

Protest, Humor, and the Nigerian Establishment in Selected COVID-19 Facebook Texts

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ABSTRACT

In this study, political protest motifs in selected COVID-19 pandemic Facebook posts ARE explored. Using Claude Ake's postcolonial insight as a theoretical paradigm, the study analyzes ten COVID-19 pandemic Facebook posts during the 2020 lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria. The posts reveal a repugnant distrust in the Nigerian governments; an affirmation of the COVID-19 pandemic as a reprisal for the ruling class' alleged impunity and Nigerian masses' repudiation of COVID-19 policies.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Facebook Posts, Political Protest, Postcolonialism, Social Media

Representaciones de protesta política en textos seleccionados de Facebook de Covid-19

RESUMEN

En este estudio, se exploran motivos de protesta política en publicaciones seleccionadas de Facebook sobre la pandemia de COVID-19. Utilizando la perspectiva poscolonial de Claude Ake como paradigma teórico, el estudio analiza diez publicaciones de Facebook sobre la pandemia de COVID-19 durante el confinamiento y el posconfinamiento de 2020 en Nigeria. Las publicaciones revelan una desconfianza repugnante en los gobiernos de Nigeria; una afirmación de la pandemia de COVID-19 como represalia por la supuesta

impunidad de la clase dominante y el repudio de las masas nigerianas a las políticas de COVID-19.

Palabras clave: Pandemia de COVID-19, publicaciones en Facebook, protesta política, poscolonialismo, redes sociales

关于2019冠状病毒病的部分脸书文本中的政治抗议表征

摘要

本文探究了有关2019冠状病毒病(COVID-19)大流行的部分脸书帖子中的政治抗议主题。本研究以克劳德·阿克(Claude Ake)的后殖民见解作为理论范式,分析了2020年尼日利亚封城期间和封城后的10篇COVID-19大流行脸书帖子。这些帖子揭示了对尼日利亚政府的极度不信任;这确认了COVID-19大流行是对“统治阶级所谓的有罪不罚和尼日利亚群众否认COVID-19政策”的报复。

关键词: 2019冠状病毒病大流行, 脸书帖子, 政治抗议, 后殖民主义, 社交媒体

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria recorded its COVID-19 index case on the 27th of February 2020. The index case was an Italian national who came to Nigeria through Murtala Muhammad International Airport, Lagos. The second case was confirmed on the 9th of March 2020.¹ The spread of the

1 See Reuben Abati, “E ku Corona O” *Sahara Reporters: An Online News Outlet*, March 4, 2020. http://saharareporters.com/2020/03/04/%E2%

infection evident in the increasing number of infected people necessitated the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and state governments to close borders, schools and offices, ban public/social gatherings and other non-essential services, and, subsequently, impose a nationwide lockdown in March 2020. The restriction of movements was initially imposed in Lagos and Ogun States, and the Federal Capital Territory for an initial period of 14 days with effect from 11 p.m. on the 30th of March 2020.² It was later extended to nearly all the States of the Federation except Oyo, Kogi and Cross Rivers, whose state governments did not subscribe to the lockdown policies.

In collaboration with security agencies, these foregoing measures were coordinated by the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19, which was constituted by President Muhammadu Buhari on the 9th of March 2020. Chaired by the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), Boss Mustapha, the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19, with its membership drawn from various Ministries, Departments and Agencies, was meant to provide technical and material support to state governments to manage the outbreak and its spread. It equally functioned as an advisory body to President Buhari on specific decisions such as imposing and lifting lockdowns and providing information to the public on the efforts that were being made to contain the pandemic through daily media briefings with journalists.

The aforementioned measures—and others put in place by the governments—exacerbated social discontent among many ordinary people in the country. Not only did many ordinary Nigerians perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as a

80%9Ce-ku-corona-o%E2%80%9D-reuben-abati

2 Ibid.

fraud, but some people also regarded it as a disease that was exclusively meant for the members of the Nigerian ruling elite who often travel to Asian and Western countries, which are considered by many common people as the origination point of the pandemic. Thus, social tension and disobedience of the government's directives and public health policies on the pandemic were recurring features of the periods of the national lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria in 2020. Various forms of protest, including the EndSARS demonstrations and looting of palliatives perceived to be hoarded by some state governments and their agencies, were staged by the ordinary people to challenge the legitimacy of both the federal and state governments to impose restriction of movement and lockdown on them. Writing on the socio-economic and cultural conditions that provoked social tension in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ruben Abati asserts that "in Nigeria, more than half of the population lives below the poverty line. Over 40 million persons are unemployed or underemployed. They have no access to food stamps or unemployment benefits. For these persons, life is a daily struggle. Even the employed are either under-paid or over-worked and their salaries and pensions are not paid as and when due."³

As evident from the foregoing, the tension that attended the periods of the COVID-19 lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria was rooted in the sociopolitical and economic contradictions of the Nigerian state. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects were important factors, the violation of the lockdown policies, looting of palliatives and protests like the EndSARS demonstration were direct means of challenging the hegemony of the Nigerian state and its ruling class. These direct protests were reflections of the masses' peren-

3 Ibid.

nial disillusionment about the failure of the Nigerian state and its agents to ameliorate the poor living condition of the masses.

Despite the chaos, fatality and anxiety that characterized the lockdown and post-lockdown periods in Nigeria in the year 2020, the social media platforms were inundated with different forms of humorous posts. The humorous posts were used by online meme artists, cartoonists, and anonymous authors to interrogate the COVID-19 pandemic, the members of the Nigerian ruling elite, including religious leaders, and the ordinary people. The humorous texts were not merely posted on social media for their own sake or just as a means of escape from the Nigerian postcolonial predicaments exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdown. Indeed, Obadare has noted that “in Nigeria, jokes serve a double function as a tool for subordinate classes to deride the state (including its agents) and themselves” (“The Use of Ridicule” 241). Similarly, “the performance of humor in contemporary Africa can best be described as *mélange* of shifts and continuities that uncover the intensification of the humorous as one of the most formidable cultural representations of the current precarious state of existence in many parts of postcolonial Africa” (Yeku, “Joke-Performance” 1). In addition, social media platforms such as “YouTube and Facebook facilitate the emergence of new structures and contexts for the subversive and anti-establishment behavior of the traditional trickster of oral narratives” (Yeku, “Akpos” 1). From these perspectives, it can be extrapolated that humorous texts on the COVID-19 pandemic enabled by social media can be important popular cultural texts for interrogating power and power contestation (and complicity) in postcolonial African society.

The current study analyzes how elements of humor in selected COVID-19 texts posted on Facebook during the COVID-19

lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria function as protest and self-criticism. In addition to selected COVID-19 Facebook texts, the study also draws instances from newspaper reports and the authors' observations before, during, and after the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria. While deploying the postcolonial insights of Ake and Mbembe as the theoretical framework, the study examines the manner in which humorous COVID-19 texts posted on Facebook during the lockdown and post-lockdown periods question the hegemonies of the Nigerian political and religious establishment. Postcolonialism encapsulates diverse theoretical perspectives that are used to interrogate various forms of neo/colonialism and their implications on the neo/colonizers and the neo/colonized people. Postcolonial theory is significant to this current project because it will help to uncover the oppressive neo/colonial relations that characterize the condition of life in Nigeria before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theory is useful to dissect how the neo/colonized subjects in Nigeria deploy humorous Facebook posts on COVID-19 to interrogate and challenge the oppressive hegemonic principles of the Nigerian ruling class. It will also demonstrate how ordinary Nigerians, through comical Facebook posts on COVID-19, engage in self-criticism and self-mockery in manners that not only lament their vulnerability to the tyranny of the ruling class, but also reveal their complicity with it.

