Exalted Faces and Awkward Bodies:
'Third Wave' of Protests in Africa, Political Imaginations and Global Sociology

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Image 1

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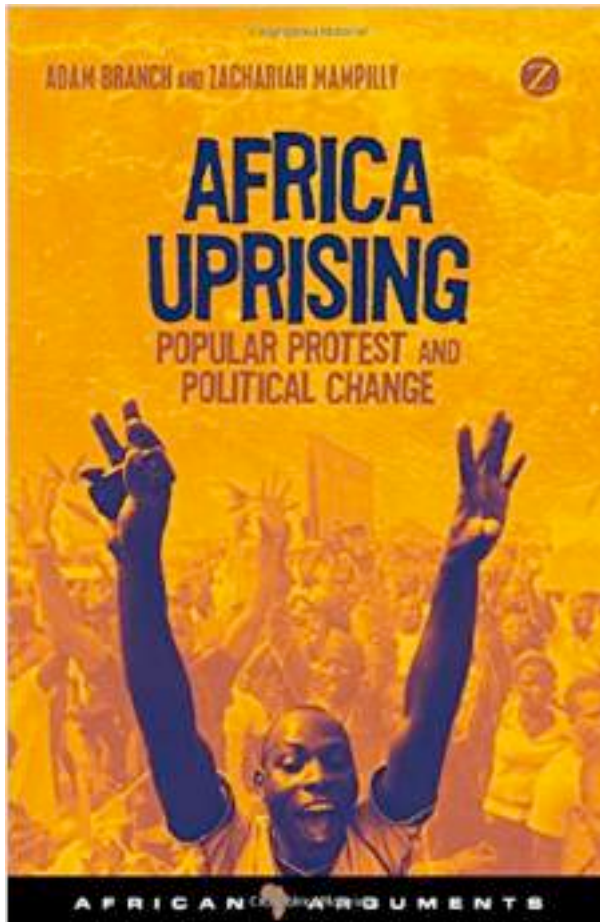
Image 2

I begin this essay with three images of the 2012 Occupy Nigeria movement. The Nigerian photojournalist Akintunde Akinleye took the first picture that initially appeared in the Telegraph's January 11, 2012 report on the protests that had spread across the country following the government's very unpopular move to remove fuel subsidies. In the week following the fuel subsidy removal Nigeria saw a national strike as protests on the streets of many towns and cities movement also intensified. This particular photograph was taken in Egbeda near Lagos on the third day of the protests.[2] The Telegraph report accompanying the photograph began with the headline, "Protesting youths on rampage in Nigerian north." It listed events of the last few days: "tens of thousands" protesting across the country, public anger over bad governance and

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[2] Special thanks to George Agbo for helping me trace the image and for sharing his own insights on the Occupy Nigeria movement, and to Akinleye for sharing more information about it.

corruption, violence in some places and, according to one minister, the looming threat of "anarchy" in Nigeria.[3]

Recently a version of Akinleye's photograph appeared on the cover of Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly's important new book, *Africa Uprising* (2015) on the so-called third wave of popular urban protests in many parts of the continent. In the foreground of this second image is the same anonymous young man with an excited even triumphant face, fairly muscular outstretched arms holding a cellphone. In the background is the small crowd holding some placards, but this time shaded in spectacular orange.

The third image I want to draw attention towards is of the acclaimed Nigerian artist, Jelili Atiku, in a performance on the streets of his hometown Ejigbo on January 13, 2012 at the height of the Occupy Nigeria movement. Here we see Atiku wandering on the streets of his agrarian market town with a population of a little over a million people wrapped in green and white of the Nigerian flag with hand-made signs emerging out of his awkwardly rambling body. Curious bystanders look on, some taking pictures from their cell phone cameras. The approximately 15-16 posters jutting out of Atiku's body exhort (one assumes, the Nigerian government and governing elite) to "Ensure stable power supply"; "Build our Roads,"; " Don't inflict more hardship on us"; "Improve Governance and Improve Nigeria"; to "Stop Inflicting Suffering on Us"; to "Remove the Problem of Education" and "Increase Refining Capacity" amongst many other things.

However before saying more about Atiku's performance let me return to Akinleye's photograph and it's re-worked book cover version. I have provided several details about when and where Akinleye took the picture of the youth in the midst of an energized crowd, with an exalted face, arms in the air, and cellphone in hand; at the same time we know that many parts of the continent and the world have witnessed collective action with considerable youth participation in the last decade. Hence a picture like this could be from a number of such places; furthermore if we ignore the cellphone in the hands of the young man in the image, then the photograph could even belong to previous decades and other places in 20th c. Africa and elsewhere that have witnessed mass action and popular protests.

