The Struggle Complex

Facebook, Visual Critique and the Tussle for Political Power in Nigeria

Le Complexe de lutte : Facebook, critique visuelle et la querelle pour le pouvoir politique au Nigéria.

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The National Assembly precinct in Abuja, Nigeria went chaotic on 20 November 2014.¹ Parliamentarians, divided along party lines, struggled to take control of the space, enacting elite struggle for power that has marked the political history of post-independence Nigeria. The melee was depicted in numerous photographs and videos that went viral in cyberspace. As a way of condemning the confrontation, ordinary Nigerians produced even more images, through digital editing, and circulated these online, especially on Facebook. Since 2012, when social networking drove a nation-wide protest prompted by the removal of a fuel subsidy by the Nigeria federal government, online platforms have remained crucial sites of popular dissidence in the country. Photography is important in the civil struggle, thanks to digital infrastructure—interconnected camera devices, image-based applications and websites—and the social practices that organise their use.

Ordinary Nigerians/citizens (who produced visual critique of the National Assembly fracas) is a category that refers to the population of people who perceive their citizenship of the sovereign Nigerian state as existing outside the domain of state power. They are geographically unbounded, but connected,

1. This essay was developed from a chapter in my doctoral thesis which focuses on the critique of the socio-political condition of post-independence Nigeria as enabled by the photographic practices undertaken by Nigerians on Facebook. I thank the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR), University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa, for the Andrew Mellon Fellowship (2014-2016) that facilitated the project. I am also grateful for the Ivan Karp Doctoral Research Award which I received in 2015 through the African Critical Inquiry Programme of the CHR, UWC, and Laney Graduate School of Emory University, USA. The grant supported my fieldwork in Nigeria in 2015, which was complementary to my “netnographic method”—the study of online interaction and its contingencies. I have undertaken virtual participant observation of the activist use of photographs by Nigerians on social media since 2012, downloading the images and their accompanying comments, and reading them with semiotic tools to understand Nigerians’ agitation for socio-political change.

through heterogeneous networks of social media such as Facebook, the most widely used social networking site in Nigeria. Recent statistics show that the number of monthly Nigerian users is up to 16 million, constituting a significant segment of the considerably literate population that inhabits mainly urban and semi-urban centres (Akinwale 2016). While this number includes the political elites and the wealthy business tycoons who constitute a tiny percentage, others are students, the academia, civil servants, and those employed in the informal sector of the economy.² Although marked by demographic divergence, much of this population of users is brought together by the experience of questioning socio-political issues such as the November 2014 clash among Nigerian lawmakers.

In this essay, I examine the photographs circulated in the wake of the National Assembly pandemonium in order to show what ordinary Nigerians make of the contestation for power among state functionaries in the country, and how the public critique is shaped by digital photographic practices, casting new light on a half-century-old chaotic political culture. I also explore political violence and the failure of leadership in Nigeria, issues which were raised by the power tussle and the criticism against it. Through the images and the conversations around them, we understand how Nigerians see the struggle in relation to democracy. There is a growing sense of despair among the citizens who anticipated that democracy would bring political and economic transformation following the many years of military disruptions, which had, by 2014, gone on uninterruptedly for one and a half decades. This essay contributes the perspectives of photography and the voices of ordinary citizens to the intellectual discussion of the struggle for power in post-independence Africa, a subject on which there is paucity of scholarly work.

In the available literature, the power tussle in Nigeria is first traced to inter-party rivalry rooted in the ethnic underpinnings of the country's nationalist political formation in the twentieth century.³ Foundational disharmony was at the core of the crisis that befell Nigeria during its early days as an independent state. In 1959, a federal election was organised in Nigeria to

2. 92% of Nigerian university students as at 2012 used Facebook, and the number continues to grow with increasing access to smart phones and related devices that support access to the Internet. See OGEDEBE (2012).
3. In this regard, see ACHEBE (2012). The ethnic-based political parties, formed as part of the nationalist movement in Nigeria and which survived after independence in 1960, include the National Congress of Nigeria and the Cameroons, later renamed National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) founded in 1944. It was understood to be dominated by the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) created in the late 1940s served the interest of the Hausa/Fulani in the North. The Action Group (AG), formed in 1950, pursued the Yoruba agenda in the South West.

elect those who would take up leadership roles in 1960 when British colonial rule would have come to an end. The election produced Tafawa Balewa of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) as the Nigerian Prime Minister and Nnamdi Azikiwe of the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) as Ceremonial President.⁴

NCNC and NPC formed a coalition government, which Emmanuel Ojo analyses as a fragile alliance and the beginning of Nigeria's post-independence elite struggle for power (Ojo 2012). The parties later broke up and from then onwards, there was a proliferation of parties and party alliances, not based on "ideological compatibility," but rather on "political expediency" conditioned by treachery and unbridled quest for power (*ibid.*: 8). The inter-party acrimony climaxed in the "rigging, state-sponsored thuggery, violence and arson" that characterised the 1965 election.⁵ Post-election violence ensued in different parts of Nigeria, bringing the political tensions to a peak—the point at which the military intervened with the bloody *coup* of 1966.

Elite power tussle in Nigeria is also an intra-party phenomenon. Ojukwu and Olaifa (2011: 25) explain the notion of "internal democracy" as the adherence of a political party to the tenets of democracy. They use the People's Democratic Party (PDP) formed in 1998 to demonstrate how the lack of internal democracy breeds "strife, imposition of candidates, god-fatherism, money bag politics, injustice, and lack of understanding of [...] party manifesto." These give way to intra-party conflict.

