

# **The Theory and Practice of Civil Society in Nigeria**

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## Abstract

What does the idea of civil society suggest in Nigeria? What does actually existing civil society look like? How do the notion(s) and reality of civil society in Nigeria relate to postulations in both global and indigenous literatures? These are the three critical problems that this thesis investigates. While the global literature variously denies, misunderstands, and ultimately misrepresents the reality of civil society in Nigeria, the Nigerian literature tends to perpetuate the same misrepresentation by uncritically apotheosising it. This study corrects the misapprehension in the two categories of analysis by attempting to show civil society in Nigeria in all its conceptual and actual complexity. In the process, significant insights into the nature of civil society, the state, and the market in Nigeria are generated. At the core of the thesis are two in-depth case studies which seek to exemplify the moral and thematic ambivalence of the idea of civil society in Nigeria. While one case study, an analysis of citizens' mass boycott of mobile phone services, shows up the 'civil' dimension of civil society, the other, an investigation of the protest spawned by the Miss World 2002 beauty pageant, exposes its 'uncivil' aspect. Drawing on these scenarios, the thesis rejects the existing hegemonic location of civil society in the associative spectrum and instead canvasses an understanding which integrates ordinary citizens into the heart of civil society discourse. The thesis also examines the implications of this definitional shift for predominant understandings of the idea of civil society, most especially its relationship with coercion/violence. While suggesting that coercion might be an inevitable property of actually existing civil society *everywhere*, it problematises notions of 'civility' and 'incivility' and appropriates the latter as a necessary logic of ordinary citizens' action.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	<b>13</b>
1.1 Background	13
1.2 Aims of the Study	18
1.3 Justification of Subject and Domain of Research	23
1.4 Outline of the Thesis	26
 <b>Chapter 2 The Idea of Civil Society: A Historical Overview</b>	 <b>29</b>
2.1 Introduction:	29
2.2 Issues and Problems	29
2.3 Civil Society: From Locke to Tocqueville	39
2.4 Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society	56
2.4.1 Western-centric Paradigm(s)	57
2.4.2 The Case against the Western-centric Paradigms	64
2.5 Conclusion	75
 <b>Chapter 3 Civil Society in Nigeria: A Critical Review of the Literature</b>	 <b>77</b>
3.1 Introduction	77
3.2 The Context: How Civil Society Discovered Nigeria	78
3.3 Structural Adjustment, Popular Resistance, and the Emergence of Civil Society Discourse in Nigeria	80
3.4 Literature on Civil Society in Nigeria: A Critical Overview	85
3.5 Conclusion: Civil Society in Nigeria and the Alternative Genealogy	91
 <b>Chapter 4 Methodology</b>	 <b>94</b>
4.1 Background- How I 'Discovered' Civil Society	94

4.2 Qualitative versus Quantitative Approaches	104
4.3 Preparing for the Field	107
4.4 In the Field	110
4.5 Conclusion	120
<b>Chapter 5 The GSM Boycott: Civil Society, Big Business and the State in Nigeria</b>	<b>124</b>
5.1 Introduction	124
5.2 The Significance of the September 19 GSM Boycott	125
5.3 Technology, the State and Democratic Activism	128
5.4 Regimes of Jealousy	138
5.5 The Coming of GSM Telephony	142
5.6 Subscribers versus GSM Companies: Between Service and Profit	148
5.7 The September 19 <sup>th</sup> 2003 Boycott and its Aftermath	160
Conclusion:	163
<b>Chapter 6 The ‘Uncivil’ Side of Civil Society: Miss World 2002 and Religious Fundamentalism in Nigeria</b>	<b>170</b>
6.1 Introduction	170
6.2 Global Processes and Sociopolitical Transformation in Nigeria	177
6.3 Religion and Politics in Contemporary Nigeria	181
6.4 The (Aborted) Miss World 2002 Beauty Pageant	189
6.5 The Ugly Aftermath	196
6.6 Fundamentalism and Civil Society: Antipodes or Siblings	202
6.7 Conclusion	209

<b>Chapter 7 Relating Theory to Data</b>	<b>210</b>
7.1 Introduction	210
7.2 Civil Society: Rethinking the Issues	211
7.3 Civil Society in Nigeria: Interrelating Theory and Practice	226
7.4 Conclusion	241
<b>Chapter 8 Conclusion</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>250</b>
A: Chronology of Regimes in Nigeria since Independence	250
B: Defining Civil Society: Table of Thinkers	250
C: List of Interviewees	252
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>255</b>

## Acronyms

AFRC	Armed Forces Ruling Council
ANPP	All Nigeria People's Party
ASUU	Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAN	Christian Association of Nigeria
CD	Campaign for Democracy
CEDAR	Centre for Enterprise Development and Action Research
CDHR	Committee for the Defence of Human Rights
CITAD	Centre for Information Technology and Development
CLO	Civil Liberties Organisation
COT	Cost of Turnover
DFID	British Department for International Development
ECONET	Econet Wireless Nigeria Limited
EDSA	<i>Epifanio de los Santos Avenue</i>
GADA	Gender and Development Action
GESAM	General Sani Abacha Movement for Peaceful Transition
GSM	Global System for Mobile Communications
IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IFANET	Information Aid Network
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
LRRDC	Legal Research and Resource Development Centre
MASSOB	Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra
MDF	Media Democratic Forum
MONAC	Movement for National Consensus
MONAS	Movement for National Stability
MTN	Mobile Telecommunications Nigeria Limited
NAAC	Nationwide Action Against Corruption
NACYAN	National Council of Youths Association of Nigeria
NAPP	National Association of Patriotic Professionals
NATCOMS	National Association of Telecommunications Subscribers



NBA	Nigeria Bar Association
NCC	National Communication Commission
NEPA	National Electric Power Authority
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NITEL	Nigerian Telecommunications Limited
NMPS	National Movement for Peace and Stability
NSCIA	Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs
OPC	Odu'a People's Congress
OSIWA	Open Society Institute of West Africa
PIN	Probity in Nigeria
PSB	Per Second Billing
PUPS	Professionals United for Peace and Stability
RKI	Radio Kudirat International
SAINT	Sani Abacha Initiative for National Transformation
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
SCSN	Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria
TAI	Technology Awareness Index
TRF	Traditional Rulers' Forum
UCPA	Unofficial Customers' Protection Agency
UDERN	Union of Democratic Elected Representatives of Nigeria
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WARDC	Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre
YEAA	Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha

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*Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it.* – Andre Gide

It is usual for scholars and researchers to acknowledge their indebtedness to individuals and institutions deemed to have been supportive in the course of their undertakings. But such, I have realised, are the obligations of the PhD candidate and the collaborative nature of the doctoral endeavour as a whole that every doctoral thesis may correctly be declared as co-authored- or at least edited.

I do not mean to evade personal responsibility for the ideas and analysis contained in this thesis through the back door- even though the temptation to do that is quite strong. It is merely a sincere confession of how much I have taken or borrowed (hopefully with their knowledge and full consent) from other people: my supervisor, Dr. David Lewis, fellow PhD candidates in the Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics and Political Science, hapless senior academics who considered it harmless enough to enquire about the progress of my thesis, friends, and faceless individuals at numerous international conferences whose only infraction was to ask me what I was generally up to. From this unsuspecting motley, I have drawn inspiration, borrowed ideas, stolen phrases, and hijacked idioms. This is where I come clean to express my gratitude to everyone, but since particular individuals (and institutions) have certainly suffered more than most, I consider it imperative to use this space to engrave my indebtedness to them.

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truly forbearing, supportive, genuinely interested, and persistently challenging. In him, I was fortunate to have, not only an excellent intellectual guide, but one who also happens to be a good man to boot. Not surprisingly, the tendency to be crass and opinionated was frequent and often strong in a former journalist, but if there is one thing I have learnt from David, it is how a certain tentativeness can be key to a broader conceptual vision.

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Writing a PhD is an extremely painless process- all a candidate has to do is look on as the chapters roll in, sometimes at a glacial four pages every six weeks. It is in those glorious moments when words have mysteriously gone out of circulation that one needs a soul mate. In my own case I had quite a few, but none so available and *true* as Wale Adebani, who, like a buried gem, I uncovered in the swamps of Ibadan. Since his relocation to Cambridge university encrusted our joint identity as migrant-scholars, Wale and I have indulged in many guilty pleasures. In perpetual flight from that incommensurability which Kant rightly identified as lying at the heart of *things*, we have shared ideas, dreams, sorrows, the innermost core of angst, and the uncommon joy of *following* Manchester United- their recent wobbles and all! Above all, we have shared that most supreme of all aspirations- to write well. I am grateful for all those things which, for the sake of many, are better denied the privilege of cold print, but most important, for *understanding* why a man who had just realised the dream of a lifetime should have been drawn to suicide. Or was it a premature summons to that original darkness...?

Researching a PhD and researching a PhD in London are, shall we say, two different things. For someone coming from the 'periphery', *feeling* the geographic embodiment of Britain's imperial swagger was definitely one motivation for choosing the LSE, but I reckoned without the surprising joys that living in a crowded, cold and compelling city would bring. Every man ultimately finds the London (Disraeli's roost for every bird!) that they seek, but London for me will remain the city of evergreen parks. If the parks, as William Pitt, the Younger<sup>1</sup> famously declared, are "the lungs of

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<sup>1</sup> British Tory Prime Minister, 1783-1801, 1804-06.

London,” then I have in the past three years ingested more than my own fair share of nourishment from the oxygen that they constantly supply. Most of my thinking (not a lot to be honest) was done in and around them, and I am grateful to the unseen hands who are responsible for making them mostly clean and welcoming.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Background

If we, as fashion designers are wont to do, were to carry out even a random survey of which political concept is 'in' and which is 'out' today, the concept of civil society would rank rather high on our list. (Chandhoke 2002, 1)

Perhaps because it has a good feel about it, many were irresistibly drawn to civil society, especially as ...it has the look of a fine old wine, full of depth and complexity. Who could possibly object to it or not wish for its fulfilment? (Kumar 1993, 376).

In 1991, an anonymous collector bought a copy of the first edition of Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* for a staggering \$1, 870 (Seligman 1992, 58). By any standard, this was a remarkable price to pay for a non-best seller which had appeared more than two centuries earlier in 1767 to a relatively subdued reception. However, the collector's interest in Ferguson's book aptly illustrates the upsurge of critical fascination with (and to a large extent, vulgarisation of) the subject of his book's enquiry: 'civil society'.

By 1991, civil society was rapidly gaining attention as the 'metaphor of the moment' (John and Jean Comaroff 1999, vii) in academic, media and policy circles. Although the aggressively promiscuous courtship that Deakin (2001) wrote disapprovingly about was still some way off, the auguries already clearly pointed to a concept that would command near-universal appeal. I examine the reasons for this

sudden eruption of global enthusiasm at different points in this thesis. In the next decade, the idea of civil society has been used in a variety of often contradictory senses to legitimate sundry intellectual and political projects. Lewis (2002) rightly notes that “different local meanings (have) been created around the concept as part of an increasingly universal negotiation between citizens, states and markets” (p.4), seemingly confirming Van Rooy’s (1998) famous quip that the concept’s inherent vagueness is integral to its appeal.<sup>2</sup>

Suffice to add then that, like the proverbial philosopher’s stone, civil society, despite its widespread employment in both critical literature and popular commentary (Chandhoke 2002), has continued to resist critical capture. When Celestin Monga (1996, 147) denounced civil society as a ‘phantom concept,’ he was merely alluding to the well known scholarly frustration with the conceptual cloudiness of the term, or what John and Jean Comaroff (1999, 6) have lamented in a similar context as the indeterminacy of its “ontological status”. One objective of this thesis is to lead the arising quest for meaning and clarity in a critically innovative direction.

To be sure, the “resistance to analytic precision” (Norton 1995, 7) for which civil society has become justly notorious is by no means a new problem. Tracing the origins of civil society from the post-enlightenment era<sup>3</sup> to its contemporary incarnation, what becomes immediately obvious is the outline of a protean concept that has meandered through a maze of meanings. Apprehending its seeming penchant

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<sup>2</sup> For John L. and Jean Comaroff, “the very fertility of the Idea- its broad, transnational appeal as a trope of moral imagining- stems from its polyvalence: its capacity to condense distinct doctrines and ethical strains in a fan of pliable associations that can be variously distilled and infinitely elaborated.” Thus, “The more inchoate and polymorphous, the more appealing; the more appealing, the less attainable in any substantive, meaningful form.” (1999, 6)

<sup>3</sup> For more on the controversy surrounding the precise dating of the term, see Colas (1997).



to revel in antinomies, Mamdani aptly concludes that “When it comes to writings on civil society, there is not one...tradition but several, and not always complementary.” (1995, 603). This thesis lends further credence to this claim.

Thus, a casual survey reveals a pageantry of taxonomies, ranging from its (civil society’s) understanding as the moral antithesis of the state of nature (Locke 1970), “the ensemble of contractual relations embedded in the market” (Marx), “the realm of public opinion and culture” (Gramsci 1971), the essential bulwark of liberal democracy (de Tocqueville); to the “natural condition of freedom” (Paine) (Keane 1995), “a condition of education, refinement and sophistication as opposed to a condition of barbarism” (Tester 1992), “the opposite of primitive society” (Krader 1976), a “point of refuge from the dangerous totalising systems of state and economy that threatened the life-world” (Habermas 1996, Trentmann, 1999), a “metaphor for western liberalism” (Seckinelgin 2002); and “the anchorage of liberty” (Dahrendorf 1990). A canvas already brimming with a medley of metaphors becomes even more baroque if you toss in Monga’s description of civil society as the realm responsible for the “management and steering of communal anger” (1995, 364).

This apparent interpretive anarchy becomes more manageable however once the controversy over the subject is stripped down to the barest essentials. Historically, it would seem as if the central dispute has turned on the issue of *what* civil society is, a dispute that has had as its crux what Seligman describes as “the problematic relation between the private and the public, the individual and the social, public ethics and individual interests, individual passions and public concerns” (1992, 5). This debate has unwrapped in a series of overlapping waves (Kaldor 2002, Comaroff and

Comaroff 1999), with each unfolding revealing distinct variations in meaning. Amidst this hermeneutic flux, the only thing that seems to have been constant is the use of 'civil society' as a moral slogan for the challenging and deconstruction of overweening political authority.

But then, things evolve. Over the past decade or so, the older debate about the (dis)contents of civil society has mutated into an even more contentious species. While intellectual factionalism over *how* to define civil society still smoulders, an even more acerbic scholarly feud has developed around the provenance of the subject. I allude to the burgeoning debate over *who* possesses civil society, and the intellectual validity or not of using it to elucidate social processes in non-Western contexts. This is what is regarded in this study as the fifth wave<sup>4</sup> in the evolution of the conception of civil society, and it is the conceptual crucible for my investigation into the meaning(s) of civil society in Nigeria.

It might be objected, with some justice, that this is a pure case of old wine in a new bottle. As an analytic concern, the geo-cultural provenance of civil society has been historically embedded in the intellectual discourse of the subject. It was definitely present in the speculations of earlier thinkers like Ferguson and Hegel, both of whom wrote with pontifical certainty about the cultural specificity of civil society. Over the past decade however, the apparent axiom of civil society being a specific 'Western achievement', irreproducible outside its geo-cultural matrix, has come under increasing scholarly interrogation. Two distinct factors are arguably responsible.

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<sup>4</sup> The image of waves is borrowed from Kaldor (2002) who teases out four interweaving 'moments' in the historical emergence of the idea of civil society, beginning from the dawn of the Scottish enlightenment in the late eighteenth century. For more on this, see also Hall (1995), Bermeo and Nord (2000), Perez-Diaz (1998), Shils (1991), and Cohen and Arato (1992).

The first factor is the industrial scale of popular and rarefied application of the term. In this respect, civil society has merely become the victim of its own popularity. Following the withering of the old Soviet order and the global ascendance of neo-liberal ethos, civil society was viewed, rightly or wrongly, in instrumentalist terms as “a support structure for democracy at the state level” (Baker 1999, 1; Kaldor 1999). The origins of this assumption are easy to see. In several parts of the world, including Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa, popular opposition to *ancien* regimes had been buoyed by a vision of civil society (Keane, 1998), or at the very least the Gramscian variant of it, which essentialises civil society as the sphere of culture and associations in which *contestation* takes place (Havel, 1985) (my emphasis).

Within this perspective, civil society became widely popular as the “hitherto missing key” (Harbeson, 1994) to the dilemma of “authoritarian recidivism” (Le Pere and Van Nieuwkerk, 1998) in transitioning societies. The ensuing scramble to appropriate the language and ethos of civil society had two interrelated consequences, or what Mamdani (1995, 606) in a different context memorably captures as “mythology and caricature”. Together, both the (unintended) mythologizing and caricaturing of civil society had the effect of provoking a renewed stream of reflections regarding its appropriate use, and, quite logically, its pedigree.

Second, while the ensuing scholarly literature on the ancestry of civil society has, in broad terms, framed the discourse on its utility or otherwise within non-Western contexts, a more immediate provocation seems to have been supplied by the writings of Ernest Gellner (1994) whose speculations regarding the cultural

particularity of civil society have provided an intellectual *cause celebre*. Yet, a critical survey reveals that Gellner is merely iconic of an analytic tradition whose central motif is to argue that since it is a “social form among others” “preaching (civil society) in conditions which do not permit it is pointless” (Gellner 1994, 211).