But to stay for now with the recent popular protests in parts of Africa, and Branch and Mampilly's book about it: their analysis of the protests suggests that the young man on the cover of their book excitedly holding up his arms during the Occupy Nigeria protests might not be so anonymous after all. It is likely that he is a member of the vast informal sector, or the unemployed or the underemployed "urban underclass" that has, according to the two authors, been a key protagonist of this latest 'third wave' of protests and many other previous instances of collective action in various parts of Africa.[4] To elaborate on the nature of this so-called underclass and its role in recent and past protests, Branch and Mampilly turn to Fanon's writings on the 'lumpenproletariat;' they also go on to describe the urban underclass as member of, what they call, the African 'political society.'

Political society is of course a term that they deploy following Partha Chatterjee's well-known elaboration of it. All three terms—lumpenproletariat, urban underclass and political society have different lineages and cannot be reduced to one another. At the

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[3] The Telegraph, January 11, 2012, first accessed August 14 2015.
[4] Genealogy of the term

same time they evoke different aspects of one another and appear in Branch and Mampilly's rendition as interconnected. These echoes and connections invite us to examine thicker histories and reflect on the role of members of the so-called urban underclass, the urban marginals and the lumpenproletariat in popular and street politics in parts of Africa. I turn especially to writings on the urban marginals and the lumpen youth in parts of West Africa, and the political possibilities and anxieties that have been associated with them. In the backdrop of these histories and ethnographies I ask the following question: if the young man with the exalted face in Akinleye's photograph and Branch and Mampilly's book cover represents the rebellious "underclass" that has been an important protagonist of many popular protests on the continent, how do we understand the figure in the third image?

This third image is Atiku's awkward wandering performer imprinted by and overburdened with numerous demands ranging from better roads, education, jobs and the call for re-instituting the fuel subsidy amongst other things? Is Atiku's unwieldy awkward figure an antithesis of Akinleye's protagonist—the muscular, well-toned young man with an excited face and arms raised? What kinds of politics do the two represent; could they both be aspects of the same set of political possibilities that members of political society, the urban underclass, and the lumpenproletariat enact? What is gained when we attend not only to Akinleye's young man but also to the politics that Atiku, the clumsy performer, iterates? These are some questions that I will seek to answer in this paper.

The resources that I draw on to lay the context for these questions and offer some answers consist not only of research on the urban marginals and lumpenproletariat in West Africa and on the politics of the informal but also another set of seemingly eclectic writings, namely Ajay Skaria's writings on Gandhi's critique of modern political systems (2011; 2014) and Leela Gandhi's work on ethics of commonness in anti-colonial practices (2011; 2014). I do so in the wake of calls for a global sociology and scholarship that not only relates apparently disparate histories, spaces, ideas and practices but also 'connects to reconstruct' the conceptual tools we use to think with about them (Bhambra 2014). This article is then an attempt to reconstruct the ways in which we think about political imaginations that underlie protest politics in various parts of Africa today and the democratic dispositions we might glean from them. As noted above I do so by paying particular attention to the figure and role of the lumpen youth and urban marginal in various protests in West Africa, everyday politics of the informal world, and in that backdrop I turn to Atiku's awkward, swaddled and overburdened figure.

Analysis and Politics; Gains and Failures

Analytical gains that might accrue as we pay attention to different protesting figures are closely tied with the ways in which we understand the political gains and losses of the protests and events that they were a part of. Thinking about the recent popular protests in parts of Africa, it becomes important to note that according to various commentators both the Occupy Nigeria movement, as well as a number of so-called third-wave of African protests, have failed.[5] Branch and Mampilly also acknowledge that public protests in Africa in the last decade have not brought desired levels and forms of change in state policies and institutions; like many others they note how a political

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[5] Note on the failure of Occupy Nigeria and then others.

'winter' has followed the 'Arab spring' (2015: 5). Callous regimes and authoritarian practices persist in many African polities inspite of spectacular and popular displays of dissent. In countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, Uganda and Sudan, which they focus on, protesters have faced the onslaught of repressive states or been rendered ineffectual due to factional squabbles (2015: 5-6).

However there are other ways of measuring political successes and failures that focus less on regime and even institutional changes but more on what, drawing on the distinguished Nigerian scholar Claude Ake, Branch and Mampilly call "political consciousness and imagination" (2015: 7). Branch and Mampilly take their cue from Ake to make the important point that measures of change and democratization that focus largely on institutional developments fail to grasp the importance of popular political movements. Ake, they note, "refused to measure Africa's progress according to formal indices of democracy." Instead he regarded popular protests as "a mechanism through which Africa's people can achieve self-realization by inventing new visions of democracy and development" (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 6). Imagination, consciousness, new visions and democratic self-realizations become the key terms here.

In his incisive 1996 treatise on *Democracy and Development in Africa,* Ake anchored these new visions and the self-realizations they promise on popular participation in sovereignty of the state and it's political and developmental processes rather than the trappings of liberal multiparty democracy (1996: 130-141).[6] The "crude" simplistic formula of democracy as multiparty elections has, as Ake points out, not served Africa well (Ake 1996: 30). It is true that end of one person/party rule was the rallying cry in countries ranging from Senegal, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, to Zaire, Zambia and Kenya in the 1980s and 1990s; more recently in places such as Burkina Faso and Burundi too the end of one person-one party regimes and calls for effective political democracy have been important triggers of widespread popular uprisings. But contained therein, as Ake might say, has been the hope and aspiration for 'real' participation in decision-making over and above the formal availability of electoral options (1996: 132).

