Occupy Nigeria and the Inception of Online Visual Mobilisation of Street Protest

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Abstract

In this paper, we use audience interpretation of images and their accompanying comments relating to the Occupy Nigeria protest and retrieved from Facebook to examine the beginning of how activist circulation and interaction around images on social media materialise into real-life protest in Nigeria. The Occupy movement triggered by the government's removal of fuel subsidy on 1 January 2012 was then the largest in Nigeria. More recently, the #EndSARS protest which outweighed Occupy Nigeria broke out in October 2020 in agitation against police brutality and more broadly, the failure of the government to bring socio-political and economic transformation. As grandiose civil movement enacted in the geographical space but driven by online visuality has taken root in Nigeria, it is crucial to reflect on the inception of this culture. We analyse the visual dimension of Occupy Nigeria to explore how it established a pattern of online-offline mobilisation propelled by internet-based dialogic visual practices that would mark subsequent social movements. Online images, from symbols to cartoons, photographs and videos are used to conscientise citizens about perceived injustice. When the virtual mobilisation sets off the spatial protest, images keep feeding back on the demonstrations, sustaining and intensifying them. The visuality of Occupy Nigeria has been previously explored in literature, but due attention has not been paid to how the images in themselves constitute a space of interaction among the networked public, both prior to and during the street protest. We draw on the work around civil discourse of photography that sees the image as a site of conversation.

Introduction

On the first day of January 2012, the then President Goodluck Jonathan presented to Nigerians what was sarcastically referred to as "a new year gift." He announced the removal of fuel subsidy by his administration. The idea of "gift" became common in the public, media and academic discussions of the incident as it occurred in a day marked by exchange of material gifts as part of the New Year's celebration. The sarcastic use of "gift" here underscores the insensitivity of the government to the plight of the masses. Rather than improve the economic life of the people, the Jonathan administration was perceived to have taken a step to make it even more difficult. What more! The implication of the subsidy removal was an increase in the price of petrol from 65 naira to 140 naira per litre. As the petroleum products used in Nigeria were refined elsewhere, the government claimed that it subsidised their prices on their importation into the country. It argued that the huge amount of money spent on the subsidy in turn enriched the "cabal," a few individuals controlling the oil sector. So, its removal "had become inevitable to avert the collapse of Nigerian economy" and would tackle the fraud in the sector (Onyishi, Eme & Emeh 2012, 58). The funds recovered from the subsidy removal would be put into infrastructural and human capital development.

That argument was severely criticised. For some critics, the policy was but a ploy by the government to enrich itself and further impoverish the poor masses. They insisted that there was no such a thing as fuel subsidy in the first place. Others argued that it was a scam closely linked to the corruption that had destabilised the local refineries so that Nigeria would rely on importation of refined petroleum products, thereby enriching the importers. With domestic refining, they maintained, there would be no need for subsidy or its removal, and the products would be available to Nigerians at reduced prices. These controversies began at the end of 2011 when the government first revealed its intention. Yet, the decision was not rescinded. Once it was announced on January 1, the following day, a multitude of Nigerians took to the street in protest that was dubbed "Occupy Nigeria."

The Occupy movement in Nigeria came as a shock to many due to the long-standing perception of Nigerians as resilient, an idea articulated in the notion of "suffering and smiling." Zombobah (2020, 59) sums it up:

> For many years now, Nigerians have died on the roads that our government will not tar; people die in the hospitals that will not be equipped; people die on the streets that is not secured; and morning afterwards, those who are left among the living will rise very early and rinse their faces and continue. Nigerians have lived under dictators of all shades, benevolent, repressive and civilian. They have seen genocide, massacres and bombs. But then this is Nigeria! It is still Nigeria! A happy nation amidst these challenges!

The Occupy protest broke that jinx of resilience. The "suffering and smiling" Nigerians known for their capacity to cope with harsh living conditions took part in what became one of the largest protests in the history of the country (Branch & Mampilly, 2015). Although the visual and social media dimensions of Occupy Nigeria are not Branch and Mampilly's focus, these are central to the movement. The protest was Nigeria's first experience of how visual practices on social media constitute a means to co-ordinate real-world social movement (Shirky, 2011).