If the central point of Gellner and others’ contentions is that civil society is unthinkable outside the west, the question naturally arises: “What makes it thinkable,” (as the Comaroffs (1999) usefully ask) in a non-Western context like Nigeria’s? Or, to borrow the more encompassing theoretic poser set by Mamdani: “Can civil society develop under a different set of historical circumstances?” (1995, 604). What does the idea of civil society suggest in Nigeria? What does actually existing civil society look like? And how do the notion(s) and reality of civil society in Nigeria relate to postulations in both global and indigenous literatures. These and other related questions are what this thesis attempts to answer.

## **1.2 Aims of the Study**

To be sure, as intellectual dilemmas go, the foregoing questions have stimulated a richly imagined, if bitterly polarised, scholarly oeuvre (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001, Hann and Dunn 1996, Chambers and Kymlicka 2002, Chandhoke 2001, Kothari 1990, Chatterjee 1993, Hall and Trentmann 2005), the core of which, following Howell and Pearce (2001) can be regarded as the ‘alternative genealogy’<sup>5</sup> of civil society. But the literature, provocative and wide-ranging though it is, still falls drastically short of a definitive analysis. For instance, while the global literature

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<sup>5</sup> More light is shed on this in chapter two and at different points in the thesis. Genealogy is understood here in its basic sense as history or ancestry.

variously denies, misunderstands, and ultimately misrepresents the reality of civil society in Nigeria, the domestic literature tends to perpetuate the same misapprehension by uncritically apotheosising it. The central aim of this study is to supply the missing link in these two categories of scholarly intervention by showing civil society in Nigeria in all its conceptual and actual heterogeneity.

There are of course other ancillary objectives, and I shall dwell briefly on them. The first is the desire to explore the intellectual ramifications of an idea which, according to Patrick Chabal (1992), has become indispensable to any attempt to understand social processes across the African continent today. In the case of the researcher, there is also the odd autobiographic flavour. Reporting underground as an opposition journalist in Nigeria in the early 1990s<sup>6</sup>, I had my first encounter with the idea of civil society when a western journalist asked me how the activities of my journal might help give shape to the collective labour of ‘civil society’ in the country. This thesis gives form to a quest which might be said to have begun at that crucial moment to understand what the idea of civil society might symbolise in Nigeria.

Second, since its emergence, the discourse<sup>7</sup> of civil society in Nigeria (and to a certain degree the rest of Africa) has been framed by a number of presumptions, the most famous perhaps of which is the imagining of civil society as “a bedrock of democracy” (Kukah 1999, xv). It is an assumption, I will argue, that rests both on a limited understanding of the meaning and usefulness of civil society, and more

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<sup>6</sup> See chapter four for more on this.

<sup>7</sup> As Apthorpe and Gasper rightly observe concerning the term ‘discourse’, “besides everyday misusages, significant gaps exist between the definitions in different research streams in the social sciences and policy fields” (1996, 2). With the recent emergence of postmodernist theorising, the word has gained further currency, although many times to the detriment of clarity. In this thesis, I will follow an elementary meaning of discourse as “conversation, debate,” and “exchange.” (White 1994)

crucially on a naïve conflation of both its reality and idea. One objective of this thesis therefore is to provide an intellectual corrective to this misunderstanding.

Third, this study aims to transcend the dominant understanding of civil society as the sphere of voluntary associations that occupies the space between the state and the family. This is not to suggest that associations are not important. They are. Nor is it to avow that such should not be seen as *part of* civil society. My main grouse is that such an associational understanding of civil society is restrictive and stands in the way of an understanding of the essential plurality of form and moral ambivalence of civil society in Nigeria. In this study, we depart from this hegemonic view by drawing a picture of civil society that includes but is not limited to associations and/or organisations. This validates Fatton's argument that "civil society is neither homogenous, nor wholly emancipatory; in fact it is contradictory, exhibiting both democratic and despotic tendencies. Moreover, it is conflict-ridden and prone to the devastating violence of multiple forms of particularisms" (Fatton 1995, 93). He concludes that, "civil society should therefore be analyzed in the plural, rather than as a uniform and unitary political space." (Ibid).

While existing research literature is slowly coming to terms with this imperative for the explication of the sheer diversity of civil society, there is very little to point to in terms of actual empirical exploration. By examining both the 'civil' and 'uncivil' dimensions of civil society in Nigeria using specific empirical cases, this thesis hopes to fill an important void in both the conceptual and empirical literature.

But there are other reasons why an associational understanding of civil society, useful as it is, is considered to be profoundly inadequate in capturing the reality of civil society in Nigeria. One is its quite arbitrary definition of the *kind* of associations which are normatively acceptable as part of civil society. For example, Naomi Chazan (in a categorisation which recalls the worst prejudices of the Gellner school) declares thus:

To be considered part of African civil society, an organization must simultaneously contain state power and legitimate state authority... Thus parochial associations- such as remote village community and religious cults- that do not encourage an interest in matters beyond their own immediate concerns, and groups that equate their own aims with those of the state and consequently seek to take it over (*some* fundamentalist groups, ethno-national movements, and ideological associations) are outside the bounds of civil society” (1992, 283) (emphasis added)

We may proceed here by quickly asking three questions. First, what qualifies *some* fundamentalist groups to be considered part of African civil society and disqualifies others? Chazan does not tell us. Second, what makes ‘parochial organisations’ parochial? And finally, why shouldn’t ‘parochial associations’ be considered part of civil society? Clearly, Chazan fails to ask the kind of questions which Markovitz (2002) considers to be important if we are not to end up with what he calls “the civil society of establishment pluralism” (p. 121).<sup>8</sup> Such questions are: “Who established the rules (of the existing socio-legal order), or by what process. Who is to say that only “citizens” are to be members of civil society? What about

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<sup>8</sup> Woods (1992) also raises similar questions in his comparative perspective on civil society in Europe and Africa..

non-citizens? Foreigners? Riff-raff? Lumpen? What if social interests don't want to hold state officials accountable and make demands on the state, but desire to overthrow the state and establish new institutions and offices?" (p. 125) (parenthesis added).

A second factor which makes the location of civil society in the associative spectrum problematic is the assumption that voluntariness automatically translates into participation and pluralism. This thesis exposes the limitations of this assumption, building on the insight from emergent literature which proves that "the associations within civil society are not automatically participatory, democratic or accountable, either in their internal composition or in their ideological orientation. Many are primarily self-seeking and economically oriented as part of survival strategies, and not necessarily capable of or interested in contesting political power relations either locally or on a nation-wide scale" (Sjorgen 2001, 40). Following this analytic trajectory, the thesis canvasses an understanding of civil society which enthrones ordinary citizens (Markovitz's "non-citizens", "riff raffs" and "lumpen") at the centre of civil society discourse.

This people-centred conception has inevitable implications, particularly for the understanding of the relationship between, for example, fundamentalism, violence and civil society. Here, we seek to promote (and justify) a view of civil society that accepts coercion/violence as one of its inevitable properties. In this new intellectual framework, there is also a place for ethnic-based associations and other social



elements which mainstream scholarship<sup>9</sup> has tended to marginalise as ‘uncivil’. Logically, the notions of ‘civility’ and ‘incivility’ themselves are problematised, while ‘incivility’ is analytically appropriated as an unavoidable upshot of citizen action globally.

### 1.3 Justification of Subject and Domain of Research

Still, the question may be asked: why is this engagement important? The question of why a study of civil society in Nigeria is important is itself folded into the larger question of why yet *another* study of civil society is required at this point. The intellectual justification of why research on civil society in Nigeria is warranted has been presented, and there is more expatiation in the chapter which reviews the existing Nigerian literature. However, there is an added policy value.

Over the past decade, ‘building’ and ‘empowering’<sup>10</sup> civil society in most parts of the developing world has become a huge industry involving a considerable amount of money<sup>11</sup> doled out by international donor agencies and financial institutions (Wiarda 2003). Generally speaking, a high percentage of these ‘empowerment’ funds has gone into the coffers of NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) with little or no connection to the rich extra-organisational social life in Nigeria, nay other parts of the developing world.<sup>12</sup> As Wiarda (2003) has observed,

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<sup>9</sup> For more on this see for example Monga 1996, Ukiwo 2002, Arzaya 1994, Young 1994, and Osaghae 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Certainly the favourite anecdote here must be the case of the enthusiastic senior official of the British government’s Department for International Development (DFID) who famously told her stunned audience that her Department was bent on “strengthening civil society” even though she and her colleagues could not say exactly what they understood by the subject (Crowther 2001, 2)

<sup>11</sup> See for example USAID NGO Assessment Report for 1998. Cited in Walker (1999).

<sup>12</sup> According to the OECD, well above US\$1 billion is now spent annually via NGOs. See Van Rooy (2000, 34). See also Carothers (2004).

“there is money involved -now often big money- and there are legions of opportunists in the United States and abroad waiting to take advantage of the largesse now going into civil society projects” (p. 132). For Howell and Pearce (2001, 2), “the constant slippage between civil society as a normative concept and civil society as an empirical reality conceals the intense, ongoing debate about its meaning and enables donors to fund “civil society” as if it is an unproblematic given.”.

By teasing out the tensions and complex strands of reality that have so far been neglected, this thesis provides a corrective to the dominant conceptualisation of civil society and thus offers a new intellectual blueprint, upon which social and political policy can be based. To a large extent, foreign donors’ understanding of civil society has sprung from a ‘one size fits all’ ideology in which “all civil society organisations (are) automatically, universally, or by definition beneficial for democracy, stability, and pluralism” (Wiarda 2003, 134). Using empirical evidence from Nigeria, this thesis broadly rejects this teleology. It attempts to show among other things that, first, the idea of civil society promoted by international aid agencies and donors is merely only one among many ideas; second, that an organisational vision of civil society, while possessing definite merits, is necessarily limiting, and fails to take into account the ‘undisciplined’ realms of society where a predominantly antistatist culture seems to exist.

Clearly, it is possible to conduct this kind of research in most parts of the developing world, and as is shown in the latter part of the next chapter, the way of thinking about civil society being canvassed here has produced quite a challenging and innovative corpus. However, Nigeria remains the primary domain of research for

a number of reasons. First, it is a geo-political terrain with which the researcher has had extensive acquaintance, both as a field reporter with a national newsmagazine, and more recently as an academic/researcher in a Nigerian university.

Second, Nigeria, Africa's most populous country<sup>13</sup> is rich in social and political contradictions, a characteristic which makes it a suitable laboratory to test many of the claims and counter-claims that litter both the global and continental literature on civil society. Indeed, the recent political history of Nigeria can be narrated, in part, as an intellectual biography of the idea of civil society in evolution. This is the approach that is adopted in the third chapter of the thesis which assesses the literature on civil society in Nigeria. Just as in other parts of the developing world, there has been in Nigeria an almost tangible presence of civil society as the metaphysical background to the radically changed political terrain over the past decade. The country also boasts of a generous balance of both 'civil' and 'parochial' associations and has since the return to civil rule in May 1999 been convulsed by recurrent incidents of violence by various ethnic groups<sup>14</sup>. If, therefore, Tester (1992, 32) is right when he says that civil society is "a condition of education, refinement and sophistication as opposed to a condition of barbarism", what might the idea of civil society be and/or suggest, in a social space riddled with obvious violence and the kind of parochialism that Chazan (1992) so stridently declaims? This thesis is partly a response to this poser.

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<sup>13</sup> Although the results of the 1992 census controversially put the population of Nigeria at 88 million, other sources have claimed figures ranging from between 120 to 150 million.

<sup>14</sup> For more on this see Adekson (2004).

## **1.4 Outline of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. The foregoing provides a general overview. In the next chapter, I introduce the general subject of the study, civil society, through a historical exploration. The chapter focuses on the different analytic traditions and currents of meaning which have shaped discourses of civil society over time. In the latter part of the chapter, I examine the factors behind the contemporary resurrection of the idea. There is also a focus on what has already been identified as the ‘alternative genealogy’ of civil society, although for reasons which are explained in the body of the chapter, there is a positive bias towards Islamic and African discourses. Again, owing to the sheer abundance of the literature involved, the analysis is restricted to broad strokes and dominant patterns.

The third chapter situates the thesis. While the second chapter has a global focus, the third concentrates almost exclusively on Nigeria. It simultaneously offers a summary and critique of the literature on civil society in Nigeria, showing how the emergence of the discourse on civil society in Nigeria is entangled with specific developments in the country’s recent sociopolitical process. The critique of the literature in the chapter provides a basis for the objectives which the thesis as a whole aims to achieve.

The research methodology is elaborated in the fourth chapter. This chapter spells out the general motivation for undertaking the study, the underlying research questions, and why, in this case, qualitative methods were favoured. This study draws on interviews, textual analysis and participant observation. An elaboration of the

planned method is followed by a narrative of the actual field experience, the difficulties encountered, and the progress of what in reality I was able to achieve. The chapter concludes with a general reflection that connects back to the original motivation and research dilemmas.

Chapter 5 is the first of two empirical case study chapters which look at what might be called ‘actually existing civil society’ in Nigeria with a view to describing it and expounding its characteristics. The grist for the analytic mill in this particular chapter is the September 19<sup>th</sup> 2003 boycott of mobile phone services by disaffected subscribers in Nigeria. The chapter shows civil society in action and relates the picture that emerges to the hegemonic contentions in the existing scholarship. Overall, the chapter explores how civil society might be understood in contemporary Nigeria as an example of the emerging discourse on civil society in non-Western formations.

The sixth chapter is the second empirical chapter which deals with actually existing civil society. If the preceding chapter can be regarded as showing the ‘civil’ face of civil society, this one shows the ‘uncivil’ one. The empirical context for analysis here, is the public uproar provoked by the eventually aborted Miss World 2002 beauty pageant, in the country. The chapter also signposts two associated issues which are pertinent to attempts to understand the reality of civil society in Nigeria: the place of fundamentalist groups (Islamic in this case) in the civil domain, and the relationship between violence and civil society.

In chapter 7, what has emerged in previous chapters are related to existing theoretical postulates. The chapter is divided into two main parts. In the first, I

provide a general overview of the conceptual field. This is followed in the second part by a detailed explication of my main arguments about civil society in Nigeria, teasing out the inter-relationships between data and theoretical postulation, and exploring the possibility and implications of *another* way of thinking about civil society.

Chapter 8 concludes by synthesising all the theoretical and empirical arguments previously advanced. It also examines the implications of the study both for theoretical and empirical study of civil society in Nigeria, as well as general policy on civil society.

## Chapter 2

### The Idea of Civil Society: A Historical Overview

#### 2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter gave an overview of the thesis. This chapter will provide the intellectual location for the thesis through an historical exploration of the concept of civil society. It identifies and analyses the points of controversy in the global research literature and gives an account of the paradoxical fascination with the idea of civil society in practice, despite the notable failure to pin it down conceptually. The chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, the main issues and problems in relation to the historical evolution of the idea of civil society are examined. The second part discusses issues in relation to the contemporary reincarnation of civil society outside the West. It looks at the way in which civil society is defined and understood in African and Islamic societies, as a way of creating the discursive space for subsequent chapters. This second part also provides the conceptual framework for the thesis.

#### 2.2 Issues and Problems

The re-entry of the idea of civil society into mainstream social and political discourses is arguably one of the most remarkable intellectual developments of the post-Soviet era.<sup>15</sup> From this invocation in Latin America (Eisenstadt 1993) and Eastern Europe by various anti-statist forces in the mid-80s, civil society has rapidly become the *idée fixe*

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<sup>15</sup> Another being the resurgence of ethnicity as a model of identity and the equally remarkable explosion in the number of ethnonationalist movements worldwide. See Huntington (1996), Varshney (2001) and Barber (2001)

of the contemporary era (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999), courted by academics, activists, international organisations, and representatives of states alike. The danger of “conceptual promiscuity” that Deakin (2001) feared seems a tragic contemporary reality.

The critical object in this section is to describe in detail the main developments in the historical evolution of civil society from its origin in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe to the present. In the process, critical perspectives on some of the major controversies that have dominated both historical and contemporary scholarship on the concept will be offered.

One important caveat is necessary at this juncture. The narrative that follows is by no means an incontrovertible one. Indeed there is none. One point of critical frustration with the notion of civil society, apart from the familiar indeterminacy of its “ontological status” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999,6) is the existence of a multiplicity of histories. As Salvador Giner (1995, 304) observed, “There is no such thing as *the* classical conception of civil society. There is a Lockean interpretation, but there is also a Hegelian one; and then there are Hobbesian, Marxian and Gramscian theories of it.”.

