

# Re/Reading Spectacles: Historicizing the Occupy Nigeria Movement

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## Abstract

Following the momentum of the Arab Spring, the Occupy Nigeria movement of January 2011 emerged as the biggest political protest in Nigeria's recent history. The movement was significant not just in terms of the geographical spread of the protests, but also in the number and diversity— particularly ethnic and class diversity— of Nigerians who subscribed to its cause. Their demands ranged in scale from a reversal of fuel prices to holistic reforms in governance. Importantly, one of the distinct ways through which these demands were articulated was through performances enacted on and around the protest grounds. This essay argues that performative expressions of ethnicity and class amplified the popular appeal of the protests while simultaneously complicating the historicization of the brief struggle. I offer that “ordinary” Nigerians’ deployment of spectacle need be understood as important indices in articulating a subaltern historiography of the Occupy Nigeria movement. Taking into account the unique interplay of class and ethnicity in the development (and dissolution) of the movement, this essay challenges the dominant impulse to historicize popular struggles from the viewpoint of the privileged class, while eliding the input and aspirations of the majority of social actors that actively shape the outlook of these movements. I employ a close reading of some of the performances enacted as part of the protests. My paper concludes by offering one of such productive methodologies for [re]reading the protests.

**Keywords:** Occupy Nigeria, Popular Movements, Subaltern Theory, Performance, Historiography

## 1. Introduction

On January 1, 2012, Goodluck Jonathan, the Nigerian President, publicized his decision to revoke the federal subsidies on fuel. His announcement would shock Nigerians who were closely monitoring ongoing talks between the government and civil society organizations over the revocation fuel subsidies. The implication of the new policy was that the cost of fuel would take a leap from N65 to N141 (over a 100% rise).<sup>1</sup> If implemented, the policy would negatively affect middle and working class Nigerians, who were at the time, already squeezed by a bleak economy. Increase in food prices, rise in the cost of public transportation, and a general rise in the cost of living would be some of the immediate consequences of the new fuel policy. The policy itself, the perceived “unilateralism” of the President’s decision, and years of economic hardship, constituted immediate catalysts for the Occupy Nigeria Movement. Other catalysts for the movement were the disillusionment at the government following the April 2011 general elections; and the ongoing Arab Spring that ousted three longstanding dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya: Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak and Colonel Gadhafi. Within days of the declaration, trade unions and civil organizations declared national strikes that would effectively paralyze the economy. In the drama that ensued, Lagos state, Nigeria’s commercial capital, became the hub of the National protests; and the freshly built Freedom Square— dubbed the “Nigerian Tahrir Square”— hosted over two million protesters of diverse ethnicities, religions, and classes.

The 2012 Occupy Nigeria movement was historical for two principal reasons. First, Occupy Nigeria movement is unprecedented in its scale and scope. No protest in Nigeria’s history has crossed religious divides or enlisted the participation of diverse ethnicities as successfully as the movement. Second, Occupy Nigeria was historical because of the way in which mostly underclass Nigerians navigated questions of nation, citizenship and history both physically at the venue(s) of the protest, and virtually through social media. The primary actors in the Occupy Nigeria Movement were, unlike dominant political actors, members of the Nigerian subaltern class.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I focus attention on some “side” performances of the 2012 Occupy Nigeria Movement to foreground the ways in which Nigerians employed performance to bring to bear their perspectives on key national issues, a significant component of which was the politics surrounding the nation’s oil resources. I employ subaltern theory to frame the nature of the popular participation in the movement, as well as to interrogate their relationship to the discourses formulated by their involvement. In placing subaltern theory in conversation with performance theory, I advocate for the salience of spectacle as a way of apprehending subaltern consciousness in popular movements. I conclude this paper by offering close reading of these performances as a useful historiographical approach in representing subaltern consciousness in contemporary

<sup>1</sup>. See Ogala Emmanuel and Ben Ezeamalu, “#OccupyNigeria: One Year Later, the Gains, the Losses,” *Premium Times*.

