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What Is Nigeria? Unsettling the Myth of Exceptionalism

Aghogho Akpome

Abstract: This article explores perceptions and representations of Nigeria and Nigerians in the popular global imaginary. It analyses selected popular media narratives in order to foreground contradictions and paradoxes in the ways in which the country and people of Nigeria are discursively constructed. By doing so, it interrogates stereotypes of corruption and criminality as well as myths of exceptionalism about Nigeria and Nigerians originating from both within and outside the country. The analysis reveals that the generalised portrayal of Nigeria and Nigerians as exceptional social subjects is characterised by contradictions and inaccuracies in dominant representational practices and cannot be justified by the verifiable empirical information available on the country and its people.

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In October 2012, I flew from London Gatwick airport to EuroAirport Basel Mulhouse Freiburg, located in the border area of Switzerland, Germany and France. On arrival, passengers entered an airside shuttle with limited sitting space. While I occupied a seat next to an elderly lady, I observed an elderly man approaching. Judging that he was the lady's companion, I offered him my seat so that he could sit by her. Both were visibly impressed, and the lady commented in a sweet, thankful voice, "You must be English!" I smiled and turned away.

I have thought repeatedly about this and wondered why she concluded I was English. Are there perhaps more black people in England than in Germany, France and Switzerland? Or in Africa, for that matter? Or were English people more likely than others to demonstrate this kind of courtesy? I still wonder how she would have reacted had I told her that I was in fact Nigerian.

If the courtesy I displayed that day suggested wrongly that I was English (for argument's sake), what behaviour would have suggested that I am Nigerian? Regarding the ways in which the country and people of Nigeria are discursively constructed, I interrogate some popular discourses of national dysfunction, stereotypes of corruption as well as myths of exceptionalism. This article adopts an investigative approach based largely on narrative enquiry and relies partly on notions of cultural representation/critique and to a lesser extent, on auto-ethnographic accounts. I conclude that the portrayal of Nigeria and Nigerians as exceptional social subjects is built upon inaccuracies in the dominant representations that are often riddled with contradictions.

"Why always us?": Discourses and Stereotypes of Corruption and Criminality

In March 2009, the late Dora Akunyili, Nigeria's former minister of information and communication, launched a "Rebranding Nigeria" campaign, asserting that "it is common knowledge that the world has a very negative perception of Nigeria" (Akunyili 2013).¹ This claim can be un-

1 This echoes the idea among some Nigerians that the country often gets undue negative press (see Nwaubani 2010), and it informs the first part of the subtitle of this section. The phrase is a play on "Why Always Me?", an inscription revealed on the inner shirt of Mario Balotelli, the flamboyant Italian football star who plays professional football in England, during a match in Manchester on 23 October 2011. He is often in the headlines for antics both on and off the pitch (see Manfred 2012). The tagline became the title of Balotelli's biography, which was published in 2013.

derstood against the backdrop of dominant international discourses on and measurements of public corruption. The most prominent of these is perhaps the yearly corruption surveys published by Transparency International (TI) since 1995. Nigeria has consistently ranked very low in these surveys; it was ranked the 33rd most corrupt country out of the 215 surveyed last year and was actually named the second most corrupt country in the world in 2002 (Kalu 2013). These surveys contribute strongly to popular perceptions about the country.

Related to this is the profile of the Nigerian political class in general, and of specific individuals in particular. In 1984 a film by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) documented the financial excesses of the political class that had been deposed by the military coup in the previous year. Titled *Nigeria: A Squandering of Riches*, it provided graphic details of the shocking extent to which the politicians in charge of the country's Third Republic (October 1979 – December 1993) had plundered the nation's treasuries and amassed great wealth which they spent in extravagant ways.²

After his death in June 1998, it emerged that the military dictator Sani Abacha had corruptly amassed a personal wealth of up to 4 billion USD, most of which was stashed in secret accounts in different parts of the world and which the government was still in the process of recovering at the end of 2014 (see Eboh 2014). Another high-profile case of brazen and massive theft is that of James Ibori, governor of the oil-rich Delta State from 1999 to 2007, who is currently serving a 13-year jail sentence in the United Kingdom for fraud and money laundering. Ibori had previously been convicted of theft and credit card fraud in the UK in the 1990s and was alleged to have embezzled over 150 million GBP while spending up to 125,000 GBP on monthly credit card bills (Glanfield 2014). Two other state governors, Joshua Dariye and Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, were also arrested in the UK in 2004 and 2005, respectively, after large sums of cash were reportedly found in their possession and following investigations into charges of money laundering. Both later jumped bail and escaped to Nigeria (BBC 2005).

