strategic affect of political revolt” (285-286).

What emerges from my synthesis of important street stories on the curse of dictatorship and the politics of death is their role as a conscientization force—or in Latin American context, process of “conscientização” (Paulo Freire 1970)—and a site for subversive discourses as well as compromise. In analyzing them, we are drawn into a “collective witnessing” (Warner 1999: 386) of the political experiences articulated in them especially in the context of the “realism of the grotesque” (Fiske 1989: 88) in postcolonial governance in Nigeria. This partly explains their class-defying appeal and their transformation into other popular cultural forms. Thus it is possible for us to see street stories as “act[s] of communal memory” (Bhabha 1994: 284), a parallel of the communal repertoire of

⁵ See interview by Moses Ochonu, “Beyond Western Recognition: History, Memory, Responsibilities,” *PONAL Quarterly Forum*, 2, (Nov 2007). <http://www.projectponal.com/pqf/dialogue.html> Web. Dec 29, 2007.

oral narratives with *versions* that depend on the narrator's subjectivity and interests.

In paying attention to the vices of the ruling elite and ridiculing them even while laughing at themselves, postcolonial subjects who circulate political street stories not only symbolically resist the reign of anomie through the street narratives but sometimes through practical action or street protests. What is at stake for them—the socially-conscious postcolonial citizens—are the possibility to construct an alternative identity to, and a higher moral order than, the corrupt leaders, and offer hope in a grim socio-political situation. The citizen-subjects draw from oral tradition for stylistic strategies in delivering verbal missiles against the “trickster generals” or kakistocrats—indeed politics is sometimes called *poli-tricks* in urban Nigeria, and politicians, *politrickcians*.⁶ And as Vizenor (1993) has noted, “[i]n the trickster narratives, the listeners and readers imagine their liberation” (193). So do the purveyors of street stories.

At this juncture, I would caution about the assumption of an unambiguous social dichotomy suggested by the “*Them*” and “*Us*”—the people versus the ruling class—binary which I have used for specific purposes in this study.⁷ For it needs to be recognized that, the “state versus society” (Askew 2002: 286) dichotomy requires deconstruction because “[j]ust as society is stratified and

⁶ The ability to parody, one that is largely lost in “postmodern” discourses in the post-fordist Western nations, is critical to the construction and preservation of a “differential consciousness” in the postcolony as Chela Sandoval calls it, and as I exemplified with Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s performance in the last chapter. See Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 196.7.

⁷ This is certainly different from the media sense in which Coleman and Ross apply the term in their book *The Media and The Public: "Them" and "Us" in Media Discourse*. Blackwell Publishers, 2010.

fractured into opposing constituencies, so too is the state—as a product of society—a disaggregated, multilayered bureaucracy fraught with competing internal units” (Ibid.). Similarly, Karin Barber (1987) has observed concerning the use of the word *elite* that it is “sometimes a category only marginally more homogeneous than the people. Elites may be so internally incoherent and so weakly bounded that elite art is by no stretch of the imagination the expression of the whole of the elite” (21). These distinctions are important because in everyday usage, people tend to assume that these categories are homogenous and sacrosanct. Yet as my study shows, the categories are somewhat loose, an admixture of individuals with tendencies that make it difficult to place them in any rigid categories. The best example would be the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka. Whereas we can classify him as a privileged member of the Nigerian elite, he does not fall under the oppressive political elite. His entire disposition and activism classify him with the people for whom street stories constitute a weapon of the weak in a figurative sense.

Notwithstanding the loose cannons in my classification, the brave symbolic and practical resistances summoned by the postcolonial subject in Nigeria against autocratic and morally sick regimes refocus attention on the role of leadership in State failure, and invites sober reflection on the wisdom in Chinua Achebe’s thesis in his important self-styled “little book”, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983). Achebe unequivocally declares that “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership,” adding: “There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or

inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership” (1). Further into the occasionally polemical analysis, Achebe develops his thesis in a way that divides the citizens into the “*Them*” and “*Us*” binary:

The indiscipline of an ordinary citizen, regrettable as it may be, does not pose a fatal threat to society because it can be generally contained by his fellows or, at worst, by a couple of policemen. But the indiscipline of a leader is a different matter altogether. First he has no fellows to restrain him, the policeman who might have done it are all in his employ. Second, power, by giving him immunity from common censure, makes the leader the envy of the powerless who will turn him into a role model and imitate his actions of indiscipline. An explosion of such actions occurring all over the place at once brings the whole society under a climate of indiscipline. Third, and fortunately, a leader’s undisciplined actions can also incite [...] anger and rebellion. (32)

As I have shown, the street stories are as much provoked by such anger as they are by the desire of some postcolonial subjects to assert their individual identity in contradistinction from those of their inept, corrupt and despotic rulers. Throughout this study, we witness scenarios such as the one painted by Achebe above. Beyond “mediocre leadership” (Achebe 1983: 10) or what some may call kakistocracy (with the pun intended: khakistocracy) in a country of 158.2 million people (UN, 2010), 250 ethnic groups and 450 languages, street narrative culture

and a shared vision for a better society are proving to be the alterity⁸ that unites the patchwork. Street stories create individual and group social identities within a national framework, and indeed promise to fulfill the Nigerian state's official mottos or slogans— "unity in diversity" and "One Nigeria"—for which the Federalists fought the separatist Biafrans in the late 1960s fratricidal war. This is yet another reason why the oft-overlooked or trivialized social phenomenon— street narrative culture—deserves more than the cursory attention it has been given in scholarship across disciplines.