The existing body of literature on the social media visuality of Occupy Nigeria does not highlight the voices of the networked Nigerians who produce and circulate the images and act upon them in real life. Igwebuike, Abioye and Chimuanya (2017) study the posts on the Facebook page of Occupy Nigeria Group, one of the many social media groups named after the protest. Through what they call "pragma-semiotic investigation," they analyse linguistic and visual materials retrieved from the page under six categories. The first is "divine intervention," where Nigerians resort to prayer to turn water into fuel in the manner Biblical Jesus turned water into wine. Other images depict "security consciousness" with regards to people guarding the fuel they have bought at the current high price. The masses adopt "innovative thinking" to enable them cope with their precarious condition. In the "exaggeration" group of pictures, hyperbolic depiction of the Nigerian situation is produced through image editing. In the last two categories, "defamation" and "abusive placards," the protesters denigrate the then President Goodluck Jonathan. This is a striking analysis, but because it is mainly restricted to the site of the image itself, we do not hear what the networked protesters say about the images on their platforms of circulation.

In the article, "Intermediality of Images: A Semiotic Analysis of the 'Occupy Nigeria Protest Images on Social Media," Nura Ibrahim's analysis is similar to that of Igwebuike, Abioye and Chimuanya with the same absence of the voice of the networked public. Ibrahim concentrates on how "images on social media had played a significant role in mobilizing the protesters to come out and keep them on the street for the period of the protest" (2017, p.3). The images convey a message of defiance, unity and solidarity that kept the protesters together in the cause despite ethnic, religious and socio-economic differences that had long remained key contributors to conflict in Nigeria.

In some other writings, transformation of the protest by the communicative and interactive affordances of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Nairaland and other websites are analysed without accounting for the impact of images. The social media sites are deployed to circulate messages that call public attention to harsh living conditions and provoke the agitation to address them. On the online forums, the street protest is organised, co-ordinated and documented (Hari, 2014; Ibrahim, 2013; Uwalaka, Scott and Watkins, 2012). When the

protest materialises in the geographical space, the elements become diverse, from occupation of spaces to street march, carrying of placards, burning of tyres, singing and dancing.

Ayobade (2015, p.61) examines these as performance in which expressions of ethnicity and class amplified the popular appeal of the protests while simultaneously complicating the historization of the brief struggle." Protest in this sense serves as a site in which Nigerians deivided along ethic, religious and economic lines come together in a common course. Performance enables the protesters to communicate their concerns about socio-economic and political issues such as poverty, corruption and insecurity that trigger the civil movement.

The different sides to the role of images disseminated on social media in the protest deserve critical examination, after all, social media culture is predominantly a visual practice and protest in conventional sense constitutes public spectacle. In what follows, we analyse how images connect the online and offline sites of civil struggle as exemplified by Occupy Nigeria. We do this not only by reading the compositionality of images as done in previous studies but by accentuating the conversational use of the images. In other words, we address the question of how protesters interact on the basis of the images to enable them accomplish the purpose for which they are circulated. We begin by situating Occupy Nigeria within the broader picture of the occupy movement that began to swept across the globe beginning from the 2010s. This is followed by a discussion of how the philosophy of solidarity that drove the protest was articulated in visual symbols. Then, we analyse how the plan and itinerary of the protest were laid out on social media and afterwards, offline demonstrations followed.