The struggle has also been analysed as a catalyst for the many switches between civilian and military rule dominating the Nigerian political history. The power tussle with other elements of political crisis that characterised the first republic gave way to a series of military *coups* and counter-*coups*.⁶ The dominant narrative about the *coups* is the quest to use military force to break the civilian struggle for power, crush its duplicity and restore law, order and economic prosperity (Olukoshi & Abdulraheem 1985). These ambitious propositions usually had timeframes set for their accomplishment, to be followed by the return to civilian rule. Nonetheless, the transition developed into a huge political crisis where the military held on to power for so long or was threatened from within (as in the case of counter *coup*). The authoritarian

4. ACHEBE (2012) argues that Balewa's position was the outcome of electoral malpractices in which Britain had a hand and thus showed complicity in Nigeria's ethnicised politics.

5. In addition to ACHEBE (2012), see also OKPU (1985) who writes about the inter-party relations of Nigeria's second republic (1979-1983) as "a condition of mini-war" where instances of thuggery, arson, and clashes involving the use of dangerous weapons were common between parties especially during elections.

6. There was a military *coup* in January 1966 and a counter-*coup* in July same year. Other *coups* took place in 1975, 1983 and 1985, followed by an unsuccessful attempt in 1986.

regime could cancel elections, dissolve “civilian tiers of the transitional regime,” and abrogate “the constitution along with the institutions of the democratisation programme” (Lewis 1994: 323).

The November 2014 National Assembly conflict in Nigeria enables us to explore how the production, editing, and circulation of digital photographs on Facebook allow ordinary citizens to critique the elite struggle for power.

Enacting the fracas

The picture in figure 1 is a still from one of the videos that went viral on the Internet on 20 November 2014.⁷ The video is originally a 10 PM news production (as shown on the lower left) of Channels Television, Lagos, with the station’s logo appearing on the top left. It was shared on the popular Facebook page, Abiyamo.⁸ We see three men (one of whose back is damp with perspiration) climbing the gate to scale over it, and others clasping parts of the metal structure to do the same. They are richly and formally dressed, an indication that they are neither athletes in physical training nor children on a playground. The inscriptions, “National Assembly Fracas/House Members Scale Fence to Access Building” signal who they are: Nigerian parliamentarians in 2014, particularly members of the House of Representatives (the Lower House of Parliament). They are to meet regarding President Goodluck Jonathan’s request for an extension of emergency rule in the three northeastern states affected by the Boko Haram insurgency (Borno, Adamawa and Yobe).

The video is somewhat like a movie to be better appreciated by pondering the very constitution of the House of Representatives. After the 2011 election in Nigeria, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) dominated membership of the Nigerian Parliament, having remained the ruling party since the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999. The House of Representatives included 360 members, drawn from 36 states of the country, to serve a four-year term (2011–2015). PDP constituted 59% of the membership of the House, while the other 41% was

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7. Numerous still photographs of the incident shown in the video were also in circulation. Like those examined in this paper, many of the images circulated on Facebook by Nigerians are of low visual quality. This is due to the processes involved, the capacity of devices deployed, and the circumstances in which the pictures are produced and circulated. In any case, the poor quality does not undermine the political force of the images.
 8. Abiyamo is a conglomerate of online platforms—blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and so on—that rely heavily on the circulation of visual contents to bring attention to topical issues in Nigeria. It is one of the Facebook pages on which the National Assembly video first appeared. On the same day, 20 November 2014, it generated up to 60 comments, 13,350 views and was shared by 420 users.

distributed among other parties including Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) and others. The Upper House (the Senate) was also dominated by PDP which formed close to 66% of the membership (US State Department 2012). PDP held 23 of the 36 state governorships and the presidency. With this startling majority, PDP came to control Nigeria and exert much influence in all spheres of national life. In February 2013, the main opposition parties—ACN, CPC, ANPP—and a faction of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) formed an alliance called the All Progressives Congress (APC). The new party would strongly challenge PDP for the rest of the term and eventually take over power in 2015.

FIG. 1. — CHAOS IN THE NIGERIAN PARLIAMENT, 20 NOVEMBER 2014 (VIDEO STILL)

Source: Facebook, 20 November 2014, posted by Abiyamo with the text: “Oga Ade, well played. You have done it. You done did it. Kontunu,” <<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=638551976255389>>. Retrieval date: 20 November 2014.

In November 2014, Aminu Tambuwal of the APC was the Speaker of the House of Representatives; he had defected from the PDP a month earlier. In the video of the National Assembly crisis, Tambuwal arrives at the entrance of the complex, along with a group of people including other lawmakers, and finds the gate locked and guarded by the police. As their attempt to break the gate fails, they climb over it and scurry into Parliament, undeterred by the teargas released into the air by the police. The echoing solidarity song indicates that a majority of the stranded parliamentarians are APC members. They begin to

gather signatures to impeach Jonathan. However, the move and the plenary session over which Aminu Tambuwal is to preside, are disrupted as the Senate President (David Mark) shuts down the Parliament.

What is played out here is the “ruling-opposition-party tension” between the two major political parties of Nigeria’s Fourth Republic—the then ruling PDP and opposition APC. In what Ojo (2012: 16) calls “the-winner-takes-all” syndrome that marks politics in different African states, “the ruling party [...] (mobilises) every available state apparatus to entrench itself in power to the detriment of the opposition.” The police constitute one such apparatus at the core of the militarisation of politics in Nigeria. In a country where police brutality is one common way in which ordinary citizens experience the dominating power of the state, the action of the police against state officials—to the extent of using teargas on them—illustrates the ruling party phenomenon. To be in power in Nigeria is to be in control of the security forces and to deploy them against, not only ordinary citizens, but also political opponents. In a similar clash that took place in 2013 in the Rivers State House of Assembly, police officials joined to batter a member of the rival faction of the Parliament who was hit with mace by a supporter of the then State Governor, Rotimi Amaechi.

