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‘Stomach Infrastructure’: Survival, Trauma, and the Slippery Relations of Nation-Building in Nigeria

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Economic survival strategies, social injustice, corruption and crime are central to interrogating the development of Africa (Michael Waibel & Colin McFarlane, 2012). Informality, a term described by Norman Loayza (2016) as “the collection of firms, workers, and activities that operate outside the legal and regulatory frameworks or outside the modern economy” (p.1856) has become the response of citizens to the continent’s social inequalities. As Mengel and Borzaga argues, “economic and political issues” can be linked to trauma (2012).

My paper considers how structural violence spawns the deployment of informality as a means of surviving suffering in Nigeria. I argue that informal economic activities are approaches to enduring trauma resulting from poor governance and socio-economic problems. I examine this claim by interrogating the writing of two public intellectuals, Pius Adesanmi and Abimbola Adunni Adelakun, who frequently take on the dynamics of governance in their writing. I employ their thinking as a lens for examining informality as a survival mechanism by broadening my interrogation using the concept of “stomach infrastructure”. By paying attention to informality in Nigeria, I engage the role of public intellectualism and literature in illuminating the slippery dynamics of nation building and its effect on the nation’s people.

Keywords: Trauma, Survival, Informality, Social Suffering,

Introduction

Economic survival strategies, social injustice, corruption and crime are central to interrogating the development of Africa (Michael Waibel & Colin McFarlane, 2012). One noteworthy response of the continent’s citizens to social inequalities is

survival by virtue of informality, a term described by Norman Loayza as “the collection of firms, workers, and activities that operate outside the legal and regulatory frameworks or outside the modern economy” (Loayza 2016, p.1856). This response from citizens, I surmise, is a response to the trauma that emerges from social suffering. I draw this premise from Mengel and Borzaga’s (2012) examination of the South African context. The authors, examining the South African situation through the lens of trauma describe the complexity of healing “psychic deformation and injuries left behind by centuries of racism and colonialism through economic reparation or by a reversal of...political power structures alone”(p. ix). They explain that while the subject of injustice is important, it brings to the fore how “trauma is deeply linked to economic and political issues, and of how the psychic dimension is inseparable from institutions and structures” (p. ix). It is this statement of how deeply trauma is linked to economic and political issues that is of utmost interest to me in this paper.

This paper considers how structural violence spawns the deployment of informality as a means of surviving social suffering in Nigeria. I argue that informal economic activities are approaches to enduring trauma resulting from poor governance and socio-economic problems. I examine this claim by interrogating the writing of two public intellectuals, Pius Adesanmi and Abimbola Adunni Adelokun on the dynamics of governance. I focus my attention on Adesanmi’s *Naija no Dey Carry Last*, a collection of his column articles widely published in online and print magazines and newspapers between 2008 and 2014. For Adelokun, who has yet to collect her columns in a book, I select from her many articles published in the Punch Newspaper and culled on several other websites. I employ the thinking of Adesanmi and Adelokun as a lens for examining informality as a survival mechanism by broadening my interrogation using the concept of “stomach infrastructure”—a spontaneously generated government policy, that can manifest in the form of handing out food to citizens, for example. In this paper, stomach infrastructure illustrates the translation of trauma—created by lack of social infrastructure—into an activity tied to survival. It also exemplifies the social suffering of the people and the resulting unacknowledged trauma experienced because of poor governance. In addition, I frame the meaning of informality beyond its traditional association with economics and social behaviour, narrowing to critical engagement of the columns of Adesanmi and Adelokun, who while seen as public intellectuals, should also be regarded as “interpreters of the people’s voice/mind”. It is through them that we get an exposition and interrogation of the conditions of social suffering in Nigeria.

By paying attention to informality in Nigeria, I engage the role of public intellectualism in illuminating the slippery dynamics of nation building and its effect on the nation’s people. The next section of my paper examines the role of the intellectual in making social suffering intelligible.