LAUGHING PROTEST, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE POSTCOLONY

The connection between humor and power in the postcolony reveals that humor enabled and circulated through social media platforms surpasses mere entertainment. Although the act/art of deploying humor to protest against abuse of power and corruption is not new to many indigenous people

in Africa, the advent of social media platforms has continued to intensify the potency and the ubiquitous nature of humor as a tool of engaging power in everyday life in Nigeria. Yeku underscores this point when he contends that “the agency and the capacity for self-representation which social media platforms enabled legitimizes the possibility of laughing out loud at the state, playing with technologies of power, and producing and reproducing new fields of cultural and political representations” (“Akpos” 3). Yeku explains further that “many Nigerian producers of online humor narratives communicate their inner anxieties and reconstruct the socio-political conditions of their nation-state through modern myths in internet enabled sites. These myths reflect their social anxieties and are also made to signify other cultural meanings on social media” (“Akpos” 3). Goldstein expresses a similar perspective on the function of humor when she remarks:

Humour is a vehicle for expressing sentiments that are difficult to communicate publicly or that point to areas of discontent in social life. The meanings behind laughter reveal both the cracks in the system and the masked or more subtle ways that power is challenged. Humour is one of the fugitive forms of insubordination. (5)

However, the confounding conditions of life in the post-colonial African state tend to suggest that laughing protest (humor) by the ordinary people can do little or nothing to subvert the hegemonies of the establishment. Mbembe underscores this point when he notes that humor “though may demystify the *commandement* or even erode its supposed legitimacy, it does not do violence to the *commandement’s* material base. At best, it creates pockets of indiscipline on

which the *commandement* may snub its toe, though otherwise it glides unperturbed over them” (“Provisional Notes” 10). Even though Mbembe’s perspective is valid, especially when one considers the “banality of power” in the postcolony, recent happenings in Nigeria tend to suggest that humor, circulated through social media, can, indeed, be an effective means of challenging the establishment. For example, the Inspector General of the Nigerian Police, Usman Baba, recently issued a statement ordering the arrest of online comic skit makers and movie producers who often use police uniform to portray the Nigerian Police in “the demeaning manner.”⁴ Usman Baba’s threat is provoked by the biting satire to which the members of Nigerian Police are often subjected by many Nigerian online comic skit makers. This has continued to impinge on the image of the Nigerian Police in a manner that makes it appear as an agency that is synonymous with grand corruption, duplicity and violence. This explanation supports Obadare’s view on the place of humor when he explains:

Humor, whether of the type targeted at the postcolonial state/elite that is widely criticized for producing ‘the condition’ in Africa, or the self-lacerating type that the sufferer directs at herself, is a veritable means of simultaneously recognizing, rejecting, and enduring social suffering. In public spaces in Nigerian bars, restaurants and on commercial buses, what people call their ‘sufferness’ is not too infrequently the cue for angry attacks on the ruling classes, which

4 See Ochogwu Sunday, “IGP orders arrest, prosecution of skit, movie makers over use of police uniform.” *The Daily Post*, An Online News Outlet, July 31, 2022 <https://dailypost.ng/2022/07/31/igp-orders-arrest-prosecution-of-skit-movie-makers-over-use-of-police-uniform/>.

are soon followed by jokes about both the bogus rituals of the state, and the lethargy of those 'elected' to run it. ("State of Travesty" 97)

Another issue that problematizes the agency of online humorous narratives in power relation in the postcolony is the "unholy" alliance between the members of the ruling class and the ordinary people, including online meme artists. In the perspective of Mbembe, "the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can be characterized as illicit cohabitation, a relationship made fraught by the very fact of the commandment and its 'subjects' having to share the same living space" ("Provisional Notes" 4). Mbembe rejects Bakhtin's view that the grotesque and the obscene are the province of ordinary people which they use as parodies to undermine officialdom ("Provisional Notes" 4). He further contends that the grotesque and the obscene are, indeed, essential elements of state power and are inherent in the manner it organizes and displays its magnificence. The grotesque and the obscene that characterize state power and the manner the ordinary people laugh at them reveal "the mutual zombification of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate" ("Provisional Notes" 4). Thus, rather than being a tool of resistance against the arbitrary actions of the ruling class, humor, as Mbembe's analysis suggests, is a site of mutual conviviality between the dominant class and the dominated one. He explains further:

The question of knowing whether humour in the postcolony is an expression of 'resistance' or not, whether it is, *a priori*, opposition or simply a manifestation of hostility towards authority, is thus of secondary

importance. For the most part, people who laugh are only reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of the *commandement*. Hence the image of, say, the President's anus is not of something out of this world—though to people's great amusement the official line may treat it as such; instead, people consider it as it really is, capable of defecating like any commoner's. ("Provisional Notes" 8)

Apart from suggesting the impossibility of binary opposition between the dominant class and the dominated class, Mbembe's view also indicates the collective culpability of the two classes in promoting and sustaining the grotesqueness and the obscenity that state power exhibits. Therefore, a laughing protest—humor—produced through social media is not only mockery of the state and its agents, but it also constitutes an art/act of self-recrimination. Not only do social media humor narratives mockingly expose the duplicity and deliberate mis-governance of many Nigerian rulers, they also depict the people's willful acceptance and perpetuation of their subjugation by the Nigerian ruling class.

Mbembe's foregoing perspective is quite relevant because it underscores the complexity of sociopolitical crises in contemporary Africa. Just like Mbembe, Lawal has noted that the essentialist representation of ordinary people in Nigeria (Africa) as victims of the arbitrary rule of the neocolonial ruling elite "fails to account for the possible role of some ordinary people in the manifestations of neocolonialism" (77). Hence, he introduces the notion of "consensual neocolonialism" to explain how "the ordinary people in the contemporary African State, either explicitly or implicitly, collaborate with neo-

colonial policies of African rulers to advance their (the ordinary people's) personal interests” (77). He explains:

Consensual neocolonialism implies that the people are not opposed to the neocolonial ideologies and policies of the ruling class, especially when such ideologies and policies satisfy either their personal, material or psychological needs at the expense of the community. Consensual neocolonialism signifies that the people are complicit in the acts of neocolonialism in contemporary Africa. (...) apart from leadership failure, there are also palpable crises of followership in the postcolony. (77)

While interrogating a number of social media (Facebook) posts, Lawal concludes that “social media texts (and their users) do not essentially constitute threats to the members of the ruling class because there are social media posts (and users) that are meant to perpetuate and validate hegemonic discourses” (77). Lawal's assertion shows the ambivalent nature of social media posts, including humor. While it is true that there have been instances where social media posts have provoked popular protests in Nigeria (the most recent being the EndSARS movement), there are also cases where some ordinary Nigerians deploy social media posts to valorize and mythologize the ruling class. In fact, in Nigeria, every member of the political class has “committed” sycophants among the masses who often use social media posts to validate their hegemony. For example, one Facebook post describes the current Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, thus: “Buhari is God's sent/ anyone against him has been cursed (sic)” (Cited in Lawal, 89). The post, apart from demonstrating the

complicity of some ordinary Nigerians with the members of the Nigerian ruling class, reveals that the common people do not constitute a coherent class. There are some ordinary Nigerians who are in alliances with the members of the Nigerian ruling class despite the abuse of power that they often perpetrate.

Mbembe and Lawal's perspectives, despite their validity, cannot discountenance the relevance of social media humorous posts as functional symbolic texts that are used to speak against the abuse of power by the members of the Nigerian elite. As a neocolonial state, Nigeria is a highly pluralistic country. It is also characterized by various dimensions of state orchestrated violence and injustice, which necessitate different forms of protest, including "laughing protest" (humor). Whether in humor or everyday life, the Nigerian state with its agents is often perceived and treated by many Nigerian citizens as an illegitimate entity. The public perceptions that many members of the ruling class, either in government or outside it, are "thieves" and irresponsible are rife among many ordinary Nigerians. Hence, widespread socio-economic and political discontent is a recurring feature in contemporary Nigeria. Ake alludes to this reality when he contends:

Political intensity received additional impetus from the alienation of leaders from followers in the postcolonial era. Basically, the political elite dealt with the tide of popular discontent arising from the deradicalization of the nationalist movement by enforcing political conformity through coercion. Coercion was used to constrain the political expression of the masses, now disillusioned with the performance of their leaders. Co-

ercion was also used to impose “political unity” in the midst of considerable social pluralism, which had become very divisive for being politicized and exploited by competing elites. (*Democracy and Development in Africa* 6)

However, in many contemporary African countries, including Nigeria, the political elite’s agenda to deradicalize the disillusioned masses and suppress them through the state apparatuses have not come to fruition. In the particular case of Nigeria, non-state actors, including militia, insurrectionist and terrorist groups, have continued to contest power and public space with the state, thereby destabilizing the state’s claim to monopoly of violence.