Nigeria also receives negative publicity over issues of economic crimes due to relatively high incidences of what are commonly called

2 It is very important for the argument in this article to place the current image of Nigeria into a historical context. Prior to the mid-1980s, the country's economy was relatively stable, and Nigerians could travel to different parts of the world without stringent visa requirements and immigration restrictions.

“419 scams”.³ Most of these “transactions” are initiated by emails that solicit partners from almost anywhere in the world and from whom advance fees are invariably sought. There have also been reports about the relatively high number of Nigerians involved in internet-based identity theft and credit card fraud. A controversial CNN broadcast in 2006 titled “How to Rob a Bank” prominently featured a convicted Nigerian fraudster who made the contentious claim that 40 per cent of Nigerians in the United States of America are scammers.

Such negative portrayals of Nigerians have also occurred in fictional mediums, one of the most notable examples being Neil Blomkamp’s award-winning science fiction thriller *District 9*, released in 2009. The movie, set in Johannesburg, has a character who is a drug-dealing crime lord named Obesandjo, a definitive caricature of former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo. As Rebecca Fasselt (2012: 99) states, it “generally provides a derogatory and undifferentiated portrayal of Nigerians as criminal cannibals engaging in inter-species sex and thus as less human/humane than the film’s aliens”. It was banned in Nigeria as well as in Iran and China, and the Nigerian government lodged an official protest with its producers (Bloom 2009). Similarly, Fasselt (2014) observed that “the legendary figure of the Nigerian swindler permeates a significant number of novels and short stories by South African writers dating back to the very first years of the democratic dispensation”.⁴

In his memoir, respected South African writer Zakes Mda (2011) referred to Nigeria as a byword for state nepotism and corruption. Such sentiments were echoed recently by Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe. While upbraiding his countrymen for the reported increases of corrupt practices in Zimbabwe, he wondered whether they were “now like Nigeria, where you have to reach [into] your pocket to get anything done” (*Vanguard* 2014). Of the major news outlets that reported on this incident, not many (like Mugabe himself) seemed to be aware of the fact that Zimbabwe was actually ranked lower than Nigeria in the much-cited index of TI (see Kalu 2013).

This leads to a largely undiscussed aspect of discourses and surveys such as that of TI – namely, that the attitudes towards corruption that they

3 “419 scams” are named after the section of the Nigerian criminal code prohibiting fraud. As Tive (2002: 10) explains, the term today refers to “a complex list of offences which in ordinary parlance are related to stealing, cheating, falsification, impersonation, counterfeiting, forgery and fraudulent representation of facts”.

4 The books examined by Fasselt are Zakes Mda’s *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995), Patricia Schonstein Pinnock’s *Banquet at Brabant* (2010), Niq Mhlongo’s *After Tears* (2007) and Andrew Brown’s *Refuge* (2009).

reflect are those of the citizens of the given countries, rather than those of researchers or of an outside, international public. In a commentary on the 2012 surveys, Alexander Hess and Michael Sauter (2013) noted that, for those identified as the most corrupt countries, “their people are largely opposed to corruption” and indeed that in “seven of the nine nations with the worst corruption, residents were at least slightly more likely to oppose corruption” than in the countries identified as the least corrupt. In other words, the people who come from the “least corrupt” countries are actually less resistant and opposed to corrupt practices than those from the “most corrupt” societies. While not fully exonerating the larger population from the perpetration of corruption in the country, Smith (2007: 8) echoes Hess’s point: “Even as Nigerians feel compelled, enticed, trapped and resigned to participate in Nigeria’s ubiquitous corruption, they also feel angry, frustrated, dismayed and betrayed.”

The opening lines of Daniel J. Smith’s (2007: 8) study on corruption in Nigeria sums up the dominant perception of the country in terms of corruption and crime in this way:

By the time I arrived in Nigeria in 1989 as an employee of an international development organisation, I was well aware of the country’s reputation for corruption. [...] The country’s image as a bastion of bribery, venality and deceit has remained constant over the years. Most recently, the global expansion of the Internet delivered evidence of Nigerian fraud to the e-mail in-boxes of millions of people around the world, in the form of scam letters seeking bank account numbers and advance fees in schemes that are premised on Nigeria’s worldwide reputation for corruption.