<sup>2</sup>. Ranagit Guha define subalterns as the people or “the demographic difference between the total Indian population and... the ‘elite’” See “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*. p.44.

mass movements. This paper loosely defines the subaltern as the demographic outside the purview of ruling class privilege; they also constitute the imagined public I referred to as “the Nigerian masses.”

## 2. Performance and Subalternity Theory

Over the last three decades, scholars of Subaltern studies have been occupied with the challenge of uncovering the voices of the subaltern, which has been routinely written out of colonial histories.<sup>1</sup> Although some of the most vibrant works in Subaltern studies has come out of India, its concerns have remained pertinent to nations who share a history of European colonialism. Subaltern studies scholars proceed on the premise that colonial histories are typically written from an elitist viewpoint, a historiographical practice that elides the agency of the masses whose actions and aspirations shaped the outcome of nationalist struggles. As such, these scholars variously deconstruct the narratives, methodologies and ideologies that undergird such colonial histories. This deconstruction, they argue, is essential to efforts at recovering the voice of the subaltern. This idea of the subaltern derives from Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci’s of a group ruled by the hegemony of an elite class.<sup>2</sup>

The project of uncovering the consciousness of the subaltern is further complicated in the case of mass revolts for which conscious leadership is often minimal or absent at best, or altogether misleading. As Gramsci suggests, elements of conscious leadership cannot be ascertained since little or no evidence is left of such (49). While Gramsci’s observation holds true for many mass movements, it is also arguable that modern technology substantially expands the archive of subaltern voices. Technological advancements, however, does not subtract from the flawed idea that subalterns lack consciousness in mass movements. In his essay “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency” Ranajit Guha contends that peasant revolts in colonial India were typically historicized not as the product of conscious mobilization, but rather as spontaneous acts of insurrection (46). These narratives of mass rebellions are usually peppered with metaphors like “they break out like thunderstorms,” or “they spread like wildfire,” descriptions that effectively summarize the complex praxis of mobilization as artless. Parallel dismissals can be found in the political elite’s description of the Occupy Nigeria Movement. Failing to understand the nuances of the movement, the Nigerian President dismissed it as a mere musical concert. Of course, this was before the movement attained full momentum. Edward Said suggests that “one historiographical prerogative of the Subaltern Studies group is to rewrite the history of colonial[ism] from the distinct and separate point of view of the masses, using unconventional or neglected sources of popular memory” (vi). Like with the field of Subaltern Studies generally, Said’s proposition raises questions of positionality and representation. I will join the thinking that one of the distinct ways through which consciousness is enacted in mass movements through performance.

Perhaps the consequence of disciplinary requirements — Subaltern studies emerged from the discipline of History— much of subaltern epistemology has derived from how archives and *writing* processes render subalterns il/legible. There is also the question of whether individuals or a collective can articulate a consciousness from a position of subalternity. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Gayatri Spivak poses the questions about the politics and ideology of representation; she argues for the impossibility of recovering the voice of the subaltern. Spivak then urges a degree of “philosophical skepticism” from the scholar and a commitment to expose the ideologies and discourses that perpetuate marginalization of the oppressed. For her, “the subaltern cannot speak” (308), and the scholar’s privilege her/his legitimacy in advocating subaltern consciousness. Like other Subaltern studies scholars, Spivak’s concern in recovering the voice of the subaltern (or not) rests squarely in the manner in which discourse is constituted and the narrative woven.

As an embodied mode of self-fashioning, performance presents one of such ways through which subaltern classes articulate their agency as political subjects in mass protests. Although Subaltern studies scholars research events like mass protests, in their effort at locating the voices of the subaltern—particularly in colonial archives— the robustness of such moments as embodied discourse has escaped their radars since they rely mostly, if not exclusively, on archives for evidence of subaltern consciousness. However, the primacy of the text precludes the plethora of ways through which subalterns articulate subjectivity within specific historical moments. Performance also offers ways for not just accessing, but also for interpreting the complex ways through which subaltern historiography might be constructed and circulated. To this end, Dwight Conquergood contends, “For many people throughout the world, however, particularly subaltern groups, texts are often inaccessible, or threatening, charged with the regulatory power of the state. More often than not, subordinate people experience texts and the bureaucracy of literacy as instruments of control” (313). For Conquergood, the text (and the archive) needs be mobilized with a degree of skepticism in the project of representing subalterns. In other words, “The hegemony of textualism needs to be exposed and undermined.”