Still, one must be wary of what Larkin (1997) has described as "[t]he tendency of many Africanists to see resistance as the underlying cause of a vast range of social and cultural phenomena" (433), since as Larkin points out, it has "led, in its reductionism, to the elision of other cultural flows that did not fit neatly into the pattern" (Ibid.). We can extrapolate Larkin's question with reference to "the absence of Indian films from analyses of African popular culture" (Ibid.) and ask: How else do we account for the absence of, or at best the peripheral attention to, street stories—under various related terminologies—from analyses of African popular culture or Postcolonial Studies? The question suggests a shared fate between street stories and Indian films which has influenced contemporary film production in Northern Nigeria in ways that Larkin astutely demonstrates in his scholarship. In the case of street stories, all too often

⁸ Giles Gunn's (2001) suggests that: "Alterity ... is the difference that makes a difference, the difference that allows the self to become corrigible to the other without reducing the other to a cipher of the self. Alterity is that which enables cultures, like selves, to learn from each other, to become constituents of each other's identity. Reconceiving identity in relation to notions of difference rather than of sameness, therefore, need not accentuate division, estrangement, stigmatization, enmity" (194).

this important genre of everyday life is not only ignored but also discussed with condescension, as-if it were an inferior cultural form. Its neglect or downgrading by scholars is even more surprising considering that, this genre of everyday life syncs with that tendency “to see resistance as the underlying cause of a vast range of social and cultural phenomena” which Larkin (1997) critiques. Beyond its important role as a tool for political resistance, or compromise as the case may be (remember the state does strike back), as an aesthetic form street stories provides remarkable entertainment for an impoverished people who, to echo Fela Anikulapo-Kuti in one of his popular songs, have learnt the tricks of “suffering and smiling” in hostile cities like Lagos, and in the rural areas as well.

Street stories also provide invaluable insights into “national imaginary,” (Askew 2002: 273), that is, “the multiple and often contradictory layers and fragments of ideology that underlie continually shifting conceptions of any given nation” (Ibid.). The “national imaginary” is foregrounded in the street characterization of the ruling elite in Nigeria as a brutish, rapacious bunch, and the subjects as victims of modern kakistocracy. Together with the occasional practical acts of protest, these contested texts reflect ordinary people’s inclination to have “the score of narratives between [them] and [their] detractors settled by recourse to power, [beyond] the innate power of stories themselves,” to appropriate Achebe in *Home and Exile* (2000: 74). Regrettably, unlike the January 2011 popular uprising in Tunisia, the case studies here paradoxically reveal that the efforts of the Nigerian masses have not really been enough to ignite a revolutionary change in the predatory political culture evident in the hidden or

public texts narrating or performing the nation. Consequently, the status quo survives. The best opportunities Nigerians have so far had for revolutionary changes were the SAP riots of 1989 and the June 12 riots of 1993. The negative stories about Babangida and his cabal which floated in the streets of Lagos and the popular press combined with near tangible angst to propel popular uprisings that could have, with a little more organization by the pro-democracy movement, become revolutionary. Although Abacha led a blistering crushing of the street rebellion in Lagos following the June 12 election annulment, what was more disappointing was that when the military and their civilian collaborators were forced out of power afterwards, the opposition was caught napping. Thus, the Interim National Government which took over provided an interlude that allowed military dictatorship to resurrect through Sani Abacha, and to attempt, as I have demonstrated, to control public discourses of power.

The texts on street stories I examine exemplify that, “[t]he understandable tendency for anthropologists and others to concentrate on the vibrancy of popular arts produced by the people, though laudable, has elided some forms of mass-mediated culture from academic purview” (Larkin 1997: 433-434). What these popular art forms require are seminal ways of examining common or seemingly insignificant but constantly evolving cultural formations. With verbal arts, the boundless possibilities are clearly implicated in the metaphoric title of Ruth Finnegan’s retrospective and futuristic volume, *The Oral and Beyond* (2007). As scholars, creative artist(e)s, cultural producers and activists, we must begin to pry open, strong orthodox terminological boxes that create artificial boundaries

between related popular cultural forms in order to establish important intertextual and inter-genre connections. By doing this, I establish a common thread linking political and aesthetic relations between orality, street stories, news stories, popular film, and music texts within the humdrum of everyday urban street life. Enabling, in this way, a transcendence of the often simplistic binaries of tradition and modernity, oral and written (literate), etc., and an entrance into more complicated frontiers where post-independence, military and post-military struggles between the social classes are waged at both the symbolic and material levels in the streets or public spheres. The symbolic level is often informed by the mythopoeic narrative imagination, so that that street stories offer inroads into a streak of postcolonial postmodernism in which neat lines between genres, narratives, texts, authors and the likes have collapsed. In speaking truth to power, the citizens have abandoned conventional modes of narratives to embody new texts like street stories that evade clear classificatory categories, yet, poignant like the old narrative forms that confronted both colonial and neo-colonial powers. It is in this context that I recognize Benjamin Radford's (2003) postulation that:

The world is shaped by myths. Our understanding of ourselves and our culture is based [*partly*] upon what we are told by the media. Yet much of the media's content includes unexamined assumptions and myths. These myths are stories, themes, and ideas that embody an aspect of culture. Politicians, advertisers, activists, journalists, and others create myths to manipulate how we think, what we value, and what we fear. Frequently these myths are also myths in the sense that they are fictions: They are

erroneous half- or non truths provided by others to alter our picture of the world around us. (11)

It is because issues of myth and objectivity in narratives can be contentious, whether in everyday discourse or in scholarship, and yet have the power to influence the course of events or the public opinion that I explored them in detail. One way to recapitulate the argument here in respect of media narratives, and their ancestry in street stories, is to summon James Winter's trenchant regard of the "cult of objectivity" as "[j]ournalism mythology" (2007: 46), and his suggestion that the notion of impartiality is a mirage, whether journalists report what they, themselves, say, or are "merely reporting on what is said by others" (Ibid.).⁹

There is, also, the additional burden of "free improvisation" (Lord 1964: 5)¹⁰ in oral narratives, film and popular music as I demonstrate in my analyses, or "atmospherics" in the context of the critical press in Nigeria during the heydays of the Generals Babangida and Abacha dictatorships. Lord (1964) clarifies what is meant by "free improvisation" as I relate what he says of the epic to my Nigerian context of street stories travelling across space and time:

It is true...that oral epic is transmitted by word of mouth from one singer to another, but if we understand [...] the transmission of a fixed text or the kind of transmission involved when A tells B what happened and B tells C

⁹ For more on this polemical take on the sociology of news see other Winter's publications, viz: *Common Cents: Media Portrayal of the Gulf War and Other Events* (1992), and *Democracy's Oxygen: How the Corporations Control the News* (1997). Also see Bagdikian *Media Monopoly* (2000), especially chapter 4, and Joseph Minton Amann and Tom Breuer's *Fair and Balanced, My Ass: An Unbridled Look at the Bizarre Reality of Fox News*, New York: Nation Books, 2007.