This situation has produced to two apparently irreconcilable positions in the literature. For one, it seems to have strengthened the arm of those like Samuel (1998) and Charles Tilly (2004) who decry the “dubiety” and “plasticity” of civil society<sup>16</sup>. For these writers, civil society is a conceptual *teflon* unsuitable for the analysis of

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<sup>16</sup> Personal correspondence, May-June 2004



concrete social processes.<sup>17</sup> For the opposing school, it would seem as if the utility of civil society is inseparably bound up with its acknowledged many sidedness<sup>18</sup>, a feature, it is argued, that should not necessarily constitute a limitation to its use<sup>19</sup>. As Beckman posits for example:

(The) multiplicity of understandings does not exclude the necessity of critical examinations; on the contrary, it makes them even more urgent, even though an “authorised definition” will not be possible. One possible way of looking at the conceptual debate is to distinguish between the term itself on the one hand, and the sets of issues that have been invoked by its use, on the other. (Beckman 2001, 5)

Here, we will be contented with a recognition of the fact that this controversy itself merely reflects one of the problems in the contemporary usage of civil society, which is that as an idea, civil society is more casually invoked than carefully explained. This banalisation may well be a direct fallout of the circumstances surrounding the contemporary emergence of the idea: its role in the imagination of alternatives to the Soviet state in Eastern Europe (Keane 1998, Havel 1985, 1992); and its almost inevitable implication in the process of democratisation elsewhere in the world.

Yet, the fate of civil society is by no means indissolubly tied to the democratic imagination, a point which is consistently underscored at various points in this thesis.

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<sup>17</sup> For more on these misgivings, especially from the point of view of the postmodernist school, see Villa (1992) and Callaghy (1994)

<sup>18</sup> Van Rooy (1998) remarks for instance that the inherent vagueness of civil society is might actually be part of its appeal.

<sup>19</sup> I am in general agreement with Young (2000) for instance that “Theoretical elaboration of the idea of civil society requires not a sentence definition, but rather distinguishing and articulating terms describing social life.” See p. 157.

To be sure, the origins of the idea of civil society can be traced to a specific era in the political history of Europe, precisely the period following the industrial revolution. According to Adam Seligman (2002), the idea of civil society emerged in late seventeenth century and eighteenth century Europe as a result of “a crisis in social order and a breakdown of existing paradigms of the idea of order.” (p. 14). He goes on to specify the character of this emergent crisis as follows:

“Whereas traditionally the foundations or matrix of social order was seen to reside in some entity external to the social world-God, King, or even the given-ness of traditional norms and behavior itself- these principles of order became increasingly questioned by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century” (Ibid).

Admittedly, then, civil society was, *ab initio*, a normative prototype impelled by the felt need to tame the demon of unfeeling individuation unleashed by the forces of rapid industrialization. The accent on rationality as opposed to emotion that was the immediate by-product of the European Enlightenment, and the emergence of the market as the arena where the new individual could realise his new found ‘freedom’ had to be tamed by something much larger than the private individual himself, hence ‘civil’ society; a society, as Tester (1992) advances, of “less barbarous manners” (p. 14). We should not let the obvious paradox escape us: while “the developing economy of market relations in the 18<sup>th</sup> century problematized social existence in new ways”, (Seligman 2002, 16) creating among other things, the highly autonomous social actor, it also unwittingly invoked “a greater stress on community, on the “reestablishment” of some public (and perforce communal) space to mediate somewhat what are seen as the adverse effects of the ideology of individualism” (Seligman 2002, 28).

To reiterate, the preceding reconstruction is just one among many, and as will be shown presently, individual thinkers have emphasized different dimensions of these *histories* in their analyses.<sup>20</sup> Thus the uneven analytic accents to be found in Ferguson (1980), Hegel, Gramsci (1971), Alexis de Tocqueville, Gellner (1994), Tonnies (2001), Marx, Cohen and Arato (1992), and Locke (1970), to name but a few among the oracular figures in the field. Appendix B demonstrates this point about conceptual differentiation clearly.

A second point worth investigating is the idea of the historical emergence of civil society following a crisis in the social order. This becomes especially pertinent when it is realised that the contemporary renaissance of civil society has been arguably produced by a similar crisis in the present social order.

The crisis under reference here is at two levels. The first was the specific crisis of socialism as the constitutive idea of the former Soviet Union and its satellite states. So long as it lasted, the socialist experiment could continue to posture as a viable alternative to Western capitalism. The implosion of the Soviet state marked a turning point in the quest for possible alternatives to capitalism, at least from the point of view of dissidents who resisted massive ‘Sovietisation’ in the former Eastern Europe (Havel 1992; Sjorgen 2001)<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> For example, certain scholars, notably Black (1984) have traced the genealogy of civil society to the formation of economic guilds in pre-industrial twelfth century Europe. For Seligman (1992), “Many aspects of Western political theory, such as the doctrine of corporations or of representative institutions, or Marsilius of Padua’s distinction between the *universitas civium* (the people) and the *pars principans* (the ruler) which relegated sovereignty to the former alone, played a role in the development of the civil society tradition.” (p. 17).

<sup>21</sup> While it lasted, the Soviet state made every effort to curtail independent social life. Yet, as several studies have pointed out, it was the very affirmation of the autonomy of civil society and the persistent spread of the idea that arguably dealt the killer blow to the regime (Gellner (1996). See also Dahrendorf (1990, 1997) Ehrenberg (1999), Shils (1991) and Gellner (1994).

The second crisis is the global crisis of the modern state, buffeted by a series of internal and external pressures, and, most important, deemed to have failed woefully in the performance of that most basic of its duties- the provision of social welfare. As Sjorgen (2001, 29-30) puts it, “generally, the crises of statist ideologies and solutions, East (state socialism), West (welfarism) and South (developmentalism), are considered to both constitute the cause of the rebirth of actual civil societies, and provide the reason for a normative distinction between state and civil society.” Perez-Diaz (1998) is even more elaborate:

The general tendency toward state growth over the last two hundred years or so has been supported by a vision of the state as the bearer of a moral project, which has been called by different names-nationalism, modernization, and social reform, among others. Today we are witnessing a generalized crisis of such a vision (and among its corresponding institutions) in both western and Eastern Europe. *The theme of the return of civil society is an expression of that crisis* (p. 61) (emphases added).

In most parts of the developing world, this perceived failure of modernisation (admittedly more ghastly in evidence in some formations than in others) to deliver on the provisioning front, had been compounded by the capture of the state by elements not necessarily oriented to the engineering of its massive bureaucracy for common welfare. Thus the ubiquity in Africa of, for example, the (mal)practice of politics devoted mainly “to the belly” (Bayart 1993), “gatekeeper states” (Cooper 2002), and of course “spigot economies” (Cooper 2002) with scant attention to the needs of the society at large. In general, this situation seems to have paved the way for “the return” (Perez-Diaz 1998) of civil society, imagined as, first, a space where the revival of the moral and welfarist project so sadly jettisoned by the state could be pursued in

earnest; and second, a sphere where subordinated and marginalised social groups, not to talk of economic minorities, could create what Young (2000, 171) refers to as “subaltern counter-publics”.

In this imagination, civil society becomes, or is, the rendezvous where the ability of the state and the economy “to colonise the lifeworld” (Young 2000, 189; Habermas 1997) is limited if not checked, and citizens and “disorganised have-nots” (Markovitz 2002) enact the “values associated with differentiated solidarity.” (Young 2000, 155). The idea of civil society canvassed in this thesis has certain parallels with this.

This specific situation (the imagination of civil society as a *moral* alternative amidst decreasing state responsibility) has had some unwitting consequences. (italics added). The first is the rosy but erroneous conception of civil society (Kohn 2002, 297) as something that is “automatically participatory, democratic or accountable” (Sjorgen 2001, 40) in direct opposition to a state that is characterised as non-participatory and unaccountable. Or, as Michael Walzer (1998, 21) puts it in a related reference to George Konrad’s *Anti-Politics*, “unchangeable and irredeemably hostile.”<sup>22</sup> Part of the intellectual project of this thesis is to examine the validity of this claim.

Gibbon (1992) has blamed this tendency to ascribe oppressiveness and freedom to the state and civil society respectively on what he calls the conceptual bias

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<sup>22</sup> Witness for example the plethora of epithets that have been used to describe the state in Africa, ranging from ‘prebendal’ (Joseph 1987), ‘soft’ (Edozie 2002), ‘predatory’ (Evans 1989), to ‘vampire’ (Frimpong-Ansah 1991), and even ‘bedridden’ (Ayoade 1988).

of the general neo-patrimonialist framework.<sup>23</sup> At any event, it is an attribution that conceals more than it reveals. In reality, as Young (2000,167) notes, “not all of the identities, practices, or goods and services that flourish in civil society are necessarily good; nor do they coexist without conflict.” This thesis tries to adduce evidence that supports this claim. Sjorgen (2001, 39) also adds that the dichotomy “conceals both the ways the state and civil society interpenetrate, as well as the relations of domination and conflict that exist within civil society and the informal sector.” For its part, this ascription of immanent goodness to civil society has also had its own fallouts, one of which is the easy conflation of civil society as an idea and as an actually existing reality.<sup>24</sup>

A second consequence of the conception of civil society as a (more) moral antipode to a derelict state has been not only to sharpen the perceived dichotomies between the state and civil society, but also to ignore “the not-so-civic associations in civil society, theoretically as well as empirically” (Sjorgen 2001, 31). The heated controversy over the status of ‘uncivil’ society within the context of civil society which has been one of the main features of the civil society literature (Boyd 2004; Whitehead 1997) in recent times is apparently a fallout of this conceptual confusion. My thesis attempts to put a new conceptual spin on the notion of incivility by appropriating it as an ontological property of civil society.

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<sup>23</sup> Often indicted as the bane of democratic sustainability in Africa, patrimonialism seeks to describe the process in which government is more or less run as an extension of the ruler’s own household. For a review of the literature and further discussion see Ayoade and Agbaje (1989) and Akande (1997). See also Bratton and Van de Walle (1994).

<sup>24</sup> This problem has been receiving increased attention from scholars. See for example Cohen and Arato (1992) and Young (2000)

This is not to deny the obvious academic benefits to some individual scholars of the apparent confusion. I do believe for one that it serves as an apt indicator of what seems to be an overarching truth in the theoretical evolution of civil society, which is that in expounding the idea, different thinkers over the years have tended to include/exclude and/or privilege only those elements that they deem favourable to their ideological and/or social circumstances.<sup>25</sup>

What does this tell us about the idea of civil society itself? First is that it helps to further clarify the notion as a fragmented one (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, Beckman 2001, Abu-Lughod 1998) with no single “authoritative” understanding. Second, interpretations of civil society have always been directly linked to the specific concerns of the historical conjuncture in which the concept has been invoked. Thus, “the processes of European state-building, the development of constitutional government, and the spread of industrial capitalism” (Houngnikpo 2000, 2) apparently dictated the 18<sup>th</sup> century obsession with the distinction between public and private interests. Similarly, the crisis of the modern state in its various disguises (as discussed earlier), the deepening immiseration of large sections of the society, and the erosion of common individual freedoms by authoritarian states in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa have formed a backdrop to the current search for greater autonomy *within* civil society. Chandhoke (2001) has described how this process has unfolded in the specific case of Eastern Europe where the invocation of civil society came to embody

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<sup>25</sup> It is in this specific sense that Beckman (2001, 3) refers to civil society as a strategy. A related point is the observation made by Markovitz (2002, 118) that “Those elements of civil society that come to the fore in any historical period are those most aligned with dominant social and economic forces.”

three, possibly even more than three, historical meanings, all of which led to some sensational consequences. First, the civil society argument sought to limit formerly untrammelled power of the state by the institutionalization of political, but more importantly, civil rights and the rule of law. Second, and correspondingly, the argument sought to carve out a domain that would function independently of state regulation. Here people, free from state inspired *diktat*, could engage in projects of all kinds (p. 2).

He continues:

Third, the civil society argument propelled an important issue onto the political agenda. It simply asserted that the active engagement of ordinary men and women in groups that were smaller than the state, namely family and kinship groups, neighbourhoods, professional and social associations, and voluntary agencies, was a good thing in itself (Ibid).

To return to the broader picture, if there is anything that has changed in the historical understanding of civil society, it is the transition from civil society as a synonym for political society (Perez-Diaz 1998, 55) to, in the loosest sense possible, the very opposite of the state. To have a better appreciation of the tensions and subtleties that have marked this transition, a brief tour of the major thinkers on civil society seems imperative. What follows, while not a conceptual history in the most rarefied sense of it, is a guide to what I consider to be most salient in the thinking of the identified scholars and writers.



### 2.3 Civil Society- From Locke to Tocqueville<sup>26</sup>

“To live by one man’s will, became the cause of all men’s misery,” is one of the more striking aphorisms credited to Locke. It may also be the key to an understanding of his conception of civil society. In Locke, we see some evidence of the conflation of civil society with political society or “the commonwealth”, “the chief end of which”, he argues “is the preservation of property.” “Civil society,” according to Locke, is to be distinguished from the state of nature or absolutism. Civil society then is the state that follows the state of nature, marked as it is by the absence of the rule of law (thus posing a direct threat to the safe enjoyment of private property), and the reign of the despot whose will was “the cause of all men’s misery.” Locke’s distinctly religious imagination is unmistakable, for he also believed that the law of nature (from which the rule of law supposedly emanates) is innate to man and not taught by any ruler.

Two elements are therefore critical to an understanding of Locke’s conception of civil society: the fundamentality of the rule of law as a demarcation of civil society from the state of nature; and the essentiality of property. By contrast, the state of nature is characterised by the absence of the rule of law, the affirmation of individual will over and above collective interests, and the incapacity of the individual for private property.

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<sup>26</sup> As I mentioned earlier, there is no ‘authorised’ way of tracing this history. Comaroff and Comaroff (1999, 4-5) have adopted a ‘series’ model by which they have outlined the emergence of civil society as a succession of four possible movements. These include, first, its transportation from Scotland to continental Europe; followed by a period of relative quiescence; its 1980s resurrection by Eastern European dissidents; followed, lastly, by its contemporary global diffusion. Mamdani (1995, 603) notes that “when it comes to writings on civil society, there is not one Western tradition but several, and not always complementary.” Here, I have chosen Locke as my point of departure because I consider him a pioneer in terms of delineating the parameters of civil society.

How is this civil society to be constituted, then? For Locke, this happens when every man wilfully renounces his natural power to preserve self and property and vests such in an 'umpire', a community. Those who perform this symbolic action together belong then to the same moral community. He argues:

Those who are united into one body, and have a common established law and judicature to appeal to, with authority to decide controversies between them, and punish offenders, are in civil society one with another: but those who have no such common appeal...are still in the state of nature, each being, where there is no other, judge for himself, and executioner; which is...the perfect state of nature (Chapter VII, section 87).

From the above, civil society is separated by individual renunciation of natural power to avenge personal injuries; and the separate constitution of the legislative and executive realms. As Locke himself put it, "Wherever therefore any number of men<sup>27</sup> are so united into one society, as to quit everyone his executive power of the law of nature, and to resign it to the *public*, there and then only is a political, *or* civil society." (emphases added).

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<sup>27</sup> The consistent reference to men here is of course not accidental. Locke, much like Hobbes, Aristotle and St. Augustine, was apparently a male chauvinist. Arguably at the heart of his civil society is the "conjugal society," made by a voluntary compact between the man and the woman, but with the man as the natural leader. Says Locke, "one cannot but admire the wisdom of the great Creator, who having given to man (the male) foresight, and an ability to lay up for the future, as well as to supply the present necessity". In any case, the man is "the abler and the stronger". One other way of looking at this chauvinism is to recognise that Locke and Hobbes and Ferguson as well lived in an era completely different from ours. As Fania Oz-Salzberger notes in her introduction to Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, "Ferguson lived in a world in which 'Americans' were native tribesmen, 'citizens' were select and exclusively male, and 'war' could imaginably pass for a good thing." (p. xxv). Tester (1992) similarly observes that "The imagination of civil society was conventionally an entirely patriarchal imagination. The imaginations of civil society which are found in writers like Marx, Hegel, Locke and, most obviously, Rousseau, were not meant for women... Women were not part of the traditional stories of civil society." (p. 24).

Locke's obsession with common subjecthood and the primacy and efficiency of the rule of law was arguably rivalled only by his open contempt for the institution of the monarchy, the inherent despotism of which, for him, constituted the essence of the state of nature. According to him, the absolute prince is an institutional absurdity because he lacks the common consent of all and seems to stand outside the consent reached by all men in the state of nature, that everyone without exception shall be subject to the same laws. The absolute prince seems to stand *outside* the law "...as if when quitting the state of nature entered into society, they agreed that all of them but one, should be under the restraint of laws, but that he should still retain all the liberty of the state of nature, increased with power, and made licentious by impunity."

The importance of the Locke's formulation of civil society, especially the way he used the idea as a device to explain how society itself was possible, has been recognised by the scholarly community. As Tester (1992, 40) puts it, Locke understands civil society to involve "the reciprocity of strangers who equally and individually give up the state of nature in order to enter into a society...For Locke, civil society was the guarantee of modernity."

Remarkably, it is on this seemingly fundamental contrast between the state of nature and civil society that Ferguson (1767/1980), the Scottish chaplain and Enlightenment thinker, differs from Locke. Unlike other Enlightenment thinkers, Ferguson does not subscribe to the widespread optimism about humanity's perceived 'progress' from the state of nature to 'civilised' society and argues, for one, that conceptions of the state of nature, far from being universal, indeed varied across cultural communities and individuals. He is also critical of the idea of the state of

nature as something preceding the emergence of communities.<sup>28</sup> He seems convinced, on the contrary, that human beings have always lived in communities.