Beyond conventional/direct protests, social media humorous posts have also become the sites of engaging the state and its various collaborators, including the ordinary people. For example, President Muhammadu Buhari is often mockingly called *Bubu* and *Jubril of Sudan*. He is given these two names by social media users in Nigeria to underscore his “unpresidential,” dead-like detachment from various national crises confronting the country. In addition to the foregoing instance, comic inversion/subversion of official statements and history, humorous reportage of subaltern everyday realities, contemptible depictions of the members of the Nigerian elite (including religious leaders) and their agents, and the mockery of state institutions are some other instances through which Facebook humorous texts on COVID-19, which are the focus of this study, register their dissatisfaction with the Nigerian ruling elite and Nigerian society in general. The current study, therefore, agrees with Obadare who contends:

Humour is meaningful only in relation to specific social referents. In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, humour is integral to a reality which compels the postcolonial subject to endless improvising. What humour and its many uses are a pointer to is [...] the diversity, even wildness, of social life *outside* institutions, though still *within* 'civil society.' These are the unmapped spaces where the governor and the governed (often in a general situation of ungovernment) blend in a spectrum of possibilities. Humour is integral to the constitution of this space because it serves as means through which the subordinate classes 'get even' with the sovereign, and, as Grovogui (1996) maintains in a related context, 'dispose of themselves.' ("State of Travesty" 109)

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, Facebook humorous texts constitute subtle, but effective critiques of the Nigerian establishment. Irresponsible leadership, culture of profligacy and violence are some of the dimensions of sociopolitical disorder depicted in the Facebook COVID-19 posts. The posts constitute functional symbolic forms of protest against the Nigerian establishment because they expose different forms of abuse of power being perpetrated by them. They will also show that there is a link between the COVID-19 pandemic and the "nervous" condition of life in Nigeria. The posts, through elements of humor, also serve as a self-criticism of the ordinary Nigerians and Nigerian society in general because they depict the complicity of some ordinary Nigerians with the Nigerian ruling class.

**PROTEST, HUMOR AND THE REPRESENTATIONS OF
THE NIGERIAN ESTABLISHMENT IN SELECTED
COVID-19 FACEBOOK TEXTS**

The COVID-19 texts that are analyzed in this section were shared on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria. The lockdown period (including the phases of the relaxed lockdown) lasted five months. It began on the 30th of March 2020 and ended on the 3rd of September 2020. The post-lockdown period in Nigeria commenced on the 4th of September 2020. Those posts (mainly cartoons) culled from Bulama's Facebook wall had been published in *The Daily Trust*, one of the national dailies in Nigeria. Apart from publishing his cartoons in *The Daily Trust*, Mustapha Bulama, a Nigerian cartoonist, often shares his cartoons on social media, especially Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. Bulama's cartoons, especially those that focus on COVID-19, are parts of the Facebook data selected for analysis because of their relevance not only to the period of the COVID-19 lockdown, but also to the recurring chaotic condition of life in postcolonial Nigeria. Another factor is accessibility. Bulama's cartoons can be easily accessed on social media.

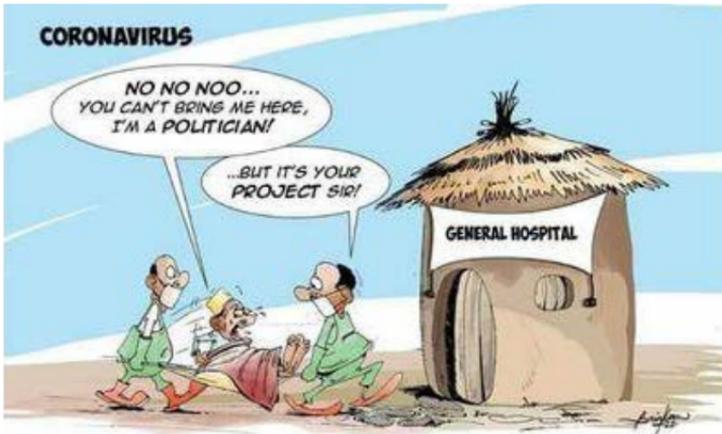
Apart from Bulama's cartoons, other Facebook texts analyzed in this section were also widely shared on Facebook and WhatsApp during the COVID-19 lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria. These Facebook texts, unlike Bulama's cartoons, could not be traced to particular authors because they were shared several times. Just like Bulama's cartoons, the Facebook texts' thematic concerns are relevant to the condition of life in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic and the recurring pandemic of mis-governance that continually assails the country before, during and after the COVID-19 lockdown.

The common motif that unites all the texts is COVID-19. The COVID-19 motif, as evident in the Facebook texts, is used to expose and interrogate the failure of leadership and the followership complicity that characterize postcolonial Nigeria. The COVID-19 motif in the posts is, therefore, used as a broad canvas to address various existential crises that hobble Nigerian society. These crises include corruption, poverty, social inequality, civil disobedience, willful violence (including terrorism and banditry), decayed infrastructure, religious charlatanism, lawlessness and wanton death. Hence, the notion and the atmosphere of the pandemic that the outbreak and the spread of COVID-19 signify are, in the context of the posts, regarded as a “normalized situation” in contemporary Nigeria. Another important feature of the posts is that they use elements of humor to depict the postcolonial Nigerian predicaments. Elements of humor deployed in the COVID-19 Facebook posts are symbolic strategies of writing back to the ruling class. They also constitute self-recrimination of the ordinary people. Thus, as used in the posts, humor transcends art for art’s sake.

**LEADERSHIP CORRUPTION AND
COLLAPSED HEALTH SYSTEM**



Source: Bulama's Facebook Wall on March 28, 2020.



Source: From Facebook on April 18, 2020.



Source: From Bulama's Facebook Wall on April 3, 2021.

In the three COVID-19 Facebook posts above, the link between leadership corruption and the collapse of the health system in Nigeria is humorously captured. In the first post—a cartoon culled from Bulama's Facebook wall—the character, illustrations, symbolism, and setting deployed are not only reflections of the COVID-19 pandemic; they are also a satiric critique of the long neglect of the Nigerian health system by the members of the political class. The spatial setting is an open space in front of a shanty building with a signpost: "Nigeria's Healthcare System." The temporal setting is during the COVID-19 lockdown in the year 2020 in Nigeria. This is evident in the fact that the open space is deserted by the people except a huddle of men labeled "Nigerian leaders." The men raise their hands, fretfully pleading with a yellow, round-like object which, obviously, represents the deadly virus—COVID-19.

Misappropriation of public funds, inflation of contracts, kick-backs and other forms of corruption are the ways in which

many Nigerian politicians become wealthy. In fact, Ake has noted that Nigerian politics (indeed, Nigerian politicians) is responsible for the underdevelopment of the country (“The Political Question” 28). Political office holders deploy state power to accumulate wealth. Ake contends that “the wealthiest people in Nigeria are generally people who have acquired wealth through state power: by political corruption, by access to state contracts, agency rates or concessions such as import licenses—which do not usually involve them in a direct productive activity” (“The Political Question” 29). Ake’s perspective is quite evident in the cartoon’s portrayal of the role of Nigerian leaders in the appalling state of the Nigerian public healthcare system. Not only have Nigerian leaders neglected the country’s healthcare system—they have also continually embezzled the funds that are meant to build and equip hospitals for everyday use and the period of emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of them, having arbitrarily enriched themselves from public coffers, often embark on medical trips to Western countries and some parts of Asia to medically take care of themselves and their immediate family members. One notable instance is that of the Nigerian Senator and Former Deputy Senate President, Ike Ekweremadu, who, alongside with his wife, Beatrice, their daughter, Sonia, and Dr. Obinna Obeta, is being charged with organ harvesting in the United Kingdom. Ekweremadu and Beatrice’s daughter, Sonia, has been suffering from kidney disease and she needs a transplant. A donor, a member of the subaltern, was gotten from Nigeria and sent to the United Kingdom for medical investigation with the aim of providing a kidney to Sonia. However, the donor’s kidney did not match that of Sonia. Hence, the donor was scheduled to return to Nigeria. However, the donor refused to return to Nigeria, but reported to the United Kingdom police in order

to seek asylum.⁵ Hence, on Thursday 23rd of June 2022, the London Metropolitan Police declared it arrested a Nigerian national, Ike Ekweremadu, and his wife, Beatrice Nwanneka Ekweremadu, for conspiring to bring a child to the United Kingdom for organ harvesting.⁶ The arrest of the Senator and his family members during their medical trip to the United Kingdom shows that the failure of the members of the Nigerian ruling class to build the public healthcare system in the country also has negative consequences on them and their family members.