Within the larger picture of occupy movement

The name alludes to the "occupy movement," a wave of protest involving the occupation of public spaces by disenchanted masses. Acquiring global attention beginning from the Occupy Wall Street of September 2011 in New York City, it became a way in which protesters gather to make revolutionary demands. In like manner, beginning from 2 January 2012, Nigerians gathered en masse in Lagos and later in other parts of the country for protest. Labour organisations embarked on strike. Offices were shut down. The protest was enacted in geographical spaces, but it had a virtual dimension which is common to most occupy movements. Larkin notes that internet technology enables the mediation of "exchange over distance, bringing different people, objects, and spaces into interaction and forming the base on which to operate…social systems" (Larkin 2013, 330). In a similar remark, Jeffrey Juris refers particularly to social media as crucial to the mobilisation of "#Occupy everywhere" as he puts it (Juris 2012, 259). While "everywhere" in that formulation suggests how widespread that mode of social movement has become, the hashtag (#) is a sign that has come to mark the connection with the virtual world.

Such connection was explicit in the Occupy Nigeria movement. In the book in which Branch and Mampilly (2015) puts the movement within the broader context of uprising in Africa, they fail to acknowledge the online relations behind it. Moving back into the history of the

Nigerian people's frustration with the failure of the state, they regard the protest as a trigger that unleashed the accumulated anger. They also examine its organising, the coalition that enabled it, its fragility, and the ultimate failure of the protest. Branch & Mampilly do not

recognise the protest's connection with social media and photography, while the uprising was in the first place conceived, organised and co-ordinated on social media with images at the heart of it. Certain Facebook groups named "Occupy Nigeria" were created a couple of months before the historic protest which took up the same name. By name, visual symbolism and purpose, the online groups laid the foundation for the momentous event. The profile images of the groups could be a good point to begin the examination of the ideology of the movement.

The visual ideology of a protest

Nearly all of the online Occupy Nigeria groups on Facebook for instance, used graphic rendering of the human fist as their profile pictures, with only slight variations in form and colour such as shown in figure 1. Since the sixteenth century, the hand has been used as a political metaphor, created into different "agitational gestures," to use Gottfried Korff's phrasing. Korff identifies three of such gestures: "the clasped hands," "the clenched fist," and "the Roman and German salute" (1992, 70). He analyses them in the historical context of workers' struggle and political revolution in parts of Europe such as Germany in Hitler's time and France during the revolution. The clenched fist in particular evolved to have close ties with forms of solidarity that underline strikes and protests. Actuated by rage and discontent, the struggle most often climaxes in violence either as a further expression of anger by the protesters or their encounter with the authorities they challenge. In the birthing of Occupy Nigeria on Facebook, the image of the clenched fist was mainly a representation of solidarity. It is "solidarity as group interaction based on shared values and beliefs" (Komter 2001, 385).

Scholars acknowledge the role of the image in civil movements and the way it constructs group solidarity. In a lecture delivered by Jessica Winegar at the School for Advanced Research (SAR), Santa Fe, in 2011, she locates the image within the larger cultural productions that constitute the language of the Egyptian revolution. Like poetry, performance, music and humour (jokes), the image bears signs that organise the underlying sensibilities of the protest movement. It is used to show how the people articulate their exasperation, how they seek to mobilise others to join in the cause, and how they bring attention to their demand (Winegar, 2011). In addition, the image exposes the brutality of the state in reaction to the uprising. Counter-resistance violence further corroborates the broader unfair treatment citizens receive in the hands of their leaders (Mitchell, 2012). When circulated on social media as part of civil struggle, the image plays all of these roles and even does more. As I will later explain with examples, the interaction engendered by the images on Facebook for instance indicates how the protesters strengthen their resolve to change the

status quo even at the height of violent crackdown. Such mobilisation of firmness is at the core of the meaning of solidarity.

Figure 1: Logos of different Occupy Nigeria Facebook groups.
Retrieved from: Facebook.
Retrieval date: 30 May 2015.