Understanding the Voice behind the Columns

Over the years, I have observed the role of the newspaper column in the Nigerian society as a platform for demonstrating and drawing attention to social and economic policies that affect the Nigerian people. This is further validated by the formation of the League of Nigerian Columnists (LNC), which says on its website that one of its objectives is, “to contribute to the attainment of the goal of holding governments accountable to the people as enshrined in the Constitution”(LNC, n.d.

para. 2). Columns have become spaces where the protean problems and collective experiences of the Nigerian nation are recorded. It is a space where the intellect and sense-making of the people about their country is made public, and this, though represented by an individual, conveys the collective experience of Nigerians. Columns, both online and in print, act as places for questioning positions and sharing insights into the responses of people to government policies and issues of social inequalities which usually have no other outlets (Kelling & Thomas, 2018).

Pius Adesanmi (2015) wrote in *Naija no Dey Carry Last*, that the main objective of his essays is to bring readers to “engage critically with the depressing condition of Nigeria!” (p. xix). This same objective can be inferred in the writing of other columnists whose differentiation is in their narrative styles and opinions on subject matters. Their ability to engage with social issues seem to have enough influence on government that a few columnists at times get invitations to join the government in her administration. Notable columnists whose influence extended to the government are Ernest Sissei Ikoli of the pre-independence era, and Ken Saro-Wiwa, who worked on the Federal side and served as a voice for minorities during the Nigerian-Biafran War.¹ More recently, the likes of Femi Adesina, Reuben Abati, Segun Adeniyi, Tolu Ogunlesi have moved from being columnists to “special advisers” to the government (Nigerian Voice, 2011; Premium Times, 2015; 2016; Todayng, 2017). This emphasizes how the evolution of the Nigerian nation is significantly linked to columnists, who over the years serve to remind the government of social inadequacies. The shift from columnist to government official is possible because of the substantial influence the columnist exerts as an individual, and the acknowledgement of the role of the columnist as a public intellectual. The question that follows therefore is, why is the voice of the columnist powerful and significant to understanding the everyday economic activities of Nigerians?

Abimbola Adelakun², is known for transcribing the collective experiences of Nigerians and illuminating the circumstance of the people through hermeneutical and active inferences of politics and policies and their implications, while Adesanmi used satire to express the collective suffering of Nigerians. It may however be said that both Adelakun and Adesanmi write on Nigeria’s “depressing condition”. These conditions emerge from issues like poor infrastructure, social injustice, corruption, poverty, among others, which I argue are tied to social suffering and consequently, trauma. According to Kleinman, Das and Lock (1996), “social suffering” is the consequence of “the devastating injuries that social force inflicts on human experience” (p. ix). This derives from “what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems” (p. ix). The writing of Adesanmi and Adelakun act as transcriptions of economic, political, and socio-cultural activities among citizens, so social factors that place the burden of nation-building on the people are made intelligible. In their writing, which I will examine and analyze later in this paper, the columnists’ draw attention to the social suffering of the people from the perspective of infrastructural violence and the avoidable limitations this violence places on citizens by narrating the oppression of the people into their columns. In effect, the columnist when writ-

1 The Nigerian Civil War took place between 1967-1970 between Nigeria and the seceded state of Biafra. The head of state, Yakubu Gowon announced a “No victor, No vanquished” policy at the end of the war as a measure, to heal the war’s wound and encourage unity. It however has remained a reference point for the erasure of the war’s memory and the incomplete mourning that followed the war.

2 Abimbola Adelakun writes for Punch Newspaper, arguably the most read and circulated newspaper in Nigeria: <https://punchng.com/>.

ing his column beyond being an individual expressing his views, is also presenting his ideas in a way that it can be owned by the people, as their position. In essence, the columnist is how the people assume the posture of speaking out against government policies. This invariably indicates that the columnist bears the narratives of the people's suppression, and inevitably dissects the significance of the people's social and economic activities in relation to government policies. This burden of representation and sense-making, I opine, is achieved through the employment of narratives in their columns.