¹⁰ Elsewhere in the same book Lord uses the term "ornamenting" to describe the process by which a song text is made "full and broad in its narrative style" (24).

and so on with all natural resources of lapse of memory and exaggeration and distortion, then we do finally comprehend what oral transmission of oral epic is. With oral poetry we are dealing with a particular and distinctive process in which oral learning, oral composition, and oral transmission almost merge; they seem to be different facets of the same process. (5)

While this work is not focused on the oral epic, theories of orality, as I lay bare, provide excellent insights for our appreciation of street stories as a genre of oral narrative, and their transposition onto other forms of cultural expression. Lord also calls “free improvisation” and what I label “atmospherics” of the journalistic piece a “substitution system” (36). It is part of the techniques for the composition—including improvisation—and transmission of oral and media texts. This system is also deployed by Nollywood film producers and popular music artistes in their appropriation of important street narratives. The degree to which such improvisations is vital in orality, and by extension to the versions of popular cultural producers’ engagement of specific or kernel themes analyzed in this study, is reflected in Lord’s (1964) bold declaration that: “In a truly oral tradition of song there is no guarantee that even the apparently most stable ‘runs’ will always be word-for-word the same in performance” (125). Further insight into the character of narrative versions emerge from Bruce Jackson’s (2007) proposition about the conscious tuning and revision we inflict on stories all the time cited in Chapter Three. We have seen this in the way the popular press, film makers and musicians treat the same narrative theme (run) or theories in this study.

Seen from the angle of a shared interest in the narratives that the street storyteller and the (small) media professionals produce and recycle, it can be argued that there is little that differentiates the kinds of texts I focus on in this study from their parallels in the industrialized world. Indeed a work such as *The Clinton Chronicles* in video and book formats with its melodramatic stories about the contentious scandals surrounding Bill Clinton, the former president of the United States, supports my viewpoint here.¹¹ But as Ben Bagdikian (2000) asserts,

Every culture has its official folklore. In ancient times medicine men transformed tribal legends to enhance their own status. The twentieth century is no different, but the high priests who communicate mythic dogmas now do so through great centralized machines of communication—newspaper chains, broadcast networks, magazine groups, conglomerate book publishers, and movie studios. Operators of these systems disseminate their own version of the world. (68)

Truly applicable to every culture as this Universalist or “collective unconscious” interpretation may be, and I indeed demonstrate this in the comparative nature of this study, one wonders about the parallels between street narrative culture in Nigeria and in other societies. For sure, conspiracy theories and rumours do exist even in postindustrial societies (Dreher 2007), as I have shown. But if I may rhetorically ask: Are they imbued with the same distinctive political functions and (African) aesthetics/poetics of the street story in postcolonial Nigeria? Can they

¹¹ For details see *The Clinton Chronicles Book*, Ed. Patrick Matrisciana, Hemet, CA: Jeremiah Books, 1994. Amongst the litany of alleged scandals associated with President Clinton are to quote from the book’s blurb: “Whitewater scam...promiscuous lifestyle, the laundering of drug money, the sweetheart deals of Clinton’s governorship and the attempted cover-up in Vince Forster’s death.”

be seen to be performing or narrating the nation? Do they share similar peoples' insurgent parliament that we have seen at the newsstands, transit stations, *molues*, Pentecostal churches and in Nollywood films? And if they do not—despite inevitable commonalities in the universality of street stories and storytelling—the question may then be asked as to why I have used Anglo-American theories and theorists to discuss an African cultural practice. The question becomes even more imperative given the views of some African scholars toward decolonizing the mind and decolonizing African literature, with Chinweizu et al¹² and Ngugi (1981) as standard bearers, and more recently Francis Nyamnjoh from a media angle with his essay “De-Westernizing Media Theory to Make Room for African Experience” (2010).

To answer the question, it is pertinent to revisit Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2003) intervention in the debate around ethnophilosophy. I am fascinated by Appiah's reasoning that because African intellectuals are “rooted at least to some degree in their traditional cultures, they face a special situation” (110) in “applying definitions borrowed from European philosophical [academic] traditions in which [...] they have been trained” (109). Appiah believes, and I share the view, that “[t]hey may choose to borrow the tools of Western philosophy for their work,” (110) on “an essentially comparative perspective” (118). It is like Haynes (2000) declaring that “[w]e should use whatever tools are available, on either side of the Atlantic” (34). But Appiah adds a caveat: “if they [African intellectuals] wish to pursue such conceptual inquiries in the thought

¹² See Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, Ihechukwu Madubuike. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Washington, D.C: Howard University Press, 1983, and Chinweizu, *Decolonizing the African Mind*. Lagos: Pero Press, 1987.

worlds of their own traditions, they are bound to do so with a highly developed awareness of the challenges of Western ideas” (110). By moving from the local to the global and vice versa, I have engaged in a process of differentiation, while using a language that is translatable. The glocalization process permits a convergence of theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches toward constructing a poetics of street stories against the backdrop of “the politics of everyday life in the postcolony itself” (Gikandi 2002: 143). In doing this I emphasized the current affairs quality of the street narratives, their political orientation or “discursive contestation” (Garuba (2003: 146), and aesthetics of modernity, as well as the profile of their producers, as some important aspects that distinguish them from traditional oral narratives and their performers. In the street narratives, we “encounter a currency of social exchange which defines the subjectivities or identities of the postcolonial citizen and their location within textual communities,”¹³ and in also terms of questions of power as the case studies of the regimes of Babangida, Abacha and Yar’Adua demonstrate.