For the National Assembly conflict, news headlines indicated that the police had acted on orders given by the then President Jonathan of the ruling PDP through the Inspector General of Police. The concluding paragraphs of Onyedi Ojiabor and Sani Onogu’s (2014) piece published on 22 November in the newspaper *The Nation*, state that police action was Jonathan’s ploy to remove Tambuwal from his position as Speaker of the House of Representatives. As the conversations around the chaos at Parliament grew on Facebook, someone posted a screenshot of the paragraphs from the article in *The Nation*. This appeared as part of a comment on a post in which PDP was said to have called “for full investigation of (the) fracas in National Assembly.” In the written comment, Garba (2014) asserts: “The same PDP which masterminded the saga is now calling for a probe. Nonsense!” As for the screenshot, it demonstrates an unconventional photographic production process in which Nigerians are immersed in their social media struggle against the excesses of public officials. While I will shortly return to this point in relation to the discourse of photography, it is important to understand the root of Tambuwal’s ordeal, as it sheds light on the question of power tussle.

A couple of days after Tambuwal’s defection from the PDP to the APC in October 2014, the PDP-led federal government withdrew his security guards. A follow-up to this was the act of locking the Speaker and his co-lawmakers out of the Parliament. The police claimed that their action was a response to an intelligence warning against the likely invasion of the Parliament by “unknown

persons” (Samade 2014). If there were any such strange people, they were Tambuwal’s bodyguards recruited after the withdrawal of his security aides. With the staging of violence at the Parliament by Tambuwal and his party members, and the accusation of thuggery levelled against him, despite this being a political norm in Nigeria, the “ruling-opposition-party phenomenon” presents itself as a cycle of violence and counter-violence. The ruling PDP plotted violence and the opposition APC responded with violence.

Meanwhile, in the Nigerian context, party-to-party defection reflects political rivalry and the quest for power. It began in the First Republic when, in 1964, the Action Group party lost many of its members to other parties. Far from any ideological reason, defection was motivated by the pursuit of personal political ends. Henceforth, defection, dubbed “political prostitution” in the Nigerian parlance, has remained a firmly established political culture predicated on the longing for power. Tambuwal’s defection from the PDP took place shortly before the 2015 general election when he would be useful to the party and Jonathan’s bid for a second term as President. To win an election in Nigeria, one must have “the structure,” another popular concept that connotes having in one’s fold established politicians to help influence the election in one’s favour. Again, with Tambuwal’s new membership in APC, he was likely to oppose the extension of emergency rule in the Boko Haram-ravaged states. Should the extension be approved, it would be to Jonathan and PDP’s advantage, as we shall elucidate in the next section. For many, the National Assembly encounter was the repercussion of Jonathan’s ploy to force Tambuwal out of his position as Speaker of the Lower Chamber of the Parliament and apparently install a PDP member.

Therefore, Jonathan’s concern about losing Tambuwal from his party was motivated by self-interest. Tambuwal had a personal agenda too. His interest in the APC was prompted by the opportunity it offered him to contest for the governorship position on the APC platform in his home state, Sokoto. As I write, he is indeed now the Governor of Sokoto. The actions of the Nigerian State officials and the inter-party rivalry that framed these in the run-up to the 2015 general election cast light on stronger political tensions that characterise the Fourth Republic in Nigeria.

The Larger Picture of Violence

The National Assembly chaos reflects the broader political crisis in Nigeria which has played out through the PDP-APC rivalry ever since the formation of the latter in 2013. To explicate this, consider the agenda of the disrupted 20 November 2014 plenary of the Lower House of the Parliament.

The members were to discuss the request by the then Nigerian president—Goodluck Jonathan of PDP—for what would have been the third extension of emergency rule (first declared in May 2013) in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states, the three states constituting the hotbed of the Boko Haram insurgency.

Boko Haram, whose origin, founder, and foundational goal remain contested, evolved into a violent jihadist sect in the 2000s. In December 2003, it launched its first attack on state establishments including a police station. The attack was followed by a heated combat between the group and Nigerian forces, leading to the suppression of the insurgents for a couple of years. The resurgence of Boko Haram, in 2007, and the killing of its ringleader (Mohammed Yusuf), in 2009, radicalised the sect (Reinert & Garçonaz 2014). In the period of five years that followed (2010–2015) during which Goodluck Jonathan served as President of Nigeria, Boko Haram intensified its activities—shooting, bombing, abduction, and the use of images to issue threats and disseminate its violence. Many have been killed and displaced by the insurgents. Boko Haram also declared some parts of northeastern Nigeria its caliphate, although the territory was later recaptured by the Nigerian forces.