For instance, the concept of "stomach-infrastructure" which I examine closely in the next section of this paper became a reference point after its use by a politician, Ayo Fayose, at the 2015 election in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Columnists have since used the concept widely in their critical examination of what the policy means for the average Nigerian man. In her article, "Senator Saraki and the Wretched of the Earth", Adelokun (2013) examines a calamity that occurred following a scramble for hand-outs of food at Saraki's residence, a two-time governor vying for a senatorial seat as a pivot for other tragedies. She uses the Saraki incident as a mirror to examine the response of the government to several tragedies that befell the country. She writes that, "As a society, we are all implicated in the politics of grief that desensitizes us to certain kinds of disasters" (Adelokun 2013, Para. 5). In acknowledgement of the mediating role of the public intellectual, which though powerless in initiating immediate placation to the people, proves necessary, she writes, "First, we all troop out to write endless op-eds. Then we agonise about the failure of our country." (Adelokun 2013, Para 6). In effect, Adelokun recognizes the democratic nature of the public intellectual, which is where her power of influence comes from. In her article on Saraki, the incident which lead to up to the stampeding to death of 20 people becomes another story to remind the people of the atrocious situation they are implicated in. This culture of "almsgiving" she writes, "feeds a system that ensures the beneficiaries remain what the Martinique-born revolutionary, Frantz Fanon, called the wretched of the earth so they will always need the Sarakis of this world to live a marginally decent life" (para. 9). This goes to confirm the survival structure model on which the people in the nation operates. Adelokun narrates the Nigerian wretched realities and provokes attention, as seen at the end of her article on the senator. She draws attention to the inexistent structures replaced by mediocre promises:

At the start of Ramadan, he [referring to Saraki] announced on Facebook he would be giving N100m³ donation to feeding folks; an average of N3m plus daily spent to feed people whose lives are already a daily fast. Why not provide some money towards long-term and regenerative activities? How about spending N100m to provide a digital library for the University of Ilorin? Or, N100m to upgrade the primary schools in his constituency to world standard? Or even N100m to fund research that points our society towards stronger and more viable democracies? (Adelokun 2015, Para 16).

In these ways, columnists like Adesanmi and Adelokun expose how structural violence spawns the deployment of informality as a means of surviving suffering in Nigeria. In another article, Adelokun describes Ayo Fayose's policy of stomach infrastructure as the people's "gastro-political choices" (Scoop n.d.). Adesanmi (2014) on his part, explains that with stomach infrastructure, Fayose problematized the identity behind "[t]each a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" (para. 9). Adesanmi writes that in the rural and underdeveloped Ekiti state, Fayose, rather than

3 100 million naira. N used before a figure in this article, represents the naira sign.

prioritizing the state's status as one with elite professors, offered to change the state's circumstances against issues of "hunger, rural poverty, and underdevelopment" (Adesanmi, 2014, para.10). This prioritization became a promise which resonated with Ekiti people than the "permanently deferred promises of the elite paradigm". This inevitably means that, "[s]o long as poverty, hunger, and rural backwardness are prevailing factors in Ekiti, the hand that offers the immediate gratification of pounded yam, grasscutter and palmwine will always win the argument over sophisticated and visionary leadership (Adesanmi, 2014 para. 13)."

As a result, Adesanmi and Adelakun draw a relation between survival, trauma, and the complexities of nation building, which is where informality arises as a symptom of enduring trauma resulting from poor governance and socio-economic problems. Significantly, it is this idea of transmitting the responsibilities of government to its citizenry in the context of existing social suffering that makes an exploration of the informal economy, also referred to as "informality" an object of study and interest in this paper.

It is imperative to note that the columns of Pius Adesanmi and Abimbola Adunni Adelakun, as I will show later, are vital to illuminating the connection between the informal economy, stomach infrastructure and the response of the people to social inequalities. In the following section, I explain informality and stomach infrastructure in the context of this essay.