Indeed, notes Ake, when grassroots organizations of the continent have come together as they did in Arusha, Tanzania in 1990, theorized their own politics and produced a document such as the *African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation,* "involvement of all" in "popular-based political processes" has been the grounding idea as well as the slogan of choice (cited in Ake 1996: 134). The charter evocatively affirms that, "nations cannot be built without the popular support and full participation of the people" (cited in Ake 1996: 138). Drawing on it, Ake reminds us of the possibilities of self-realization that collective actions create as they generate a sense that 'the people' might be able to effectively partake in the sovereignty of the state.

On their part, Branch and Mampilly give a similar account of the place of related visions and aspirations in popular protests that have taken place in post-colonial Africa in the 1980s, 1990s and now in the 2000s (2015: 40-85). In the late 1980s and early 1990s popular protests took place in nearly two-third of the African states; more recently protests have occurred in approximately forty African countries between 2005-2014. Economic decline especially exacerbated by the debt crisis of the 1970s, and the dismantling of the state structure and services on the heels of the structural adjustment

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[6] Ake on Pg 30 of Dev and Demo: "liberal demo at it's best inimical to popular power…"

programs of the 1980s, hit the populace in many African states hard. It is in this backdrop that the 'second wave of protests' occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Similarly the protests in the 2000s have occurred in the wake of increased economic precariousness, rising food prices and a growth model that fails to generate adequate employment. On the political front, authoritarian regimes and violent state power were at work in the 1970s and 1980s, and have also marked life in many countries that have seen the protests in the 1990s and 2000s (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 73, 78).

Protests in the 1980s and 1990s brought together multiple actors ranging from members of political parties, labour unions, university students, unemployed and underemployed youth and squatters who form a vast 'urban underclass' (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 48-52). The 2000s have seen another configuration of actors with protesters demanding better social services, infrastructure, seeking to further relations of patronage, opposing fuel and food prices or raising grievances against stubborn and obdurate regimes. In each instance though, according to Branch and Mampilly, something else and something more has been at work (2015: 73-81).

They highlight that something more and something else when drawing on Ifi Amadiume (1995) and Kathryn Nwajiaku's (1994) work they note how for many actors involved in the protests change might mean not just reforming the state or seeking better networks of redistribution but safeguarding their groups' autonomy and "subverting, by-passing, and/or even openly attacking" state power (Nwajiaku cited in Branch and Mampilly 2015: 52). Distinguishing between localized protests and general uprisings that the continent has seen since 2005, Branch and Mampilly observe how the latter have posed challenges to "the very parameters and foundations of social and political order…." In some instances protesters have envisaged "nothing less than the overthrow of postcolonial power and its attendant grip on social, cultural, and economic life as a whole—to make the last the first as Fanon says" (2015: 81).

Fanon's famous words: "The last shall be the first and the first last" (2007: 3) that announced his aspirations for decolonization thus serve as terms with which together with Branch and Mampilly, as well as other scholars such as Ake, Al-Burushi (2012), Nwajiaku (1994) and Zeilig (2012) amongst others, we might grasp the possibilities and aspirations contained in popular protests seen in many postcolonial African states. If Fanon's hope and the desires for decolonization that he detected amongst the continent's anti-colonial protesters several decades ago was for a change in the "whole social structure… from the bottom up" (Fanon 1963: 35-6; Branch and Mampilly 2015: 32), the recent protests have also iterated hopes for vital basic changes in the very character of many African societies and polities (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 78-83).

We might offer this argument about the protests without ignoring their complicated nature and without discounting the fact that the protesters have articulated a range of diverse and even conflicting demands. This is a point that Branch and Mampilly emphasize as they describe how in some instances concerns and political impulses of the various participants in the protests—political parties, civil society groups, labour unions, small traders, unions of the unemployed, underemployed and the urban underclass—have converged and coalesced, and at other times they have fragmented (2015: 73-84). And yet, Branch and Mampilly surmise, contained therein have also been demands for "total

and immediate change" (2015: 207).

Political Society, its Agency and Agents

What Branch and Mampilly describe here is a particular kind of agentive moment and agency especially embodied in the actions of those who make up African political society. As noted above Chatterjee's well-known formulation of political society is a key resource for Branch and Mampilly as they reflect on its character in the African continent. Chatterjee describes political society as the antithesis of the ideal typical space of civil society. Members of the latter conform to a liberal constitutional visage of rights bearing citizens who possess the social capital necessary to undertake negotiations with the state, individually or as members of rule bound associations. In the sphere of political society are those who push and breach those rules to make themselves heard; they make loud, obtrusive and often violent demands for welfare and well-being and/or strategically use illegality and coercion to make governmental claims on the state (Chatterjee 2002).