Performance a way of knowing the world challenges and confounds the “hegemony of textualism” as

<sup>1</sup>. The corpus of essays in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Selected Subaltern Studies* constitutes a good example of such intellectual attempts at recovering the voice of the subaltern (New York: Oxford University, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>. See *Prison Notebooks*, 1975.

Conquergood understands it. Just as it constitutes “an object of analysis,” performance also constitutes “a methodological lens that enables scholars to analyze events as performance” (Taylor 3). As “restored behavior,” Performance encompasses embodied activities ranging from trance and shamanism to exorcism, from ritual to theatre, to dance and rites of initiation (Schechner 35). The range of embodied activities that constitute performance attests to its epistemological importance particularly for subaltern classes. In other words, for the majority of social actors who fall outside the purview of privilege — potentially embodied in the *access* to texts and/or the mechanisms of its regulation — performance becomes a paradigm for subaltern *being*.

Historically, oppressed communities express themselves and transmit knowledge through embodied means like gestures, dance, oral poetry, and ritual. Drawing the connections between performance and subalternity can yield productive outcomes in not only recovering the *voice* of oppressed subjects in mass movements, but also in *listening* to the multiple, complex significations of those voices. Subaltern consciousness, expressed in and through the body of the oppressed subject, not only articulates agency but can also challenges categories such as nationhood and citizenship. Additionally, performance helps us understand the ways through which these notions are inscribed on the body, and, conversely how the bodies “speak” (to borrow from Spivak) to/with them particularly in popular uprisings like the Occupy Nigeria movement.

### 3. Agency and Subalternity in Occupy Nigeria

The Occupy Nigeria movement endures in the public imagination both as a political event and as performance. Throughout the roughly one week lifespan, average attendance was put at two million people. The movement in Lagos assumed multiple aesthetic dimensions. The space itself was resembled an overpopulated concert complete with the incorporation of a central platform from which members of the opposition delivered political speeches, and popular Nigerian musicians performed free music. The protests also resembled a carnival populated by “side” acts. Many of the protesters brandished humorous placards, flaunted adorned bodies; some wielded hastily constructed political puppets of the President. Some attendees joined random processions of protesters, dancing, singing and/or chanting political slogans. Although some the processions were short-lived, not spanning more than a few meters, they remained often effective in inspiring participation from protesters that were far from the main platform. The “side” performances were equally important in echoing the immediate thrust of the movement Occupy Nigeria movement as a protest over fuel.

For all the complex aesthetic outlooks that the movement assumed, it did not fail in its central concern as a political movement. Yet the performative aspects of the movement are hard to ignore. For one, the protest featured an eclectic use of the space. The freedom part was used as protest ground, as “concert” venue, as political rally, and as a space of worship. These point to the multiple, complex meanings that were invoked by the protests. I do not intend, however, to undercut the significance of the acts that transpired on the main rally stage. However, I preoccupy myself with the ways in which the “side” performances (the processional and variety acts) of the Occupy Movement, demonstrate consciousness. I examine two of such performances to highlight the complex ideas they embodied about complex questions around nation, citizenship and history. The spatial coordinates of the performances I evaluate in relation to the main stage, speaks volumes about the performers identities as subaltern; popular performers and renowned citizens were closer to the platform.