My choice of selected illustrative texts to follow a performance-oriented approach, has enabled me to probe beyond the provenance, contents, and the postcolonial setting in which the street stories are produced, transmitted and recycled. The performance-oriented approach has encouraged attention to the profiles of the purveyors of the street art as well as to the aesthetics of their delivery in various popular culture formats. With the performance-oriented approach, I am convinced about the value of looking at the specificity or locality

¹³ Anthony D. King, “Introduction: Cities, Texts and Paradigms,” *Representing the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21st-century Metropolis*. Ed. Anthony D. King, New York: New York University Press, 1996, 5.

of the art and cultural politics expressed in the texts even in an age of globalization and the dominance of “biased Western ethnocentric assumptions about the centrality of writing” (Finnegan 1986: 84) in the contemporary world. The sociology of cultural production and performers illustrates the point so forcefully made by leading oral literature scholars concerning the need to pay close attention to the “specific ways in which oral and literate elements [are] used in differing ways in the processes of composition, transmission and performance” (Ibid.). We witness these complex processes in the fairly large amount of texts examined in this study; in the street stories of “artisans” or street parliamentarians such as Smokey Joe and Iya Ijebu which I have placed as an evocative backdrop to my analysis of print and electronic media texts; in the sophisticated print media productions of the various journalists analyzed here; in the Nollywood visual texts of Simisola Opeoluwa and Tunde Kelani, and the highly rhetorical sound texts of Gbenga Adeboye and Sonny Okosuns. The last two oral performers deployed technology in ways that underscore Karin Barber’s (2009) observation that “One could hypothesize that the ‘media,’ in the form of the tape recorder, is simply a shortcut in a wholly traditional, oral pathway” (5). The two artistes illustrate the notion that traditional oral performers “conceptualize their practice in terms derived from modern print and electronic media” (Ibid.) as evident in the contents of the texts. With them, as with Kelani in his film *Saworoide*, we witness how oral literature is surviving in the contemporary African world—through adaptation.

The value of the technological economy of globalization which drives the circulation of the street narratives is that it “makes possible the forging of social relations across time and space in ways not open to oral cultures.”¹⁴ But the example of Smokey Joe’s people’s parliament and similar street parliaments I discussed in this study compel us to see street storytelling, to appropriate the words of Stephen Nimis (2004), as “a performative event, something delegated to the physical presence of the performer, not to the verbal portion of the performance that we have preserved in our written down versions of those performances” (180) in newspapers or/and other forms of cultural representation that I explore in this project. This necessitates a sensitive appreciation of the “semiotics of everyday life” advocated by Lash and Urry (1994) and their argument “that an audience is sensitized to the reception of such cultural objects of a semiotics of everyday life in which the boundary between the cultural and life, between the image and the real is more than ever transgressed” (135). The import of such transgression is obvious in the modern form of audience participation in say, newspaper consumption either in the hardcopy format or, even more so, on the internet. While in the oral performance context spectators’ responses are spontaneous, the audience response to media content are structured through rejoinders of Right of Reply columns, and phone-in programs on television and radio, or film/music reviews as the case may be. Such correlatives which I delineate in sections of this work cement the interrelations between the triad of orality, the media and popular culture. Importantly, the correlatives demonstrate that from the open peoples’ parliament to open media, we witness the

¹⁴ “Introduction,” *The Polity Reader in Cultural Studies*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994. 4.

“impossible closure of the oral text” (Zumthor and McGarry 1984), and its advantage for subversion of repressive governance, and the promotion of participatory democracy or democratization on one hand, and on the other, as a tool for subordination and promotion of a hegemonic status quo.

Hence my main objectives in the study have included using street stories to apprehend and comprehend the politics of everyday life embedded in seemingly innocuous communicative transactions amongst ordinary people in the postcolonial urban street. This much I have done by tracking the same root stories from the street to their transpositional versions in the press, film and popular music. Thus, if as Bagdikian (2000) suggests, “[t]he news is the first rough draft of history” (xxxix), then street stories are the basic fodder which feeds that first rough draft. This is why I find Daniel Jordan Smith’s (2007)¹⁵ study of the circulation of street stories, but in association with ritual murder and the bizarre trade in human body parts as reported on the Otokoto saga of Owerri, indicative of an area of opportunity for future research—the social aspects of the production and circulation of street stories. In which case, we must look beyond the stigma of corruption which Daniel Jordan Smith sees as “a *primary* discursive lens through which people interpret the experience of postcolonial citizenship and suffering in Africa’s giant” (231). [Emphasis added.] For as his study ironically shows, and mine corroborates, *street stories* are the primary discursive lens not *corruption*. The lens goes beyond politics into the realm of everyday social experience. Indeed, a vast repertoire of such socially-themed street stories

¹⁵ Here I have paraphrased a sentence on page 155 of the book. For more on the point being made here, see especially Chapter 5 of the book, *Rumors, Riots and Rituals*.

abounds, examples of which are included in Chinedu Ozordi's thrilling article "The Urban Legends of Lagos."¹⁶ We may also recall Smokey Joe's story about a man who transfigured into a vulture, or the humorous anecdotes that Obadare discusses in his essay cited earlier. Corruption may be a central theme in these narratives—be they rumours, gossip, grapevine as in corporate circles, popular media texts, etc.—but it is the narrative impulse, that universal passion for storytelling, for myth-making and for explaining social reality and renewing the world, that forms and frames the discursive lens. Interpreting the situation this way, we would be able to transcend the stigmatization or Othering of the postcolonial subject that inspires much of Western theorizing on Africa as the Comaroffs foreground in the important work *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Chinedu Ozordi, "The urban legends of Lagos", NEXT. http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5545313-146/the_urban_legends_of_lagos_csp Web. March 28, 2010. Also see Wood, Molar. "Naija Uncovered." Wordsbody blog, Monday Sept 24, 2007. <http://wordsbody.blogspot.com/search/label/Soft%20Sell> Web. December 12, 2007.