With Ferguson, we see the emergence, contrary to Locke for instance,<sup>29</sup> of the non-religious justification for civil society. In this, he was, perhaps, a true child of the Scottish Enlightenment. As Seligman (1992, 35) has observed in respect of the Scottish Enlightenment, “in (it), civil society was loosened, if not totally freed, from its transcendent anchor, and that universal (basis for the good) which for Locke was to be found only in God was, by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, displaced. The universal was no longer beyond the world, but within it.” (1992, 35). For Ferguson also, the will (and individualism) is more important than reason, as opposed to the ‘moral community’ or the ‘public’ privileged by Locke, is more fundamental to the idea of civil society.

Nevertheless, for all their differences, Locke and Ferguson seem to agree on one thing: the absolute need for what Perez-Diaz captures as “a combination of ideas, institutions, and social groupings that support one another: those of limited government, a tradition of containment of the king’s powers, and a core of citizens able to combine their involvement in the market with their involvement in the public sphere.” (1998, 70) All these were absolutely crucial if civil society was to exist- and, shall we say, persist.

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<sup>28</sup> Some scholars even doubt the objective reality of the state of nature as something existing ‘out there’, stressing a more metaphoric understanding. For Tester (1992, 9), the presumed division between “a state of civilisation and a state of nature” becomes problematic “where humanity (itself) is interpreted as a threat to the self-sufficient freedom of nature.” (p. 25). Rousseau’s grouse is that the ‘social contract’ represents an oppressive break from the ‘state of nature’ in which man enjoys the unfettered expression of his basic emotions.

<sup>29</sup> As Seligman (1992, 205) has remarked, the transcendental dimension, the belief in men as Godly subjects, was critical to Locke’s image of civil society.

Nor should we ignore the sharp sensitivity to nuance with which Ferguson's *Essay* had been composed. Perhaps more than any other thinker who came after him, Ferguson understood the underlying dialectic at the heart of the imagination of civil society. For him, this dialectic is not only "intrinsic" but also "at the same time analytical, historical and moral. On the one hand, civil society is identified as that which has been achieved (*a la* Hegel). On the other hand, civil society is imagined as that which stands in need of achievement." (parenthesis added). These broad conceptual horizons are recognised in the definitions of civil society which he offers. Thus,

Civil society is best understood as a socially and historically specific attempt to achieve a number of aims. Firstly, civil society was an invention from the conditions of European modernity which was able in principle to explain the reciprocity of people who experienced themselves as individuals in relationships with strangers (1980, p. 124).

Secondly, civil society was

the milieu in which individuals entered into voluntary associations and thus freely carried out the social construction of a bounded community called society. Thirdly, civil society was the guarantee and the achievement of societal self-sufficiency and of the deconstruction of the natural artifice. (Ibid)

The same dialectical imagination is revealed in the use of civil society to denote, at different times, and often without sufficient warning to the reader, either the polity, or the society at large. Two good examples are the contrasting use of civil society to represent the polity:

It is in conducting *the affairs of civil society*, that mankind find the exercise of their best talents, as well as the object of their affections. (p. 149). (Italics added)

Or the society at large:

He enjoys his felicity likewise on certain fixed and determinate conditions; and either as an individual apart, or *as a member of civil society*, must take a particular course in order to reap the advantages of his nature. (p. 16). (Italics added)

If, however, Ferguson made no distinction between ‘civil society’, and the ‘state’, an observation apparently confirmed by the passages above, Georg W.F. Hegel certainly did. In fact, it is on record that he was the first to do so. According to Oz-Salzberger, this distinction “between a private sphere of trading and socially interacting individuals and a public sphere of government and law, was notably profoundly alien to the civic tradition.” (1980, xix).<sup>30</sup> Hegel defines civil society as “the realm of difference, intermediate between the family and the state.” It is however difficult to understand the Hegelian conception of civil society outside his, admittedly abstruse, philosophy of history.

I offer a necessarily arbitrary simplification as follows: History<sup>31</sup> is the evolution of consciousness and the modern world is the highest demonstration of that

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<sup>30</sup> She equally notes the irony that the notion of ‘burgeliche Gesellschaft’ (bourgeois society) which is fundamental to the Hegelian and Marxian conception of civil society was actually made fashionable in German scholarly circles by the German translation of Ferguson’s *Essay*.

<sup>31</sup> History here presumably referring only to European history. Hegel, as it happens, did not think very highly of non-European cultures and systems, which he believed were set apart by a certain lack of freedom. See Taiwo (1998).

evolution. For Hegel then, civil society is “the achievement of modernity,”<sup>32</sup> one *moment* (the other two being the family and the state, in which the movement of the objective spirit (*Geist*) can be apprehended (Schechter 2000).

In truth, Hegel owes Ferguson, whose *Essay* arguably framed some of his own arguments in respect of the emergence of civil society, a conceptual debt of gratitude.<sup>33</sup> Although in clear contrast to Ferguson Hegel had insisted on the ontological integrity of the state as having a ‘concrete existence’ (Schechter 2000, 38) of its own, he shared the Scottish Chaplain’s derision for the state of nature construct. Hegel’s own case for its untenability is based on his appreciation of historical developments, particularly in the economic sphere.

While the dichotomy that the state of nature/state of civilisation presumes might possibly have made some sense at a historical moment, Hegel believed that profound changes in the economic realm had made this binary distinction otiose (Mehta 1968). The most ramifying consequences of this economic revolution, he believed, were to be seen in the specific transformation of what was regarded as the private sphere. More specifically, the expansion of the economy, he argued, had incorporated and dominated civil society, leaving the state to emerge more clearly as a ‘separate political sphere’. The family, for its own part is, relegated to what is left of the by now ‘emaciated’ (Schechter 2000) public sphere.

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<sup>32</sup> What modernity means (or more precisely the multiple meanings of modernity) is of course a different matter entirely, although Hegel was clear that it is a specifically European achievement. For a summary of some of the contending perspectives on the meanings and origins of modernity, see, for example, Chatterjee (1997), Rundell (1987) and Bauman (2000).

<sup>33</sup> It is even more correct to acknowledge Hegel’s overall indebtedness to the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers in general, including Smith, Hume and Ricardo.

These changes would have serious effects on, first, the idea of public opinion, which can no longer be what it used to be; and civil society, now far too sundered by economic competition to play the expected role of holding the state in check. Hegel's historical analysis led him to doubt the essential quality which the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment had attributed to civil society, what Seligman (1992, 33) captures as "a realm of solidarity held together by the force of moral sentiments and natural affections." For Hegel, the dawn of the industrial revolution and the emergence of economic competition among men who ordinarily would have been obligated to collaborate within "a realm of solidarity," had irreversibly undermined civil society, transforming it into a bourgeois civil society. Thus, while men, in the primary Lockean sense, might have taken leave of the state of nature to enter into a commonwealth, that moral sphere which they automatically entered would become gradually circumscribed by the expansion of the economy.

In drawing a line under these reflections on the Hegelian conception of civil society, it is useful to make an observation. Adam Ferguson (1980, 110) is justly taken to be the fountainhead of the intellectual tradition that considers civil society to be incompatible with non-Western cultures. Note, for instance, his dismissal of Africa for the perceived "weakness in the genius of its people". Or the following illustrative statements:

The torrid zone, everywhere round the globe, however known to the geographer, has furnished few materials for history; and though in many places supplied with the arts of life in no contemptible degree, has nowhere matured the more important projects of political wisdom, nor inspired the virtues, which are connected with freedom, and required in the conduct of civil affairs (1980, 110);

and



The Africans and the Samoiede are not more uniform in their ignorance and barbarity, than the Chinese and the Indian, if we may credit their own story, have been in the practice of manufacture, and in the observance of a certain police, which was calculated only to regulate their traffic, and to protect them in their application to servile or lucrative arts (Ferguson 1980, 111)

Ferguson's affirmation of Western cultural exceptionalism, if we may call it that, also finds continued expression in Hegel, for whom civil society is the "achievement" of the West. I mention this fact in order to underscore one pertinent observation. This is the historical use of the idea of civil society for a variety of ends, among them what Kaviraj (2001) captures as "the denigration of the other." Civil society in this light becomes "like human rights...what authoritarian regimes lack by definition. It is what the Greeks, the Enlightenment and we today have, it is what despotic governments, whether in the past or the present, the here or the elsewhere, do not have." (Goody 2002, 150).

In the contemporary era, this cultural essentialism (especially following on the postulations of Gellner) has sparked a controversy which centres on the usefulness or relevance of civil society to non-Western societies (Chambers and Kymlicka 2002, Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001, Lewis 2002, Hann and Dunn 1996). Lewis' (2002, 4) argument, drawing on Hann and Dunn is that "the view that the concept is of less relevance to non-Western contexts can obscure the fact that...there is also little agreement about the concept even within Western contexts about relevance and practical policy value." As already declared, this is the broad framework within which the discussion in this thesis on civil society in Nigeria must be understood. In the second part of this chapter, more light will be shed on this.

Setting aside similar profound disagreements among some of the scholars already discussed, Marx's disagreements with Hegel illustrate very clearly Lewis' point about the lack of a monolithic understanding of civil society even within what is generally known as the Western tradition.

However, focusing on their agreements seems to be much more analytically fruitful at this point. Like Hegel, Marx saw civil society as "a historical phenomenon" (Tester 1992, 18), the product of "the post-feudal separation of the realm of the state (public life) from the realm of the private" (Ibid). Again, both questioned the existence of a truly independent private realm under feudalism given its well known determination and appropriation of the personal, and the insinuation of the monarch into the fabric of everyday life. Their argument was that it is superfluous to speak of a private realm if the will of the monarch permeated every sphere of social life as it did.

But Marx was also sceptical of the capacity of the Hegelian bourgeois society to produce the kind of emancipation which Hegel was convinced was possible. Rather, for Marx, the bourgeois civil society is the realm of privation and inequality, and only a false emancipation can be produced within it, at least until property became properly socialised. Thus, there really was no hope in civil society as a realm of emancipation so long as the chief agency that defines its character is the bourgeoisie. In taking this position, Marx took a firm stand against what Tester (1992, 18) calls "one of the strongest myths of the bourgeois order" that, in the private sphere, man finds himself and his freedom. "On the contrary, in the private sphere", Marx argues, "man is thrown back on to himself against others, and on to the

assumed certainties of reification rather than the difficult freedom of reflexion. For Marx, civil society is basically a lie.” (Ibid).

The last word on the Hegelo-Marxian understanding<sup>34</sup> of civil society arguably belongs to Markovitz (1998), who argues that:

What (Gramsci), Hegel and Marx have in common is their uncommon use of the term ‘civil society’. *Each of these theorists meant something very different, something that made sense only within the larger corpus of their work.* What we must learn from their examples is how to measure the meaning of the term within some larger political and intellectual framework and context. (pp. 21-22). (emphases added).

We have made the point that the arguments of Hegel and Marx did, in different ways, signify the end of the classic idea of civil society (Seligman 1992). This is not to deny however that their contentions continue to reverberate in modern discourses of civil society in various ways, most especially in the work of thinkers like Cohen and Arato, Chantal Mouffe, Lawrence Krader, and John Keane. In actual fact, the writings of Marxist thinkers like Gramsci have been rightly cited as giving intellectual impetus to the recent resurgence of the idea of civil society, especially in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Before moving on to Gramsci however, let us briefly consider another thinker whose ideas have become an integral part of the history of civil society.

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<sup>34</sup> Gellner, ever the polemicist, puts a large chunk of the blame for the fuzziness of civil society at the doorsteps of the Hegel-Marx axis. He argues: “Although the notion of Civil Society is indeed simple, the historical concept to which it is linked is tangled and elusive. Given its roots partly in Hegelo-Marxist metaphysics- *a tradition whose authors can hardly be held up as models of lucidity*- this is perhaps not too surprising. (1994, 55) Italics added.

Ferdinand Tonnies' multi-layered *Community and Civil Society*, first published in 1887, is not about civil society *per se*, and certainly not about any of the several obvious ways in which the notion is currently understood. A sociologist by training, Tonnies was also clearly a product of his age, one in which the boundaries that demarcate the human and natural sciences today did not exist. As such, his dense study was as much an excursion into law, medicine and literary criticism<sup>35</sup>, as it was an analysis of the mysterious 'transition' from community to civil society, or, from "mere heaps of contiguous individuals" to "collectivities which had acquired a common political 'personality'" (2001, xix). It is this latter understanding that interests us.

Broadly speaking, Tonnies delineates between two types of communities- "an 'organic' Community... bound together by ties of kinship, fellowship, custom, history and communal ownership of primary goods; and a 'mechanical Society...where free-standing individuals interacted with each other through self-interest, commercial contracts, a 'spatial' rather than 'historical' sense of mutual awareness, and the external constraints of formally enacted laws." (2001, xvii-xviii). The key to the distinction between these two archetypal communities, it seems, is the change in the perceived axial role played by the "ties of kinship" in one, and "free standing individuals" (Ibid) in the other.

This, as it happens, is a crucial distinction. The theme of the role of the individual (as opposed to the 'herd') in the making of civil society has been central to

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<sup>35</sup> *Community and Civil Society* is divided into three 'books'. It is in 'Book One', a "general classification of key ideas", that Tonnies outlines his main arguments on the theories of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (civil society). The second and third 'books' are by and large philosophical treatises on "Natural will and rational will" and "The sociological basis of natural law".

more recent formulations of the concept. For Gellner and Seligman<sup>36</sup> for example, it is this accomplished individual, Gellner's 'modular man', whose emergence emblemises the *arrival at* a civil society. Modularity, Gellner continues, is what distinguishes a civil society from a 'segmentary' one. Therefore, for him, while civil society may be "a cluster of institutions and associations strong enough to prevent tyranny" (1994, 103), the golden rule is that such institutions must be "entered and left freely" (Ibid) by free individuals.

So how crucial is the role of the individual and the rule of free entry into, and departure from, associations in civil society? While not allowing this to detain us here, we may close with some of the reservations that have been expressed by other scholars and at which I hinted in the preceding chapter.<sup>37</sup> The first is that voluntary associations themselves often seem to embody a certain paradox. Kohn (2002) has noted the irony:

That voluntary associations are often exclusionary and hierarchical and yet are nevertheless an essential element of a liberal-democratic polity...Many exclusive associations have produced the most inclusive effects. Class-intransigent Marxist parties achieved the political inclusion of the working class in Europe. The separatist wings of the civil rights and women's movements advanced the struggle for meaningful citizenship and political equality. (pp. 290-91).

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<sup>36</sup> In fact, Seligman believes that the central problem in the evolution of civil society has always centred on "the problematic relation between the private and the public, the individual and the social, public ethics and individual interests, individual passions and public concerns." (1992, 5)

<sup>37</sup> Other criticisms of Gellner abound. See for example Hann and Dunn (1996), Khaviraj and Khilnani (2001) and Mamdani (1997).

Second, as Michael Walzer (1998) has reminded us, “membership in the most fundamental associations- the family, nation, and social class- is neither free nor voluntary.” (Kohn 2002, 295).

Tonnies himself has been criticised on a number of grounds, not least for conflating conceptual prototypes with actually existing realities. We do not need to journey into the interior of these criticisms, except to note that his dichotomy between ‘Community’ and ‘Society’ has been smuggled somehow into more recent debates about the usefulness, or otherwise, of civil society in certain contexts, the two archetypes taken as direct analogues of ‘developing’ and ‘Western’, “cousingly republics” and “non-traditional”; or even “primitive” (Krader 1976, 22) and “modern” societies respectively.

Antonio Gramsci, arguably alongside Alexis de Tocqueville<sup>38</sup>, is justly credited with a huge part of the inspiration for the contemporary revival of civil society. One source of inspiration, at least to the opposition in the former Soviet satellite states, was Gramsci’s understanding of civil society as the sphere in which ideological contestation takes place. For Gramsci, civil society is the sphere of culture, ideology and associations. While Marx reduces civil society to the market economy, Gramsci reduces it to sociocultural institutions (Perez-Diaz 1998, 58). For

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<sup>38</sup> The reputation of de Tocqueville (who visited the United States at the age of 25 in 1831 rests on *Democracy in America* (1835/1840/2003), a two-volume study of Americans and their political and social institutions. More important, his praise of the people’s ‘habit of association’ which he saw as key to the United States’ democratic ebullience is generally singled out as the precursor to the modern revival of ‘associationalism.’

him, the good thing about civil society is the (possible) existence of a plurality of associations which can challenge the homogenising reflexes of totalitarianism.<sup>39</sup>

With both Hegel and Marx disagreeing on the correct relationship between the state and civil society (with Marx insisting that civil society includes the state and does not exist apart from it), it was left to Gramsci to underscore the mutual intertwining of the two.<sup>40</sup> Even more important, the Gramscian formulation allows for a structural distinction between civil societies in different types of societies. As Markovitz (1998, 32-33) has observed, he distinguishes between “civil societies in different types of states- or at least suggests a difference in terms of the ‘complex structure’ of the ‘most advanced’ states and those that are less developed. The example that he chooses is Russia, but the parallels with Africa are striking.” This is clearly useful for our exploration in this thesis.