Far removed from the stage and potentially buried among the mass of protesters, people could most clearly articulate themselves through performance. These performances were [sometimes unwittingly] captured by independent videographers and personal cellphone cameras, and circulated (or not) through the internet and on the Blackberry network which is particularly popular among Nigerians. The protesters’ access to publicity also underscores modern ways through which performance is potentially documented as evidence of subaltern consciousness in the age of technology. The sources (mostly video) that I found of interest are those circulated by individual videographers or actual participants themselves. The quality of performance I analyze might not interest mainstream media houses, who mostly covered the more eloquent speeches on the platforms. I draw on one particular YouTube video that features some of the “side” performances. Although the transition between the two performances I analyze is mediated by an editor’s cut and the cameraman’s pan, I still consider the main acts viable evidence for my argument.

In one of the performances, we see a group of five men who are animatedly addressing the camera. The most vocal of them, the first of who appears onscreen and who is adorned with a traditional beaded necklace, occupies the camera’s field of view and begins speaking to his imagined audience. In a tone that simultaneously hits the registers of jest, assertiveness and orature, the performer declares:

We cannot allow Goodluck to be our President! If he know [sic] he is sick and tired of us, let him move out of that chair. After all, if me, Ifeanyi, Chief of Obodo... (The others cheer him like supporters would a political figure! He waves them mimicking a politician’s wave to a crowd of imaginary supporters. He proceeds.) If me, Ifeanyi, chief of Obodo, can become the president I will turn the fuel to ₦40 per liter.

If you know you does [sic] not have fuel, use kerosene. (iROKTV)

With wide arm movements travelling between his body and the camera, the performer challenges his imagined

public to their civic responsibilities. Albeit playfully, he beckons on them to elect him President. Besides the symbolic necklace and the playful declaration, nothing of his performance suggests that he is a real chief; his brisk arm movements and his equally animated cheerers support this observation. They are ordinary citizens! The subtle smirk behind his sunscreen and his proposition that Nigerians use kerosene (to fuel cars and/or generators) suggests that he is deliberate about his joke and about the President's perceived incompetence, a major contention in the recent elections. In offering himself as a viable substitute, the "Chief" raises questions about the unholy marriage between class, age and citizenship in Nigerian politics; only the wealthy, old, and corrupt are considered "ripe" for the Presidency. The "Chief" smacks his chest while addressing himself as an honorary Chieftain. In a gesture symbolic of confidence and competence, "Chief" registers himself as masculine enough to both challenge the President and to be counted as a citizen.

Some other performances featured in the Occupy Nigeria movement also challenged the idea of nation and the rhetoric of Independence. In *The Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee, analyzes the question of nation as it pertains to the colonial conditions of Asia and Africa. For Chatterjee, the nation in the African example is a product of the colonial imagination of Europe and the Americas. Within this frame of analysis, the misery for the postcolonial [Nigerian] subject rests not only in his inability to *autonomously* imagine new communities, but in the surrender to "old" colonial state formations (10-11). Taken altogether as a performance of subalternity, the Occupy Nigeria movement offered the possibility for radical reimagining of the nation as a collective that *might* thrive even within the frame of a colonial formation. In other words, performance became a mode through which Occupy Nigeria ventured a utopian vision of Nigeria as a community capable of dealing with its internal complexities of ethnicity, language and religion. In a video that made quick rounds on the Internet during the movement, Christians stood watch over Muslims as they offered their prayers on the protest grounds. This act of solidarity happened in the middle of faith-inflected killings across Northern Nigeria. These killings were purportedly incited by "religious intolerance." At the grassroots level, Nigerians understood that the "religious" violence had the fingerprints of the national elites who potentially fuel disorder for political gains. By solidarizing at the grassroots level on a common cause, the protests offered an effective critique of the ruling elite whose best representations of nation are expressed by recruiting fellow elites across ethnic and religious divides to reflect a "national character." In their "side" performances, commentators offered that Nigeria's problems are not fuel subsidy per se (the government's narrative), but of the larger problem of corruption and gross apathy of the ruling class.