In 2014, Boko Haram became a site of intense politics, exposing the animosity between PDP and APC. Jonathan's move for extension of emergency rule came when the two parties were busy accusing each other of having created Boko Haram. In defence of the PDP-led government, Marilyn Ogar—the then spokesperson of the Directorate of Security Service (DSS)—claimed in August 2014 that APC sponsored Boko Haram, given that the party's victory in elections was often heralded by peaceful jubilation, while bombings followed PDP's (Ekundayo 2014). The involvement of a security agency—a supposedly neutral institution—in the blame game, rather than addressing the insurgency, reflected the precariousness of the Nigerian situation under political violence. Again, for many, the emergency rule was not the solution to the Boko Haram menace. There were contentions, especially among APC members and supporters, that the extension of the emergency rule would affect the 2015 election. It would either lead to the postponement of the election, and by implication extension of the PDP-led Jonathan administration, or disenfranchisement of electorates from Adamawa, Borno and Yobe, if the election was to be held (Idris *et al.* 2014). In these three and other states, both in the northeastern Nigeria and other regions of the country, many had seen the persistence of Boko Haram and other vices, such as corruption, as markers of PDP's failure as ruling party.

APC cashed in on that sentiment and deployed various media including an offline rally and photographic production on social media to win support. On 19 November 2014, prominent members and supporters of the party

embarked on a protest called “salvation rally,” against the PDP-led federal government, accusing it of perpetrating insurgency, police brutality, killing and corruption. They demanded an end to insecurity, impunity, and as Governor Rotimi Amaechi put it during the rally: “diarchy, a government headed by a civilian but under the support of the military” (Nwabughiohu 2014). He argued that the Nigerian democracy had failed under PDP and needed to be rescued. He presented APC as the rescuer. Those familiar with the Nigerian political terrain could relate with Amaechi’s evocation of impunity. But the fourth republic that began in 1999 has coincided with the rise of Internet-based activism in Nigeria and across the world. The digital infrastructure has consequently afforded Nigerians unprecedented access to information about the activities and the excesses of state functionaries. “Things got in the open,”⁹ as one active user of Facebook puts it in an interview. Documents associated with dubious deals of high-profile status somehow get “caught” by the public domain of the “net,” bringing public attention to culprits.

The portraits in figure 2 are those of Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, which I posted on Facebook two days after the National Assembly melee and shortly before his death in early 2015. The photographs reflect some form of “celebration of corruption,” which as explicated in the next section, marked the first sixteen years of the Nigerian fourth republic controlled by PDP (1999–2015). Alamieyeseigha became the governor of Bayelsa State in 1999. Against the Nigerian law prohibiting public officers from ownership of assets abroad (of which many top politicians have been found guilty), he had accounts with banks in the United Kingdom. He claimed that the moneys were donations made by his well-wishers towards the education of his children (Does de Willebois *et al.* 2011). In September 2005, he was arrested at Heathrow Airport, London, on allegations of money laundering and detained for a few weeks by the police. He was granted bail on a number of conditions: to provide surety in monetary form and to appear daily before the Metropolitan Police in whose custody he would also leave his passport. Alamieyeseigha forged identity documents, disguised himself and fled to Nigeria.

In his portraits, we see him in two sets of attire (fig. 2). The one on the left shows Alamieyeseigha, the man, in his regular mode of dressing with a hat on his head. In the other photograph, he appears disguised, wearing women’s headgear, a necklace, earrings and upper garments made of lace material. The Bayelsa State House of Assembly responded quickly by impeaching the fraudulent governor. This action was lauded as it signalled the promise of confronting corruption in the new democracy. But in the following decade and beyond, it proved to be a rare example of action against high-profile

9. Chidi Ugwu, personal interview with the author, Nsukka, August 2015.

corruption. Alamieyeseigha was granted a state pardon in 2014 by the Jonathan administration to facilitate his return to the country's politics. The majority of the comments elicited by Alamieyaseigha's portraits on Facebook reflect a sense of disappointment with the government for making that move.

FIG. 2. — PORTRAITS OF DIEPREYE ALAMIEYESEIGHA

Source: Facebook, 22 November 2014, posted by George Agbo with the text, "Do you remember who this couple is?", <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/occupy.naija/permalink/845268662184501/>>.

The pardon that reinforced Alamieyeseigha's aspiration to rejoin politics fits into the larger frame of what can be regarded as a "celebration of corruption." It connotes how criminal records get suppressed in the Nigerian political memory. Not only are culprits of corruption let off the hook, the way they are subsequently allowed to take part in national politics suggests a form of "forgiving and forgetting." The late General Sani Abacha who defrauded Nigeria of billions of dollars received the Centenary Award posthumously from the Goodluck administration in 2014. It was said to be in recognition of his "patriotism and promotion of unity and national development." In defence of the action, the government claimed that the "award was not a test of sainthood" and should not be taken as complicity in official crime (Pegg 2015: 612).

As the controversy surrounding the award raged on Facebook, a related case emerged. PDP had nominated the son of Sani Abacha—Mohammed Abacha—to contest for the gubernatorial position in Kano State in the 2015 general elections. The Sani Abacha looting scandal is a family story in which his wife and son are implicated. Mohammed's case was in the court for 446.3 billion Naira (some 1.48 billion dollars) embezzlement charges connected

to his father's regime. In June 2014, the Federal Government ordered that the case be withdrawn (Ibekwe & Udo 2014). Such a legal decision and the presentation of a man with crooked antecedents as a governorship candidate suggest a kind of celebration of corruption, entrenchment of impunity, and another example of forgiving and forgetting.

As the 2015 general election drew close, there were concerns among many Nigerians that Jonathan and PDP's re-election would mean another four years of subjection to misrule. The anxiety was manifest in the conversations around the multitude of images created in relation to socio-political issues in Nigeria and circulated on Facebook. The longing for political change became intense in Nigeria. APC tapped into the sentiment and sought to demonstrate its force as the only strong opposition party in the country. It took up the concept of "change," fashioned it into a weapon of sorts, and used it to wage war against Jonathan's government and his PDP. In addition to its mobilisation of rallies in public spaces, APC deployed the media and used the Internet to sensitise the public about the need for change, presenting itself as its agent.