¹⁷ Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) interestingly observe that in some postcolonial contexts, where "banditry" by the rogue regimes and their Western godfathers "shades into low-level warfare" and yield "new cartographies of dis/order, [...] no genre of communication is authoritative: 'dark circuits' of rumor and popular media alike flash signs of inchoate danger beneath the banal surface of things" (9). Beyond the "'dark circuits' of rumor," *Asia Africa Intelligence Wire* report on the Abacha loot indeed names such Western "godfathers" in his corruption ring. According to the news service, former World Bank president Paul Dundes Wolfowitz said at a press conference at the bank headquarters on September 27, 2005 that "the return of the "stolen" [Abacha] funds, from Swiss financial institutions, represents one of the first such cases of international cooperation and may set an important precedent," and that "Corruption is not just the problem of developing countries. The developed countries have a responsibility, too, and part of that responsibility is to make it as hard as possible for corrupt governments to hide the money that they steal and to help in its return." For more on the repatriated fund see "Utilization of repatriated Abacha loot: Results of the field monitoring exercise," page 5. Report Prepared by the World Bank with Cooperation from the Federal Ministry of Finance, December 2006. http://www.integrityng.com/Library/Abacha_Funds_Monitoring_1221.pdf Web. October 26, 2008.

A Filtration Process

This study expands our understanding of the complex processes of the filtration of political narratives from the street to the popular press or vice versa, and from both into film and popular music in postcolonial Nigeria. Examining the multifaceted texts that result from this complex inter-genre filtration process, I am struck by how endemic street stories and media texts are, and how they are reinscribed in various popular cultural domains. These texts reflect the intertextual inflections of orality in the sense theorized by Foley (1995), complete with “the rhetorical signals that are the bequest of [street stories] performance and tradition” (81). In at least one example, we encounter the lively “specialized communicative exchange” (Ibid.) between the oral artist and his audience (“Guess the Caller”). In *Stubborn Grasshopper* and *Saworoide* we witness re-enactments of the people’s parliaments or contexts of performance associated with street narrative culture. So that as Foley (1995) advocates, “[e]ven against the inevitable loss that accompanies textualization, we can still sense a work’s empowering relationship to the enabling event of performance (real or rhetorical) and enabling referent of tradition” (81). Understandably, therefore, the texts analyzed share certain fundamental elements or techniques in their narrativization/performance of the nation. These include themes (tropes or motifs), episodic plots or lays, stock characterization, gender politics, and disposition toward performance aesthetics based on the principle that “each human communication is an action performed upon a social stage, a drama engaged in by motivated individuals in specific contexts” (Pelias 1992: 7).

Although largely working with the same root stories—more like archetypes in folktales—it is fascinating how various cultural producers reconfigure and recycle the stories, enriching them with their artistry as they transmit them: from those with a documentary impulse (Onwuka and Opeoluwa in *Stubborn Grasshopper*, Gbenga Adeboye in “Guess the Caller,” and Okosuns in “Political Game”), to some with more fictive attitudes—Kelani in *Saworoide*. What emerges is the idea that the aesthetics of performance are strongly linked with the issue of self reflexivity, of the performer’s self consciousness as a participant in an interaction and his determination to fulfill the dispersed audience’s expectations and “aesthetic experience.”¹⁸ Between the insubordinate discourses¹⁹ promoted by disenchanting citizen-subjects determined to speak truth to power, through the compromise by other citizens for whom “survival is a cruel battle of wits” (Otiono 1995: 12), to the hegemonic discourses of the privileged ruling class who perpetuate the status quo, citizenship becomes “an active process that involves the core of people’s daily existence, including the ways in which they interact with and use popular culture” (Dolby 2006: 35).

This notion of contested active citizenship and the use of popular culture were especially visible during the military dictatorships of Generals Babangida and Abacha. In opposition to champions of the struggle against tyranny, not only were genuine news media publications faked as I noted, but outright fictitious

¹⁸ I have borrowed thought and words here from Berger and Del Negro (2004: 90). For further clarification on the various ways in which the term “reflexivity” is used, see the subsection of the book, “The Notion of Reflexivity, Verbal Art as Performance, and the Study of Reflexive Language”, 90ff. Additionally, I am using the phrase “aesthetic experience” here in the performance context suggested by Sekoni (1990) and cited earlier.

¹⁹ Pauline M. Aucoin, “Blinding the Snake: Women’s Myths as Insubordinate Discourse in Western Fiji,” *Anthropologica* 42.1 (2000), *Questia*, Web, 13 Aug. 2010.

stories aimed at discrediting visible opponents were invented, and small media technologies used to nail the opposition. So strong was the practice that Wole Soyinka, an arrowhead of the opposition then, was virtually driven to seeing a shrink, a victim of the strategy allegedly deployed by one Abiola Ogundokun, accused by Soyinka of being a press agent to the dictators. Recalling the experience in his memoir *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006), the Nobel Laureate expressed “the snarl of genuine contempt for the purveyors of [such] degrading fantasies” (417), who (like the accused person) in the specific publication he was referring to, jettisoned “the most tenuous restraints” and “invented between the lurid pages [...] a total stranger [an imagined daughter], a doppelganger with an odious smirk,” a “fake persona who dispensed spores of corruption guaranteed to percolate through the most protective layers of society (417).” For Soyinka, it was no use responding with “a campaign of retaliation, targeting some of the more notorious props of the regime” or “the principal himself” as proposed within the opposition, because “no mind was equipped with the fiendish imagination that could invent crimes to beggar the reality of atrocities committed by the innermost core of the Abacha regime” (418).