The Occupy Nigeria online groups that heralded the offline enactment were created with such strong sense of solidarity that however transcended intra-protest group context. It rather drew on a broader international framework that marks the 21st century civil struggle. The first post of one of the earliest Occupy Nigeria Facebook groups appeared on 18 October 2011. It was an excerpt from the About page of the Occupy Wall Street movement of September 2011, which in turn drew inspiration form the uprising called Arab Spring. The emergence of Occupy Nigeria a month after Occupy Wall Street and the adaptation of its ideas speak of a shared concern about the avarice of global politics and capitalism.[1] In Nigeria, the oil sector is a site of that rapacity. Another Occupy Nigeria Facebook page also opened in October 2011 resisted the condition by directly addressing the removal of fuel subsidy:

[1] Occupy Nigeria, "Occupy Nigeria is a people-powered movement that began on October 17, 2011," *Facebook*, October 18, 2011, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=161733580587708&id=160388144055585.

> Fellow Nigerians, this is a wakeup call to you all of my generation, lets flow in to the street to tell our leaders that we (are) no longer going to be docile, we can no longer take everything they give, we must end the era of forcing iniquities down our throat. We must now stand up
>
> for our right and do what Libyans, Egyptians, Yemenis, Syrians, Americans, British, and recently Italians are doing to make their wish come through. We will decide on a date and move to occupy any government installation. Do not let them force this bitter pill of Oil Subsidy down our throat.[2]

A couple of thoughts can be drawn from these lines. First, the protagonists of the struggle were influenced by the wave of occupy movements that greeted the 2010s, spilling over from one country to another. The last line in the opening paragraph of Branch and Mampilly's chapter on Occupy Nigeria is evocative of the seemingly infectious attribute of this mode of uprising. They write: "The Occupy movement had arrived in Nigeria" (2015, 86). Just as it happened in Egypt, Tunisia, and some other places, and this is the second point, it did arrive through the virtual space of social media. The Occupy Nigeria offline mass protest was initiated on Facebook. The group began to mobilise action against the government for the particular reason associated with fuel subsidy removal a few months before the public announcement of the policy and the resulting resistance. It was initiated at a time the government had publicised its plan as if to test the reaction of the masses about a decision that would not be withdrawn. In the midst of the controversy that erupted at that moment, the social media group was in essence inviting the masses to reject the move and to rise up in protest if their voice was not heard. The government remained resolute and implemented the policy. So, the masses took to the street as set out on Facebook. The civil movement adopted the same name – Occupy Nigeria – which was conceptualised and given to it on social media. More Facebook groups emerged, most of them named "Occupy Nigeria."[3] Some were created on the first day of the offline protest (January 2, 2012) and others a few days after. Images and texts pertaining to the civil movement began to be circulated from its inception and would subsequently continue to address broader socio-political concerns in Nigeria.

The flow: Online to offline

Once the protest had begun, further activities were arranged on Facebook. On 3 January 2012, a programme was drawn on one of the Occupy Nigeria pages with a list of eleven cities where the protest would be held. Date, time and the exact locations were stated.[4] Through that medium, the spatial scope of the movement was defined. It was intended to spread across

[2] Occupy Nigeria, "Fellow Nigerians, this is a wake up call to you all of my generation," *Facebook*, October 22, 2011, https://www.facebook.com/OccupyNigeriaGroup/posts/302275939786853.

[3] Nationwide Anti-fuel Subsidy Removal: Strategy and Protest is an example of the groups with different naming.

[4] Occupy Nigeria Movement, *Facebook*, January 3, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/pages/Occupy-Nigeria-Movement/318278821540428.

the major cities in the various regions of Nigeria. Indeed, in a couple of days, the protest that began in Lagos rapidly swept through the country. Facebook was used to report the expansion of the movement. The circulated reports indicate not only how the protest was territorially spreading in Nigeria and in the diaspora, they brought to public knowledge the groups of people in support of the movement. A photograph from Warri shows a group of protesters who represent the branch of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) in the city (figure 2). Similar images from other cities have shown that the union was among the key supporters of the struggle.[5]

The photograph helps to show that the movement was not restricted to the urban poor whom Ruchi Chaturvedi (2016) has argued to be powerful agents of revolutionary actions in Africa. Indeed, the informal proletariats are so crucial that they most often champion the movement. But here, in addition to its circulation within the paradigm of citizen photojournalism through which updates about the protest are disseminated, the photographic image suggests the involvement of the elites in the struggle. In this regard, the Ojota Gani Fawehinmi Park was a remarkable site in relation to Occupy Nigeria. The park which was named after the late popular Lagos radical civil rights lawyer was the initial meeting point for the protesters. Then they flowed into the streets for the activist rallies. There was a nationwide strike by the organised labour. Banks, airports, seaports, and other establishments were shut down, resulting in "a complete paralysis of economic activities" in Nigeria (Chiluwa, 2012).