The state-civil society see-saw in the Gramscian formulation of civil society has been captured by Mamdani (1995) thus:

For Gramsci, the realm of civil society is that of public opinion and culture. Its agents are intellectuals, who figure prominently in the establishment of hegemony. The sphere of civil society is public, not private. Civil society may be state-organised, but it is not state-controlled; while it is autonomous of the state, it cannot be independent of it. (p. 605).

Kaldor (1999), among others, has argued that the conceptual space that Gramsci (granted that he writes *within* a Marxian tradition) gives, to the need for plurality and the legitimacy of a challenge to state authoritarianism, is one reason for

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<sup>39</sup> For more on the Gramscian notion of civil society see for example Norberto Bobbio (1988).

<sup>40</sup> Yet, Gramsci himself is not immune to contradiction. As Hoare and Smith point out in their introduction to the *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (1971), there is a great difficulty with Gramsci's conflicting definitions of the state.

the successful invocation of the civil society idea in Eastern Europe.<sup>41</sup> To that, we might add the influence of Alexis de Tocqueville, although he apparently belongs to a different tradition of thinking about civil society,<sup>42</sup> while some scholars (Bratton 1989 for instance) have made the argument for a more global penetration of his ideas.

Contemporary civil society discourse arguably owes the notion of associationalism<sup>43</sup> to de Tocqueville who believed that it holds the key to democratic equality in the United States. He itemises three clear functions of civil society:

First, civil society is seen as a counterweight to state power...Second, civil society is understood as being intrinsically pluralistic...Third, and as a mental counterpart to the institutional argument, civil society is seen as having an ethical function, as a sphere for elaborating or transforming normative notions of fair systems of governance. It is a locus for the learning process necessary for nourishing a democratic political culture, and is as such a democratising force on the ideological level.” (Sjorgen 2001, 28).

This three-fold classification of functions has been severely criticised, in particular the unguarded stress on the ethical functions of civil society (Markovitz 2002, Chandhoke 2001). Thus, while the Tocquevillean conception of civil society may have been crucial to the contemporary revival of the concept, its critique has been equally significant in its latter day re-invention.

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<sup>41</sup> Of course there has always been a tradition of opposition to Soviet rule in Eastern Europe (what Adam Michnik (1998) calls “revisionism”) which the exponents of the idea of civil society tapped into. See also Kolakowski (1990).

<sup>42</sup> Both Marx and Gramsci for example appear to have been overly concerned with an ideological interpretation of civil society. As Wood (1990) has noted in respect of Gramsci, his “conception of ‘civil society’ was unambiguously intended as a weapon against capitalism...” (p. 63).

<sup>43</sup> Tocqueville’s conviction in the power of associations is exemplified in his statement that “There is no other dike to hold back tyranny.” See Tocqueville (2003).



Certain deductions can be made from the analysis thus far. One is the existence of a variety of conceptions of civil society, which seems to confirm the truth of the earlier observation that civil society has always meant different things to different scholars/thinkers, and that each thinker's emphasis has been invariably shaped, either by local exigencies or ideological orientation, or often times by a combination of both.

Furthermore, there also seems to be a confirmation for Lewis' (2002, 12) anxiety<sup>44</sup> that overall, "there is a rich theoretical tradition of thinking about civil society, but far less empirical work available." This thesis partly assuages this worry with analyses that draw on substantial empirical information. What Lewis himself imagines the nature of these empirical investigations to be is, of course, a different matter entirely.

For the moment however, and indeed in seeming response to Lewis' call for more empirical investigation, a massive intellectual interest has been stimulated by the problematic of the usefulness or otherwise of civil society in non-Western contexts (Orvis 2001, Kazemi 2002, Kamali 1998, Howell and Pearce 2001, Chandhoke 2001, Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, Chambers and Kymlicka 2002, Lewis 2002). Other scholars have taken the discourse in totally unexpected but fascinating directions. A good example is Chan (2002, 51) who, insisting that "civil society needs a much deeper and wider interior view", radically argues for, among other things, the place of magic and witchcraft in it.

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<sup>44</sup> His other legitimate fear is that "it is not always clear within the research literature or within political discourse whether what is being referred to is a discussion of civil society as an analytical concept or as an actually existing social form." (2002,4).

This may not be as strange as it sounds. In the introduction to their thoughtful and provocative collection of essays, John and Jean Comaroff (op. cit) also map out possible directions for anthropological studies of civil society in Africa, specifically emphasising the need for studies that “... disinter the cultural seedbeds and historical sources of anything that might be regarded as an analogue of civil society in Africa”, and for those few that consider

“the sorts of public sphere presumed by specifically *African* relations of production and exchange, codes of conduct, or styles of social intercourse, by *African* markets, credit associations, informal economies, collective ritual, modes of aesthetic expression, discourses of magic and reason; by the various strands, in other words, that “weave the fabric” of the civil here beyond the official purview of governance” (1999: 23).

Chan, the Comaroffs and others are iconic of a growing body of literature that has notably been grappling with how “different local meanings (are) being created around the concept as part of an increasingly universal negotiation between citizens, states and markets” (Lewis 2002, 4). The story of this revolutionary intellectual ferment (what earlier I called the alternative genealogy of civil society) is told in the section that follows.

## **2.4 Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society**

The analysis in this section will focus on the recent emergence of alternative conceptions of civil society in the non-Western world. As declared earlier, this is the broad conceptual framework for the thesis, the intellectual umbrella under which our reflection on civil society in Nigeria takes refuge. This analysis will be meaningless

without explaining the origins of these alternative conceptions and the issues in the literature which have made them urgent. This is what I do next, after which I will attempt to summarise the main arguments of this body of knowledge.

#### **2.4.1 Western-centric Paradigms**

Intricately bound up with the conceptual biography of civil society is the issue of its nativity. As I indicated in the last chapter, the belief that (an actually existing) civil society is part of the ethical heritage of the west (its achievement as Hegel triumphantly proclaims) has always existed, in seeming opposition to the view that it (civil society) is best conceived as an “imagination by which philosophers and sociologists have attempted to explain those relationships which we do not directly experience” (Tester 1992, 14). One notable aspect of the contemporary revival of the idea of civil society is the analytic privilege accorded the former, which is the perspective that civil society is historically specific and being “... a social form among others: preaching it in conditions which do not permit it is pointless” (Gellner 1994, 211).

This critical disposition, virtually personified by Gellner (who equates civil society with ‘Atlantic society’), is a highly influential one, and analytic justice demands that it be carefully outlined.

Can civil society be used to analyse social and political dynamics in non-Western milieus? This question, a notorious sticking point among scholars in recent times, and arguably the animating force behind the alternative genealogy of civil

society, has generated a culturally charged debate between its protagonists and antagonists.

Gellner's skepticism about the relevance of civil society to non-Western social formations is well known. This doubt, systematically argued in his *Conditions of Liberty Civil Society and Its Rivals* (1994, 103) is predicated on four related arguments which can be summarised thus: first, that "segmentary non-Western societies are undermined by "awesome ritual"; second, that such societies are characterised by "Ritual-pervaded cousinsly republics, not to mention, of course, outright dictatorships or patrimonial societies" (Gellner 1994, 43); third, that "traditional man" (clearly the philosophical opposite of his Western 'modular man') is subject to the "tyranny of cousins" (1994, 7); and fourth, that even though associations (being a condition for the existence of civil society) may exist within non-Western contexts, "they are usually underwritten by ritual and a whole set of inside relationships" (1994, 103).

Further expatiation will help illuminate these arguments. What makes civil society, this unique "endowment of Atlantic Society" (p. 13) irreproducible in other cultural systems? Gellner laments the presence in them (his favourite examples are Marxist and Islamic societies, but the assumption of universal application is undisguised) of the undermining force of "awesome ritual" and the "tyranny of cousins". For him, in the case of the world of Islam for instance, the exiguity (if not total absence) of the necessary cultural condiments is aggravated by the fact that it "exemplifies a social order which seems to lack much capacity to provide political countervailing institutions, which is atomised without much individualism, and

operates effectively without intellectual pluralism” (p.29). As for Africa, the prevalence of “ritual-pervaded cousingly republics” and “traditional man” contrasts rather sharply with the situation in the ‘Atlantic Society’ where the existence of “economic decentralisation” and the ‘modular man’ has provided a guarantee for the existence of civil society.

Gellner’s exultation at the achievements of Atlantic (Western) society often grates, but perhaps understandably so, for apparently without this cultural essentialism there would be no basis for his theory of civil society. Unsurprisingly therefore, his thesis privileges the role of culture as the immovable foundation on which the achievement of civil society rests. This cultural determinism is seen for example in the following:

Men are born into and live within the institutions and culture of their society, which they often take for granted, roughly in the manner in which they speak prose. They are made by the culture they live in, and do not come to it fully formed and able to ‘choose’ a society which pleases them. A culture is a system of prejudgment. Social institutions and cultures are seldom chosen: they are our fate, not our choice (p.185).

If culture is a system of prejudgment (a point that would seem to be valid all by itself, but for Gellner’s refusal to contemplate the possibility that cultures do change, and that men can have a profound impact on the cultures into which they are born), the fate of “segmentary societies” with regard to the possibility of civil society would seem to have been sealed *a priori*. In any case, if he is to be believed, even though there may exist a surfeit of associations within these societies, such are usually “total, many-stranded, underwritten by ritual and made stable through being linked to a

whole inside set of relationships” (p.100). In addition, their fundamental characteristics negate the essence of civil society as “a cluster of institutions and associations strong enough to prevent tyranny, but which are nonetheless entered and left freely, rather than *imposed by birth or sustained by awesome ritual*” (italics added) (p.103). Philosophically speaking, and perhaps this is the locus of his argument, Gellner is cynical of the possibility of civil society in “segmentary societies” “because the sub-communities on which they depend are too stifling for modern individualism.” (p. 29)

Before considering the logical issues raised by Gellner, I will attempt to interrogate further the contentions of the body of knowledge of which he is representative. This is necessary because, as pointed out earlier, Gellner is emblematic of a tendency that has a long pedigree. A scrutiny of the work of other scholars of a similar persuasion is thus clearly important.

The denial of the possibility of civil society in non-Western contexts spins on two apparently related axes. The first predicates its doubt on the argument that since civil society emerged at a specific conjuncture in Western political history, using it in non-Western situations is at best inappropriate, and, at worst, ill-conceived. Interestingly, a good number of African and Africanist scholars are also of this view. Ekeh (1992, 188) has warned, for instance, of the danger of “...misapplying Western political constructs to African circumstances, especially when their analyses concern such history-soaked concepts as civil society”. Similar doubts have been expressed by others, including Chandhoke (2001), Orvis (2001), Mamdani (1997), Hutchful (1996), Callaghy (1994), Kunz (1995), Gyimah-Boadi (1997), and Darnolf (1997).

In strict typology, this strand of scepticism seems radically opposed to the cynicism of those who locate their argument within a cultural essentialist paradigm. This is the intellectual movement to which Gellner and others belong, and their argument borders on the construction of non-Western societies in terms of what Mudimbe (1994) calls the “paradigm of difference”, or the ‘uncivil other’. As I have argued earlier, this position that civil society “reflects not only a particular stage of historical development in the West but the particular conditions that obtained there and not necessarily in other parts of the world” (Gellner 1994, 169) transcends Gellner alone, and a brief examination of the writings of a few other scholars of that persuasion will illustrate this point.

First is Adam Ferguson, whose *Essay on the History of Civil Society* is widely regarded as setting the benchmark for the non-religious justification for the existence of civil society, and who dismisses Africa because of the perceived “weakness in the genius of its people” (1980, 110). I have already quoted him at some length earlier in this chapter.

A second more contemporary thinker is Adam Seligman (1992, 169) who anchors his denial of the possibility of civil society in a non-Western milieu on three foundations. The first is his belief that “...civil society reflects not only a particular stage of historical development in the West but the particular conditions that obtained there and not necessarily in other parts of the world”. The second argument seems even more foundational. This relates to the question of the role of the individual actor within non-western societies, one that was also raised by Gellner. According to

Seligman (1992, 202-3), the virtual assimilation of the individual by the rest of the community vitiates the emergence of anything bordering on a decent civil society. Alluding specifically to Eastern European communities (significantly, the characteristics isolated here have also been used to define the African condition); he sees a problem in the fact that “the individual actor is... firmly embedded within communal, mostly primordial attributes that define the individual in his or her opposition to the State”.

His third ground for scepticism is the issue of ethnicity. Ethnic divisions, Seligman (1992, 202) argues, “pose serious questions about the viability of the idea of civil society in a political sense, *at least in societies characterised by ethnic and national heterogeneity* (as opposed to the homogeneity of certain Scandinavian countries)” (italics added).

For clarity, the basic arguments of what might be call the ‘civil society-as-Atlantic society’ school<sup>45</sup>, can be summarised as follows. First, it is held that civil society, being an outcome of specific processes in the West, is irreproducible outside that self-same geo-political ambience.

A second argument, in a way a corollary of the first, is to view civil society as connoting the possession of certain values (for example privacy, individualism and the market) which are present in and actually define the West but are, alas, largely absent in non-Western contexts. In this light, civil society becomes what the West has but ‘others’ don’t, others in this context ranging from other cultures to other socio-

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<sup>45</sup> This is a direct allusion to Gellner.



political systems, or at times a combination of both. Within this understanding, Jack Goody notes, civil society becomes ‘like human rights... what authoritarian regimes lack by definition. It is what the Greeks, the Enlightenment and we today have; it is what despotic governments, whether in the past or the present, the here or the elsewhere, do not have’ (Goody 2001: 150) It is also, as noted earlier, an understanding that confirms Goody’s (2001, 149) wry observation that from time to time (or indeed for some time now), civil society appears to have been used to “denigrate the other”.

A third complementary understanding of civil society from within this Western-centric paradigm is its conceptualisation as the highest (and qualitatively the purest) in the hierarchy of types of society achieved by different cultural communities. According to this notion, the idea of civil society could be used to separate (non-Western) societies that are rooted in monarchism and absolutism from those (obviously Western) in which there is a “regulatory framework accepted by all”. (Howell and Pearce 2001: 21). The former, presumably, is the domain of the uncivil, and the latter the civil. I shall have more to say about this ethical bifurcation as the thesis proceeds.

The foregoing is a summary of the proposition that civil society has no explanatory usefulness in non-Western milieux. While it may be true, as Hann and Dunn (1996) have observed, and Lewis (2002) has reminded us, that the proposition itself tends to mask the fact that even *within* Western contexts, there is also little agreement regarding civil society’s “relevance and practical utility” (Lewis 2002, 4), it goes without saying that the proposition helps call attention to some pertinent questions. For example, can we meaningfully talk about civil society in a situation

where the kind of individuality that Gellner (1994) and Seligman (1992) consider as critical is absent? Is civil society possible within a communal setting where ethnic categories are dominant? What makes civil society thinkable, for instance, in Islamic societies about which Gellner concludes thus: "The expectation of some additional civil society, which could hold the state to account, on top of the Umma defined as a shared commitment to the implementation of the Law, would seem almost impious, but in any case *unrealistic*."? (p. 28) (*italics added*). What, crucially, might civil society mean in Nigeria where, admittedly, these controversial elements are present in different degrees?

These and other pertinent questions have spawned a new body of work, and it is to this literature that I now turn.

#### **2.4.2 The Case Against the Western-centric Paradigm**

Even political formations in West Africa lacking any consolidated form of the state reveal 'some space for manoeuvre between the personal and the public'. They, too, have specific norms and normative codes through which people are made accountable and responsible to other members of society. This is the broader meaning of civil society, and it can be fruitfully explored in all types of human society (Hann 1996, 20).

Can civil society be usefully invoked cross-culturally? How, if at all, should civil society be used to describe social processes in non-Western contexts? What does the 'broader meaning' suggested above translate into empirically?

Answers to these queries have been as diverse as the number of scholars who have vouchsafed them. In his study of the possible usefulness of civil society in the

African context, Lewis (2002) reduces these answers to a possible four. The first is an affirmation that civil society can be usefully invoked cross-culturally based on the imagination of prescriptive universalism, or “the idea of a positive, universalist view of the desirability of civil society as part of the...project of building and strengthening democracy around the world.” (Lewis 2002, 6). A second answer has been to deny the usefulness of civil society in non-Western contexts based on a strict adherence to the principles of ‘Western exceptionalism.’ As the argument goes, using civil society to analyse realities outside the West amounts to “underestimating the analytic and inspirational power of the term.” (Lewis, p.13). Callaghy (1994), who describes civil society as a “vague, often confusing and ever shifting concept” (p. 236) succinctly sums up this perspective thus: “We do not need a new or imported concept, with all its attendant historically specific baggage” (p. 248). A third identified response, a half-way house between measured application and wholesale rejection, takes the middle course by specifying a set of narrow conditions within which the use of the idea can be justified. Famously, Blaney and Pasha (1993) rejected existing conceptualisation of civil society in the Third World for being inattentive to “structure and process”. And in his analysis of civil society in Africa, Orvis (2001) seems to encapsulate this perspective when he argues that:

While we clearly should not import the concept wholesale from the West, it makes little sense to create a definition that is totally unrelated to the centuries’ long, Western tradition. The challenge is to create a concept clearly part of the Western tradition, precise enough to have analytical utility, and able to include and reflect the rich associational life of contemporary Africa (p. 20).