It is in light of this that Akunyili’s earlier-cited comment that “it is common knowledge that the world has a negative perception of Nigeria” can be better understood. Yet, Akunyili’s statement does not take into account the fact that among Nigerians themselves, there is a strong sense of disaffection with the state of the nation, especially in regard to political leadership, poor governance and economic crimes. Recalling Chinua Achebe’s (1984: 2) observation that “whenever two Nigerians meet, their conversation will sooner or later slide into a litany of our national deficiencies”,⁵ Smith explains how popular discontent and complaints have become

5 One good example of this is offered in Ken Wiwa’s biography of his father, the late Ken Saro-Wiwa. The writer recalls Saro-Wiwa’s description of Nigeria variously as “a society that ‘rewarded theft and penalised hard work’”; a place where “the only wrongdoers are those who do no wrong” and where “the usual laws of economics do not apply”.

dominant national discourses. He adds that the popular use of the expression “the Nigerian factor” “suggests that Nigerians have concluded that corruption is so endemic that it defines the nation” (Smith 2007: 99).

“The Nigerian Factor”: Narratives of Nigerian Exceptionalism

While the expression “the Nigerian factor” is almost exclusively used in a negative context to refer to what Achebe has called the nation’s deficiencies, it provides an instructive point of departure for the next point of this paper – namely, that notions of Nigeria’s exceptionalism⁶ (held by Nigerians and non-Nigerians alike) also relate paradoxically to the perceived strengths and abilities of the country and its peoples. This complicates Akunyili’s one-dimensional assertion as well as the basis upon which some of the dominant narratives and representations of dysfunction, corruption and criminality are founded. It is thus important to examine the ways in which these paradoxical perceptions intersect in the discursive construction of what “Nigeria/n” means today.

Ali Mazrui (n.d.) describes the 1914 amalgamation of the formerly separate British protectorates of Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria as the formation of “Mega-Nigeria, an enlargement of political scale”. He describes the country in terms of both its “exceptionalism” and its “typicality” in relation to other African countries. The attributes identified by Mazrui include its huge population and the combination of “immense human resources (youthful and potentially gifted population) with immense natural resources (led by oil and gas)”. This resounds with Smith’s (2007: 8) observations, during the time he lived in Nigeria, that

many people’s perceptions of the magnitude of oil wealth far exceed the reality. Even at my tennis club, where members are obviously educated and elite, some people spoke as if individual Nigerians would all be wealthy if only the government gave each citizen an equal share of the annual oil revenue – a fantasy belied by the numbers.

6 New Zealander economist Brian Easton (2007) provides the following general definition of exceptionalism as it relates to a country: “Exceptionalism is the notion that one nation’s story differs qualitatively from others, because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, distinctive political and religious institutions, or whatever – that the experience of a nation is so different that its story can be told without reference or only in contrast to others.”

This narrative of extraordinary national wealth is at the centre of what can be called Nigeria's self-exceptionalism regarding its presumed status as the "giant of Africa" (see Ojukwu and Shopeju 2010). Yet, although the origin of this term is uncertain, Nigeria has indeed occupied, at different times in history, positions of leadership and prominence in both the West African region (see Adebajo and Landsberg 2003) and the continent as a whole. These include the role of Nigeria in both the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the intervention force of ECOWAS' Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to end the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, as well as the part it played in the continent-wide effort to end Apartheid. Nigeria's Technical Aids Corps (TAC), a scheme by which the country's numerous experts provide developmental assistance to other African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, was particularly effective in the 1980s. Other noteworthy initiatives are the country's troop contributions to international peacekeeping missions, and the formation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

The country's claims to leadership in Africa have been reinforced more recently by its emergence as Africa's largest economy following the "rebasings" of its GDP figures and consecutive years of impressive annual growth. This is on the back of the meteoric growth of some industries, notably the 5 billion USD movie industry (Nollywood) that, according to Adebajo (2014), is the continent's "first authentic cinema" and is currently the largest in the world in terms of the number of films produced per year. Leadership has also emerged in other fields including sports, literature and the arts. The national football team, the Super Eagles, won the coveted Africa Cup of Nations in 2013; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Tope Folarin are among a set of young writers who have won major international awards in recent years, while Dapo Oyebanjo (a.k.a. D 'Banj) and the twin Okoye brothers (a.k.a. P. Square) continue to make waves in the international music scene. It is also worth mentioning that there are several Nigerian churches that command a large following across the continent and the African diaspora (see Fihlani 2010).