From these submissions by Soyinka, and by extension from my study, I deduce an aspect of what Chaney (2004) describes as the “character and delineation of the cultural sphere” (42). Soyinka (2006) deepens and complicates our understanding of this aspect of the “cultural sphere” regarding the battle of narratives that rages between the ruling elite and oppositional voices when he states that, he “doubt[s] very much if any people in the world can match the

conglomeration called Nigeria in the propensity of its inhabitants toward the game of character denigration” (417), since he believes that, “it is all part of a justly remarked-upon creative energy, unfortunately much of it a negative, even self-destructive temper.” Soyinka concludes that “[t]his brand of the abuse of inventive energy has driven many valuable individuals away from any form of Civic commitment or public service” (417). Soyinka’s rage in this context where the state strikes back is understandably justifiable.

But as I have demonstrated earlier, despite this negative propensity for “pull-him/her-down” (PHD as it is called in street parlance in Lagos), street stories are also “weapons of the weak” to echo James Scott Smith again, targeted at a corrupt, oppressive ruling elite. Following James Scott Smith’s example, but using street stories in the context of postcolonial governance in Nigeria, I have tried to show how “the public backstage [and frontstage] transcripts of the dominant and the weak can illuminate power relations in a novel way.” (*Domination and the Arts* 202).

Beyond the thematic concerns of scholars in various disciplines implicated in this work, these texts reflect literary or artistic merits that I have highlighted. My task has been less one of substantiation of the authenticity of the narratives or repertoire than an appreciation of their function and aesthetics as narratives that cross “social borders” (Bourdieu 1998: 21) and various modes of cultural production, in their framing of “a nation that seems to be in endless transition” (Apter 2006: 278). Much so that every election cycle presents new fears about the corporate existence of the country and the importance of storytelling as a tool for

comprehending the politics of illusion that has characterized governance. By focusing on the functional and aesthetic significance of the stories, we are able to come to terms with why the stories are populated with certain stock themes such as death and illness, the same way we often interpret such themes in (oral) narratives and literary arts as a whole.

When the narrator of one of the versions of the Sunjata epic for example states rather matter-of-factly that Faa Koli though a short man, considered himself almost a giant that he would bend down before entering a house, he was not speaking the literal truth. Instead, he was by that hyperbole, illustrating the accomplishments of the character as a revered general.²⁰ In the street stories, the storytellers seek to subvert the villainous status of the generals instead. Having lost every iota of respect for the so-called generals whose myopic vision had condemned them to primitive acquisition and cruelty against the very people they seized power through coup d'états to rule, the people elected to punish them through narratives. This is not to say, however, that the stories are fictional. In these scenarios, the relationship between the postcolonial state and the subjects becomes synonymous to that between ancient Benin kingdom and the resentful constituents of its large empire who constructed narratives of resistance against Benin domination as Okpewho clearly shows in his essay and book respectively “African Mythology and the Postcolonial Impasse” and *Once Upon a Kingdom* which I discussed in Chapter Two. Instructively, Okpewho concludes in the latter text that: “the oppressed *can* know and speak for themselves’ [...], and [...] true peace will come only when they are allowed to tell those stories that have for too

²⁰ I am referring to the Gordon Innes’ (1974) volume of the epic.

long been hidden or muted” (191). This is the fate of all oppressed people in a globalized, especially postcolonial, world.

Embedded in the conflictual situation is the splendid reality that “the need to survive does not...swallow up the need to imagine”²¹ In the context of globalization, the issue is not just how the postcolonial subjects use popular culture to narrate or resist the nation, but how they use it through the “materiality of the technologies which transmit those texts within a wider social configuration that gives those texts purchase and social force” (Larkin 2008: 14).²² In street stories, the small media in which they are recycled meets the social force leveraged by Nigerians’ proclivity to talking about the “court of public opinion,” many having lost confidence in the judiciary and other official institutional channels. By constructing street stories in the people’s parliament and other platforms of popular cultural production, ordinary people and the progressive elite not only challenge the hegemonic power of the ruling class, they transgress their “master narratives” and actually undermine them.

A morbid interest in private lives or an interest in public good?

Soyinka’s submissions above raise a grave question regarding the street stories that needs one final contextualization: do the street stories reflect a morbid interest in private lives or an interest in public good? To answer the question it should be noted that some 48 years after Boorstin (1962) regretted “our morbid interest in private lives, in personal gossip, and in the sexual indiscretions of

²¹ Hecht and Simone (1994: 13).

²² I am also echoing here, Andrea Witcomb’s essay, “The Materiality of Virtual Technologies: A New Approach to Thinking about the Impact of Multimedia in Museums,” *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007. 35-48.

public figures” and that “[w]e search for those areas of life which may have remained immune to the cancer of pseudo-eventfulness” (255),²³ the Abacha “Apple Theory” story remains an important validation of those interests from a public good point of view. In The Sleaze Agenda section of his book, McNair (2000) offers an insightful parallel to the Nigerian story as he notes that: “Sleaze journalism became a prominent sub-category of British political journalism in the [John] Major years, *underpinning the narrative framework of decay and disintegration within which stories about the Conservatives were interpreted* after the Black Wednesday crisis of 1992” [Emphasis added]—June 12 in the Nigerian context. Defending sleaze journalism, McNair declares:

sleaze journalism can, and with normative democratic principles in mind, *should* be viewed as the welcome by-product of an era when journalistic [narrative] deference toward political elites has been eroded, and the normative watchdog function of the Fourth Estate is increasingly applied, in conditions of heightened competitiveness, to the secretive, insider networks which if left alone burrow away at and undermine the democratic process. (54)