According to Branch and Mampilly here lies an important distinction between Chatterjee's formulation and their mobilization of the term. Chatterjee's close engagement with the Indian context and the history of the Indian state especially inform his rendering of political society whose members, according to him, are constituted by and entwined with it's powers to make and sustain groups as governmental categories dependent on entitlements and assistance. They include a range of people—from those living in shantytowns in urban India to others in smaller towns and peri-urban areas, from caste and tribal groups making vociferous demands for affirmative action, to regional communities seeking to carve out separate territorial and administrative unities (Chatterjee 2002). The key protagonists of the third wave of popular protests in Africa and those who, according to Branch and Mampilly, make up it's political society are especially the urban underclass whose relationship to the state is marked less by expectation of entitlements and more by state neglect and violence (2015: 20-1).

Informality, illiberal politics and illegality marks the lives of these urban unemployed, underemployed, and informal traders and workers as does state coercion and constant forceful contests with the state (2015: 21). This very economic precariousness, vulnerability to state power and confrontations with direct force also makes the urban underclass of the African postcolony akin, Branch and Mampilly tell us, to Fanon's "most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people" or the lumpenproletariat (Branch and Mampilly 32). "You may kick them and throw stones at them," wrote Fanon, "but despite your efforts, they will go on gnawing at the roots of the (colonial) tree" (Fanon 1963:103).

The postcolonial African context, especially the protests of the 1980s and 1990s in West Africa, have produced a new set of compelling analyses about the political role and agency of lumpen youth and the lumpenproletariat (Abdullah 1998; Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999; Diouf 1996). Abubakar Momoh's observations are apposite here: Writing about the role that so-called *Area Boys* and girls played in the Campaign for Democracy (CD) and the United Action for Democracy movement against the Nigerian military regime through the 1990s, Momoh argues that "the struggle for democracy has been

falling on emerging social categories that ordinarily qualify as 'miscreants', 'hoodlums', 'hooligans', déclassé and the lumpenproletariat" (2003:183). According to Momoh while their economic deprivation makes these groups unstable and fickle about their political choices, such groups of "street parliamentarians" (2003: 183) can in fact be turned into effective "vanguards of democracy" (Momoh 2003:184).

Like Ake, the democratic form Momoh hails and believes the lumpenproletariat can contribute towards is the participatory kind—born of popular struggles and protests—that offers the possibility for 'full participation' in economic and political processes (to use the African Charter of Popular Participation's words). On a more existential register, we might say with Fanon that it is one where the last has become the first. As the possibility of full participation starts to flicker on the horizon, as it starts to seem that the last may become the first and the first the last, we might also speak of an "interruption in the order of things" or "the breached moment of secondness" (Daniel 1999: 3082 of 4049) when existing habits, patterns and ways of being in the world are jolted and exposed as inadequate.[7] In that instance, the possibility of change in reified institutional, collective and individual ways, habits and structures might start to emerge. It is such an interruption marked by the possibility of change (1999: 3076 of 4049) that drawing on the anthropologist E. Valentine Daniel's writings, I describe as agentive.

A politically agentive moment was underway and, in Rancierian terms, a politics of equals has been on display during popular protests in many parts of Africa when these breaches in the order of things challenged existing institutional hierarchies and unequal ways of being in the world. (Ranciere1999). The social order has appeared "plastic" (Kaviraj 2000: 154) and the naturalness associated with unequal orders seemed questionable in that disruptive moment when, for instance members of the urban marginals, that is those who have been placeless, disidentified with their given location and role, and staged their aspiration to equality. We might then pause and look at Akinleye's photograph and the young man in the foreground as one amongst many agents who breach and interrupt hierarchical orders and stage a demos that discovers, seeks to iterate and verify it's equality.[8] Other moments—for instance—when a protester in Lagos while rapidly and energetically keeping step with other protesters on a broad avenue turned to the camera held by a journalist and assertively screamed 'We are the Government, we are the people' another iteration of equality occurred; here the demos recognized and realized itself, and articulated that continuity between the populace and the government that many like Ake and participants in the Arusha African grassroots organizations meeting have hailed as a key democratic ideal.

Branch and Mampilly's description of not just the Occupy Nigeria protests of 2012 but also other third wave of protests in places such Uganda and Ethiopia in the last ten years resonate with this interpretation. They describe the ways in which raging hopes, passionate protests, forceful spectacular demonstrations as well as violence of the urban underclass have played a crucial role in staging a veritable general uprising in all three places. In each instance the constituents of this political society have been similar yet diverse—the unemployed, the underemployed, mini bus taxi and boda-boda drivers, conductors and petty traders often living in urban slums and making up that category of

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[7] Firstness, secondness, thirdness.
[8] Ranciere

people who the Ethiopian state described as "dangerous hoodlums" (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 159-64). While their religious and ethnic affiliations, nature of relationship with the rural hinterland and party structures, and form of residence in urban areas have diverged, the grounds for their protests have been the shared feelings of deprivation and precariousness in the midst of high growth economic models that have failed to deliver employment and social services, and been marked by high levels of corruption and coercion. In all three instances, political society participation has enlivened and intensified the protests generating not just demands for piecemeal reforms but provoking visions of change infused with the possibility of more fundamental transformation.