Unrestrained manifestations of power, absurdity, excesses, and orifice are the recurring features of many postcolonial (Nigerian) rulers and governments. According to Mbembe, “the emphasis on orifices and protuberances has to be understood in relation to two factors [...]. The first derives from the fact that the *commandement* in the postcolony has a marked taste for lecherous living. Festivities and celebrations [...] are the two key vehicles for indulging in the taste. But the idioms of its organization and its symbolism focus [...] on the mouth, the belly and phallus” (“Provisional Notes” 6-7). Mbembe explains further that, “beyond this concern specifically with the mouth, belly and phallus, the body itself is the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power” (“Provisional Notes”7). As captured in the cartoon, the Nigerian leaders’ overweight bodies reveal their lecherous living which is made possible by their embezzlement of public funds, including funds meant for health facilities and other public utilities. The bales of currency that they stuff in their pockets underscore their extravagant lifestyle. Thus, confront-

5 See “UPDATED: UK Police Arrest Ike Ekweremadu, Wife for Organ Harvesting” Channels Television, 23 June 2022. <https://www.channels.tv.com/>

6 Ibid.

ed with COVID-19, the Nigerian leaders in the cartoon fretfully surrender, admit their guilt, and declare thus:

WE ARE SORRY SIR;

WE PROMISE TO FIX IT!

Beyond their admittance of guilt implicit in the statement above, their promise to fix the country's shambolic health-care system is not borne out of genuine repentance of their corrupt acts. Rather, it is informed by thanatophobia—the fear of death—occasioned by the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and their sudden contraction of it. It is important to note that many members of the Nigerian elite contracted the deadly virus in the year 2020. In fact, Suleiman Achimugu, the former Managing Director of the Pipelines and Products Marketing Company (PPMC); Victor Ikwuemesi, the founder of the defunct Sosoliso Airlines Limited; Suleiman Adamu, a member of Nasarawa State House of Assembly; Senator Esho Jinadu (popularly called Buruji Kashamu), a former Senator who represented Ijebu-Igbo Constituency in Ogun State at the 8th National Assembly and founder of Western Lotto Limited; Adebayo Sikiru Osinowo, a Senator who, until his death in June 15, 2020, was representing Lagos East Senatorial District in the National Assembly; Abiola Ajimobi, the former Governor of Oyo State, Nigeria; Wahab Adegbenro, Ondo State Commissioner of Health, and Abba Kyari, the Chief of Staff to President Muhammadu Buhari, were said to have died of COVID-19 complications.⁷

7 See, "Year in Review: 10 prominent Nigerian figures killed by COVID-19 in 2020." Ripples Nigeria: An Online News Outlet, 2 January 2021. <https://www.ripplesnigeria.com/year-in-review-10-prominent-nigerian-figures-killed-by-covid-19-in-2020/>

As said earlier, the Nigerian leaders' promise to fix the Nigerian health system is borne out of death anxiety. In the perspective of Ernest Becker, thanatophobia—death anxiety—comes to every human who considers the thought of death and dying unacceptable. Becker notes further that “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man” (ix). From Becker's view, the goals human beings set, their struggle for achievements and greatness are all coping strategies of repressing the thought of death and dying. Hence, as revealed in the cartoon, the Nigerian leaders' acceptance of guilt, their apologies to COVID-19 and their promise to fix the Nigerian healthcare system are strategies of escape from the death that COVID-19 may want to inflict on them. They are mere smoke screens to cover up their mis-governance. As depicted in the cartoon, their acceptance of guilt, their apologies to COVID-19 and their promise to fix the Nigerian healthcare system are not engendered by any sense of patriotism. Indeed, the stolen public funds in their pockets reveal that they lack any sense of decency, patriotism, and integrity. The actions of the Nigerian leaders, as depicted in the cartoon, are essentially motivated by their personal and class interests.

By using a vocative case of politeness/honor, 'SIR,' to address COVID-19, the Nigerian leaders show that they, in spite of their powerful positions, are scared of the deadly virus. Here, their stolen wealth and positions of power have been rendered somewhat useless because they are incapable of rescuing them from the deadly virus. Therefore, 'Sir,' as used in the cartoon, is an ingenious linguistic device to denigrate the hitherto powerful status of the Nigerian leaders. COVID-19 is portrayed as a kind of master who has come to expose and

put to check the culture of corruption among the Nigerian leaders.

In subjecting the Nigerian leaders to the whims and caprices of COVID-19 in the cartoon, Bulama, the cartoonist, desires to deflate the lecherous lifestyle and messianic preoccupations of the members of the Nigerian ruling class, depict them, in spite of their personalization of the state resources, as powerless individuals. The cartoon, therefore, tacitly challenges the binary difference between the Nigerian ruling class and the masses. Just as the Nigerian masses are victims of some common diseases, the Nigerian leaders are also not immune to COVID-19. The deadly virus is no respecter of wealth, political power, and class. It is a form of leveler. Thus, the Nigerian ruling class's refusal to build medical infrastructure in the country is injurious not only to the masses but also to their survival as leaders of the country.

In the cartoon, the deadly virus' confrontation with the Nigerian leaders relates to Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. The abject is what culture throws away, its garbage, or its waste products. Instances of abject substances include excrement, menstrual blood, and dead bodies. In the perspective of Julia Kristeva, "these substances evoke the lack of division between self and other that characterizes the pre-Oedipal phase" (cited in Mary Klages, 4). These substances conjure the maternal body, from which the infant has to separate in order to become a self (and to create an unconscious where pre-Oedipal memories and desires are repressed) (4). Therefore, things that are abject create a deep sense of horror, disgust, and discomfort in the civilized viewer for they remind him or her the time before differentiated selfhood; they threaten to dissolve the boundaries of the self and the other, and to return the civilized viewer to a non-differentiated state

of egolessness that is frightening to the self (4). Hence, read as a thing of abject, the deadly virus, as captured in the cartoon, reminds the Nigerian ruling elite of their inherent morbidity and mortality. In spite of their accumulation of wealth and control of state apparatuses, they, like the masses and other animals, are vulnerable to diseases, illness and death. Their civilized selfhood, represented by their elitist status, is a mere illusion.

Entitled 'CORONAVIRUS,' the second cartoon shows two health workers carrying a COVID-infected man to a small hut labeled: GENERAL HOSPITAL. In anguish, the man yells to the two health workers not to carry him into the "general hospital" because he is a politician. In response to his demand, one of the health workers declares that the hut-like general hospital is the politician's project. Therefore, he has to make use of the hospital just as the ordinary people do.

As seen from the character, setting, dialogue and symbolism in the cartoon, the members of the Nigerian ruling class, represented by the politician, do not truly want for themselves what they want for and give to the Nigerian masses. In Nigeria, it is common knowledge that successive governments often claim to provide social amenities such as hospitals, schools, and roads, but many of these facilities, in reality, are mere white elephant projects because they are always poorly executed, underfunded and poorly maintained. Hence, such projects end up as conduits for embezzling public funds by politicians, contractors, and their collaborators in the civil service. While the ordinary citizens contend with either dysfunctional basic social amenities or outright absence of them, the members of the ruling class often fly to developed countries to enjoy those basic facilities. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic came travel bans and

lockdown across many countries in the global North, especially in the year 2020. Thus, the members of the Nigerian ruling elite, represented by the politician in the cartoon, became the victims of the mis-governance and leadership ineptitude they foist on the ordinary Nigerians. Confronted with the dysfunctional public healthcare system, some members of the Nigerian elite who contracted COVID-19 had to seek respite in private hospitals in Nigeria.

The hut-like general hospital is a metaphor for the dysfunctional public healthcare system in Nigeria. It is an insignia of the predatory capitalist ruling elite. The interests of the predatory elite, represented by the politician in the cartoon, are to exploit and enslave the common people. That the politician refuses to be treated in the so-called General Hospital he builds for the people underscores the fact that the “facility” is more of a morgue than a hospital. Contrary to the interest of the people, the hut is constructed by the politician for the accumulation of wealth. It is a bogus project that is meant to irrigate and enlarge the private purse of the politician. The politician’s predatory attitude supports Ake’s idea that the Nigerian ruling elite’s interests do not correspond with the interest of the majority of Nigerians (“The Political Question” 23).

By carrying the politician to the hut, the two health workers want the politician to have a foretaste of his corruption and its negative consequences. The action of the two health workers underscores Mbembe’s view that “in the postcolony the search for majesty and prestige contains within it elements of crudeness and the bizarre that the official order tries hard to hide, but which ordinary people bring to its attention” (“Provisional Notes” 8–9). Despite the politician’s pretentious claim to provide functional healthcare facilities to the people in his constituency, the people, represented by the health

workers, expose his duplicity by forcing him to use the hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic. The health workers' action is an effective symbolic protest against the politician's treacherous character. That the two health workers are able to expose the politician's fraudulent attitude suggests that not all Nigerian citizens are deceived by the phony promises and amenities that the members of the ruling elite often provide for the common people. Infected and demystified by COVID-19, the politician's legitimacy is further subjected to questioning by the two health workers. Thus, he becomes a victim of his own predatory leadership as he is served the poisonous meal he prepares for the masses.