McNair differentiates this form of journalistic engagement from “sexual sleaze” which “exposes private rather than public corruption, personal rather than political or professional failings” (55). He concludes that: “Those who argue that

²³ Quoted in Brian McNair, *Journalism and Democracy: An Evaluation of the Political Public Sphere*. London: Routledge, 2000. 53.

this knowledge is not worth knowing, or that it diverts citizens from consideration of ‘serious’ issues, underestimate the public’s ability to judge when the human frailties exposed in sleaze journalism are relevant to sound political decision-making and when they are not” (57). Thus, there cannot be any overstating the fact that in the Abacha case, the sleazy orientation of the street stories and the journalistic coverage of his life and death cohere with the people’s interest in throwing the kitchen sink at him at all costs—as was done to his military predecessor, Ibrahim Babangida—through narratives that sought to show how odious he was.

The cyclical nature and effectiveness of the street narrative weapon is partly evident in the fact that over a decade after Abacha’s downfall, his co-conspirator Babangida issued a public explanation on why he did not retire Abacha in the mass purge in the military that preceded his (Babangida’s) stepping aside in 1993, following the annulment of June 12 presidential election of that year. Confirming the street narrative that avowed that Babangida had secret deals with Abacha to succeed him, the report reveals that Babangida, who spoke at an interactive session with members of the Correspondents Chapel of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Niger State, “took a critical look at the pacts he had with the two former heads of state, Generals Olusegun Obasanjo and Sani Abacha that enabled them to assume power at various periods in the country,” and “insist[ed] that he was concerned with the future security and unity of the nation.”

²⁴ The report further states that Babangida “explained that at the time he “stepped

²⁴ See “Why I left Abacha in govt after stepping aside in 1993 - Babangida,” Online, http://www.transparencynigeria.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1576:why-i-

aside”, the situation was very fragile, adding that “if the military profession was left in the hands of the young inexperienced officers, they would have tore [sic] the nation apart in coup d’états” (Ibid.). But what Babangida failed to acknowledge was that as Abiola had said, “even Maradona gets to a point when he has nobody to dribble but himself.”²⁵ And this is the point that the effectiveness of street stories symbolically emerges at an intersection of interrelated hidden and public discourses performed by a broad spectrum of citizen-subjects of the postcolonial state, from the *agbero*²⁶ or Motor Park tout to the Nobel laureate.

Paradigm Shift

By promoting Street Stories as an umbrella term for apprehending and appreciating the little genres of everyday lived experience under the postcolonial condition (in Nigeria), this study calls for a better understanding of a “slippery” and “fugitive” cultural phenomenon that had not been given the kind of serious attention and theorizing that it deserves. Although various disciplines have staked interest in its existence under various strands such as rumours, gossips, and urban myths and legends, the challenge had been to establish a *thread* linking those dispersed strands and disciplines. This study is an attempt to provide that thread

[left-abacha-in-govt-after-stepping-aside-in-1993-babangida&catid=67:politics&Itemid=151](#) Web. August 12, 2010.

²⁵ M.K.O. Abiola, “The June 12 Mandate,” *Tempo*, June 15, 1995, 11. (The speech was given in the United Kingdom in 1993.) This is one of many wise cracks and proverbial style associated with oral tradition for which Abiola was known.

²⁶ See Grant Barrett, *The Official Dictionary of Unofficial English: A Crunk Omnibus for Thrillionaires and Bampots for the Ecozoic Age*, New York: McGraw-Hill Books, 2006, 1.

through *street stories*, a genre that finds resonance across a wide range of lifescapes and disciplines.

In “the post-everything age” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: vii), excavating and tracking the most important street stories in Nigeria implicates unrecognized ordinary storytellers in the People’s Parliaments in urban streets, critical news reporters, and popular artists. Together, they use their works to combat criminal leadership that has kept the country down for so long. The choice of a variety of media and diverse styles of expression including the radio commentary style adopted by both Adeboye and Okosuns, and film adopted by Kelani and Opeoluwa and Onwuka are instructive. These media are some of the most popular in the world; radio for example, is the most widely patronized source of news and entertainment in Nigeria, especially in northern Nigeria where the “pavement radio” is owned by nearly every household for a variety of reasons similar to those adduced by Ruth Teer-Tomselli (1995) in her study of the role of South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) in moving the country towards democracy with reference to the historic 1995 elections in the country.

In all, I am convinced that the *street* will increasingly become an important epistemic site for a broader and deeper range of interdisciplinary scholarship on everyday lived experiences in postcolonial Nigeria and other parts of the world in the 21st century. As global economies hurt, and life in the main, even *mean*, street increasingly become the focus of discussions in top government circles, as well as in open street parliaments, scholarship in the field will become more urgently needed. More so in developing countries like Nigeria where a

combination of factors including the tropical weather enable streets to become instant narrative theatres, and street stories important barometers for measuring the socio-political pulse of the nation.

An indication to this trend has already emerged in Herman Wasserman's fresh collection of essays *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa* (2010/2011),²⁷ and a new essay just published as I was concluding this study, Wangui and Rasmussen's "Setting the Agenda for our Leaders from Under a Tree: The People's Parliament in Nairobi."²⁸ Beginning with Wasserman's introduction cleverly entitled "Taking it to the Streets," other essays pointing in the same direction in *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa* include: Audrey Gadzekpo's "Street News: The Role of Posters in Democratic Participation in Ghana,"²⁹ and Inge Brinkman et al's "Local Stories, Global Discussions: Websites, Politics and Identity in African Contexts." True, as Wasserman notes, and this study easily proves, "the broad field of cultural studies has established the legitimacy of the popular as an area of scholarly enquiry" (1); but interest in the street and *street stories* as a viable site for academic research is yet to gain traction. That is, if the reverse is not what applies now--condemnation

²⁷ The catalogue and publication page of the book states that the Routledge "First edition [was] published 2011," and then adds mid way into the page that the e-edition I used was first published by Taylor and Francis e-library 2010.