The website—APC Mobilization for Change—was created along with Facebook pages to harness the power of the Internet in the propagation of the change ideology. The purpose of the group was "to mobilize and campaign nationally and globally for All Progressives Congress," in support of its quest for change.¹⁰ A different online protest group—Nigerian Global Awakening Day Protest (NGADP)—created in October 2011 synchronised its objectives with those of APC Mobilization for Change, which was formed much later. NGADP was initiated with the goal of "positive change" but not in the context into which it metamorphosed as APC's catch phrase. It began with agitation for good governance, economic and infrastructural development, and the eradication of corruption.¹¹ Later, the intensification of efforts against the PDP-led government drew the group to also use the forum for that purpose. With time, the castigation of the ruling party on social media gave the indication that it had lost the support of many Nigerians. So arose the assumption that PDP would be defeated if the 2015 election was not rigged. The APC Mobilization for Change and NGADP groups further became concerned with how to contribute in making the election free and fair. The camera and Facebook were useful to this end.

10. See "APC Mobilization for Change," <<http://apcmobilizationforchange.org/>> and the Facebook page, <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/380102332101468/?fref=ts>>. There are different Facebook pages for the various branches of the group across Nigeria and abroad. Both "APC Mobilization for Change" and the Nigerian Global Awakening Day Protest (NGADP) were created by Mirian Awolowo.

11. The demands are stated on the "Description" panel of the group's Facebook page: <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/Nigerianglobalawakeningdayprotest/?fref=ts>>.

In December 2014, The APC Mobilization for Change and NGADP designed and circulated a graphic image captioned: "Action against PDP Rigging Election 2015." In a flow chat-kind-of model, the picture urges: "Threat identified. Take picture. Video evidence. Raise alarm. Report to APC locality leaders and share on Facebook" (Awolowo 2014). It was accompanied by the short description of an incident considered disturbing by members. It states that members of the PDP in Yobe State were collecting the details of people's voter's cards. Questioning the motive behind such action, it is read by APC Mobilization for Change and NGADP as a strategy to rig the gubernatorial election in the state. The so-called evidentiary power of photography would be used to address the concern. Individuals were to use the camera to photograph or video incidents of electoral crime. They would "raise alarm" by reporting the crime and sharing the visuals on Facebook. The image would serve as "evidence" against the perpetrator(s).

The power of the camera "to see and record; (the) power of surveillance that affects a complete reversal of political axis of representation" does not exclusively belong to the state, as John Tagg (1988: 259) would suggest. Ordinary Nigerians who use the cyber platforms for activist purposes believe that they have some agency: the power to observe with the camera the very process that ultimately determines their living conditions. Granted, it is the institutional framework—the electoral body in this context—that "guarantee(s) the authority of the image [...] to stand as evidence or register a truth." That process cannot take place in the absence of the image. The Nigerian Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) can only cancel an election if there is a proof of malpractice. The image constitutes such "evidence" which the activists could present, should Jonathan's party commit electoral fraud. All these mobilisations were intended to reduce PDP's chances of emerging victorious in the 2015 presidential election. In the end, PDP lost to APC whose member, Mohammadu Buhari, became president.

The use of photography and social media in the above-discussed mobilisations is a possibility that came with the emergence of digital infrastructure, the Internet, and societal circumstances that motivated their deployment. While APC employed visual production on Facebook in pursuit of its ambition to take over power from PDP, Goodluck Jonathan took Facebook as a platform on which he could connect with Nigerians to get a sense of their take on national issues. Hillingsworth and Kemedi (2015: 159) describe Jonathan as "the Facebook President," who employed social media as "a means to monitor national sentiment". However, many Nigerians instead used the opportunity to scorn him, calling him a failure (Ogundimu 2013). Jonathan became "the

most cursed President ever on Facebook” (Ogunjimi 2013). This struggle complex would not have been possible a couple of decades ago.

In the 1990s, the Internet came to Nigeria with services limited to the basics, such as email communication. In the latter part of the decade, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) brought Wireless Fidelity (WIFI) and dial-up connections. These were followed by the advent of Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) technology in the 2000s. This came with voice telephony services, but later began to offer Internet packages. The same decade saw the proliferation of camera devices (including camera phones) and image-hosting websites (such as Flickr and Facebook). As ownership of camera phones expanded in Nigeria, it also meant possession of “phone-cum-camera-cum-computer” that is at times Internet-ready (Shanks & Svabo 2014: 234).

With these, Nigerians would join in the practice of Facebook activism that began in the late 2000s. When Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook as “Thefacebook” in February 2004, it only supported the networking of Harvard University students. A couple of years later, Facebook became accessible to the public and was deployed to mobilise protest in Egypt (2008), Moldova (2009), and in the historic “Arab Spring” of 2011. In 2012, Facebook was important in the organising, enactment and dissemination of information about the Occupy Nigeria protest that broke out as a response to the removal of fuel subsidy by the Goodluck Jonathan administration. Since then, Facebook activism has remained strong in Nigeria, and its related use of photography asks us to think differently about the idea of photography and how it is produced and disseminated.