Beyond the themes of corruption and revenge, the cartoon challenges the superiority posture of the members of the ruling class. That the politician, owing to the COVID-19 global lockdown, ends up in the hands of local health workers in a dysfunctional hospital destabilizes the binary opposition between the rich and the poor, the rulers, and the ruled. It suggests that political power and money are insufficient to give an individual physical and emotional wherewithal. The rich and the poor, the rulers, and the ruled need each other for survival. Therefore, beyond parochial interests, every human, especially those entrusted with public offices, must strive for common good.

The third cartoon is a (post-lockdown) critique of the recurring medical trips by the incumbent Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, to the United Kingdom. The cartoon shows that President Muhammadu Buhari and other members of the political class have refused to abide by the lessons of the global lockdown occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. As revealed in the post, the debilitated healthcare system, represented by the shambolic structure and the hut-like

general hospital in the two previous posts, remains the same in Nigeria after the COVID-19 lockdown. Despite the threat occasioned by the pandemic which was compounded by the collapsed healthcare system in the country, the members of political class have refused to rebuild Nigeria's health system. For example, no sooner had some developed countries lifted the ban on the lockdown and opened their spaces than some members of the Nigerian political elite, including the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, began traveling there to enjoy medical amenities. The verbal text, "Buhari heads to UK for medical checkup" in the cartoon underscores this reality. The message in the verbal text is further graphically foregrounded through the flying aircraft in the cartoon. The two yellow, round-like objects which, obviously, represent COVID-19, declare:

APPARENTLY

HE DIDN'T LEARN ANYTHING

In the excerpt, the pronoun, "HE," is a referent to the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari. By immediately traveling to the UK for medical checkup after the lockdown without serious efforts to address crises in the Nigerian health system, COVID-19 perceives Buhari as a myopic who refuses to learn from the health crises occasioned by the immediate past pandemic in order to resolve the conundrums in the Nigerian health sector. COVID-19's statement also connotes that Buhari, despite the supposed lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, has not desisted from using his position as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to advance his private welfare at the expense of the masses.

Besides, the presence of COVID-19 in front of the Nigerian crumbling healthcare system suggests that the virus is still around, and that the Nigerian healthcare system is incapa-

ble of confronting it. Its position in front of the dilapidated public health facility also makes the ordinary Nigerians who rely on the facility endangered individuals. The caustic manner in which the virus speaks to Buhari further suggests that the members of the ruling class's recurring trips to developed countries for checkups cannot save them from the wrath of COVID-19 if they fail to rebuild the crumbling healthcare system in the country. COVID-19 and other deadly diseases will continue to have a field day in the county. Thus, both the rulers and the ruled are at risk of contracting the disease.

Buhari's trip to the United Kingdom for a medical checkup can be viewed from the neocolonial relations that continue to exist between the former colonizers and the leaders of the former colonized countries. This reality is emphasized by Akude that "African governments maintain their relationship with the departing colonial masters based on the complementarity of interests by granting expensive contracts to foreign firms, increasing investment opportunities for those firms and enriching themselves through deals with the firms (1). Akude, therefore, surmises that "foreign aid, foreign trade and foreign investment contribute to the maintenance of African rulers in power" (1). Similarly, by neglecting the Nigerian healthcare system and expending taxpayers' money on medical tourism in the United Kingdom, Buhari's character, as depicted in the cartoon, validates Ake's view that "the political interests of the few who control state power rarely coincide with the economic interests of the rest of the nation" ("The Political Question" 28). The members of the Nigerian ruler class are solely committed to advancing their private interest, and they often do this by engaging in various forms of "economic irrationalities," including embarking on recurring medical tours to developed countries instead of rebuilding the country's dilapidated healthcare system.

**PREDATORY ELITE, SOCIAL INEQUALITY,
AND THE HUNGER EPIDEMIC**



Source: Bulama's Facebook Wall on April 28, 2020.

Entitled “Lockdown,” the above cartoon reveals how the lockdown policy imposed on the country in the year 2020 by the Federal Government of Nigeria worsened the socio-economic inequalities that have hitherto existed in the country. The cartoon captures the situations in the homes of two different classes of Nigerians—the ruling elite and the common people—during the COVID-19 lockdown. In the home of the ruling elite, two overweight, flamboyantly dressed men are captured. The two men who clad in traditional attire (agbada and caps) are busy wining and dining. Amidst this activity, one of the men justifies the lockdown policy imposed on the country by declaring thus: “CORONAVIRUS IS REAL!”

In the second home, which represents the life of many ordinary Nigerians at mealtime, are two other individuals—one is standing while the other is sitting. However, unlike the class of “the haves,” the two common people are not only shabbily dressed, they also look hungry, sick, and gaunt. With

the empty plates in their hands, they cast a furtive, resentful gaze at the two rich men who are busy winning and dining at the table. In a kind of acerbic tone, one of the two common people retorts thus: "...*HUNGER is, to some Nigerians!* His assertion is a protest against the corrupt Nigerian rulers who abandon the ordinary people to languish in poverty before and during the pandemic. His assertion can be considered a counter-narrative to the statement *CORONAVIRUS IS REAL!* made by one of the two members of the elite. This is because the poor man, just like many ordinary Nigerians, does not regard COVID-19 as a major threat to his life. Rather, he believes that the lack of food is his major problem.

Apart from indicating that the year 2020 lockdown in Nigeria is an anti-subaltern policy which aggravates the economic distress of the ordinary people, the cartoon also validates Ake's notion that "the need for a more secure material base drove the indigenous elite to increase the statism of the economy" (*Democracy and Development in Africa* 6). Ordinarily, in a period of lockdown occasioned by a pandemic, governments at various levels are expected to offer palliative measures to alleviate the people's socio-economic hardship. However, the cartoon reveals that the members of the ruling class only take care of themselves while the people languish in hunger. Hence, the immediate threat to the common people's existence is the epidemic of hunger, but not the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the cartoon, the lockdown policy is depicted as an ideology of the ruling class. By foisting it on the members of the lower class without corresponding socioeconomic provisions for them, the members of the ruling elite not only impose their ideology on the common people—they also misrepresent reality in a manner that valorizes their will. Indeed,

the lockdown policy corresponds with Louis Althusser's idea of ideology when he explains that "in ideology the real relation is invariably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that expresses a *will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality" (234). Thus, by essentializing the "reality" of the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of "the reality" of the hunger epidemic, and by endorsing the lockdown policy, instead of alleviating the socioeconomic deprivation of the ordinary people, the members of the ruling class deliberately misrepresent reality to express their desire, elevate and preserve it. Contrary to the view that COVID-19 is the major threat, Abati contends:

The bigger epidemic in Nigeria, in any case, is the epidemic of empty pockets. The ordinary Nigerian will do anything to fill the emptiness of his or her pockets. It is therefore not surprising that the prices of sanitizers, face masks and hand wash have gone up. I won't be surprised if very soon, there is a Nollywood movie on Corona-Virus! I have already seen photos of some beautiful women carefully posted on Social media with the message: "Not all Coronas are deadly!" Phone numbers are discreetly attached.⁸

Nonetheless, the ordinary people produce counter-hegemonic ideology to project the reality of their class. This is evident in the statement "...*HUNGER is, to some Nigerians!*"

8 See Reuben Abati, "E ku Corona O," *Sahara Reporters: An Online News Outlet*, March 4, 2020. <http://saharareporters.com/2020/03/04/%E2%80%9Ce-ku-corona-o%E2%80%9D-reuben-abati>

By capitalizing hunger, the cartoonist foregrounds it. This implies that starvation, rather than COVID-19, is the fundamental reality of the ordinary people in contemporary Nigeria. The foregrounding of hunger is also a way of speaking back to the members of the ruling elite and inverting their unicentric knowledge of reality.