In another related "side" performance, a group of approximately twenty youths clustered within the camera's field of view. This particular space resembles a temporary media hub created by an independent video collector, as the camera was complete with a wired microphone. The protesters appear uncoordinated; they struggle to fit into the camera's field of view. In the middle of this disarray, one protester reaches for a microphone to initiate a political speech. He starts with a poor rendition of the formulaic verbal call to political action characteristic of student mobilizing in Nigeria, "Greatest Nigerian Students!" His supporters respond, "Great!" This protester unwittingly misses the basic sequence of the call as he conflates the call with the variety of riffs that should follow it. He calls "Greatest Nigerian Gbo-Gbo-Gbo!" Observing his incoherence, a fellow protester grabs the microphone but produces an equally dismal result. For all their uncoordinated efforts, a woman emerges from behind the camera to reclaim the microphone. They are, however, unrelenting in their desire to express themselves. I have taken time to describe the protesters in this way as a way of approximating their socio-economic statuses. Their collective failure to articulate themselves in standard English could be read as evidence of their subaltern station.

The collective performance evolves until it reaches something of an equilibrium. Once the microphone is seized from them, these protesters break into a different but equally popular call-and-response chant, while still gesturing frantically at the camera. Suddenly, in dance and music some order is momentarily installed in the scene. Responding with "Ole!" which roughly translates as "Thief!" the protesters begin chanting to the lead of a spontaneous leader of the group. Gramsci's notion of multiple elements of "conscious leadership" applies here: individual leaders emerge spontaneous but may not lead for long. While the group responds "Ole!" (Thief!), the "spontaneous" leader riffs on the following calls: "World Bank!" "IMF!" "PDP!" "Ngozi!" "Oju ole re e!" "Obasanjo!"<sup>1</sup> This "side" performance is heightened by one member of the group seated on the ground amidst the bodies leaning over him towards the camera. In accord with the leader's call but in contrast to the din around him, the seated character, ritually taps the earth with a stick as though immersed in serious oracular divination to unravel Nigeria's problems. With the help of his props in that moment of appropriation — his props are a stick swathed with red ribbon, and a strip of leaf held in place by his pursed lips — the character *becomes* an oracle.

<sup>1</sup>. "PDP!" "Ngozi!" "Oju ole re e!" "Obasanjo!": PDP (Peoples Democratic Party) is Nigeria ruling political party and it had been in power since 1999; By "Ngozi" the protesters are referring to the Nigerian Minister of Finance, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who was a Managing Director of World Bank prior to her appointment; Obasanjo was the Nigerian President between 1999 and 2007; "Oju ole re e!" translates as "These are the faces of thieves!"



The Oracle's costume — a worn jersey branded "USA"— unwittingly converses with discourses on neoliberalism and its impact on Third World economies. Because the local and transnational processes that subjugate the group are often difficult to express, the group resorts to music and movement, once English language betrays them. Through play, this group of performers is able to articulate their *own* awareness about the nation and a rough expression of its unholy alliance (historical and contemporary) with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It would be misleading, however, to assume that everyone in this group holds a uniform degree of awareness. To the contrary, I am suggesting that their shared reality, primarily socio-economic, forms a foundation upon which they negotiate and perform aggregate their consciousness about their condition albeit fleetingly. In this sense, spectacle becomes one potent outlet through which they move their bodies and/or their voices within viewing range at the protest site, and at the national level. They effectively exploit the promise of legibility that spectacle powerfully offers.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although I have attempted in this narrative to offer plausible interpretations for the actions of the protesters, a detailed description of their performances, particularly in the ways that they engage with spectacle and play, could prove invaluable methodology for recovering consciousness of subaltern classes in popular political movements. Detailed description of performative actions – of not only the major players in a movement, but also those potentially insignificant characters, the "side" performers — could prove a useful methodology for animating the ways they struggle to challenge hegemonic narratives of nationhood. Also, such methodology might allow us understand how they apprehend themselves in a mass movement like Occupy Nigeria. Subaltern historiography of mass movements is necessarily a historiography of performance that should account for the place of play and performance. This convergence between popular struggle and performance should interest scholars concerned with finding alternative ways of articulating subaltern consciousness.

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