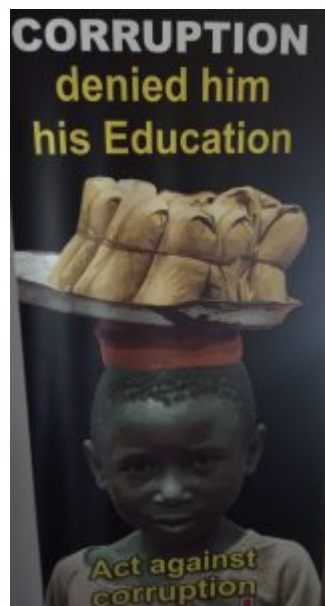


Echoing Professor Oyovbaire's Bombshell in Nigeria's Corruption Conundrum, (1)

The last month in the last quarter of the year takes us to an aspect of the radical strategy in balancing power between the elite who perpetrate much of the corruption in Nigeria and the masses who bear the brunt of corruption. That is the amplifying 'Voices from Below' that a MacArthur Foundation supported and CITAD administered Project has been all about since late 2018 in Nigeria. Anchored by a Social Influencers Cohort on Anti-Corruption and Accountability, it works through multi-modal messaging in the form of protest poetry, drama, storytelling, news frames and researching of the voices in question towards achieving a critical mass in anti-corruption consciousness as a condition of possibility for routing corruption.



As a member of the cohort, *Intervention* has been troubled by the lingering question of whether this strategy is free of disruptive intervening variables. Reflecting on that has compelled attention to what we have chosen to call the Prof Oyovbaire Bombshell. The bombshell refers to the 2002 assertion at a presentation to the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, (NIPSS) by Prof Sam Egite Oyovbaire, ex-Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria Political Scientist. In the presentation titled "The Media and Democratic Process in Nigeria", Oyovbaire made the startling disclosure that the media in Nigeria has no space for the poor. That key contention in the work now generally regarded as seminal strongly points to a reality of a thick exclusionary practice of zero representation for the masses on the ground that covering the poor is bad business as far as advertisement is concerned.

To the extent that no media chief has contradicted Prof Oyovbaire, that claim becomes central to the agenda of tackling corruption through discursive power envisaged by 'voices from below'. As a condition of possibility for ending corruption, enhanced discursive power is too crucial factor in the anti-corruption project. Yet, with the Oyovbaire bombshell,

enhanced discursive power is at risk. The question is how this might be corrected, from the point of view of the masses?

This is the stuff of this two-part Special Report which privileges voices of the suffering masses, *Intervention's* new concept for the poor, following the flat rejection of the word poor by the so-called poor themselves in the first of the two-part Special Report that marked our shift to the self-understanding of the masses as actors in anti-corruption politics. That was last October in the following reports: "[Can the Poor Fight Corruption? The Views From Nigeria's Federal Capital Poverty Hubs of Bwari, Nyanya, Mararaba, Jikwoyi and Gwagwalada](#)"; "[Still on the Views From Abuja Poverty Hubs on Current Corruption Politics in Nigeria](#)". The shift to the masses is within the framework that corruption speaks to unequal power relationship, a reality mediated by language use. That framework structured the emphasis on investigating self-understanding of contestants in the February/March 2019 presidential, senatorial and gubernatorial elections.

In other words, it came out very categorically from the focus on self-understanding of those covered by the expression 'voices from below' that the masses do not accept the word 'poor' to describe them. What they accept is 'suffering masses' which they distinguish from being poor. That is, majority vehemently rejected being described as poor. They rather argued that they are suffering from lack but they are not poor because to accept that they are poor is to put a curse themselves.

Still largely under the grip of positivist reasoning, many academics responded to the two part report in various ways. While some disagreed with the pattern of reporting it mainly because they think it must follow a definite pattern, others dismissed the collective self-understanding of the interviewees, with one critic calling it Pentecostal reasoning.

But that criticism itself reveals the prevailing grip of Cartesianism on social science or knowledge production in Nigeria. Otherwise, there was very little or nothing Pentecostal in the rejection of the term 'poor' in capturing the life of the people we routinely call poor.



Like the former Uruguay leader in the cover picture, Bob Marley is also not deriding money but saying material things are not enough to consolidate life

In rejecting that categorisation to our face, they are challenging positivist reasoning that measures poverty solely in material terms – type of accommodation, savings, lack of electricity, lack of water and stuff, thereby excluding the force of ideas, norms, values and language in how the other half survives. That distinction between the ideas, norms, values and language which still guarantees their vibrancy in spite of the absolute material lack they experience is a very instructive challenge to our ways of knowing. The masses are dismissing the distinction we make between the mind and the world and privileging the mind as the source of knowledge.

The physical world might be out there to be discovered through systematic, empirical research but not the social world. That one is not out there but in how the beholder sees it. Although none of those interviewed would have ever heard, not to talk of reading Anais Nin, the legendary multinational author, we cannot help asserting that those voices from below simply confirmed her appropriation of the Talmudic witticism that “we don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are”. Beyond Anais, there is the cover picture of the story. Other than those, the late Bob Marley has said that “some people are so poor. All they have is money”.

The argument here is that our frameworks, concepts and policies must be informed by the question of ‘how’ more than the question of what or why. Emphasis on the ‘how’ question is what makes ‘voices from below’ radical, even in itself because it anchors all plausible ways forward on collective self-understanding rather than Cartesian data sense that does not jell with prevailing consciousness. There is nowhere more than mainstream International Relations where positivism has brought humiliation to knowledge production in the social sciences. As some scholars, particularly Ersel Aydinli and Gonca Biltekin have pointed out, they have failed to predict any of the major developments in the domain immediately before and since the collapse of the USSR.

Of course, ‘voices from below’ is also fraught with its own peculiar problems. While there are enthusiastic elements within when it comes to being interviewed, there are those that nothing will convince them that a prospective interviewer might not be a government agent. In yet some others, there is a silent manifestation of that consciousness in terms of the care they exercise in talking. This is not totally surprising given that the Nigerian government itself suffers from being snubbed in, say, carrying out immunization.

This introductory piece now takes us to the main report on what the suffering rather than poor masses think about the mediation of corruption and the implication of that for power relations in fighting corruption. Note that part two is titled differently as