And so, as Branch and Mampilly tell us, in Nigeria members of this political society became central to the messianic Save Nigeria Group's calls for profound change as well as its combative stances (2015: 103-104).[9] In Uganda where youth unemployment is 80 percent members of political society have frequently taken to the streets even in the absence of a more widespread movement. During the 2011 'Walk to Work' protests the streets of the capital city Kampala and other urban centers of Uganda became battlefields between stone pelting barricading members of its political society and a heavily militarized police force (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 128-132). Heightened "excitement and hope" and anticipation of vital political changes akin to what had recently happened in Egypt and Libya came to mark the passionate and intense street protests (2015: 134).[10] Meantime in Ethiopia anger and disillusionment of the unemployed youth, informal workers, shared taxi drivers and conductors who made up its political society, which was further activated through their informal networks, heightened the call for 'total change' (2015: 153-163).

Here too calls for fundamental change were enacted violently on the streets and in intense battles with security personnel. In Branch and Mampilly's words, "As the security crackdown intensified, so did the popular violence, with barricades of burning tyres, petrol bombs, and destruction of government property" (2015: 164). Similar protests, crackdowns and violence also took place in other urban centers of the country. Importantly, Branch and Mampilly do not interpret the violence of the protesters as an expression of uncontrolled anger or rage but as political society's mode of enacting demand for total change in dense neighborhoods. "…. Protest derived its meaning," they write, "from the popular political imagination from which they erupted, not from liberal notions of what a proper protest should look like. Violence was a performance of political agency, a direct attempt to uproot state power, within the 'moral economy' of the street and by those criminalized as 'dangerous hoodlums'" (2015: 164). In other words, according to Branch and Mampilly, such a political imagination hoped for fundamental change and the language in which this hope was iterated was violence of the so-called urban underclass, marginals and the lumpenproletariat.

Political Agents, their Histories and Refusals

Branch and Mampilly do not anchor their understanding of the underclass or the lumpenproletariat in a Marxian reading that a-historicizes the lumpen as "innately

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[9] Describe, say more.
[10] Describe, say more.

depraved" and essentially "shabby" "paltry" "rabble" (Stallybrass 1990: 70)[11]; nor do they reduce them to their sociological location and disparage the underclass for its lack of coherent ideology and political programme. Instead they emphasize the need to contextualize the urban underclass' participation in local and regional histories of protest while reflecting on their agentive propensities. The call to pay attention to these histories takes me to the work of other scholars, particularly Momoh, Ibrahim Abdullah and Mamadou Diouf, who have also written about the role of the lumpenproletariat, 'lumpen youth,' and the urban marginals in recent popular upheavals—especially in West Africa. I begin this section with Momoh's research on the *Area Boys* of Lagos who have been an important part of the urban underclass in Nigeria, and central to his analysis of contemporary Nigerian polity.

If Branch and Mampilly emphasize the role of state neglect and violence in the making of African political society, Momoh describes *Area Boys* as a "cardinal product and target" of structural violence and militarism of the postcolonial Nigerian state; moreover *Area Boys* have themselves been stigmatized as violent criminals (Momoh 2000: 197). Writing against this criminalizing trend, Momoh traces the emergence of the *Area Boys* to youth groups who came to identify with different streets of Central Lagos, who played soccer and table tennis against youth of other streets and began offering protection to it's residents from harassment (2000: 187). While various kinds of illegality and petty as well as contrived crimes characterize the many ways in which *Area Boys* survive, Momoh does not associate purposeful sharply violent practices with them. Instead he tells us that "The *Area Boys* mostly do menial jobs, such as informal guards or watchmen protecting lives and property, washing cars, serving as bus conductors, touts in garages, janitors, vendors at public buildings, market places and motor parks, retailers of drugs, servicing people and touting at market places, embassies and public offices" (2000: 193). More inventively they also "plant nails in roads to deflate tyres of motorists in order to collect illegal tolls. They dig up roads in order to cause a traffic jam (go slow) and extort money from motorists," as well as engage in, amongst other things, "responsible begging" (2000: 193).

And while for Marx writing in the wake of Napoleon Bonaparte's 1851 coup, "the lumpenproletariat, this scum of depraved elements," could only be "the worst possible of all allies," (cited in Stallybrass 1990: 88-9), 1990s Nigeria presents a more complicated picture of the political involvement of the brazenly entrepreneurial young men and women living and working in the interstices of it's large capital city. 1993 saw the emergence of the Campaign for Democracy that was seeking to reverse the annulment of the presidential elections. As Momoh tells us organized groups of *Area Boys* joined it in large numbers and played an important role in the civil disobedience movement that the Campaign had initiated. In his words, "their action went a long way to make the struggle very effective in Lagos" (2000: 198). In previous years during the anti-Structural Adjustment Program protests too *Area Boys* had effectively allied with students from the University of Lagos. In both instances incidents of looting and burning accompanied other kinds of political action and were clamped down on heavily. During the 1993 Campaign for Democracy, *Area Boys* were also recruited as bodyguards for politicians or to intimidate opponents often for a fee (Momoh 2000: 197-9).