In an article for the *New York Times*, Chinua Achebe (2011) echoed his earlier assertion about Nigeria that the "vast human and material wealth with which she is endowed bestows on her a role in Africa and the world which no one else can assume or fulfil" (Achebe 1984: 99). With regard to African-American exceptionalism, Imani Perry (2011: 147) has observed that

exceptionalism is not simply something that is externally imposed. The practice of self-exceptionalism is common. And that self-

exceptionalism is not only a way for people to demand that their distinctiveness be acknowledged. It can also be a deliberate strategy to encourage an image of distinction.

Zainab Usman (2012) has argued that Nigerian self-exceptionalism can be understood as a way of rationalising the contradictions revealed by the country's many failures in spite of its natural wealth and potential. She argues in response to Achebe's controversial memoir (2012), in which he seems to explain the country's post-independence failures as direct consequences of ethnic conflicts. This, she contends,

disappointingly feeds into an increasingly disturbing trend in public discourse on national issues in Nigeria, of a perceived Nigerian *exceptionalism*, and the deployment of such to excuse the failures of nation-building, socio-economic development and social cohesion in Nigeria. Proponents of this view of Nigerian exceptionalism (defined as the perception that a country or society is unusual or extraordinary in some way and thus does not need to conform to normal rules or general principles) believe Nigeria occupies a unique place [on] the world stage because it is an artificial British creation, from an amalgamation of the Northern and Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria for administrative purposes in 1914. This artificial creation is chiefly responsible for the present dysfunction of the Nigerian state, according to this view, and thus, social cohesion and national unity will forever remain elusive as Nigerians are "not one". (emphasis in original)

What, then, is Nigeria?

Knowledge production about the so-called "developing world" has historically been characterised by serious errors of fact and representation, some of which have had far-reaching implications for the way several peoples and territories are perceived and "known" all over the world. For example, a recent CNN news broadcast labelled Niger on a map as Nigeria. This reveals how easily the undiscerning public can be misinformed – even if unintentionally – by dominant and trusted purveyors of received knowledge.

In 2013 I visited a senior diplomat at the Nigerian Consulate-General in Johannesburg. I was in the company of two colleagues from the University of Johannesburg. I introduced myself before announcing that we were from an association of Nigerians. After I mentioned my name, the man asked what country I was from. Needless to say, my colleagues found it both funny and odd but it was hardly surprising for me.

Being from one of the country's many minority areas, it is not uncommon for me to meet Nigerians who are unaware that my name and the language I speak are Nigerian.

Similarly, I have come across several Nigerian names and languages I had never personally encountered previously. Also, I have often mistaken people from other West African countries (particularly Ghanaians, Cameroonians and Sierra Leoneans) to be Nigerians. A Nigerian doctoral researcher who visited the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg from a European university once reported meeting an asylum-seeker in Germany who claimed Nigerian citizenship (and residency in Abuja) but who could not demonstrate to this researcher any knowledge of the city and the country beyond what is superficial. Furthermore, a Somali friend of mine has told me in confidence that he once travelled to the Netherlands from South Africa to seek asylum with a bogus Nigerian passport he obtained from a Johannesburg-based syndicate run by people he identified as non-Nigerians.

It is no wonder, then, that several reliable reports have shown that while many scam "419" e-mail messages received by people in different parts of the world claim to originate from Nigeria, a considerable number of these messages have been traced to other locations. According to Eric Rosenberg (2007), a report on cases of internet fraud in the United States in 2006 reveals that "of the internet criminals who could be traced to their location, 61 per cent resided inside the United States, followed by criminals based in the United Kingdom at 16 per cent. Nigeria-based criminals were next at 6 per cent." Similarly revealing is an article by Michael Kassner (2012), who draws on the research of other IT security experts to demonstrate that a good percentage of scam e-mails purporting to originate from Nigeria may actually originate from other countries.⁷ In fact, one of the experts quoted by *The Economist* (2012) and invoked by Kassner (2012) makes the categorical claim (uncontested in these reports) that "there are more non-Nigerian scammers claiming [to be] Nigerian than ever reported".