Consider circulation first. Photographs and videos of the National Assembly conflict appeared in the public domain through various channels and networks. The channels included social media sites and conventional media such as print and online newspapers, in addition to television channels. It is well to note that all these platforms are interconnected. In the circulation of media contents—written words, photographs, videos, animations, and voice recordings—the line separating a television channel and a social media platform, for instance, is but a click of the button. The video illustrated above is the production of Channels Television, Lagos, which was shared on Facebook where many more Nigerians were able to view and engage in the interaction around it.

Secondly, the political use of photographs, as demonstrated in this essay, challenges the stable notion of photography (in opposition to film) as the production of still images with the use of the conventional camera. My methodological decision to freeze a video frame and read it as a photograph is informed by the direction already taken by the Nigerian digital visual culture. Besides

the still photograph as we have always known it, Nigerians treat video stills as photographs, and indeed, technically that is what they are. Historically and technically, cinema emerged from photography following late nineteenth century experiments to create the illusion of motion with still images. Facebook is replete with images which are actually frames grabbed from videos of important events originally circulated on other media platforms.

The other kind of image—screenshot—is also a photograph in technical terms. It is taken through actual shooting of the screen of the device by itself. On Facebook and other social media websites, Nigerians circulate screenshots of web contents such as tweets and other Facebook posts which may be composed of typographical or pictorial signs, or both. Video still and screenshot are taken through the same process of grabbing what is displayed on the screen of the digital viewing device. Yet while a video still is the photograph of another originally experienced in motion, I use screenshot to refer to anything other than a playing video photographed by the device on which it is displayed.

The various kinds of images—conventional still photographs, videos, video stills, and screenshots—brought the National Assembly melee to public view on different platforms. The incident and its critique reflect larger political conflict in Nigeria, including insurgency and political corruption for instance.

Beasts in Politics

Ariella Azoulay's formulation about how the photographic image constitutes a site of interaction among many individuals is crucial in the reading of the visual practices that emerged with the National Assembly melee. Azoulay proposes two ways to understand the eventness of photography. Whereas, "the photographed event" is what is seen depicted within the frame, "the event of photography" is the infinite series of encounters that ensue in relation to the image, or the camera (Azoulay 2012: 21). Hence, a photograph is a transaction, one which involves the photographer, the photographed, the various groups of viewers who bring their own ways of seeing to bear on the image, and all those who would work with it in different contexts.

The implication of that theory is even more profound in the digital age with its numerous imaging possibilities. Image applications or "apps," allow the working of photographs in a variety of ways on digital devices. Social media platforms support different ways of circulating photographs and bringing users to interact around them. Martin Hand writes about commenting—one of the ways people are brought together on account of the photograph: "Photos become vehicles for often elaborate conversations about their meaning, their

significance and, most importantly, their contested nature as a reflection or representation of a person or event” (Hand 2012: 180). Conversation over the meaning of photographs on social media, especially Facebook, has remained strong in Nigeria since 2012.

It is important to think more critically about the photographic image in relation to Facebook conversation. The photograph can double as the original post that elicits comments from users, and a comment in its own right. In another instance, the stream of comments on the video of the National Assembly commotion posted on the Abiyamọ Facebook page include photographic collages that show how Nigerians make sense of the competitive politics played by the Nigerian state officials.

FIG. 3. — PICTORIAL COMMENT ON THE CHANNELS TELEVISION VIDEO
ON THE CHAOS IN THE NIGERIAN PARLIAMENT (20 NOVEMBER 2014)
SHARED ON FACEBOOK BY ABIYAMỌ

Source: Facebook, 20 November 2014, posted by Muyinat Babatunde, with no additional text, <<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=638551976255389>>. Retrieved: 20 November, 2014.

In one such collage, different moments in the episode at the Parliament are frozen, organised in four panels, and labelled “now.” They are placed as a group in juxtaposition with the photograph of uniformed school children climbing a high wall (fig. 3). Despite the poor resolution of the image, it resonates with a striking parallelism. As a rhetorical device, parallelism

supports an argument by searching out similar semiotic codes and threading them together. If there is “parallelism of sound, syntax, and semantics [that] can epitomize an arguer’s claim that multiple instances belong to the same grouping,” then there is visual parallelism (Fahnestock 2003: 125).

It is clearly inscribed in the collage (fig. 3): the inscriptions, “before” and “now,” adults and children climbing, the similarity of figural pose between the two groups of images. This visual rendering allows a particular critique of power frictions in Nigeria. In the inordinate quest for power, the Nigerian government officials can display childish inanities. They make thoughtless decisions that have devastating effects on the socio-political and economic life of millions of Nigerians.

As the conversation unfolds on social media, there emerges another reading, one that expresses frustration more strongly than the question of childishness. A comment on the video reads: “Nigeria is a disgrace, sometimes I am ashamed to say I am from dat country a place where d leaders behave like animals [*sic*]” (Iyamu 2014). The Nigerian political elites exchange verbal abuse, punches, slaps and engage in outright fighting.

Digital photography with the interpersonal relations that cohere around it has transformed the public critique of the elite power struggle. Multitudes of Nigerians who are interconnected on Facebook see the photographic practices on the platform as political acts. They combine photographs in highly expressive manner, circulate and interact around them online. These processes allow them to challenge the rivalry that dominates the country’s political space. As shown in the section that follows, this situation raises questions about democracy, a political system which the citizens expected to salvage Nigeria from the deplorable conditions occasioned by long period of military rule.