²⁸ Wangui Kimari and Jacob Rasmussen, "Setting the Agenda for our Leaders from Under a Tree: The People's Parliament in Nairobi." *Nokoko*, Journal of the Institute of African Studies (Carleton Ottawa), Vol.1. <http://www1.carleton.ca/africanstudies/research/nokoko/volume-1/>. Web. January 21, 2011.

²⁹ Prominent Postcolonial Studies scholar and author of *Postcoloniality: Theory, Practice or Process* (2000), Ato Quayson, is also currently researching Oxford Street, Accra, Ghana, a project described as "a mixture between a personal memoir and a biography of the city of Accra from the focal point of 'Oxford Street', perhaps the most globalized street in the country." In 2009 he gave a lecture from his research-in-progress entitled "Signs of the Times: Discourse Ecologies and Street Life on Oxford St., Accra" at the University of California at Berkeley. See <http://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/node/32506> Web. September 2010.

in conservative academic circles in Nigeria and elsewhere where the study of popular culture is still viewed with condescension and curiosity.³⁰

As an army of more frustrated youths are churned out from the universities every season in a country with rising double digit unemployment ratio and inflationary rate; with the 2010 United Nations Habitat predictions about the frightening growth rate of Lagos and other African cities in the world; with the example of the role small media technologies have played toward turning the otherwise isolated act of self-immolation of an unemployed graduate (Mohammed Bouazizi) into a roaring popular uprising in Tunisia, followed by similar revolutionary outbursts in Egypt, Libya and parts of the Middle East³¹; urban street culture is poised to grow astronomically in postcolonial Nigeria in the 21st century, and perhaps so would accompanying scholarship. Already, the street and postcolonial cosmopolitan experience have begun to engage the attention of a

³⁰ A 2008 e-mail from a Nigerian university don to Krazitivty, a list-serve comprising younger Nigerian writers easily lends credence to the point being made here. The scholar and teacher, filled with pride, gushed that “about three years ago (which should be around 2005), [he] taught Nigerian films in a course on Nigerian drama at a university in Eastern Nigeria.” By so doing, he continues, he offered the students an “unprecedented opportunity of watching films inside a classroom and the encouragement to discuss same before they were asked to write a term paper on any five films of their choice.” Related to this, Femi Shaka, pioneer Film Studies scholar and author of *Modernity and the African Cinema*, Trenton, NJ, Africa World Press, 2004, declares: “Film scholars in Africa [...] are very few. I can count them on the tips of my fingers.” He adds that he is hoping “to build the foundation of the first real Department of Film Studies in Africa” around the few students he has trained at his university in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, “because there is a shortage of manpower.” My investigations have shown that although there are a few universities combining film studies with one or two other disciplines (mostly Theatre Arts/Media Arts) at the Departmental level (and examples include for instance Ibadan, Jos, Nsukka, Niger Delta, etc.), there appears to be not a single Department of Film Studies yet in any Nigerian university.

³¹ These include similar uprisings in Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. Commentators have, however, been understandably divided on the role of social media in these uprisings. Peter Beaumont provides excellent insights into this phenomenon—including the cynical views of Jay Rosen—in his essay, “The truth about Twitter, Facebook and the uprisings in the Arab world,” *The Guardian* (UK), Friday 25 February 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/25/twitter-facebook-uprisings-arab-libya> Web. February 26, 2011. Also see Rosen’s “The ‘Twitter Can’t Topple Dictators’ Article.” <http://pressthink.org/2011/02/the-twitter-cant-topple-dictators-article/> Web. February 13th, 2011.

wider spectrum of cultural producers: the emerging generation of Nigerian writers—including spoken word artistes of course.³² Some of the significant novels published in the first decade of this millennium, like the films and popular music texts analyzed in this study, do not only accord visible roles to journalists or popular media; they are also set in Lagos or other Nigerian cities such as Port Harcourt. The novelists, three of whom have been journalists (Ndibe, Habila and Bina Nengi-Ilagha), seem to be committed to calling attention to the significance of the print media and the city in contemporary Nigerian socio-political imaginary, as well as to the narrative imperative of fighting poor leadership with words from below. From a list that includes Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005); Bina Nengi-Ilagha's *Condolences* (2002); Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) with its omnipresent radio; Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain* (2000); award-winning novelist Helon Habila is most fascinated with the idea. Both his first novel *Waiting for an Angel* (2003) and the most recent, *Oil on Water* (2010), are narrated by journalists who focus on the ravages of postcolonial life with the city as the main setting. If this paradigmatic shift in focus from the writings of the Achebe generation of writers is anything to go by, and I do not see why it is not, a concert of voices incorporating street oral artists in the people's parliament, journalists, and socially-conscious film-makers and popular music artistes may well be building up in narrating the nation against the politics of illusion. In

³² The spoken word genre presents another opportunity for further research on the influence of orality and street stories on contemporary popular arts in Nigeria, nay Africa. From the early 2000s when the Abuja Literary Society (ALS) began its Poetry Slam to the mid 2000s when the first spoken word festival called Word Slam was hosted in Lagos, a new wave of spoken word performances have been sweeping the cultural circles of Lagos and Abuja. A similar current is reported in Kenya and South Africa, culminating in Azania Speaks, the first international conference on spoken word in Africa hosted by the University of Udine, Italy, in November 2008.

contributing toward raising the required socio-political consciousness about the importance of this peripheralized but critical phenomenon I call “street stories” at this propitious time in history, and in activating greater positive participation in the democratic process toward good governance, my overarching objective for this study would, hopefully, be doubly achieved; that is, beyond its basic contribution to knowledge.

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