Between Stomach Infrastructure and Informality

The phrase "stomach infrastructure" crept into Nigeria's lexicon in 2015 after a governorship candidate, Ayodele Fayose, was accused of enticing voters with gift items that included rice, chicken and clothes. (AIT, 2015). While Fayose's motive is nothing new in a political economy where buying voters is common, his audacious and peculiar coinage of stomach infrastructure to justify a need for economic empowerment for the people, albeit unethical, is worthy of examination. First, we can start by considering that the governor explained his motive for stomach infrastructure as the desire to "banish poverty and hunger" from his state (AIT, 2015 para. 7). Understandably, as Nigeria is considered an underdeveloped economy caused largely by poor governance, corruption, and absence of social infrastructure, a motive such as the governor's become socially acceptable as a spontaneously generated policy (Awojobi, 2014). The people, correspondingly, pursue the idea of surviving and adopt stomach infrastructure as a suitable activity to combat the socio-economic inadequacies. As Gabriel Chioma acknowledges in a Vanguard article online, "[a]dvocates of stomach infrastructure believe that government cannot be investing heavily on infrastructure when the stomach is empty. To them, both development and stomach upgrade could be done side by side" (2015, para. 4). In the same Vanguard article, Chioma quotes Dr. Aluko, one of the staunch supporters of the governor who expressed that, "Poverty is poverty; it knows no religion and it has no tribal mark; and it affects everyone" (2015, para. 13). He explains further that the governor's intention is to "identify with the masses by putting food on their tables" (para. 14). This he plans to achieve by the provision of "gainful employment for the youths" as well as "assist traders with soft loans so that they can feed themselves" (2015, para. 15). In this context, the "gainful employment" being referred to is primarily about

the subjects catering for their own needs rather than relying on the government. The economic action, evoked here, is the approach for achieving political power, which is modelled after an observation of the circumstance of the impoverished subjects: there are no social structures, and the people need to survive, hence this narrative of creating employment. In offering people what he believes they need most—food and clothing—the governor and his supporters shift discussions from ethics and proper governance to the subject of survival.

This logic of survival rather than nation-building, as we see, is essentially what drives informal activities. Therefore, while the term “stomach infrastructure” speaks directly to Nigeria’s social maladies of electoral inadequacies, it also infers that the average citizen navigates Nigeria’s dismal economic state by seeking to satisfy existential needs. The spontaneous government policy which brought stomach infrastructure into existence also acknowledges the prevalence of poverty among the people. This foregrounds my focus on informality as a by-product of poverty, where the people turn inwards for survival mechanisms that create social and economic structures for them, in the absence of government ones. Although informal economies earn labels such as “black market”, “underground”, “illegal” and several other names, these monikers distract policymakers from the laudable argument that informality offers to citizens an opportunity to earn a livelihood and reduce poverty, because of the contempt associated with the names (Mason, 2007). As Jonathan Emenike Ogbuabor et al. (2014) also notes, “numerous informal sector activities in contemporary Nigeria are illicit, especially those conducted on the external scene. These activities include drug peddling/trafficking, currency trafficking, money laundering, smuggling, advance fee fraud (419), over invoicing/under invoicing, crude oil bunkering or theft, kidnapping for ransom, illegal arms trade, human trafficking, among others.” Nevertheless, the chance to earn a livelihood sometimes tend to lead to criminal activities, as the corrupt practices in the country blurs the lines between illegalities and criminalities. However, economists recognize and continue to argue about informality as a means of stabilizing the economy or as a form of demand on the government for the creation of socio-economic dynamics capable of enhancing nation building (Edgar, 1990; Habib-Mintz, 2009; Keck, 2012). In these instances, there is a tendency to miss the motive of informality as a coping mechanism among the people against structural violence.

In his book, *Naija no Dey Carry Last*, Adesanmi describes the dire situation of Nigerian society. He examines and reveals the subsurface of the informal and the formal economic sectors. The book, which is divided into four parts, examines socio-economic problems created by the ineptitude of political leaders, that, in effect, create problems around the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services. It provides a context on why informality is a home-made approach to subjects’ socio-economic problems, as they innovate ways to meet the demands of their economic needs. Employing his typical satirical style in “Breaking News: Envelope and Stamp Riots Spread in Nigeria,” Adesanmi connects a riot following the introduction of Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) by former head of state Ibrahim Babangida to a more recent one triggered by the scarcity of postal envelopes and stamps. The SAP, Adesanmi writes “ensured that the average Nigerian now enjoys a quality of life slightly lower than the lives of domestic dogs and cats in Euro-America” (Adesanmi, 2015 p.18). This impoverished condition the people were thrown into was never contested but was met with a “we dey manage” resolve—an utterance of re-

silience which meant facing challenges by creating ways of survival. While Adesanmi goes on to explain that eventually the resilience is broken, the idea of finding other means to survive under the weight of misery, contextualizes the idea behind how the informal economy is a survival mechanism for Nigerians.