“Democracy” — The Nigerian Democracy

As the images of the violent encounter examined in this paper travelled across Facebook pages, one recurrent theme of the comments they generated relates to the question of democracy in Nigeria. Whereas some of the comments appear in interrogative form such as: “Is this really democracy?” (Yarema 2014), others are assertive: “This is actually called ‘democracy’” (Kamfut 2014). There are even remarks such as: “the government of the thugs by the thugs and for the thugs” (Adeosun-Oladimeji 2014) and a “*coup* against democracy” (Olawale 2014). These expressions do not merely remind us that the pandemonium being analysed here occurred in a democratic setup. They index the sense of disillusionment, which is fast overtaking the hope for socio-economic and political change that attended the long struggle to establish democracy in

Nigeria and other parts of Africa. One recurring explanation of Nigeria's failure as a state is that, since independence in 1960, military interruptions have not allowed democracy to take root. By 2014, the current phase of democratic government (the fourth republic which began in 1999) had lasted for one and a half decades, making it the longest of the four republican governments in the history of Nigeria.¹²

At the outset, the political elites developed new vocabulary as epitomised by such formulations as “nascent democracy” and “democratic experimentation,” that allowed them to downplay the enormity of the failures of democracy under their power. The consistent increase in political violence, insurgency, fraud, and elite competition for power in the fifteen years of uninterrupted democracy in Nigeria leaves majority of the citizens in doubt as to whether democracy would transform the nation as they expected. But the conviction in the transformative power of a system of government that has engendered much violence calls up Allen Feldman's reading of ruminations on democracy by Foucault, Derrida, Lefort, and Castoriadis. While democracy claims “political immanence” and to be driven by transparency, it is constituted of “self-emptiness” and inherently violent (Feldman 2015: 69). Feldman in fact asserts that democracy originates from negativity, a point corroborated by Bruno Latour (2005: 14) who establishes an etymological link between democracy and demon:

They share the same Indo-European root *da*—to divide. If the demon is such a terrible threat, it's because it divides in two. If the *demos* is such a welcome solution, it's because it also divides in two. A paradox? No, it's because we ourselves are so divided by so many contradictory attachments that we have to assemble.

The contradictions that divide Nigeria are indeed numerous: ethnic identity, ties of kindred, distribution of material resources, political affiliation, language, religion, education, and many more. Part of the dominant language of politics in Nigeria is that these differences are the source of our strength and must be harnessed for socio-economic development. Nonetheless, in practice, they breed conflicts expressed in the form of hate speech, media war, insurgency, killings, and the elite struggle for political positions, as demonstrated herein.

12. The first republic, which began in 1960, was disrupted in its sixth year (1966). And while the second republic was overthrown after four years (1979-1983), the third lasted for only three months (August-November 1993).

FIG. 4. — PICTORIAL COMMENT ON THE SCANNNEWS' POST
ON THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FRACAS

Source: Facebook, 22 November 2014, with the heading, “PDP calls for full investigation of fracas in National Assembly,” <https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=781371411924711&id=378378918890631>. Retrieval date: 22 November, 2014.

Let us turn to how the use of photography connects to the question of *democracy*—the Nigerian democracy, a formulation that demonstrates what can be called “nigerianisation of things.” It is a normal practice for Nigerians to use “Nigeria” as a modifier to describe the poor state of socio-political and economic conditions in the country. Such descriptive tags include: Nigerian road, Nigerian police, Nigerian educational system, Nigerian hospital, and so on. Photography allows the citizenry to express its sense of despair about democracy.

In the stream of comments elicited on Facebook by the video of the National Assembly pandemonium, we see a collage of three photographs in which different portraits of a particular man appear (fig. 4). In the image above, the man is seated in the foreground, amidst green-coloured seats that lay

unoccupied up to the middle ground. On the lower left, he is fully dressed in suit and is atop a metal gate trying to scale over it. The last image shows him in an election campaign poster revealing his name as Kawu Sumaila, who aspires for governorship position (in Kano State). The logo of his party (APC) appears on the top centre and beside it is the inscription “Right Choice 2015.”

As also shown in figure 4, the picture in which Kawu attempts to scale the fence is a moment in the National Assembly chaos. Kawu’s self-exertion apparently in combination with the effect of the police teargas takes a heavy toll on him. He partially undresses himself and sits away from the cluster of people to recuperate once he makes it into the interior of the lower chamber of the Parliament which is furnished with seats whose green colour differentiates them from those of the House of Senate made in red. The collage under analysis here has been widely circulated online, but there is a variation in the inscription that horizontally runs across it. The earliest form of the picture has “Governorship aspirant” inscribed on it and appeared simultaneously on different websites on 26 November 2014. For instance, on that day, it was posted on Gistmania (a locally popular social media platform) by one of its users, Olavavage.¹³ In this one (fig. 4), we see “Hope for Nigeria,” a sarcastic rendering of what the photograph portrays about the Nigerian democracy.

It allows us to use Kawu’s example to ponder the quest by the Nigerian political elites to maintain their power in a democracy. At the time of the National Assembly squabble, Kawu was serving the last part of his third term in the House of Representatives. He served consecutively in 2003-2007, 2007-2011, and 2011-2015. In the last two tenures, he held the position of Deputy Minority Leader, but as Thomas Hobbes (1651: 61) has underscored, there is “a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power [...]”. By 20 November, it had been publicised through posters and other media that Kawu would contest for the gubernatorial position in Kano, his home state. Across social media platforms on which Kawu’s photographs circulated, he was denigrated as the “gate jumper” contesting for the position of governor (which he did not eventually secure), and a microcosm of the hooliganism that constitute the Nigerian democratic governments. But for Kawu’s fellow politicians, he is the preferred player—one who fights for the interest of his party. It is little wonder that Governor Rabiul Kwankwaso of Kano State commended Kawu for his “efforts” at the Parliament. Again, in August 2015, President Mohammadu Buhari appointed Kawu as his Senior Special Adviser on National Assembly Matters (House of Representatives). Evidently,

13. For the complete post, see <<http://www.gistmania.com/talk/?action=profile;u=906042;-sa=showPosts>>.

the inscription on the group of photographs examined in this section suggests that there is no hope for Nigeria as long as such political indecencies persist.