The cartoon also shows that the colonial structure is still in place in contemporary Nigeria. Frantz Fanon explains that “the colonial world is a world divided into compartments” (29). He asserts that “it is [...] the existence of native quarters and European quarters, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans” (29). This structural violence promoted by colonialism is also a recurring feature of many countries in post-independence Africa, including Nigeria. The cartoon emphasizes this reality through the symbolic elements of binary opposition. For instance, the two members of the ruling class are flamboyantly dressed in traditional attire; they also look overfed. In addition, their plates from which they are still busy eating chickens are full of sumptuous meals. However, the common people look shabbily dressed, frustrated and hungry. Their plates are also empty. The darkness in the background of their house connotes a gloomy life while the illumination in the elite’s palatial house symbolizes the material comfort that characterizes the life of the members of the ruling class. These instances reflect the Manichean structure of the neocolonial condition in contemporary Nigeria, even during the COVID-19 lockdown. They also support Ake’s view that the Nigerian bourgeoisie “did not fight the colonial system in order to change it but merely to inherit it” (“The Political Question” 23). Ake adds that the Nigerian bourgeoisie’s “intent, now clearly manifest, to inherit the exploitative colonial system underlies its own oppressive style in regard to the Nigerian masses” (“The Political Question”

23). The overfed, monstrous bodies of the two members of the ruling elite metaphorize the profligacy that characterizes the postcolonial Nigerian governments, both military and civilian. This point supports Mbembe's view:

The body itself is the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power. But if [...] it is the festivities and celebrations that are the vehicles, par excellence, for giving expression to the commandment and for staging its displays of magnificence and prodigality, then the body in question is firstly a body that eats and drinks, and secondly a body that is open in both ways. Hence the significance given to orifices and the central part they play in people's political humour. ("Provisional Notes" 7)

Despite the fact that ordinary people make mockery of the monstrous bodies of the members of the ruling elite, the monstrous bodies are, according to Mbembe, "part of a system of signs that the commandment leaves, like tracks, as it passes on its way, and so make it possible for someone to follow the trail of violence and domination that is intrinsic to the commandment" (Mbembe, "Provisional Notes"). Thus, the monstrous bodies of the members of the ruling class are ways by which they proclaim their domination, violence, and lustful lifestyle. Their monstrous bodies are symbolic strategies of instilling themselves and their regimes into the consciousness of the dominated class.

However, beyond a mere mockery, the monstrous bodies of the ruling elite provoke the anger of the ordinary people. This is evident in the rage displayed by the two common people

in the cartoon. They are angry because they believe the two members of the elite, like predators, are feeding fat on the collective resources of the land. This point recalls the jibe flung at Aishat Buhari, the wife of the President of Nigeria, by Aminu Muhammed, a final year student in the Department of Environmental Management and Toxicology, the Federal University Dutse, Jigawa State, Nigeria. On June 8, 2022, Aminu Muhammed “posted on Twitter that Mrs Aisha Buhari had suddenly added massive weight after taking part in plundering the nation’s meager resources,”⁹ while the masses languish in socioeconomic hardship under her husband’s regime. “According to Muhammed’s friends, Muhammed made the post because he was frustrated about the protracted strike by public Universities across the country. The strike started in February 2022 and ended in October after eight months.”¹⁰ Muhammed was arrested by men of the Nigerian Police but was later released after heavy criticism by several social media users.

Muhammed’s arrest and his detention show how social media humor in contemporary Nigeria can unsettle the members of the ruling class. Here, contrary to Mbembe’s view, humor is an instrument of subversion. This view is supported by Obadare who notes that humors are “symbolic instruments of social transgression” and that in Africa (Nigeria), humor “must be seen as integral to a reality in which the postcolonial subject is condemned to endless improvising” (“State of Travesty” 92). Similarly, Yeku alludes to the potency of humor as instrument of resistance when he contends:

9 See Nigerian Tweeps Knock First Lady Aisha Buhari Over Arrest of Twitter User for Saying She Fed Fat on Masses’ Funds, *Sahara Reporters*, 27 November 2022. <https://saharareporters.com>

10 Ibid.

Through social media for instance, postcolonial humour achieves a more caustic emphasis, as those who are subject to power can directly travesty the state and its apparatus of systemic oppression. The implication of organizing the rhetoric of political humour through the images and texts of social/mew media is that humour as a site of resistance is individuated, with the 'private spaces' of citizens online becoming public sites of power contestations, hereby affirming the importance of treating (social) media texts, as (...) as embedded in broader social discourses. ("Akpos"³)

Obadare and Yeku's perspectives are also supported by Goldstein:

Everyday forms of "resistance" are admittedly largely fleeting, but, I believe, they are important nonetheless. As expressions of power, such dissent reveals the fault lines within society. As a deployment of power, however weak or limited, dissent challenges the status quo. If laughter often does not live up to its radical potential, it nonetheless echoes Rabelais and speaks bitter truths to power. (8)

**THE EPIDEMIC OF LAWLESSNESS, CORRUPTION,
AND INSECURITY**

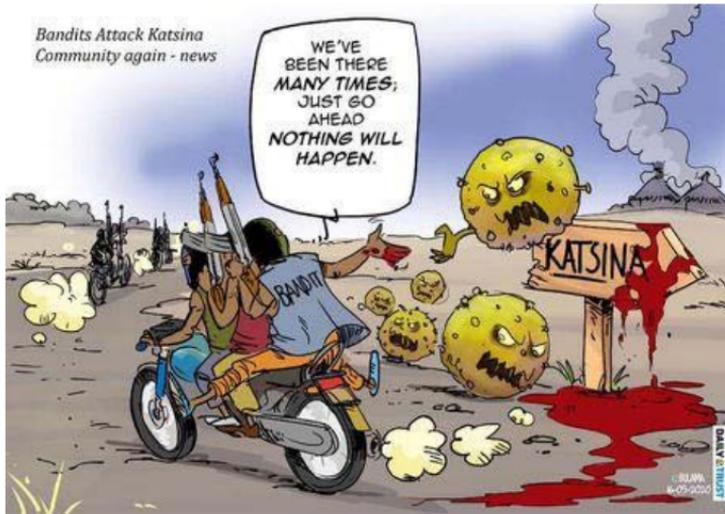


Source: Facebook on May 30, 2020.



Source: Facebook on May 8, 2020.

Protest, Humor, and the Nigerian Establishment



Source: Bulama's Facebook Wall on April 16, 2020.

The three Facebook posts above dwell on the recurring lawlessness, corruption, and terrorism that characterize Nigeria before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Structurally, the first post contains two sentences. The first one, which is a compound sentence, highlights the social distance policy formulated by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) in the year 2020. It further demonstrates how the members of the Nigerian Police disobey the policy. The second one, presented in Pidgin, is a rhetorical question which interrogates the illegal conduct of the police with regards to the social distance policy. Emblazoned on the post is a picture of Mr. Ibu (John Okafor), a popular Nollywood/Nigerian comic actor. The picture of Mr. Ibu on the post tends to suggest that the statement emanates from him. However, Mr. Ibu's picture is emblazoned on the post to accentuate its satiric undercurrent.

As evident from the verbal text, the post captures the arbitrary character of the agents of the Nigerian state. The post

shows that the COVID-19 pandemic does not restrain the country's law enforcers, especially the men and women of the Nigerian Police, from violating the laws which they are meant to obey and implement. Just like in the colonial era where the colonial masters "made rules and laws profusely and propagated values" (Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa* 3) without engendering "any legitimacy," successive Nigerian governments and their agents have often enacted laws and propagated values, but have always failed to abide by their own laws. It appears, then, that the laws and rules are made to be obeyed by only the masses.

The violation of the social distance policy by the members of the Nigerian Police also signifies that they are the spreaders of the virus. The lawless act by the members of Nigerian Police, especially during the lockdown, inverts their status as law enforcement agents. Hence, their repressive methods of enforcing the social distance policy and lockdown are oppressive. They are portrayed in the post as agents of illegality and chaos. By interrogating their action through the rhetorical question presented in Pidgin, the post subjects them to the court of the people. The rhetorical question shows further that they, just like the ruling elite they serve, are arbitrary powers, which not only spread COVID-19, but also constitute oppressive viruses to the common people.

Produced against the background of the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria, the second post shows how some members of the Nigerian Police, in collaboration with some ordinary Nigerian citizens, engage in corrupt acts with a view to violating the lockdown policy for their parochial ends. In the pictorial post, a commercial motorcycle rider on his motorcycle, contrary to the lockdown policy, is seen on the road. He is also carrying a passenger on the motorcycle. The commer-

cial motorcycle rider's encounter with a gun-bearing policeman further reinforces the lockdown policy. The policeman, maintaining a social distance and wearing a facemask, puts forward a net to receive a bribe of one thousand naira from the commercial motorcycle rider. Here, the policeman who is supposed to implement the law by getting the commercial motorcycle rider and his passenger arrested, compromises the law for his pecuniary gains.