The concept of the “informal economy” according to Markus Keck (2012) first emerged in the 1970s and was coined by the anthropologist, Keith Hart and his colleagues “within the frame of the ‘employment missions’ of the International Labour Organization in the 1970s” (ILO, 1972)” (p.111). It was used to differentiate transactions that the state recorded and taxed and those they did not. Jonathan Emenike Ogbuabor, Gladys C, Aneke and Chukwunweike A. Okafor (2014) in their examination of the mobilization for revenue, argue that the concept of informality came in an earlier era. In their categorization of the theories of informality, they acknowledge the existence of four main theories: Modernization, Dependency, Structuralism and Neo-liberalism. The “Modernization theory” with its main proponent Rostow (1960), characterized “informality in the less developed countries largely as a ‘social problem’ internal to and caused by the backward socio-economic systems of individual countries” (p. 362). Adelokun and Adesanmi’s regular analysis of Nigeria’s social problems in their columns also provide an avenue to understand those factors that create informality, which as mentioned earlier, operates outside the modern economy. Later in this paper, we will also examine how Adesanmi and Adelokun’s exploration of policies helps us to understand stomach infrastructure as a manifestation of Nigeria’s social problems and how it falls into the category of those activities that are not governed by legal and regulatory frameworks. Stomach infrastructure therefore extends beyond the informal economy in Nigeria and its traditional relations to economics. My argument, therefore, is that informality is one of the response of citizens to the continent’s social inequalities, beyond the orientation of informality as an economic tool for citizens to demand the government engage more effectively in nation-building. Nation-building, in this paper, means the creation of economic majorities, with the objective to reduce poverty and enable the society to function and thrive. Under this logic, the state should be responsible for nation building. However, as Loayza notes, “[i]nformality is not only a reflection of underdevelopment; it may also be the source of further economic retardation” (p. 1856). The retardation in the case of Nigeria is the undiagnosed trauma of years of poor (or in some cases, absent) social structures.

Adelokun, reflecting on rumours of death of the Nigerian president, Muhamadu Buhari, concludes that years of social and economic negligence had led people to show their displeasure by invoking death on their leader. She explains that people do not care if “leaders live or die” since the leaders themselves do not care about the people’s welfare. She writes:

Why would people who live, move, and have their being amidst dehumanising conditions be concerned about the ethics of wishing death on someone else? The conditions of their own existence already bespeak death, yet they are supposed to writhe at the pain of a leader whose privileges are funded with their blood? (Punch, 2017 para. 14).

The state of living in a perpetual condition of misery from one government to another has resulted in a social suffering where the people are enclosed in their melancholia. Comparably, Mengel and Borzaga (2012)—in the context of apartheid in South Africa—make a valid argument about how economic and political influence further this kind of trauma. The authors explain “people seem to invest considerably—emotionally and affectively—in economic and political powers, often in a

negative way, and on the basis of unprocessed traumas experienced in the past” (v). Although Mengel and Borzaga’s argument follow the concept of trauma from historical events evoked by acts of systemic murder and physical violence, it does not take away from the idea of the everyday trauma is drawn out by structural violence. Arthur Kleinman (2000) evaluating structural violence describes it as an act used to denigrate “people who experience violence (and violation) owing to extreme poverty. That violence includes the highest rates of disease and death, unemployment, homelessness, lack of education, powerlessness, a shared fate of misery, and the day-by-day violence of hunger, thirst, and bodily pain” (p. 227).

In this regard, I engage the works of Adesanmi and Adelokun to bridge the connection between the informal economy, stomach infrastructure and the people’s responses to social inequalities. I argue that informality in Africa is for survival, that it is a tactic against the mental and physical debilitation imposed by the socio-economic and political structure.