A fourth possible answer is to argue that the question of whether civil society can be usefully invoked outside the West is superfluous because it is the wrong question to ask *ab initio*. According to this outlook, the question misses the point because it ignores the manifest ways in which civil society has been used in multiple socio-political and religious traditions. In addition, according to this perspective, the issue of the applicability of civil society to non-Western situations is a moot point as over time, the concept has tended to become “indispensable to conceptualise politics” (Chabal 1992, 93) in the non-Western world. Chambers (2002, 8) further underscores the same point when she notes that in several non-Western societies, civil society has become the “social basis of a democratic public sphere through which a culture of inequality can be dismantled”; while Kaldor (2002, 66) argues in a similar vein that civil society “has become an emancipatory banner, a platform on which different marginalized groups have challenged for access to power and resources”.

The alternative genealogy of civil society arguably draws intellectual inspiration from both the first and last of the possible responses identified above. Essentially, the aim has been not only to argue theoretically that civil society can be a useful analytic tool in explicating facets of social life outside the West, but also to demonstrate empirically how this can be done. This thesis subscribes to this analytic tradition. Thus the welter of studies relating to civil society in the Islamic world (Hanafi 2002, Hefner 2000, Kamali 1998, Khatami 2000, Goldberg, et al 1993, Norton 1995, Esposito 1996, Kamel al-Sayyid 1995, Watts 1996, Sullivan and Abed-Kotob 1999, Mitsuo, et al 2001, Kelsay 2002, Kazemi 2002, Kamrava 2001); Christianity and civil society (Coleman 2002, Banner 2002, Stackhouse 2002); civil society in the context of Chinese history (Metzger 2001) Confucian conceptions of

civil society (Nosco 2002, Masden 2002); Judaism and civil society (Stone 2002, Zohar 2002); and a growing body of work on the feminist conception of civil society (Phillips 2002, Howell and Mulligan 2004).

By their very nature, discourses embody profound intellectual tensions, and one is by no means suggesting that the alternative genealogy is monolithic. Indeed, in a later chapter, a case is developed for the recognition of its inherent plurality. For the moment though, I am content to reveal some of the evident fissures and the discourse within the Islamic conceptions is a good example.

While within this specific framework, the overriding intellectual aim has been to prove the applicability of civil society to the world of Islam, or at least demonstrate that both are not necessarily mutually exclusive, there is an equally distinguished analytic lineage that dissents from this mainstream. Serif Mardin (1995, 278), the Turkish sociologist who argues that “civil society is a Western dream, a historical aspiration” (p.?) is a fine illustration. Nevertheless, the main predilection within this sub-paradigm has tilted overwhelmingly towards a positive affirmation of the usefulness of civil society to Islamic societies.

The case against Islamic societies, which were mentioned earlier, has been summed up by Hefner (2000, vii) as follows; that: “Islamic civilization...does not value intermediary institutions between the government and the people, thus precluding the emergence of civil society, and is based on a legal culture of rigidity, thus placing a premium on obedience and social conformity rather than on critical inquiry and individual initiative”.

The riposte has been equally fierce and illuminating. The broad philosophical underpinning for this body of literature (something akin to the prescriptive universalism that I alluded to earlier) is the principle that “in all societies there are values and practices that hover close to the ground and carry latent possibilities, some of which may have egalitarian and democratic possibilities” (Hefner 2000, 9).

Hefner attempts to show that in opposition to the prevalent wisdom, “Muslim politics is not monolithic but, like politics in all civilizations, plural” (p. 7); and that “contrary to the claims of conservative Islamists today, the medieval Muslim world also knew an extensive separation of religious authority from state authority” (ibid). At a much more fundamental level, he also attempts to expose as sheer mythology the notion of “...the Islamic state...based on a totalising understanding of Islamic law (Shari’ah) and a monopolistic fusion of religious and political authority” (pp. xvii-xviii).

Similarly, other Islamic scholars insist that the desire for civil society or decency is not “civilizationally circumscribed” (Hefner 2000, 221). A good example is Kamali (1998) who, situating his own narrative within the older “Western scepticism with respect to the internal capacity of Islam to foster democracy,” (p. xvi) argues that “Islamic civil society is grounded in *different cultural concepts* and institutional arrangements than (sic) its Western counterparts” (p. ix) (italics added). Defining civil society as “a social space where individuals and groups can interact and organise social life” (p. xvii), he claims that “Iran (for example) has had a civil society, but it differs significantly from that conceived of in Western societies. It is a

civil society of communities and institutions rather than individual citizens and their associations” (Kamali 1998, 11). To substantiate this claim, he points out that the creation and development of a traditional civil society in Iran dates back to the establishment of Shi’ite faith as the religion of Iran by the Safavids in 1501 (p. 11); and that in Iran, an independent public sphere has existed over centuries with the most important institution in this independent public sphere being the *manbar* (pulpit) (p. 37).

Kamali’s accent on the communal element of Islamic civil society is an important one, for it recalls the debate regarding the role of the individual (Gellner’s ‘modular man’, or Kant’s ‘unencumbered self’ (Sandel 1984, Jenkins 2001)) in the constitution of Western civil society. In Gellner’s view, “civil society is a cluster of institutions and associations strong enough to prevent tyranny, but which are, none the less, *entered and left freely*, rather than imposed by birth...” (Gellner 1994, 103) (*italics added*). By the logic of this conceptualisation, only an unencumbered individual, free from the shackles of communal life, can enter and leave associations freely. Kamali rejects this fundamentalist position by showing that in Iran at least, “civil society... is not directly conditioned by the existence of ‘sovereign’ and ‘free’ individuals, but by groups or communities and their institutions enjoying a significant degree of autonomy from the state” (p. 36).

Gellner has also been attacked for “using the notion of *umma* as a homogenous phenomenon existing all over the ‘Muslim world,’” (p. 247), a generalisation which neglects “the reality of different cultural and institutional

arrangements in the various Muslim societies” (ibid). Kamali deserves to be quoted at some length:

Gellner’s argument against the concept of an Islamic civil society is dubious in the face of historical facts of Iranian society, but also the Arab world’s. Neither in the Arab world nor in Iran was there ever a society consisting of a unified body called *umma*. The Islamic societies consisted of different ethnic, religious, and tribal groups who created a mosaic of diversity and pluralism. The ulama was a distinct and important group of civil society not only in Shi’ite Iran but also in the Arab world (p. 249)

He also argues that:

Gellner’s definition of the whole Muslim community as the same *umma* leads him to misunderstand contemporary social movements. He reduces social movements in Muslim countries...to merely nationalistic movements without any concern about social forces and power balances in these countries. Here again the territorial and particular differences in Muslim countries are neglected. He reduces the notion of culture to an abstract religious belief that determines socio-political structure of the ‘Muslim world’. In his argument, the Muslim world is a simple sum of *Muslim men* and *similar* entities of *umma*. The social adoption of Islam and the particular social development and historical events that led to the appearance of a mosaic of institutions and organisational arrangements in different countries is missing in his historical generalisations (pp. 247-8).

Kamali (1998, 249) caps his rejection of Gellner by noting that “the term civil society was not exclusively Western, although the definitions and meanings certainly varied. Islamic civil society was based on diversity”. For him, civil society was actually there at the very beginning of the establishment of the Islamic political order, an argument seemingly validated by the interesting observation that the first Islamic community was referred to as *al-mujtama’ al-madani* (civil society), “with civil here



indicating the establishment of the city that was composed of Muslim segments allied on tribal and geographic lines, as well as Jews and others who were allied on similar lines” (p. 249).

I have dwelled fairly extensively on the Islamic critique of the position on civil society championed by Gellner because of the overall implications for this study that this critique helps bring to the fore.<sup>46</sup> However, the larger issues raised by the Islamists, and more generally by the emerging body of knowledge within which their critique is located, are of huge significance. The refutation of Gellner’s argument that the ‘autonomous individual’ must be the locus of civil society, and the consequent insistence that a civil society ‘of communities’ is possible offers a platform for my analysis of civil society in Nigeria.

The African discourse takes after the preceding Islamic discourse in many ways. While there is clearly a larger project of claiming joint conceptual ownership of civil society, deep fissures are also evident. Thus, while some scholars affirm the usefulness and relevance of civil society to African processes, others remain largely sceptical.

In addressing the latter first, it is useful to note that their main grouse is not with the relevance of civil society to Africa *per se*, but deeper reservations about whether an idea which cannot be held down to a particular definition, or even a set of meanings, can be useful in explaining dynamic social processes, including Africa’s. Callaghy (1994) for one doubts “whether civil society as commonly defined can do

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<sup>46</sup> Although on occasion, such critics themselves have syllogistically fallen foul of the same charge of generalisation that they level against their conceptual opponents

much to elucidate important processes in contemporary Africa, can do more than label them vaguely, can be more than a “metaphor masquerading as a player” (1994: 235). He continues: ‘The current search for “civil society” is much like the long Africanist flirtation with class analysis; you often “find” what you go looking for if you just try hard enough. In the case of civil society, I would argue that there is even less reality out there than with “classes”’ (1994, 250).

Similarly, Hutchful warns that

As a historical moment... the notion (civil society) is associated with fundamental transformations in western society and economy that do not *necessarily* apply to the African condition (capitalist modernisation, urbanisation, the communications revolution and growth of literacy, the dissolution of traditional bonds and the decline of religious consciousness<sup>47</sup> (Italics added).

By contrast, he concludes, ‘African “associational life” is most often made up of ascriptive groupings (organisations one is born into) rather than voluntary ones, and ones that may be entwined with the State and ravaged by outside forces (ethnicity, sectarianism, etc)’.<sup>48</sup>

Two interrelated issues emerge here. The first is the rejection of civil society based on its valid appreciation as a foreign concept. The second issue, one that has been further explored in more recent African discourses of civil society, is the rejection of civil society because of its presumed incompatibility with some basic elements of the African socio-cultural make-up. This problem is what Hutchful’s allusion above to Africa’s plethora of ascriptive groupings aims to capture. This

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Van Rooy (1998: 22).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

position is also quite significant, especially as it recalls the arguments of the 'civil society-as- Atlantic society' school, that I mentioned earlier.

Be that as it may, it does raise certain pertinent questions about the nature of civil society in Africa, and non-Western societies for that matter. For example, does the presence of ascriptive groupings necessarily militate against or make civil society impossible? What are the implications of Hutchful's 'outside forces', ethnicity and sectarianism<sup>49</sup>, for civil society? Is Africa really as culturally exceptional as this reasoning would partly suggest?<sup>50</sup>

While robust answers to these questions may not be provided here, we can at least note that they have formed part of a larger debate in the theoretical literature on the relationship between kinship, ethnicity and civil society (Barber 2001, Varshney 2001). It is important to dwell on them, however briefly, in order to gain an insight into the reasoning behind the position of those who, in the broadest terms, doubt the applicability civil society to African social and political processes, and the possible theoretical implications of this skepticism. The argument of this school, especially the part of it relating to kinship, seems to have been well summed up by Ekeh thus:

The... problem confronting the successful adoption of the elements of civil society in Africa concerns the relationships between individuals and kinship... Kinship will continue to be relevant in the lives of millions of Africans who are either threatened by the state or else ignored by its agencies. Yet kinship distorts the expansiveness and universalism of civil society. Civil society requires that the worth of the unique individual be recognised beyond his or her ethnic group. *However, the*

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<sup>49</sup> For more on this, see Bayart (1986) and Keane (1998).

<sup>50</sup> There is also the logically prior issue of the appropriateness of regarding Africa as a single, undifferentiated political and sociological unit. For more on this see Taiwo (1998), Zeleza (2002) and Mudimbe (1994)

*ideology of kinship imposes restrictions on the moral worth of individuals, with those from outside its domain being more morally valued than the kinsfolk... the universalism of civil society helps to offer common moral empathy, whereas kinship is restrictive in its meaning of freedom.* The dilemma of African politics is that the ineptitude of the state emboldens kinship and its organization of ethnic groupings which in turn threatens the operation of civil society appears' (Ekeh 1998, 123) (Italics added).

To advance the discussion, such doubts must be counterbalanced with the arguments of the opposing school, which in general is much more convinced of the usefulness of civil society for elucidating African social processes. This is the school to which this thesis belongs. While its proponents do not doubt the fact of the western provenance of civil society as an idea, they nonetheless argue that an African civil society is not necessarily a contradiction in terms, the undeniable salience of factors like ethnicity and kinship notwithstanding. According to Michael Bratton (1989, 411) for instance, "While many pre-colonial cultures in Africa may have lacked states, they certainly did not lack civil societies, in the broad sense of a bevy of institutions for protecting collective interests".

In making this argument, Bratton, and indeed the majority of scholars of a similar disposition, anchors his reasoning on a particular understanding of civil society. This is based on a 'diluted' definition that locates civil society within the mainstream of developments associated with its most recent reincarnation - the struggle for political liberalisation and democratisation of the public sphere. It is in this sense, arguably, that Bratton talks of 'the broad sense of a bevy of institutions for protecting collective interests' (Bratton 1989, 411).

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that civil society is not only useful in describing social dynamics in Africa, it is actually a categorical imperative, a point which is further underscored by the discussion in the next chapter. Such indeed is the interpretive vista opened up by this radical interpretation, the basis of which is that civil society is *not*, as Lars Jorgensen (1996, 40) said, “the prerogative of European-type industrialised countries”. According to him, “In any country, its citizens need to organise to protect their families, develop their agriculture or crafts, form some health service or educational initiative, arrange for their burials and so on. The balance to be struck with the other social sectors varies from country to country and period to period” (Ibid). In addition, Harbeson (1994: 27) argues that “... civil society by definition roots political values in culturally specific value systems and is thus singularly valuable in *overcoming* and counteracting ethnocentrism”.

These latter contentions suggest radical possibilities for the study and analysis of civil society, and at the very least anticipate the variety of ways in which civil society is imagined by various political and social communities outside the West. Howell and Pearce (2001, 36) summarise the trend as follows:

In many cultures and societies as distinct as South Korea, Palestine, and India, civil society is used in some form to express opposition, whether to the elites of a given country or to global capitalist development writ large... For all of these groups, the most common thread is the use of the concept of civil society to legitimise their right to resist the prevailing development paradigm. In so doing they have shown that the liberal meanings of this concept are now truly contested. For some, these liberal meanings have weakened civil society and emptied it of any real content and meaning; *for others, civil society has enabled critical*

*voices to occupy an intellectual space where an alternative set of values and propositions on how societies ought to develop and change can be put forward, challenging those that would otherwise dominate. (Italics added).*

Presumably too, this is the kind of vision Chan had when he argued for a “sustained articulation of the varieties of civil society that may be possible and definable” (2002, 20). This takes us to the issue of whether scholarship on civil society in Nigeria has begun to grapple with this emergent challenge. In other words, given the implications of the principles of the alternative genealogy (as outlined by John and Jean Comaroff and Chan among others) for the understanding of civil society in general, how has the relevant literature on Nigeria responded? In order to be able to answer these questions, a critical exploration of the same literature is essential. This is the focus of the next chapter.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Civil Society in Nigeria: A Critical Review of the Literature**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In the last chapter, I attempted an historical overview of the idea of civil society. I was able to show that over time, the meaning of the term has been heavily contested by scholars. It also emerged that in this its most recent incarnation, the idea of civil society arose in the former Eastern Europe and Latin America in the context of a historical imperative to contain the powers of the state. This seems to confirm the wisdom in the literature that the idea has usually gained appeal in moments of social upheaval. Nevertheless, the situation remains foggy at the level of discourse as doubts continue to be expressed about the relevance of the idea to Gellner's 'non-modular' societies, particularly Africa and Asia.

These doubts have provoked a counter-paradigm of discourse which attempts to construct an alternative genealogy of civil society. This alternative genealogy, despite being itself riddled by tensions and contradictions, provides the intellectual framework for this thesis. In this chapter, the existing literature on civil society in Nigeria is critically reviewed, as this is the chosen domain of research. There are two clear aims: to trace the emergence of the Nigerian discourse of civil society; and also to understand how this literature conceptualises civil society. It is also concerned with the extent to which the literature in Nigeria, can be said to be philosophically coherent with the alternative genealogy, of which it is a part. Because the civil society discourse arose as part of the history of Nigeria's recent struggle for political

liberalisation, the approach adopted in the chapter is to creatively embed the literature itself, within this historical construct. Where necessary, references are also made to developments in other parts of the continent.

### **3.2 The Context: How Civil Society Discovered<sup>51</sup> Nigeria**

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is, as has been noted before, steeped in manifold social and political contradictions. Since it became an independent political entity in 1960 after decades of British colonial overlordship, martial rule by a succession of military despots has been the rule rather than the exception.<sup>52</sup> At the best of times, the populace has been caught between the Scylla of unaccountable military rulers and the Charybdis of self-serving politicians, and social protest and the struggle for political reform has often been animated by the felt need to reclaim the contents of actual citizenship.<sup>53</sup>

Civil society discourse in Nigeria was therefore forged in the depths of the struggle against what Apter (1999) calls "the politics of illusion". Apter's analysis duly laments the spectacular corruption and mass manipulation that apparently set apart the era of General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993)<sup>54</sup> from other (military or civilian) regimes in the annals of Nigerian history, even though Babangida's pales into relative insignificance when compared with General Sani Abacha's heavy handed

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<sup>51</sup> Mustapha (1998) uses this reversal to illustrate the general fact that the concept descended "from non-African sources."