Quite significantly, there are serious uncertainties about Nigeria's population, which is generally thought of as the largest in Africa. As recently as 2013, the head of the country's population commission, Festus Odimegwu, was quoted in a reliable news report as saying that "no census has been credible in Nigeria since 1863. Even the one conducted in 2006 is not credible. I have the records and evidence produced by

7 Kassner cites an article in *The Economist* (2012) as well as the work of Microsoft researcher Cormac Herley (n.d.), which is cited in the same article.

scholars and professors of repute” (Ndujihe 2013). The report went on to detail the controversies that have dogged census exercises and that render current figures questionable. Similarly, the country’s cultural make-up is largely an issue of perpetual (re)construction and conjecture, as most accounts provide only approximate figures – “250 or so ethnic groups” (Osaghae 1991: 238), “roughly 400 languages spoken within Nigeria” (Fardon and Furniss 1994: 26).

While these inaccuracies reflect the inherent slipperiness of cultural categories, they are also, in part, an illustration of what Harry Garuba (2014) describes as the “unremunerated” nature of the Nigerian polity. This situation ensures that any stereotypical and unequivocal representation of what (and who) is definitively and typically Nigeria/n is bound to be misleading regardless of whether such a determination is made within or outside the country’s territory. Interestingly, several stereotypes including those relating to physical appearance and criminality seem to proliferate in post-Apartheid South Africa in particular (see Adeagbo 2013; Khumalo 2014).⁸ This is significant because black immigrants in general have often been subject to violent xenophobic attacks by locals in that country in recent times. In a 2010 BBC report on the perceptions of Nigerians in six different African countries (Libya, Liberia, Ghana, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya and South Africa), the section on South Africa includes the comment that Nigerians “tend to *stand out* in a crowd with their *big* flashy cars, *bold* dress and *lively* speech, for their ability to *keep their heads up* in the midst of great and often undue condemnation” (Fihlani 2010; author’s emphasis). This demonstrates one of the ways in which Nigerians are exceptionalised and constructed as objectified spectacles that both attract and repel their gazers in the South African context in particular.

Whether positively or otherwise, the popular and dominant representations by which Nigeria and Nigerians (as social and cultural subjects) are exceptionalised and/or exoticised – whether by design or not – are inevitably characterised by inherent contradictions and inaccuracies. And it is these narratives and discourses (both from Nigerians themselves and

8 The unique NGO, United Nigerian Wives in South Africa (UNIWSA) was formed to “combat the prejudice they and their husbands face” (Khumalo 2014). Perhaps one could argue that the belief in South African exceptionalism (see Mbembe 2012) is a critical contributing factor here. And the fact that discourses of exceptionalism (at least in the African context) are prominent in these two countries might be related to the subtle rivalry that has developed between them since South Africa emerged from Apartheid (see Adebajo 2014; Akpome 2013).

from sources external to the country), rather than any verifiable empirical information available about the country and its people, that constitute the beguiling basis of the simultaneously mystifying and reprehensible notion of Nigeria's exceptionalism.

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Was ist Nigeria? Wider den Mythos der Besonderheit

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag untersucht Wahrnehmung und Darstellung Nigerias und der Nigerianer in der populären globalen Vorstellungswelt. Der Autor analysiert ausgewählte Darstellungen in populären Medien. Er hinterfragt die Stereotype Korruption und Kriminalität, aber auch den Mythos der Besonderheit Nigerias und der Nigerianer, der sowohl innerhalb als auch außerhalb des Landes verwurzelt ist. Seine Analyse bringt zutage, dass die vorherrschende Sicht, nach der Nigeria und den Nigerianern ein Ausnahmestatus zukommt, auf widersprüchlichen Annahmen und Ungenauigkeiten beruht und der Analyse zugänglicher, verifizierbarer empirischer Daten zum nigerianischen Staat und seiner Bevölkerung nicht standhält.

Schlagwörter: Nigeria, Weltmeinung/Weltöffentlichkeit, Auslandsbild, Stereotype, Wirkung von Massenmedien, Meinungsbildung, Öffentliche Diskussion, Gesellschaftlicher Dialog