As captured in the post, the ordinary citizens and the law enforcement agents are mutually involved in the violation of law and order, even during the COVID-19 lockdown. What this implies is that there is a kind of transactional and mutual relations between the ordinary people and the agents of the law with regards to the desecration of the state and its laws. These transactional relations between the two classes—the ordinary citizens and the agents of the state—are anchored on mutual gratifications. For example, the commercial motorcycle rider disobeys the COVID-19 lockdown policy to eke out a living. Also, the policeman, who is supposed to arrest and prosecute him, renders the lockdown policy impotent by receiving a bribe from him. Thus, both the motorcycle rider and the policeman are depicted as the agents of corruption. The transactional relations between the policeman and the commercial motorcycle rider validate Mbembe's perspective that:

In order 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, such as resistance v. passivity, autonomy v. subjection, state v. civil society, hegemony v. counter-hege-

mony, totalisation v. detotalisation. These oppositions are not helpful; rather, they cloud our understanding of postcolonial relations. (“Provisional Notes” 3)

However, the representation of the policeman shows that he is more culpable than the commercial motorcycle rider because the onus of implementing the COVID-19 lockdown policy is on him. Implementations of government policies, including those of COVID-19, also involve the arrest and prosecution of violators of the policies. By taking a bribe in order to compromise the lockdown policy, the policeman not only enables the spread of COVID-19, he also contributes to the endemic rise of corruption in Nigeria. Hence, the policeman is represented as an agent of the COVID-19 pandemic and corruption. As noted by Ake, the (post)colonial society, despite the fact that it makes “rules and laws profusely and propagates values,” cannot “engender any legitimacy” because its operators are enablers of corruption and sociopolitical disorder (*Democracy and Development in Africa* 3).

In a number of ways, the characters of the commercial motorcycle rider and his passenger challenge the hegemony of the Nigerian state and COVID-19. First, the commercial motorcycle rider and his passenger violate the lockdown policy imposed by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Second, the motorcycle rider subverts the hegemony of the state and its law by offering a bribe to the law enforcement agent. Third, the motorcycle rider and his passenger refuse to use facemasks or nose-masks, thus announcing their disbelief in the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic and its fatal effects. They are only concerned about the epidemic of poverty, which they are out to combat. Their violation

of the lockdown policy is also informed by their conscious realization that the members of the Nigerian ruling elite do not provide meaningful palliatives for them prior and during the lockdown. Thus, they defy the government policies on COVID-19, manipulate its agent and undermine its hegemony for their material interests. The commercial motorcycle rider and his passenger's aforementioned acts are effective symbolic protests against the state. Their rebellious attitude shows their disillusionment about the state and its operators. On the attitude of ordinary Nigerians to the Nigerian state and its operators, Ake explains:

In Nigeria, for instance, the state has little influence on the lives of the rural people. Much development that has taken place in rural communities has occurred not because of the state, but in spite of it. To many rural dwellers, the state exists primarily as a nuisance to be avoided in their daily struggle to survival (cited in Uwasomba and Alumona 209).

Entitled “Bandit Attack Community again—news,” the third post is a cartoon produced by Mustapha Bulama during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria. The cartoon shows a group of arm-wielding bandits who, on motorcycles, are returning from a community in Katsina that they have just invaded and looted. This is evident from a huge smoke emanating from the community in the distance and the splash of blood on the road sign labeled KATSINA, and on the road. As captured in the cartoon, a group of Corona viruses, which is also heading for the invaded community, meets the bandits on the road. One of the bandits and one of the viruses wave to each other, and the bandit declares:

WE'VE
BEEN THERE
MANY TIMES;
JUST GO
AHEAD

NOTHING WILL HAPPEN.

As depicted in the cartoon, the spatial setting, the symbolism, diction and characters not only reflect the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria; they equally capture the epidemic of insecurity in northern Nigeria in particular, and the country in general. Ake's idea that "the political interests of the few who control state power rarely coincide with the [...] interests of the rest of the nation" ("The Political Question" 28) is clearly evident in the cartoon. The members of the ruling elite who control the security apparatuses only deploy them to protect themselves and their immediate family members while they abandon the ordinary people to their fate. This is why the bandits have the latitude to attack the communities. The lack of presence of security agents/agencies in various communities in Nigeria reveals the alienation of the ordinary people from the structure of power. The bandit's assertion that they have successfully attacked the Katsina community several times, without reprisals from the security agencies, underscores further the estrangement of the community and its people by the government. Therefore, COVID-19, another agent of insecurity, is not likely to encounter any resistance from the state and its agents owing to the fact that funds earmarked to combat various forms of insecurity, including health crises, have either been misappropriated or embezzled by people in governments. This is why Ibeanu and Momoh conceived of security decision-making

in Nigeria as “highly politicized and subject to political manipulation” (69). They note that, in Nigeria, “provision of security [...] is often used for political ends and to justify impunity and corruption” (69). Egbo *et al* underscore the same point when they declare:

The ambiguity and secrecy usually associated with the concept of national security create the enabling environment for such funds to be misappropriated by the custodians of the state, and security votes have thus become a convenient tool for disguising the looting of the public treasury. Unfortunately, security votes have also become a useful tool for perpetuating the power and control of the ruling class. (2)

From the foregoing perspective, the recurring cases of insecurity in Nigeria which manifest in banditry, terrorism and kidnapping are largely caused by the corruption of the ruling class.

In the cartoon, the symbols of violence and disorder are appropriately deployed to foreground the ubiquitous character of insecurity in the northern part of Nigeria. The blood and the smoke connote the destruction of the people and their property by the bandits. The characters of the bandits and the virus also indicate physical and medical forms of insecurity being experienced by the people in the region and the country at large. These forms of insecurity further suggest the absence of good governance in the country. The bandits’ contestation of power with the state and its actors supports Ake’s notion that postcolonial African politics, occasioned by the failure of the ruling class, is reduced “to the crude mechanics of opposing forces driven by the calculus of power. For every-

one in this political arena, security lay only in the accumulation of power. The result was an unprecedented drive for power; power was made the top priority in all circumstances and sought by all means” (*Democracy and Development in Africa*, 3). Just like the postcolonial politicians, the bandits too are interested in absolute power. They are, therefore, anti-democratic and anti-people forces. This is evident in the callous manner they destroy the people and their property. By telling the virus to visit the ravaged community and unleash its violence on its dwellers, the bandits show that they are agents of destruction. Hence, their anti-establishment stance is cruel and retrogressive. It does not represent the interest of the oppressed class. However, their statement—“We’ve been there many Times; just go ahead nothing will happen”—is a mockery of the Nigerian state and its security forces. Apart from connoting that the government has abdicated its primary responsibility of providing security to its citizenry, the statement also reveals that the Nigerian State is like a Hobbesian state where life is nasty, brutish, and short.

As noted earlier, the bandits’ act of violence is not a revolutionary act because it is not meant to liberate ordinary Nigerians from the perpetual sociopolitical and economic predicaments confronting them. The bandits’ violence is a form of commercial enterprise. They attack the people, kill them, and loot some of their worthy belongings. They also kidnap innocent people in order to obtain ransoms from their family members. Mbembe alludes to this commoditization of violence in many parts of Africa, including Nigeria, that:

The political economy of statehood dramatically changed over the last quarter of the twentieth century. Many African states can no longer claim a monopoly on violence

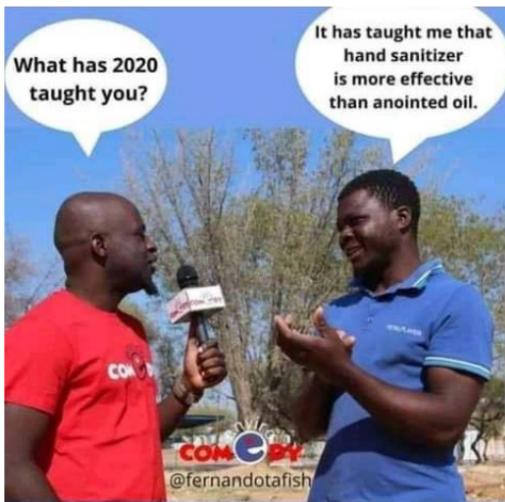
and on the means of coercion within their territory. Nor can they claim a monopoly on territorial boundaries. Coercion itself has become a market commodity. Military manpower is bought and sold on a market in which the identity of suppliers and purchasers means almost nothing. Urban militia, private armies, armies of regional lords, private security firms, and state armies all claim the right to exercise violence or to kill. (“Necropolitics” 32)

From the foregoing view, many postcolonial African states may be considered as weak states owing to their inability to maintain law and order. Non-state actors, especially in some northern and southeastern states of Nigeria, enact their own laws and subject the ordinary citizens to various forms of violence. This unwholesome situation tends to show that Nigeria operates, like many other African states, on the survival-of-the fittest principle.