This violent turn, amongst other things, leads Momoh to worry in this article

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[11] Say more about Marx and Engels via Stallybrass etc.

published in 2000 about "the current *lumpen* form" of the *Area Boys,* their proclivity for "spontaneity and fatalism" and the absence of sustained association with more reflexive political movements. That said, writes Momoh, "We must not dismiss…the politics of the *Area Boys….*" To quote his concluding comments:

> The social space which the *Area Boys* construct for themselves
> creates an avenue for a new mode of politics and it is a terrain that can be
> exploited for deconstructing statist and hegemonic politics based on class
> interest, as ramified and expressed in pluralist political parties and transition
> to civil rule (2000: 200).

Here as in his other writings on the *Area Boys* and girls Momoh is skeptical of traditional multiparty democratic politics; furthermore in terms that resonate with not just Ake's emphasis on political possibilities of popular politics but Fanon's reflections on how the lumpen might find "a new language and a new humanity" (Fanon 1963: 130) Momoh invokes the *Area Boys* politics' potential for "self-expression," "self-actualisation and liberation" (2000: 200).

A different picture of the role of the lumpenproletariat and the 'lumpen youth' in African polities emerges in Abdullah's writings (1998; 2006). The contexts that Abdullah draws on are also different from Momoh's Nigeria of the 1990s when *Area Boys* participated in struggles to end military rule. Abdullah, on the other hand, reflects on and writes in the wake of wars and grievous violence in Sierra Leone, Congo, Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire (2006). The lumpen youth he especially focuses on are the ones who rode into Sierra Leone's Kailahun district in 1991—not as a part of a campaign against militarism, but to set the stage for and subsequently support the military coup that took place in Freetown twelve months later (1998). Thus unlike Momoh it is not the possibilities of liberatory self-expression and actualization of a constructive anti-statist politics that he reads into the history of the lumpenproletariat in Sierra Leone; instead what he recounts is a tale of their slow descent into "terror and nihilism" (2006: 100).

At the same time it is important to note that Abdullah also does not take recourse to pervasive Marxian interpretations to account for the lumpen youth's apparent nihilism and turn to terror. Like Branch and Mampilly and Momoh, he steers clear of explanations that emphasize the lumpenproletariat's so-called inherently reactionary and regressive character;[12] on the other hand he blames the historically specific situation in which the youth in Sierra Leone found themselves in without the moorings of a "well-articulated ideology," "program for societal transformation," (2006: 110) and a "radical post-colonial alternative" (1998: 204).

Abdullah equates the latter with a strong labour movement and an effective working-class party (1998: 205-207). In other words, according to Abdullah, Cabral's déclassé or Fanon's lumpenproletariat in places such as postcolonial Sierra Leone did not stray from the radical path because they were innately reactionary but because such a path began to dissolve through the 1970s and 80s and eventually receded from the horizon of political possibilities. The demise of a "leftist tradition" in Sierra Leone (Abdullah 1998: 205) then became the condition for the lumpen youth's turn to terror, nihilism and violence.

Momoh and Abdullah's account of the lumpenproletariat and the possibilities they embody bear the mark of the specific histories they tell; at the same time there are some

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[12] Robin Cohen and Michael David 1974; Thorburn; Patnaik

similarities between their otherwise disparate evaluations of the political role of the lumpen youth and urban marginals. While Momoh describes *Area boys* and girls as 'street parliamentarians' and 'potential vanguards of democracy,' and ends one of his key articles on them on a note that emphasizes the progressive political possibilities they can help realize, Abdullah traces and nearly saturates his account with the rise of nihilistic violence amongst them. These differences aside, for both Momoh and Abdullah the lumpenproletariat's contribution to the realization of progressive or revolutionary political possibilities remains contingent on giving appropriate direction to " their narrow and limited passions and sentiments" (Momoh 2003: 184). Both of them call for these passions and sentiments to be anchored in a more sophisticated ideology and program for transformation; and while Momoh associates such a program with visions of participatory democracy, Abdullah associates it with working class leftist traditions.