<sup>52</sup> The first armed intervention in politics took place in January 1966, six years after the country wrested political independence from the British. In the last two decades, the military have been in power for almost fifteen years. The current civilian Third Republic under Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military ruler between 1976-1979, was inaugurated in May 1999.

<sup>53</sup> For an excellent overview of Nigeria's political history since political independence in 1960, see Osaghae (1998).

<sup>54</sup> See Appendix A for a chronology of Nigeria's political leaders since political independence.



rule (1993-1998). In what follows, I attempt to demonstrate, *inter alia*, that the provenance of the discourse on civil society in Nigeria is best traced to the complex dynamics of elite and mass mobilisation against military rule, particularly the military regime of General Babangida, and the subsequent struggle to institutionalise democratic ethos in the country.

This, in some ways, is a familiar narrative. Across the African continent at large, the language of civil society appears to have been born in the late 1980s and early 1990s amid the showdown between popular democratic forces and autocratic rulers and structures (Diouf 1998, Oyediran and Agbaje 1999, Ihonvbere 1996). In actual fact, the rash of constitutional conferences that generally climaxed in the unceremonious departure from office of a good number of African dictators is generally taken in the literature as evidence of civil societies in full flush (Nwokedi 1995, Omitoogun and Otite 1996). Yet, if anything was new at all, it was the concept of civil society, certainly not the critical energy that it sought to capture, and an energy which had always been a formidable presence in societies across the continent. More light is shed on this presently.

This review of existing literature on civil society in Nigeria will be mindful of this important distinction. Next, I will consider the context in which the idea of civil society emerged.

### **3.3 Structural Adjustment, Popular Resistance, and the Emergence of the Discourse of Civil Society in Nigeria**

Since the beginning of the 1980s, Nigeria's economic indices have been on a downward spiral, indicating a serious crisis. More than two decades after, this crisis shows little signs of abating, and many would argue that it has actually deepened. The central features of this economic depression have been identified as follows: declining export revenue, falling industrial production, and the inevitable contraction of the manufacturing sector. At the same time, the reliance on oil as the main foreign exchange earner appears to have made matters worse, as the general instability in the global oil market seems to have hit the country doubly hard (Soyibo 1999). As many commentators have observed, the crisis of the 1980s appears to have caught the country completely wrong footed. Nigeria had profited immensely from the two 'oil shocks' of the 1970s, leading the then military ruler, General Yakubu Gowon, to famously declare that Nigeria's problem was not money, but how to spend it.

Such injudiciousness was more of the rule than the exception, and it was only a matter of time before the general fiscal recklessness would start to take its toll on the country. By the mid-1980s, the growing turbulence in the global oil market and the persistent failure to increase non-oil exports significantly had taken Nigeria to the very brink of complete economic collapse. On October 1<sup>st</sup> 1985, the regime of General Babangida which had assumed power two months earlier on August 27<sup>th</sup> 1985, declared a fifteen-month state of economic emergency, which was followed by the introduction of a World Bank/International Monetary Fund (IMF) Structural Adjustment Programme in 1986.

The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) had many objectives. Among them were “the restructuring and diversification of the Nigerian economy in order to reduce the country’s dependence on the oil sector and imports,” and “the achievement of fiscal and balance of payment viability for the country in the short to medium term.” (Olukoshi 1993, 60). Whether these aims were ever achieved is still hotly debated. What is beyond any doubt however is the severe impact that SAP had on the underprivileged majority in the country.

Several scholars have noted that SAP<sup>55</sup>, while arguably sound in conception, was nevertheless hijacked to serve the narrow interests of the Nigerian ruling elite. At all events, the consequences of its implementation (distortion?) for the mass of the citizenry were nothing short of tragic. Declining industrial production meant that unemployment figures trebled over the course of a year, and despite the endless removal of subsidies, the government still could not find a solution to the problem of perennial fuel shortages. The weakening of the national currency, the Naira, also meant a decline in the purchasing power of workers. Olukoshi (1993) has summarised the overall effects of SAP thus:

As a result of SAP, a vicious inflationary cycle (is) presently at work in the Nigerian economy in which devaluation and high interest rates lead to high costs of production which, in turn, reflect themselves in highly priced commodities and an ever-growing wholesale and retail price index which, in turn, leads the government to tighten further the liquidity and credit squeeze, thereby increasing the cost of production in the context of an ever-dwindling Naira, and which, in turn, means even higher costs of production and higher wholesale and retail prices...In the context of an almost ten-fold decline in real incomes between 1986 and 1990, many Nigerians have

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<sup>55</sup> An extensive literature exists on the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in Nigeria, particularly its consequences for the urban poor. See for example Okome 1999, Anyanwu 1997, and Beckman and Sachikonye 2001.

found that they simply cannot afford basic consumer goods and even certain categories of food items which were taken for granted by most households (pp. 66-67).

The net effect of this situation- popular disaffection- was almost predictable. Beckman (2001, 75) makes the important observation that "...military rule in Nigeria was imposed on a society which had developed a plural associational life that was only weakly linked to the state, and often highly resentful of state interference." As discontent spread through the entire society, it was this existing plurality of associations that saw to its effective canalisation. In May 1989, spontaneous pockets of riots in different parts of the country finally exploded in the so-called anti-SAP riots, which the Babangida regime repressed with extreme savagery (Diamond 1995)

Yet, the anti-SAP riots which brought together an epic coalition of university students, professionals and workers' unions across the country were as much a protest against deteriorating economic conditions, as they were an uprising against the perceived assault on fundamental political rights, by the praetorian state. In 1987, the Babangida regime (1985-1993) had inaugurated a Programme of Transition to Civil Rule which was expected to culminate in the transfer of political power to an elected government in 1990. However, the Programme was dogged by inconsistency right from the beginning, and in time, it actually emerged that the purportedly impartial umpire, General Ibrahim Babangida, was himself interested in the ultimate prize: civilian presidency. Suffice to add that 1990, like every other date that was scheduled afterwards for the planned hand over of power, came and went with the reins still firmly in the hands of the self-proclaimed military president, who fiddled endlessly with the programme of transition. Babatope (1995) notes for example that by the time

General Babangida cancelled the presidential elections of 12 June 1993, the Transition to Civil Rule programme had already been amended 62 times (p. 32).

Infidelity to a programme of democratic transition and cascading economic fortunes were always going to be a deadly combination, and this was soon manifested in mounting public restlessness, which the military felt compelled to pacify with a slew of draconic measures. Such measures, for their part, only seem to have strengthened the public determination to resist. By the time the Babangida regime annulled the presidential elections of 12 June 1993, eleven days later on June 23<sup>56</sup> the stage was already set for arguably the most formidable coalition of Nigerian workers' representatives, human rights bodies, professional groups, trade unions, student groups, and just about anyone who had a grouse against the military dominated social order. The media and other public commentators were quick to designate this unique ensemble of social forces 'civil society'.

But where did the idea of civil society come from, and how did it become insinuated into the register of the mass media and more critical scholarship in the country? To be sure, there are no simple answers to these questions. Mustapha (1998) has mapped out a decidedly circuitous route involving a combination of International Financial Institutions and what he calls 'a school of American political scientists', among other critical agents. To this I would like to add that altogether oblique, though palpable, osmotic process through which ideas in general are transported across national and cultural boundaries. Thus, while it may be true that those actors identified by Mustapha may have been responsible for the dissemination of a certain

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<sup>56</sup> Apparently the freest and fairest election in Nigeria's electoral history, the 12 June presidential vote is believed to have been won by M.K.O. Abiola, aspirant on the platform of the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

conception of civil society<sup>57</sup>, it is no less true that the concept was being increasingly used, especially in the mass media, to describe both the incipient coalition that had been formed to challenge military rule, *and* following that the different social groupings that constituted this coalition. The inspiration however was distinctly East European, as implicated by copious references to what the burgeoning opposition to military autocracy could learn from the civil society-driven revolution in Eastern Europe.<sup>58</sup>

One thing is clear at this point: civil society did not enter the popular or scholarly vocabulary until the early 1990s, in tandem with the crystallising of popular discontent against military rule and depression in the economic realm. The discourse on civil society in Nigeria could therefore be said to be a product of the clash of two opposing desires, one, the appetite of the military's highest echelons for social homogenisation and domination; and the urge of a nascent coalition of pro-democracy and anti-Structural Adjustment forces for political liberalisation and economic empowerment.

As I mentioned earlier, this was a movement that was noticeable throughout the African continent, and Young (1994) seemingly confirms this as follows:

Although civil society as a trope, a collective signifier for a politically defined human aggregate, has antique lineage, only during the 1980s did it acquire widespread currency in comparative African analysis and, indeed, more generally in everyday discourse...An increasingly assertive East European and Soviet intelligentsia characterized the space grudgingly abandoned by retreating state socialism as civil society, through which the last redoubts of a discredited

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<sup>57</sup> Those Markovitz calls "mainstream social scientists" promoting "an establishment civil society." (2002, 124).

<sup>58</sup> See for example Ganger and Umar (1998)

“totalitarianism” could be breached. The global pressures for democratization that swept across Africa and other regions in the late 1980s gave added force to these trends. (p. 219).

One other striking dimension to this process of “lexical resurrection” (Ibid) is that, arguably, for the first time, individuals and groupings that were central to this open challenge to the state in Nigeria and indeed in other parts of the continent, began to refer to themselves as belonging to, and defending the values of, civil society. This is remarkable in the light of the realisation that even at the height of nationalist agitation in the 1950s and ‘60s by forces who sprung from the same socio-ideological ambience, the concept was completely absent, either as a collective denominator or as a rubric adopted by actors, to capture either themselves or their activities (Young 1994).

By the middle of the 1990s, the emergence of the idea of civil society was complete.

### **3.4 Literature on Civil Society in Nigeria: A Critical Overview**

There are two important observations here. The first is, that for all its popularity and ubiquity in everyday discourse, particularly in the general media, scholarly literature on civil society in Nigeria is surprisingly patchy. This seems to confirm earlier observations that ‘civil society’ is more casually invoked than rigorously analysed. It goes without saying that in this kind of atmosphere, the cause of conceptual clarification is hardly served, and the general ambiguity that came bound up with the revival of the term has only endured.

A second observation is the existence of what seems to be a general thematic fixation in the same literature, by which I refer to a certain tendency to discuss civil society either in relation to democratisation or the state. One is inclined to put this inclination down to the circumstances in which ‘civil society’ made an entry into the scholarly landscape in Nigeria.

As such, a literature which was, *ab initio*, democratisation-inspired, is now largely consolidation-driven. What this translates into is that while the initial preoccupation was with how civil society could add value to the democratisation process (Abutudu 1995, Lewis 1997, Gboyega 1995, Bradley 2003, Granger and Uba 1998, Fadahunsi 1998, Jua 1999) in the immediate post-military era, critical attention has shifted to the role of civil society in what is generally referred to as ‘the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria’ (Uya 2000, Uchendu 2000, Oyovbaire 2000, Fawole 2001, Director 2000, Walker 1999, Njoku 2001). Coupled with that is the equally notable rise in analyses of the role of different civil society groupings in the same process of democratic transition (In the case of the media for example, see Agbaje 1993, 1999, Dare 1997, Abati 1996; NGOs- Fawole 2001, Madunagu 2000, Enemuo and Momoh 1999, Momoh and Adejumobi 1999; and for the labour movement see Lakemfa 1998, Babawale, Olufemi and Adewunmi 2000, Ihonvbere 1996, Adewunmi and Adesina 1999).

That said, civil society did not begin to feature consistently as a subject of general social research until the middle of the 1990s. One notable exception, the volume edited by Caron, Gboyega, and Osaghae (1992), contains a chapter on the subject by Peter Ekeh. Ekeh’s trail-blazing “The Constitution of Civil Society in



African History and Publics,” which provides a fairly detailed portrait of the evolution of civil society and its obvious Western provenance. While he also dwells on the theme of the relevance of civil society to Africa’s cultural ecology, he appears particularly interested in challenging the popular notion regarding the perceived endemic weakness of the African state.

Ekeh’s most important contribution to civil society discourse in Nigeria is arguably his four-fold classification (1992, 201-207)<sup>59</sup> of what he calls “free associations” in Nigeria (1992, 201). This classification, it emerges, draws heavily on his landmark theoretical study of colonialism and the two publics in Africa (Ekeh 1975, 1998). His contention is that those who look for the roots of civil society in Africa within only “civic public associations” miss the point for, he argues, “beyond the civic realm, there are vast networks of associations of civil society whose capacities have hardly been measured in academic research.” (p. 207).

Although he concedes that “there are certain distinctive features<sup>60</sup> of these associations (of the primordial public)<sup>61</sup> that have not helped in promoting democracy and in defining individual liberties and respect for the human person in the abstract” (Ekeh 1992, 208), to ignore them however is to lose sight of one of the most profound truths about the associational landscape in Africa at large. This truth, according to him, is that even though associations of the civic public realm “may contribute toward

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<sup>59</sup> These are Civic Public Associations, Deviant Civic Associations, Primordial Public Associations, and Indigenous Development Associations.

<sup>60</sup> One such feature, according to Ekeh, is kinship which he considers to be “intrinsically segmentary”. (p. 208).

<sup>61</sup> For more on Ekeh’s analysis of the moral distinctions between the civic and primordial publics, see Ekeh 1975. For a critique, see Trager 2001.

generalized definitions of personal freedom and individual liberty in Africa,” (1992, 208)

Yet these are the associations that are within easy reach of the state because they operate in the public sphere that it controls and claims to own. They are therefore the most exposed and the weakest of the associations of civil society in Africa. This is what has contributed to the *appearance* of a civil society in Africa. (Ekeh 1992, 208) (*Italics added*).

In seeming contrast, primordial public associations are well outside the purview of the state and thus less susceptible, at least in theory, to the manipulations of an overweening state. In actual fact,

Although associated with ancient structures of kinship, these primordial publics are modern social formations whose goals are to enhance the collective welfare of unique primordial groupings in the modern circumstances of multiethnic and polyglot nation-states in Africa. As such they are well beyond the private interests that do not extend into the affairs of others. Indeed, primordial publics in, say, Nigeria, may involve the public behaviours of several million persons, stretching to the collective finances of their associations as well as their paid staff. *And they are not necessarily independent of the civic public realm.* As a matter of fact, their success often depends on how well they are able to exploit the resources of the state-related civic public realm. (Ekeh 1992, 205)

Ekeh’s insights provide a useful foundation for the criticism not only of the discourse on civil society in Nigeria, but also of the broader scholarship on civil society in the African context at large. For instance, by repudiating the ‘civil society as civic public associations’ tendency that is prevalent in the literature (Olukoshi 1997, Momoh 1998, Enemuo and Abubakar 1999, Bratton 1989, Lucas 1994), he opens up a fresh analytic vista that compels an inquiry not only into the specific

practices that obtain within such associations, but also into the civic potentials of seemingly kinship-bound primordial associations, and the actual relationship between them and civic public associations. He actually notes that “A reconciliation of the primordial public and the civic public realms through the values that they yield would be a fair approach in African circumstances,” but laments that “there appears to be little attempt in that direction.” (p. 208). This thesis makes a modest contribution in this respect.

Ekeh’s concerns successfully capture some of the emerging broad theoretical and empirical dilemmas in the general literature on civil society. These, briefly, may be posed as questions: What is the real nature of the relationship between civil society and ethnicity? Is a primordially-based civil society possible? (Obadare 2004). Is ethnicity bad for civil society? Is an ethnically based civil society really bad for democracy, as some scholars have maintained? (Srebrnik 2000). Can an association not based on voluntarism be considered to be part of civil society? And finally, could an ethnically based civil society produce civic ‘goods’? (Ikelegbe 2001, Adekson 2004).

Part of the argument is that existing literature on civil society in Nigeria does not seem to have engaged sufficiently with these questions. In fact, what Ikelegbe (2001, 1) calls “the perverse manifestation of civil society in Nigeria” seems in reality to be the rule rather than the exception in Nigeria and other African social formations. This observation apparently underscores the imperative for deeper empirical investigation into the character of actually existing civil society. While there has been a surfeit of studies of primordial associations (Adebanwi 2002, Ukiwo 2002, Akinyele

2001), they (the associations) are yet to be appreciated through the specific lens of civil society, with a view to using empirical data, to validate or repudiate, some of the claims made on their behalf in the theoretical literature. This oversight becomes more remarkable when it is realised that such primordial associations, for example the Odu'a People's Congress (OPC) and the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) have become such a crucial factor in Nigeria's new civilian dispensation.