Figure 2: The Occupy Nigeria protest by the Nigerian Bar Association (Warri Branch) Retrieved from: Facebook, 6 January 2012, posted by Occupy Nigeria with the text, "Protesters take over Warri." The picture came with a *Vanguard* newspaper article entitled, "Protesters take over Warri."
URL:
https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=228271247250052&id=160388144055585Retrieval date: 31 May 2015.

[5] The NBA is but a member of a larger organisation – the Trade Union Congress – that took part in the protests. Other mega groups include the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and civil society organisations (which include the Save Nigeria Group (SNG), the Federation of Informal Workers' Organisations of Nigeria (FIWON), and Joint Action Front (JAF).

The enormous impact of social media on the civil movement motivates us to revisit Mancur Olson's notion of collective action. In his conceptualisation of how common interests drive the goals of groups of individuals, he argues that the smaller the size of the group, the more effective it would be in organising itself and in pursuing its purpose (Olson, 1965). The Occupy Nigeria example destabilises Olson's proposition. With social media, collective actions can be efficiently articulated and executed, with a large number of people involved. We concur with Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl's thoughts in the article "Reconceptualizing Collective Action in the Contemporary Media Environment." They ask us to rethink the "group theory" in an era when technology has transformed the ways groups organise themselves for action. As they put it, "scholars should be asking…whether the theoretical ideal (such as promoted by Olson) fits the rich array of collective actions now present in public life" (2005, 366). We think it does not. There has been a successful mobilisation of large groups of protesters in Egypt, Tunisia and in Nigeria as argued here. Even if Olson's argument was relevant as at when it was made, times have changed. Digital technology and the internet have made it possible for multitudes of people to organise themselves effectively for a common cause.

The effectiveness of social media in group action is located in its complex structure of the information economy. As shown above, it facilitates in significant ways the initiation, planning and real time update on the activities of activist movement. Through the information flow, expressions of solidarity come in various forms to boost the resolve of the protesters. The reports of the Occupy Nigeria protests as they took place in different locations came with commendation to the commitment of the participants. On 5 January 2012, the protest in Kano was reported to be "an inspiration to all of us." The activists "occupied all day and night (leaving the comfort of their houses and beds) and forgetting ethnic and religious divides."[6] The protesters had more to contend with than ethnic and religious differences, and the discomfort of the weather in the outdoor spaces.

The martyrdom of a revolution

The Occupy Nigeria protest faced a violent crackdown by the government. Lives were lost allegedly to police firearms. Tensions were heightened. The protesters sought vengeance against the police in the case of the killing of Ademola Aderinto for instance. But they later retreated for fear of the escalation of violence (Branch and Mampilly, 2015). They eventually resorted to circulation of the images of the deceased as a means of self-consolation and reinforcement in the face of violent crackdown. This can be illustrated with the example of Muyideen Mustapha who was reported as the first victim of the police brutality that came with the Occupy Nigeria protest. A Facebook page was created to pay tribute to him: "R.I.P.

[6] Occupy Nigeria Movement, *Facebook*, January 5, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=319656774735966&id=318278821540428.