Mamadou Diouf's rich history of the *Set/Setal* movement in Senegal (1996; 2005) and the place of African youth in postcolonial public culture (2003) gives us different set of lenses with which to regard and further nuance the ways in which we understand the agentive capacities of the lumpen youth and members of the urban underclass. The Set/Setal movement that emerged and coalesced in the late 1980s and through the1990s has been composed of two different group of the young: those who the Senegalese state describes as maladjusted and deviant "social marginals" made up of "products of the rural exodus, rejects from the school system, traveling merchants and beggars" (Diouf 1996: 230), and the vast number of unemployed school leavers and students whose education has been severely disrupted by the breakdowns in the school and higher education system since the 1980s. Together they have been part of groups that engaged in terrible violence on various occasions in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Diouf 1996: 238-242); at the same time these youth have also gone on to generate a range of inventive practices in urban areas that have recast and re-made everything from the physical space of neighborhoods, their streets and walls, to the nature of local memory and heritage and, with them, democratic citizenship itself (Diouf 1996; 2005).

Here it is important to note the particular tenor of Diouf's analysis of the Set/Setal movement. While acknowledging and describing its violent phases, Diouf does not see the movements' engagement in more creative acts of citizenship as contingent on its association with so-called sophisticated political programs of transformation that have or have not/might or might not direct the passions and sentiments of the young students, unemployed school leavers and social marginals.[13] It is in this way that he departs from Momoh and Abdullah's writings. Rather than evoke the importance of an "ideological base" that can "reconstitute" the lumpen youth's relationship to "the rest of civil society" (Momoh 2003: 184), Diouf emphasizes ways in which the Set/Setal's politics, repudiated and refused the trappings of not only state directed democratic institutions but also other established ideologies, party programs, and modes of doing politics (1996: 242, 247). It is this refusal that especially interests me.

In Set/Setal's case, according to Diouf, this repudiation of familiar political practices and dominant ideologies facilitated a sociality and a politics marked by "the progressive dissolution of the logics of centralization and the submission of social actors to the powers of the state" (1996: 236). As noted above such a sociality and politics can be traced through its aesthetic imprints on various neighborhoods, through the ways in

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[13] Religion has played a role but

members of the movement have organized, embellished and inhabited public spaces, the activities they have undertaken there, and the networks and associations they have formed amongst themselves.

Aesthetic imprints that the young members of the Set/Setal movement have produced on the walls of Dakar's neighborhoods signified a refusal of old ideologies and heralded new forms of sociality and politics. Jelili Atiku's performance in the Nigerian market town of Ejigbo outside Lagos towards the end of "one of the largest mass protests in the country's history" (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 87) was anchored in its own departures from familiar political practices as well as acts of protest; and through this aesthetic gesture he too presents to our senses, as Ranciere might say, the shape of a different polity and "community to come" (2004: 30). I thus return to Nigeria and Atiku's performance in the upcoming last few sections of the essay.

Occupy Nigeria, Atiku, Other Imaginations and Possibilities

As noted above, in the wake of the removal of fuel subsidies on New Year's Day 2012, protests spread beyond Lagos to many other parts of the country; the government's actions triggered an effective nationwide strike supported by organized labour. Atiku's performance in Ejigbo came towards the end of the two weeks period of intense mass action. However his overburdened, awkward figure wrapped in cloth was a far cry from typical images of protesters with raised arms, fists, excited, enthusiastic and sometimes angry faces that we are familiar with.

For a few months even before the subsidy was removed, the emerging Occupy Nigeria movement had been exhorting its followers to forsake docility, to react to the state of governance in the country much like the North Africans and people in parts of Middle East had recently, and be ready to move and "occupy" state installations.[14] Atiku's rambling figure was not docile but it was halting, faceless and overburdened— pulled in one direction by demand for better roads, in another for more jobs, and in yet another for affordable fuel and better education. Atiku thus performed the ordinary, common concerns of many as he stumbled along the streets of Ejigbo with great effort with his arms weighed down rather than raised in a clenched fist, with his face invisible, and without making any loud claims about being part of a people who are the government and the state.

Drawing on the grammar of the Yoruba practice of Egungun masquerades Atiku was writing another political script. This was a political script that in the first instance did not equate an act of political agency and resistance with assertion of sovereignty. In other words this was not an overturning of hierarchies where the one who was once minor becomes major, or for that matter the common man or woman becomes the exceptional and ascendant one. The democracy that was being heralded here was not the one where, to use Leela Gandhi's words, everyone "gets a serial shot at power for some time" (2014: 1738 of 6559). Neither was it akin to Claude Lefort's characterization of democracy as

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[14] I would once again like to thank George Agbo for drawing attention to these early exhortations of the movement. Agbo explores this recent pre history of the Occupy Nigeria movement in his on going doctoral research project and thesis "Photography, Facebook and Virtualisation of Resistance in Nigeria" to be submitted to the Department of History, University of the Western Cape. See especially his chapter on "The Appearances of Hope" received on July 24, 2015.

that polity where power is essentially an empty place to be "created and re-created as the manifestation of the will of the people" (cited in Skaria 2011: 213).[15]

Like many other participants in the Occupy Nigeria movement and votaries of republican as well as participatory democracy, Atiku too hails the idea of 'the people' and the possibilities for recognition and self-realization it can offer to them; the ones who spontaneously joined in song and scribbled up posters, market vendors, their helping hands, by standers and children with makeshift drums also invoked such a people.[16] But straggling along with Atiku's heavy and pained figure what we see here is not the oft spoken about common people seeking to become ascendant or uncommon, the minor aspiring to become major or dominant, and the citizen-subject or the people emerging as sovereign. Atiku's singular performance and that of the group who gathered around and walked with him was not of passionate hope and rage but something else.