COVID-19 AND THE EPIDEMIC OF RELIGIOUS CHARLATANISM



Source: Facebook on April 17, 2020.



Source: Facebook on December 30, 2020.

The above two Facebook posts use both pictorial and verbal elements to capture the confusion and frustration of some self-appointed miracle-performing pastors in Nigeria during the COVID-19 lockdown. In the first post, a male pastor, in a perplexing mood, puts his hands, which also contain his Bible, on his head. The pastor's frustration and confusion are caused by the fact that the members of his congregation whom he often exploits, through church offering and tithe collections, have all stayed in their homes because of the COVID-19 lockdown. The pastor's acclaimed "spiritual power" to perform miracles—which constitute his main source of income, has now been exposed as a mere pretension. This is because the pastor can neither prevent the spread of COVID-19 nor cure its victims. The male pastor and his ilk are frustratingly waiting for the virus to end so that they can resume the exploitation of their followers through their self-acclaimed spiritual power.

The post uses the circumstance of COVID-19 and the lockdown to satirize the self-imputed messianic character of many religious leaders in Nigeria. The reference to the unscrupulous attitudes of the pastor in the pictorial post recalls the character of Brother Jero in Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*. Brother Jero is a self-acclaimed evangelical prophet practicing along Lagos Beach, Nigeria. He uses false prophecies and other dubious methods to extract money from his followers. He plays on people's ignorance and desires by giving them compelling prophecies which make them depend on him as a true prophet of God. With the endless absence of good governance in Nigeria, a majority of Nigerians turn to religious leaders, self-acclaimed spiritualists and prophets, especially Pentecostal pastors, for spiritual solutions to their existential problems. Just like the Nigerian politicians, the Pentecostal pastors and prophets subject

their followers to various forms of exploitation and oppression. They swindle and enslave their members through their artificial spiritual power and performance of miracles.

But with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the claims of these spiritualists to spiritual power and miracles have turned out to be false because they have failed to use their power to neither forestall the spread of the virus nor cure its victims. Similarly, the COVID-19 lockdown has shown that some pastors are rakes who feed on the gullibility of their followers, which is why the pastor in the first post puts his hands on his head in frustration. The absence of his church worshippers to swindle and exploit portends hunger and intensifies his dissatisfaction.

The Facebook post also reveals the role of Nigerian religious leaders in the socio-political and economic crises in the country. Obadare alludes to this reality that, in Nigeria “a cohort of Christian leaders—a theocratic class—has steadily gained influence over the course of the Nigerian Fourth Republic, due in large part to its astute construction and maintenance of a discourse whereby the country’s economic and political problems are defined in spiritual terms” (*Pentecostal Republic* 34). He notes that “such a definition is consistent with the Pentecostalist world view of ubiquitous and apparently inexhaustible evil, which is only (if at all) eliminable through aggressive prayer and other forms of spiritual warfare” (*Pentecostal Republic* 34). Obadare remarks further:

The stress placed on the ubiquity of unseen enemies and invisible diabolical forces allows the theocratic class to seize the narrative through which it is able to leverage tremendous social and political power. This power threatens the democratic project in-

sofar as it is mobilised to enter alliances with various state actors, and to advance the corporate interests of the theocratic class, much to the detriment of the citizenry. (*Pentecostal Republic* 34)

A similar view has been expressed by Ake. According to him, “the trouble with Nigeria is not its governments but its ruling elite” (“The Political Question” 31). Ake remarks that “government is a small group in charge of major institutions of the state, particularly the legislative and administrative machinery. The ruling class is all the power centers, political, cultural, religious, and economic that constitute the existing political domination” (“The Political Question” 31). He explains that “in the case of Nigeria, the ruling elite includes all the powerful traditional leaders, the major religious leaders, the higher ranks of the coercive institutions such as the military, the police and the judiciary, international capital and the wealthy Nigerians who command the economy” (“The Political Question” 31). Thus, the religious leaders cannot be exculpated from the problems hobbling the country. Their behavior reinforces the hegemony of the government. For instance, the Nigerian religious clerics’ mystification/spiritualization of the crises of governance and their exploitation of the ordinary people, as revealed in the post, is a way of advancing their private material interests. Thus, the predatory character of many religious leaders is not different from that of Nigerian politicians.

The second post also questions the veracity of the spiritual product of some pastors in Nigeria. This spiritual product, known as anointed/anointing oil, is often sold to the members of church congregations by the pastors or “General Overseers” of various churches. The anointed/anointing oil

is claimed to be an antidote to several ailments and diseases, including “spiritual attacks” from known and unknown enemies. However, the post demystifies the claim that the anointed/ anointing oil has any power to prevent or cure any disease. Through the characters of a journalist and a respondent, the post contends that hand sanitizer is more potent than the anointed oil. By undermining the supposed potency of the anointed oil, the post deconstructs the self-acclaimed power of its producers, the pastors, or general overseers. In addition, the post intends to liberate the minds of Nigerians, especially ordinary people, who often regard pastors, general overseers, and other spiritualists as super-humans. It shows that Nigerians need to liberate themselves from predatory pastors, general overseers and other spiritualists who often exploit them. The hand sanitizer, a metaphor for scientific knowledge, is considered as capable of combating COVID-19. That the people resort to hand sanitizer, rather than the anointed oil, during the COVID-19 pandemic shows further that the anointed oil lacks the efficacy often ascribed to it.

As evident from the foregoing analysis, the post is a mockery of the messianic and predatory self-positioning of many Nigerian pastors and their product, anointed oil. Thus, the satiric repudiation of the anointed oil is a subtle protest against the hegemony of “the miracle-doing men of God.” The post canvasses scientific solutions to Covid-19 and other existential problems challenging the country. It shows that religions or the belief in miracle by many Nigerians cannot address their socio-political and economic problems. The post advocates pragmatic attitudes to various challenges bedeviling Nigerians. Hence, the post is not only a mockery of Pentecostalist pastors; it is also a criticism of the masses who often repose their hope in them.

CONCLUSION

This study has focused on how humorous COVID-19 Facebook posts function as protest and self-criticism in contemporary Nigeria. The study has discussed how the humorous portrayals of the COVID-19 pandemic on Facebook constitute a distinctive form of protest against the manifestations of mis-governance, corruption and perversion of state institutions in Nigeria. This is achieved through postcolonial insights of Mbembe and Ake. The study has shown that the COVID-19 posts, through elements of humor, privilege sociopolitical and economic contradictions that are prevalent in contemporary Nigeria. As part of its findings, the study observes that the COVID-19 posts capture the ordinary people's revolting distrust in the Nigerian government, its agents, and policies; the privileging of the COVID-19 pandemic as a reprisal for the alleged corrupt acts of the Nigerian ruling class; and the Nigerian masses' rejection of COVID-19 policies. Also, some Facebook posts on the COVID-19 pandemic criticize the exploitative and the "superior" spiritual self-positioning of some Nigerian religious leaders for their failure to use their self-acclaimed spiritual power to address the pandemic and the crisis engendered by it. However, it is revealed that some posts interrogate the ordinary people for their involvement in promoting social disorder during the pandemic. It destabilizes the assumed binary difference between the ruling class and the masses because some ordinary Nigerians are in conspiratorial alliances with the establishment and their agents in the destruction of the Nigerian state.

As evident from the foregoing, this work has shown that humorous COVID-19 posts on Facebook (and indeed humor on social media in general) constitute important cultural texts which document as well as critique the debilitating sociopolitical realities in contemporary Nigeria. The humorous

COVID-19 posts serve as symbolic engagement with the Nigerian state because they are acts/arts of speaking back to the Nigerian establishment. They also constitute acts/arts of self-critique by many ordinary Nigerians. Thus, beyond the mirthless laughter that the posts may elicit from the audience, their meanings reveal deep yearnings for responsive and responsible leadership and supportive citizenry, which are ingredients of democracy, good governance and national solidarity that are required in addressing various forms of pandemic challenging contemporary Nigeria.

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