Informality, Storytelling and Trauma

Informal economic activities reflect stories of human relations faced with existential problems. These stories operate in what the American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars identifies as the manifest image of the world (Sellars, 1962 p. 42-54). According to Sellars, manifest image refers to one way in which humans locate and explain their place in the world, the other being the scientific image (55). The manifest image explicates the reasons behind actions. The manifest image would be all the things found in the quotidian and represented in literature, philosophy, and sometimes psychology and, as Stellar explains, is observable, while the scientific is unobservable. It may be implied that literature (which in the context of this paper involves newspaper and magazine columns) serves as a tool to help us understand underlying economic conditions, and their social consequences, in more humanistic terms. This means that stories can help us understand how things appear to us. It is through narratives that economic terms like informality become interpretable, and this is where public intellectuals like Adelokun and Adesanmi are useful in their employment of the newspaper as a “village square”.

The two writers establish themselves in the narrative of Nigeria’s socio-economic and political worlds. Adelokun sometimes begins her columns with an analogy, and Adesanmi consistently used satire in his writing. Stories, I will therefore add, become applicable to creating intelligibility for the many forms and categories of informalities, especially as it reflects negotiations with existential issues and struggles with survival.

Informal labour can be thought of as an existential narrative in the African context, as it portrays the people’s attempt to give meaning and structure to their economic condition in the face of social injustice. It is about innovating ways to survive, which requires modeling alternative means of existence to circumvent the formal system. Loayza (2006) explains that the presence of informality and its growth implies that subjects are denied appropriate technologies, have no access to public services, and lack protection from the state. Because representations exist outside our reality, as suggested earlier, what we have are traumatic experiences that emerge from economic inadequacies that become narratives of survival as opposed to narratives about chronic poverty. As Kai Erikson (1994) notes in *A New Species of Trouble*:

Chronic conditions as well as acute events can induce trauma, and this, too, belongs in our calculations. A chronic disaster is one that gathers force slowly and insidiously, creeping around one's defenses rather than smashing through them. People are unable to mobilize their normal defenses against the threat, sometimes because they have elected consciously or unconsciously to ignore it . . . (p. 21).

An example of such "chronic conditions" can be found in Adesanmi's article, "Mrs. Clinton, Please Do Not Come to Nigeria!". In this article, Adesanmi writes a letter to Hillary Clinton, who at the time was the United States Secretary of the State and was intending to visit Nigeria to discuss election malpractices and corruption. In the letter, he satirizes what has become the norm for Nigerians and brings attention to the violence that precedes official motorcades: "...we would have been cleared off the streets, from within a forty mile radius of wherever you will be in Abuja....It is done by soldiers and antiriot policemen with koboko, tear gas, machine guns, and tanks. They will kick the heck out of our butts to ensure that our offensive presence as Nigerians does not mar your trip" (Adesanmi, 2015 p. 38). Informal activities are created in such a traumatized environment. In Nigeria, informality is thus a form of resistance to an oppression that creates acute poverty and, as a result, typifies those familiar symptoms of the traumatized. The people in their hopelessness, rage and depression live in a perpetual anxiety of their social and physical surroundings. Informality, therefore, is a form of resistance against being rejected and excluded by the political class, which not only displaces them but leaves them oppressed and defenseless against social forces that could decimate them. Informality becomes the way to ensure survival and exist and move beyond one's circumstances in the absence of a formal socio-political system.

Understandably, the problems of representing trauma--such as the agonies associated with survival mechanisms in a bad economy--could seem abortive. As the leading trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth (2016) points out in *Unclaimed Experience*, trauma as a deferred experience which preoccupies the survivor, defies language and representation and returns to haunt the survivor, and it continues to "stubbornly persist in bearing witness to some forgotten wound" (p. 5). By extension, Jane Robinett (2007) explains that trauma demolishes our assumptions about the world, and we find no language in which to express it (p. 297). The complexity of representing trauma's mundane nature in Nigeria with its close ties to survival, is the reason a close study of informal activities as reactionary to the oppressive conditions that grow poverty, is imperative.