In order to articulate that other political imagination at work in Atiku's performance, and the steps of the crowd following him, I locate them back not only in what Branch and Mampilly call the 'third wave' of protests in Africa but in a much wider and constant set of activities associated indeed with a different kind of "wave" of everyday struggles of livelihood and life. I am referring here to what the human geographer Ilda Lindell calls "waves of informalisation" (2010: 1), which have characterized urban economies in various parts of the continent for the last few decades. This vast informal sector is also where most members of the so-called urban underclass, 'lumpen youth' and social marginals work and live.[17]

In order to read the political actions of these members of the informal economy, we can take our cues from various writings on popular protests in various parts of the continent and reflections on the role of the lumpenproletariat; that has been my focus so far. But our cues also expand vastly when we pay attention to the considerable new research that has been published in recent years on the modes of organizing and the nature of collective actions and alliances that informals ranging from tailors to market vendors, to informal manufacturers of make up, to casual port workers and waste collectors, and cross border traders have been undertaking in various parts of the continent (Andrea G and B. Beekman 1998; Devas ed. 2004; Hansen and M. Vaal ed. 2004; A. Brown ed. 2006; Lindell 2010). Furthermore when we consider the relationship of this political society to state power a picture, which is far more complicated from the one that Branch and Mampilly outline, emerges.

As noted above, Branch and Mampilly argue that governmentality and expectation of entitlements do not determine the character of political society in most parts of Africa; at the same time, research on the myriads forms of political practices prevalent in the informal sector on the continent suggest that "contests of force and state violence" (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 20-1) (or, sovereign power) are also not the strongest influences shaping political society there. And while it might be true, as Keith Hart noted a few years ago, that the informal economy (like aspects of the Set/Setal movement) "was nothing less than the self organized energies of people, biding their time to escape from the strictures of state rule" (cited in Hansen 2004: 19), an address to the state to ensure better education, roads, power supply etc—in other words, the

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[15] Equality of sovereignty

[16] Conversation with Atiku Oct 18, 2015.

[17] Statistics

infrastructure of life—is an important aspect of this politics just as it was during Atiku's performance.

Indeed what we encounter is both what Asef Bayat calls "the quiet encroachment of the ordinary" (1997)—the slow, sometimes singular inroads into land, space to pedal their goods, electricity and water connections that individuals and families need, as well as complex collective negotiations with local state authorities, formation of personalistic networks that cannot always be captured through the concept of clientlism, and symbolic acts of protests of various kinds.[18] In various instances ethnic, religious, and regional identities of members of the informal economy who so come together to engage in these actions guide their composition and influence these negotiations, formations of networks and symbolic acts.[19] At the same time, in many instances, the "cramped" overdetermined spaces from which these actions are undertaken hinder rather than facilitate self-referential assertions of not just communitarian identities but even that overarching identity invoked through a category like 'the people.'[20] Instead what we see is the emergence of 'provincialised selves' or selves that, to use Ajay Skaria's words, have "relinquished dominance" (2011: 22, 23).

It is this provincialised, shared self that I believe Atiku enacts and we might want to attend to. This self seeks visibility and self-realization in that instance of making the concerns of the last the first but remains faceless, wearing some colors (in this instance, the national ones) but also refusing sharp particularity; it offers neither model solutions nor raises arms and fists to become exceptional, attain ascendance, hegemony or dominance.[21] Thus the resistance it offers, to cite Skaria again, is not through "pursuit of sovereignty" (2011: 213); instead such a self foregrounds commonness and encourages us to think about the agentive capacities and political possibilities contained therein.

For if, with Ake and others, we want to consider political possibilities other than the ones reducible to multiparty electoral democracy and its "consolations," where the energies of the commoners, social marginals, the informals, the lumpen and the youth deployed to take repetitive "shots at power" (Gandhi 2014: 72) and are captured by the competition between them, then we might want to think about political resistance and democracy themselves as a cultivation of commonness (Gandhi 2011; 2014). Such cultivation maybe anchored, in the first instance, in a refusal of ascendance, exceptionality, dominance and sovereignty itself. It is this refusal that I have sought to plot by juxtaposing Akinleye's photograph of the youth with the exalted face, arms raised during the 2012 protests in Nigeria, the forms of political agency it invokes, the ways in which this agency has been understood and written about with more complex histories of the politics of the informal and especially Atiku's performance in a common market town.

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[18] details

[19] details

[20] Thorburn 2002: 436 via Deleuze and Guattari on minority politics.

[21] Leela Gandhi's recent work on practices of non-ascendance, imperfection crucial

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