

## Book Review: Humour, Silence and Civil Society in Nigeria by Ebenezer Obadare

*Humour, Silence and Civil Society in Nigeria* is a rich and highly readable meditation on overlooked aspects of public life in Nigeria, says LSE's Portia Roelofs.

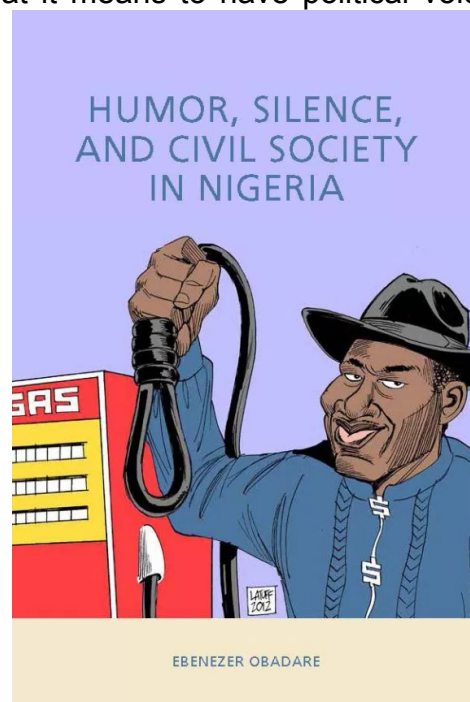
In *Humour, Silence and Civil Society in Nigeria* Ebenezer Obadare, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas, argues that “real civil society has to be sought ... outside the professionalised third sector, and often in the content of collective citizen action rather than in its organizational forms.” (p.27) This poses the question of how to flesh out and conceptualise what exactly that ‘over and above’ is. As the author of some of the key analyses of Nigerian politics over the last decade, and a Puck-like provocateur in the Nigerian press, Obadare is in a good position to reflect on the opportunities and constraints of public expression. He approaches this task through the clever pairing of humour and silence, representing two forms of agency that exemplify the expansive possibilities of civil society. Both have been overlooked by political scholars, the first for being trivial (p.62), and the second as the opposite of what it means to have political voice (p.85).

The introduction and chapter one showcase Obadare’s impressive ability to weave together multitudinous literatures (p.9). Obadare’s argument comes down to a call to see civil society more as a sphere of action than a network of actors and associations. **Habermas’** work on the public realm (1989) would seem to be an obvious ally in constructing such an argument, but is barely mentioned.

Chapter two traces how, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the idea of civil society arose in Nigeria in the context of public disaffection with the disastrous implementation of Structural Adjustment Programmes and the increasing authoritarianism of military rule under Babangida and Abacha (p.51). The simultaneous rise and merging of formal associations and the civil society discourse explains the neglect of the “historically robust social life outside of associations” (p.49).

Chapter three considers jokes as one element of this “robust social life”, and asks whether they should be thought of as politically effective. Humour functions both as a personal coping mechanism of the poor to deal with social meltdown, and as a political tool to “puncture the hubris of state power” (p.67). Humour is also highly ambiguous; utilised by both elites and subordinate classes, it is used to both resist and reinforce state power (p.63). Obadare concludes that the political effects of a joke, and its capacity to have political effects at all, depend on context.

Chapter four considers the expressive potential of silence as a wilful gesture, and centres on the case of Bola Ige in early 1990s Nigeria. The highly-respected former Governor used his newspaper column to criticise the military dictator’s repressive and erratic rule. Eventually Ige declared that the extent of repression left public figures like himself only one path of action: interested but silent observation. *Siddon look*, a contraction of ‘sit down and look’, captures this posture. Obadare recognises that not all silences are created equal, and Ige’s effectiveness derived from his pre-existing political status. Again, his conclusion is that context is everything. The conclusion returns to the idea of civil society as the “moral antithesis of the state” (p.35), and



restates the importance of civil society as a vibrant “ecosystem” of dissent in Nigeria’s still precarious democracy (p.129).



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Obadare’s hyperactive style is at times reminiscent of the wildly popular Slovenian philosopher, **Slavoj Žižek**: he summons into life numerous, quick-change possibilities for understanding his subject, without necessarily wrapping them up into neat conclusions for the reader. Obadare’s writing is often as lyrical as that of Harvard anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff, to whom he makes almost pagely reference. This affinity may well determine his appeal to certain readers at home with that genre of post-structural anthropology, and put off those who find it all a bit ‘**ethereal**’.

Despite the book’s comprehensiveness, the reader is at times left wanting a bit more guidance through the material. Obadare notes that humour is inherently hard to institutionalise, suggesting that “institutionalised humour” is an oxymoron (p.64). Chapter three reinforces the sense that, despite Obadare’s evident skill with the material, humour is equally hard to write about. Explaining what makes something funny is, almost by definition, only necessary if the audience hasn’t got the joke. Moreover, jokes are notoriously hard to translate across languages and cultures.

Obadare deals with this by keeping the nuts and bolts analysis light-touch. For example, recounting a joke about a husband’s self-defeating ploy to “pimp out” his wife, he seems to recoil from the stolid task of spelling out its implications: “this joke gestures at crisscrossing themes of gender and gender politics, marital solidarity (or the lack thereof), power, and last but not least, female desire.” (p.75) If Obadare wants jokes to bear the weight of his newly enlarged concept of civil society, then an analysis of what exactly Obadare thinks are the subversive and transgressive effects of the specific jokes he discusses would have been useful.

Obadare’s empirical focus is for the most part of the era of military rule in Nigeria. Indeed, his vision of humour and silence as ways of expressing dissent without risking outright confrontation seems pertinent to what Obadare describes as the “smoke-and-mirrors quality of life” under Babangida (p.48), and what elsewhere Apter (1999) describes as the ‘politics of illusion’. It is true that many state agencies in African countries remain violent and chaotic, and continue to manifestly fail their citizens. But after two and a half decades of good governance and public management reforms, a good number of state bodies have come to resemble the slick NGOs, private sector consultancies and international institutions which have been central to leading these reforms.

It would be interesting to see Obadare engage with the new political configurations and technologies of governance that are seen in Nigeria, in particular the ‘Lagos Model’ states in

Obadare's home turf of the Southwest. Perhaps the role of humour in these emerging states is not to send up the obvious ridiculousness of a neopatrimonial "façade" but to use this subversive power to resist the apparent professionalised rationality of these new modes of governance?

Overall, this book is a rich and highly readable meditation on overlooked aspects of public life in Nigeria. The definition of civil society beyond associations may not be entirely novel but it is strongly argued, and Obadare's tantalising hints at the political potential of humour and silence will no doubt stimulate further debate.

**Humour, Silence and Civil Society in Nigeria. Ebenezer Obadare. University of Rochester Press. 2016**

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**

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