Usually the question is, in a nation rife with corruption and bribery, where and how does one define the magnitude of inexpressible suffering? As Adesanmi explains in the preface of his book, whereas many of his articles describe the corrupt practices of the government, his choice to deploy a satiric style in his columns was a "political decision" which was to connect with Nigerians, who he understands, love to laugh at themselves. Hence, "If it took laughter to get people to reflect seriously on the abject condition of our country and our lives, so be it! (p. xviii).

Another fact to recognise is that informal economic activities are traumatic representations of the inadequacies of the formal sector. In a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria, with high unemployment rate and corruption, the lines between formality and informality is blurred because, people who earn below their area of expertise seek for other sources of income and turn to informal activities within the formal structure. In her online essay, "Why We wish our Presidents Dead", Adedokun examines rumors of the death of the president, as a form of "moral revanchism" which is

“a ready weapon of warfare available to the agonized poor, the helpless victims of the nation’s necropolitics, the forgotten and silenced majority, and the historically and structurally dispossessed” (2017, para. 15). Essentially, Adelokun captures the traumatizing social contexts where leadership does not see the plight of the people. Similarly, in “Nigerian Leaders have Still not Learned” she explains that the dependence of government on medical tourism makes them nonchalant in the face of a national pandemic. The implication of this she explains, is that the state is “growing an army of citizens who are mentally disconnecting from the country. They are subsisting in a country that promises too little in terms of opportunities and delivers even far less” (Adelokun, 2020 para. 10).

My argument thus far is that narrative representation makes the intolerable comprehensible. The social contexts examined by Adesanmi and Adelokun demonstrate that many of the economic activities that emerge from the informal sector are riddled with stories of aspirations, ambitions, and hope; the voiceless seeking a voice to speak. Dierdre N. McCloskey (2002), recognizing the connection between economics and storytelling agrees with Peter Brook’s assertion that “our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves...We are immersed in narrative” (Brooks 1985 p. 3 in McCloskey p. 61). McCloskey writes that storytelling is integral to intelligibility in economics, when he explains that, “[e]conomists have not lived without it, not ever. It is no accident that the novel and economic science were born at the same time. We live in an age insatiated with plot” (p. 61). As McCloskey explains, while the applied economics can be seen as a “realist novelist or a realist playwright...the theorist, too, may be viewed as a teller of stories, though a non-realist—whose plots and characters have the same relation to truth as those in *Gulliver’s Travels* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Most economics is saturated with narration” (p. 62).

Thus, it is through the narration of human realities that economics can become intelligible. This is evident in the columns of Adesanmi and Adelokun, which can also be described as theorizations of Nigeria’s socio-economic realities. Their columns function as social commentaries that construct the unsteady dynamics of the existential conditions required for nation building. These existential conditions are usually a response to economic models and political activities.

Throughout his book, Adesanmi (2015) pays attention to Nigeria’s political structure, most especially the country’s leadership and its disregard for creating social structures for Nigerians. In the first part of the book, Adesanmi examines the ineptitude of government and widespread corruption, which does nothing to create social structures for the people. Adesanmi describes this as a form of “vicious, symbolic violence Nigerians have to cope with every day” (2015 p. 56). As the author writes, “[v]iolence is the kind of figures that are in the newspapers every day: billions and billions being looted in broad daylight by our friends in Abuja⁴ and the state capitals” (p. 56). In another article “The Scramble for the Partition of Nigerian Ailments”, Adesanmi lampoons the inexistent health structures which account for leaders travelling to the west for health and he satirically narrates how the head of a Nigerian delegation thanked Western powers for the selflessness with which they place the excellent medical facilities in their countries at the disposal of Nigerian leaders (Adesanmi,