Digital photography with its malleability, online circulation, and ensuing transaction of subtexts allow multitudes of Nigerians to express their ways of seeing the elite struggle for power in relation to democracy. They define a Nigerian version of democracy called *democracy*—one dominated by thugs. The photographic image becomes a means through which the masses express their growing sense of disillusionment with a pseudo-democratic arrangement, for its failure to bring transformation where the repudiated military rule failed.

The pandemonium that broke out at the lower house of the Nigerian Parliament on 20 November 2014 allows us to explore two overlapping kinds of struggle that define the Nigerian post-independence political history. On one hand, political elites aggressively strive to maintain their privileged positions. On the other hand, multitudes of Nigerians who are outside the circuit of state authorities condemn the power tussle, and photography is central to this struggle complex. Ordinary citizens follow the events that reflect the elite power tussle as especially represented in videos and still photographs. Rather than view the images passively, they actively engage with them in a variety of ways. They circulate the images *via* Facebook and other social media platforms and participate in conversations around them by adding their thoughts and comments. They combine the photographs to create picture collages and add other photos produced in other contexts, locations and times, an approach predicated on the idea of *montage*.

The state officials are motivated by self-interest and, in turn, driven by the general perception of the African “post-colonial state [...] as a repository of resources” to which political power provides easy access (Eyoh 1998: 341). The democratic setup in which these circumstances thrive has been given a popular definition: *democracy*. Embedded in this formulation is the feeling of despair demonstrated by the citizens regarding the state of Nigerian democracy, criticised and satirised, yet sincerely bemoaned. The creative use of social media, dependent on sharing images, reworking, editing and republishing these online, indicates a new democratic process in progress, one in which the Web. 3.0 masses expect the current civilian government to restructure or remedy the damage done by decades of military insurrection in Nigeria and respond constructively to popular criticism.

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ABSTRACT

On 20 November 2014, a violent melee broke out among the parliamentarians on the premises of the National Assembly in Nigeria. It was an inter-party confrontation that demonstrated the elites' struggle for power, not necessarily unprecedented in the country's post-independence political history since 1960. What is fascinating about this particular case is its connection with a new social and visual culture driven by digital infrastructure. The videos and still photographs of the encounter, and other images derived from these, went viral online and became visible sites of interpersonal exchange. I tracked the visual production on Facebook, the platform that allowed the most compelling form of interaction around the images. In this essay, I deploy semiotic analytical tools to examine a selection of the images and their accompanying comments. I demonstrate that digital photography and its structures of image editing, circulation, and construction of meaning allow the subjects of Nigerian government to criticise the struggle for power among state functionaries. The power tussle and its critique produce a struggle complex that casts light on the broader political conflict in Nigeria and the growing sense of despair towards the failed Nigerian postcolonial democracy. This argument enhances our understanding of how digital photography brings "ordinary" citizens to the centre of discussions of African political issues and enables them to challenge the dominant state power. I consider the intersection of new media and the theorisation of photography as a site of politics and interpersonal relations.

Keywords: Nigeria, democracy, Facebook, photography, political violence, power tussle, struggle.

RÉSUMÉ

Le Complexe de lutte : Facebook, critique visuelle et la querelle pour le pouvoir politique au Nigéria. — Le 20 novembre 2014, une violente bagarre éclata parmi les représentants de l'Assemblée nationale au Nigéria. La confrontation entre les partis, qui illustre la lutte des élites pour le pouvoir, n'est pas nécessairement sans précédent dans l'histoire politique depuis l'indépendance en 1960. Mais ce qui est fascinant dans ce cas particulier, est sa connexion avec la nouvelle culture sociale et visuelle impulsée par l'infrastructure numérique. Les vidéos et photographies de l'événement, ainsi que d'autres images dérivées de celles-ci, se diffusèrent en ligne, de manière « virale » en devenant des sites visibles d'échanges interpersonnels. J'ai suivi la production visuelle sur Facebook, la plateforme qui permettait de sonder l'interaction la plus vive autour de ces images. Dans cet article, j'utilise des outils analytiques de la sémiotique afin d'examiner une sélection d'images et leurs commentaires connexes. Je démontre que la photographie numérique et ses capacités de structuration, notamment par le montage des images, la diffusion et la construction de leur signification, permettent aux sujets de l'État nigérien de critiquer la lutte pour le pouvoir chez les fonctionnaires. Les luttes de pouvoir et leur critique produisent un complexe de lutte qui apporte un éclairage sur les conflits politiques plus étendus au Nigéria ainsi que sur le sentiment grandissant de désespoir vis-à-vis de la démocratie postcoloniale nigérienne. Cet argument permet de mieux comprendre comment la photographie numérique fait entrer des citoyens « ordinaires » dans les discussions politiques en Afrique et leur permet de contester le pouvoir d'État dominant. Je considère l'intersection des nouveaux médias et de la théorisation de la photographie comme lieu de politique et de relations interpersonnelles.

Mots-clés : Nigéria, démocratie, Facebook, lutte, lutte de pouvoir, photographie, violence politique.