Muyideen Mustapha – A Hero Of the Nigerian Revolution."[7] The heroism was articulated in visual form, used as the profile image and posted on the page. His corpse with blood on his chest is placed against a graphic representation created and circulated on Facebook at the beginning of the protest movement (figure 3). The graphic image like the fist of solidarity symbolises a collective ambition to change the status quo. The juxtaposition of Mustapha's body with the symbol is in itself symbolic as can be deduced from the conversations it generated on Facebook. One thought-provoking comment refers to Mustapha as a "martyred hero" whose death became a "redemptive force that will bring new light to the darkness we face in this nation…The spilt blood… (will) cause the thieves in (government) offices to come to terms with their conscience."[8]

Besides the notion of martyrdom, Mustapha's demise became a means through which exchange of encouragement among the protesters was facilitated. They resolved not to allow counter-resistance to dampen their determination. Nigerians in the diaspora also sent in words of support through Facebook and other online channels. At the places where the solidarity was demonstrated through the physical enactment of protests, photographs were taken and circulated online. In the United States, the protest took place in New York, California and Georgia. In the United Kingdom, the protesters marched to the Nigerian Embassy in London. Some of the photographs of these events that found their way to Facebook as the mark of diasporic solidarity were produced as part of articles published in other online platforms.

[7] "R.I.P Muyideen Mustapha - A Hero of the Nigerian Revolution," *Facebook*, January 4 2012, https://www.facebook.com/311939162179813/photos/a.311968125510250.78217.311939162179813/311968248843571/?type=1.

[8] "R.I.P. Muyideen Mustapha – A Hero Of the Nigerian Revolution," *Facebook*, January 4, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=311974932176236&id=311939162179813.

Figure 3: The body of Muyideen Mustapha who was shot on 3 January 2012 during the Occupy Nigeria protest. It is also the profile photograph of the Facebook page set up in his honour: "R.I.P Muyideen Mustapha - A Hero of the Nigerian Revolution."
Retrieved from: Facebook, 4 January 2012, posted without any text by "R.I.P Muyideen Mustapha - A Hero of the Nigerian." URL: https://www.facebook.com/311939162179813/photos/a.311968125510250.78217.311939162179813/311968248843571/?type=1.
Retrieval date: 31 May 2015.

For instance, "Message of Support for the Ongoing Mass Protest" is the title of an article shared on Facebook from Sahara Reporters. It begins with the striking remark that "it is not every time one gets the opportunity to demand for a change in the political, social and economic situations in a country" (Gomsuk, 2012). The author asks the activists to view the uprising as a "life-time opportunity" for a revolution that was long overdue in Nigeria given the enormity of state failure. He evokes the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jnr, to prove that the masses have the power to change how they are governed. He challenges the claim by the government that the money recovered through the subsidy removal would be reinvested into the economy and used to provide social amenities. The poor state of infrastructure in Nigeria does not result from lack of funds but the embezzlement and mismanagement of it. He also warns against compromise which could come in form of material enticement. No amount of bribes would match the better living conditions that would benefit all, should the revolution come true.

However, there are contentions that the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) was compromised in the end. Without including other groups involved in the struggle, NLC entered a negotiation with the government. A hurried decision was made, not to reverse to the original fuel price of 65 naira per litre, but to enforce a partial subsidy removal that left the price at 97 naira per litre (Chiluwa, 2012). For this reason, many felt that the uprising was a failure, that rather than bring a revolution, it took lives of some Nigerians.

Conclusion

We suggest that the Occupy Nigeria movement should not be critiqued as a failure. At least, *something* was achieved. A new mode of challenging dominant power was established in Nigeria and it held the promise of future revolutions. Indeed, in 2020, a more momentous uprising emerges – the #EndSAR protest that followed the blueprint of the Occupy movement. Occupy Nigeria marked the beginning of revolutionary action in which social media converge with images to trigger an uprising that materialises in the physical world. In this paper, we have brought out the voices of the protesters who use images on social media to push the agenda of the protest. Social media along with its visuality as shown in the case of the Occupy Nigeria influences conventional form of civil movements by way of supporting its conception, co-ordination and dissemination of information that sustains it. The online visuality is further deployed to attend to further disparate elements that emerge in the course of the struggle, such as the tendency to cower and back down due to state crackdown.

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