4 Abuja is the capital of Nigeria.

2015). He adds, “[w]hat further proof of their commitment to the progress of Nigeria could there be? For it is only when Nigerian leaders enjoy good health that they are able to serve the people and deliver the dividends of democracy” (p. 12). In the article “Confirmation Hearing 101 for Senator David Mark & Co.,” Adesanmi compares screening of elected officials in the American and Nigerian senate. He examines how “the periodic circus they call senate confirmation hearings” (2015 p. 28) of political appointees, costs Nigerians a “considerable price” (p. 29), which in effect can be interpreted to mean incompetent leadership, and consequentially inexistent social structures. In the piece “In the Beginning was the Word”, Adesanmi uses the historical narrative and parables of the bible to lampoon the governance, corruption and ineptitude of the period of President Goodluck Jonathan’s rule (Adesanmi, 2015). Adesanmi offers another critical analysis of Jonathan in “The Prodigal Son”, where he alludes to biblical verse to satirize a profligate ruling class coming to terms with the consequences of their actions. In this essay, Adesanmi portrays the president, King Jona, as the prodigal son. In his article, King Jona who has inherited a huge wealth from “black gold”, which refers to the diminished economic resources that President Jonathan inherited from the previous government. He writes, “And King Jona rent his clothes and cried: “Lo, I have sinned against God and man. For I have squandered my inheritance on wine and music. Now pestilence and the abomination of desolation is come upon the land” (Adesanmi, 2015 p.102).

Adesanmi helps the people to understand that their leaders see them as perpetually lacking maturity. This means that the Nigerian people can be cheated and denied their needs, once they are distracted with irrelevancies that add no meaning to their lives.

Columns like Adedokun’s and Adesanmi’s narrate the underdevelopment of a nation and offer a scope to understand the reason informality is a form of sustenance, because the columnists are also the people. In this light, we come to see how storytelling is also about self-involvement, which demonstrates how human lives are interwoven with politics, social and economic activities. Through these columns, we hear the responses of people to social inequalities and therefore see a connection between the informal economy which develops and the policies like stomach infrastructure which reinforce the survival mechanism the people have to create for themselves.

Examining Ayo Fayose and his concept of “stomach infrastructure” Abimbola Adedokun (2014) in her article, “Why Ekiti Voters are Nigeria’s most Sophisticated,” explains that Nigeria’s political scene reiterates how the country has been reduced to stomach infrastructure, which leaves people in a constant debate of what she calls, “bread-and-butter-issues” (2014 para. 7). The deduction here from Adedokun is essentially that it is the desire to survive that births informal activities. According to Adedokun, survival takes precedence among citizens, and leaders use this as a tool to ignore the major restructuring which should evolve the country’s development. As she writes, “Nigeria currently faces a major crisis of underdevelopment and for an economy that remains undiversified, clogged in the wheels by the shortsightedness of her greedy and myopic leaders, you can be sure we will run into a major trouble at some point” (2014 Para 7).

Conclusion

In his article “Defining and estimating underground and informal economies: The new institutional economics approach,” Edgar L. Feige (1990) identifies four types of “underground” economic activity:

illegal; unreported, unrecorded and informal to explore their nature and interrelationships and relevance for different economic issues. Each underground activity is characterized by the particular institutional set of rules that it circumvents. The metric for measuring the dimensions of each underground activity is the aggregate income generated by the activity (p. 991).

As is usually the case, the illegality of informality is compounded by the context of its slippery relations with criminality. The thin line between illegalities and informality in Nigeria informs an economy where arguments occur on social media and public spaces on the legitimacy of 419 as a “business”, because it falls into the category of a form of survival. As Adelokun suggested “Let us face it, integrity does not live in our society. Our institutions—political, social, religious, educational, and financial—lack integrity just like our leaders” (Adelokun, 2018 para. 10).

Although arguing that some of the concepts assumed to be informal are cultural, Yeboah’s explanation that some of the informal economic activities are largely indigenous systems of production and culture is not tenable, as it further complicates the relationship of the formal and the informal. In what context does one place the traditional way of life, which is not simply an economic boost for the society, but exists also, as a cultural structure? And while economic statistics show, or continue to show, increasing unemployment (Statista, 2019), and an almost inexistent social infrastructure (Punch, 2016), citizens are left to making economic opportunities for themselves in the absence of choices.

Public intellectuals like Pius Adesanmi and Abimbola Adelokun, undertake the task of narrating economics in the Nigerian context. By identifying as “the people”, they make the nation’s political problems, economic policies, and activities, less ambiguous and more visible and meaningful. More significantly, they illuminate the slippery dynamics of nation building, in their narratives that show that existential conditions reflects economic activities which are not choices, but creative responses to what the socio-economic situation dictates.

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