The point therefore is that even though civil society had started "making the rounds" (Kukah 1999, vii) as far back as the late 1980s and early 1990s, it did not begin to make an appearance in the literature until the middle of the 90s. To illustrate, the majority of studies published during this period, which analysed the many twists and turns of the military-supervised transition programme, had little or nothing at all about the concept of civil society (Olowu, et al 1995). Yet, three years or so later, the initial trickle had swollen into a dam, a fact testified to by the number of studies which have devoted some chapters (in most cases one each) to civil society (Kukah 1999, Ibrahim 1997, Diamond, et al 1996, Aborisade and Mundt 1999)

If these emerging studies shared anything in common, it was the presumption of what Kukah (1999, vii) calls "the connection between the integral nature of civil society (sic) and democracy", one reason, perhaps, why they focused overwhelmingly on how the associations under inspection had contributed, or could contribute to, the cause of democracy. Even at that, a certain fuzziness emanating from the failure to trace the conceptual spoor of civil society and problematise it, can only mean that these studies simply assumed a straightforward equivalence between (civic public) associations and civil society, whereas the reality seems to point at least to something

essentially broader. Given this situation, it would seem that the debate over the weakness, or otherwise, of civil society in Nigeria which has obsessed some Nigerian scholars<sup>62</sup> is altogether misguided.

### **3.5 Conclusion: Civil Society in Nigeria and the Alternative Genealogy**

In the foregoing, I have adopted a critical-historical approach in tracing the emergence of the concept of civil society in Nigeria. In this regard, my argument has been that civil society as a concept is a product of both local and international dynamics. Regarding the former, I alluded to the struggle for economic enhancement and political empowerment within the context of mobilised opposition to military authoritarianism in the country, in the 1980s and 1990s. This challenge was part of the movement that is now freely accepted in the literature, after Huntington (1991), as the global “Third Wave” of democratisation. The various social groups involved in the mounting of that challenge thus came to be known and regarded themselves as “civil society”. The international aspect entailed the fallout of the process of de-Sovietisation in the former Eastern Europe, and the adoption of the concept of civil society by the opposition in the various countries to press their claims against a totalitarian state. We have shown that the appearance of the concept in popular and critical discourses in Nigeria cannot be understood outside the framework of the inspiration provided by events and processes in the former Soviet satellite countries.

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<sup>62</sup> Compare for instance the opposing views of Olukoshi (1997), Momoh (1998), and Abati (1996).

While 'civil society' ideas/organisations thus emerged in the early 1990s, research literature on it did not begin to flourish until the middle of the same decade. A number of deductions can be made based on my appraisal of this literature.

The first is that as a result of the circumstances surrounding the emergence of the concept, the civil society discourse in Nigeria has been democratisation-driven and is still largely in thrall to the imperatives of democratic consolidation. Kukah (1999) is a good example of the general presumption of a direct relationship between society and democracy.

Second, the literature appears to uncritically reify the largely Western equation of civil society with the realm of voluntary associations in opposition to the state. This has created two problems. The first is the general tendency to take single-issue Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) the majority of which have been formed over the past decade, as the sole and authentic expression of civil society. This, it must be underscored, is largely a global phenomenon, reinforced in part by the activities of NGOs themselves. According to Chandhoke, observing what she describes as the process by which history plays "tricks with well-meaning projects and inspiring concepts,

The idea of civil society was to be quickly hijacked by a relatively new set of actors that emerged on the national scene. These were non-governmental organisations, which were to intervene increasingly in areas crucial to collective life. In fact, these actors were to proceed upon their tasks on the blithe assumption that civil society means the non-governmental sector (Chandhoke 2002, 2).

Third, such, it seems, is the fascination with recently established, urban-based associations that the literature has largely ignored their interior lives, missing in the process, the disturbing moral congruence between them and the state domain.

Fourth, there seems to have been little or no conceptual progress in terms of grappling with either the various understandings, or the ambivalent moralities, of civil society in Nigeria. Nor has there been an attempt to suggest what the existence of both (a melange of understandings and ethical ambiguity) means for existing notions of civil society globally, and on the African continent. This thesis proposes to fill these gaps in the literature by, among other things, articulating a non-organisational understanding of civil society, and exposing two radically opposed images of this differently conceived civil society; thus cumulatively providing a basis for a rethink of other attributes normatively associated with civil society in Nigeria and Africa.

This kind of endeavour cannot but have its own problems, perhaps the most important of which is *how* best to carry it out. In the next chapter, I describe the methodology used in carrying out my research, focusing in the process on how I encountered the idea of civil society, why I settled for the approach that I eventually adopted, what I was able to achieve, and the limitations.

## Chapter 4

### Methodology

#### 4.1 Background- How I ‘Discovered’ Civil Society

How might the idea of civil society be studied at the empirical level, and with what units of analysis? What ought the researcher to look for, and how or when do they know for certain that they have found it? In any case, can civil society be *found*? Although this thesis focuses specifically on civil society in Nigeria, it is obvious that a consideration of these and related epistemological questions is inescapable if the research process and its eventual product are to have any secure foundation. The foregoing questions have dogged civil society research ever since its re-entry into global scholastic and policy discourses in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Guyer 1994, Edwards 2004), and an agreeable ‘resolution’ is still nowhere on the horizon, despite vast scholastic output on the subject. Part of the ‘blame’ for the existing conundrum inevitably derives from the larger problem of how civil society itself is defined. Although a universally agreed definition remains an intellectual mirage, a researcher must have at least a working definition, for this is what determines what they *look for*, and ultimately what they *find* or *not*.

But this is not without its own complications. Researchers, famously, are rooted in specific cultural and ideological matrixes, a factor which can have a determining impact on the process and outcome of their investigations. As such, the definition that is privileged is invariably shaped by one’s cultural and ideological



orientation. I will elaborate on this later in the chapter. An allied problem is that of motivation, which speaks to the *raison d'être* of the research itself.

The study of civil society, particularly in a non-Western society as Nigeria, furnishes an appropriate canvas for the exploration of these and kindred issues. As I illustrate presently, it provides a useful, if complex, template for a re-assessment of issues bordering on appropriate definition and how it determines the *object* of research, the context (both political and social) of the research, and the motivation of the researcher. For researching civil society in the West and doing the same in a non-Western society (in this case an African society) seem to be radically opposed enterprises. Logistical challenges apart, something I discovered in the field, suspicion of the researcher's intent appears to be an unavoidable aspect of the research process, a fact about which I will shed more light on presently. More important, it would seem as if the civil society researcher in the West and their academic counterpart in the South do not necessarily investigate the same phenomenon. For Fowler,

The dominant theoretical Anglo-American lens on civil society typically searches for a definition in relation to other dimensions of modern society, most commonly government, business and family. Here the definitional image of civil society is one of a bounded functional domain, sector, sphere or space inhabited by configurations of freely formed associations serving purposes that do not belong to, or are not adequately taken care of, by what is operating outside the boundaries. Typical units of analysis in this structural-functional approach are the *number*, *types* and *tasks* of associations located within the civic boundary (2002, 5) (emphases added).

While this "definitional image" seems to enjoy a degree of popularity in the West, a situation testified to by the considerable influence of organisation-centred studies by Anheier (2004), Salamon (1994), and Salamon and Anheier (1996) among

others, the situation in the developing world seems to be different. For one, the imagination of civil society as a “bounded functional domain...of freely formed associations” (Fowler 2002, 5) is certainly restrictive and inadequate in describing the realm of social life, known more for its vibrancy. Second, the schematic notion of social boundaries is functionally otiose in such contexts as Nigeria’s, where it seems to be much more useful to describe the social landscape in terms of cross-cutting layers. A third problem with this conceptual vision, which I already hinted at in the previous chapter, is the tendency to equate the ‘freely formed associations’ of civil society with the emergent NGO sector in parts of the developing world. As Lewis (2004, 9) has argued in the case of Bangladesh, for example, this can lead to the unfortunate situation whereby the long history of state/society struggles is obscured.

If these objections are valid, it means that in Nigeria, where, I advance, civil society comprises *both* organisational and other forms, the study of civil society may not necessarily lend itself to the tropes of “numbers, types and tasks”. How then might civil society be analysed?

Before going into further detail, it is appropriate that I indicate where I started from, in terms of analytic motivation, and what my research itself set out to achieve. Part of this has already been adumbrated in the introductory and foregoing chapters, but I will reiterate them here in depth for clarity.

My fascination with the subject of civil society dates back to a rather fortuitous encounter I had with a French journalist back in 1993 while working as an underground reporter for *TEMPO*, Nigeria’s main opposition newspaper at that time.

I was clearly befuddled when the said journalist posed the question of what I regarded as the implications of the democratic activism of my newspaper<sup>63</sup> for 'civil society in general'. Having never heard the word 'civil society' prior to that encounter, I gave my interrogator a quizzical look, but made a mental note to find out the meaning of the term.

I did not have to look too hard. In the late 1980s and early 1990s (see the historical trajectory already outlined in the preceding chapter), as the struggle to remove the military from power and establish democratic rule in Nigeria reached what appeared at that point to be a critical climax, 'civil society' became a common register in the popular (print and broadcast) media, where it was apparently used to describe the clutch of organisations, which had risen to mobilise against the military. Added to the burgeoning anti-militarism as a unifying social project, was the controversy about the propriety or otherwise, of drawing credit from the International Monetary Fund. Akinrinade (2004) describes this intermingling process as follows:

The 'IMF debates' were followed in 1986-87 by the public debates on the political future of the country and also initiated by the government. This officially initiated public debates provided great opportunities 'for civil associational life to flower, as numerous associations including labour, religious, student, women's, artisan and professional associations emerged to proffer and canvass positions' on the economic and political future of the country. And, once set in motion, the process was difficult to reverse. Indeed, it was the several problems that state policies had inflicted on the people that provided the second platform for the awakening of popular civil society at this time (2004, 222).

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<sup>63</sup> In July 1993, *The News* magazine was proscribed by the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida for championing popular agitation for the de-abrogation of the 12 June 1993 presidential election. Consequently, the proprietors established another magazine, *TEMPO*, which continued to publish underground and was a constant thorn in the military regime's flesh. For more on this see Olukotun (2002)

As noted earlier, this development was by no means unique to Nigeria. Across Africa, widespread disenchantment had fanned the flames of popular revolt, and the wave of democratisation that, putatively, had originated in Eastern Europe in the mid-1980s, was sweeping the entire continent. The significance of this movement may have been widely acknowledged in the literature (see Chole and Ibrahim 1995), but its overall impact is underscored by the realisation that by the close of the 1990s, more than thirty sub-Saharan African states had introduced multi-party electoral systems (Cowen and Laakso 2002).

Many of the organisations at the apex of this immense popular surge were non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which had been formed in the late 1980s and early 1990s to agitate for specific causes and social programmes. In Nigeria for example, the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) had been established in the wake of the controversial demolition of Maroko and the expulsion of its impoverished residents.<sup>64</sup> In any case, Maroko was merely symbolic. Military rulers in Nigeria, typical of the majority of African countries in general, had established notoriety for human rights violations, stifling the common voice and repressing the media, among many examples of social injustice. Organisations like the CLO, the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR) and the Campaign for Democracy (CD) were established as part of the coalescing attempt to call the military to order and ensure the return of the country to the path of constitutionalism and the rule of law. In this effort, they (the new pro-human rights NGOs) were joined by professional

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<sup>64</sup> Over the years, Maroko, a melange of hovels, sheds, and open drainages had existed on the fringes of highbrow Victoria Island, whose well-heeled residents saw it as an architectural eyesore. There was tremendous public outcry when the military administration of Brigadier Raji Rasaki sent in the bulldozers in 1990.

associations like the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), students' movements, religious bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), community based associations, and trade unions.

As I noted earlier, these groups were what the general media apparently had in mind each time they used the concept 'civil society', although greater accent was invariably put on the emergent non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Indeed, in many cases, these NGOs were used interchangeably with civil society. Why was this so? Part of the reason is that the NGOs themselves actively encouraged this equivalence. While, as I have observed, military rule and the attendant violations of all known social norms created a *moral* space for the emergence of public-oriented NGOs, the case for their legitimacy seems to have been strengthened at the global level with a clear shift in emphasis from state to civil society empowerment, by Western governments and international financial and donor institutions.

As Martinussen (2003) has made clear, the 'knowledge' seems to have become gradually entrenched among Western governments and policy strategists that if African and other Southern countries were to democratise and 'develop', attention had to be shifted from the state to *civil society*. In this conceptualisation, civil society was widely considered as the growing number of NGOs which were emerging partly in response to the identified shift in international perception. A central issue was, of course, money. For example, out of a sample of 80 such organisations in the Lagos and Ibadan area, 65 were established in 1990 or after, either with external donor backing or with the implicit intent of attracting and relying on donor funding. This cannot but have its own consequences. As Sola Olorunyomi, the co-ordinator of

IFANET<sup>65</sup> admits with a touch of understatement, “We have a relationship with foreigners which I think impoverishes our work.”<sup>66</sup>

To be sure, Western governments and financial institutions demonstrated enough willingness to back up their newfangled conviction in the transformative potential of *civil society* with the necessary financial support meant to ‘build up their capacities’. As Howell and Pearce noted, donors often funded ‘civil society’ as if though it were an “unproblematic given” (2001, 2). As a result, the Nigerian (urban) landscape was soon dotted by a huge number of NGOs, the majority of which were arguably set up to cash in on the situation. Elsewhere (Obadare 2004), I have described in some detail what might be called the rise of ‘civil society entrepreneurship’ in Nigeria, but suffice to say that this realisation in the beginning was arguably the ‘Damascene Moment’ in my decision to research civil society in Nigeria.

For one, I was convinced that the West had mis-recognised civil society in Nigeria. Thus, in the case of the NGOs on whom special attention was being lavished, one could not resist the conclusion that Western donors had probably seen them as analogues of similar institutions in their own countries, or what might be called, following Lewis (2002, 9) “horizontal contemporaries of wider institutions of transnational governmentality”. Even if civil society was going to be defined as

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<sup>65</sup> Information Aid Network, based in Bodija, Ibadan. Started in 1996 with funding from Ford Foundation International and the Open Society Institute of West Africa (OSIWA), it has since, like many of its normative siblings, endured a dry spell.

<sup>66</sup> Personal communication, 15 June 2003.

comprising NGOs<sup>67</sup> (in which case they should be the primary unit of analysis), this seemed clearly problematic since many of them were apparently lacking in any 'civic' content. Thus, I was interested in understanding what might, or should be, or is being, called civil society in Nigeria, with a clear delineation of both its civil and uncivil boundaries, although as I came to understand later, the two are inextricably intertwined.

My other interest was in democratisation, and in this I confess I was merely a product of my age. My initial object, arguably emanating from my training and experience as a journalist, was to answer the question that my French colleague had asked me, about the conceptual and practical interface between civil society and the quest for democratisation in Nigeria. Thus, in my initial research proposal, I sought to compare for a number of reasons, the role of civil society in the processes of democratisation in Nigeria and South Africa. Part of the reasons for this had to do with the fact that the two countries were at similar social conjunctures in terms of attempting to replace authoritarianism (military and racist respectively) with liberal multi-party democracy.

This perspective hardly survived my first term at the London School of Economics and Political Science. First, it rapidly dawned on me that a comparative study of the type that I had envisaged required huge financial resources that I certainly could not muster. Second, my acquaintance with the existing literature made me rethink the focus of my study. I determined, for one, that I did not want my

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<sup>67</sup> A different set of problems is introduced here when it is realised that even NGOs are not the homogenous creature that many take them to be. For an overview of the relevant literature, see for example Ayeide (2004), Dechalert (2002) and Sandberg (1994). See also Glasius et al, 2004.

research to be yet another addition to existing NGOs-as-civil society studies,<sup>68</sup> the limitations of which had been clear to me both as a journalist, and as an observer of the Nigerian society. Third, and perhaps most important, I realised that the literature was replete with claims and counter-claims about civil society, both inside and outside the West, that only a study that juxtaposes theoretical wisdom with empirical observation could refute or corroborate, and as it were, rise above a clearly rancorous field. These claims and counter-claims have been discussed in the preceding chapters.

However, while I was intent on doing a study of civil society that engages with some of the claims made in the literature, especially regarding non-Western societies, I also had to be cautious so as not to merely set up ideational ‘straw men’ which I could then easily demolish. As my supervisor advised, it is far better to do a ‘proactive’ study that shows civil society in its multiple varieties and contradictions and allows the reader to reach their conclusions, rather than a study which robustly refutes claims but provides no empirical insight to legitimate such. In any case, as he made clear to me, I also stood a better chance of deepening existing global knowledge of civil society if I could do this successfully. Of course this did not mean that I had to abandon the literature totally. On the contrary, for example, rather than affirm the possibility and existence of civil society in Nigeria (see chapter two), I could *show* it by, first, describing what people understood by it, and second, describing actually existing civil society

That apparently settled, it was obvious where I should start, which was to have a working definition of civil society. This is tantamount to what might be called,

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<sup>68</sup> See for example Kew (2004) and Olukoshi (1997)



following the relevant methodological literature, the ‘foundation for enquiry’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1989, Denscombe 1998), and as I have observed earlier, it is what ultimately determines, what one sets out to look for. It might be argued that there is already some bias involved, for I seem to have already taken for granted that some form of civil society exists in Nigeria and which could be described. My response to this is that a bias of this sort would seem inescapable given, first, the circumstances in which I decided to take up the research; and second, the fact that it is virtually impossible to conduct any research without an antecedent set of values<sup>69</sup> or assumptions. Therefore, I set out by broadly defining civil society as **the processes through which citizens in a given formation mobilise for change and contest authority**. At this point, I had arrived at this definition mainly through a careful consideration of the literature, specifically what I considered to be its crucial oversight regarding the activities of common people.<sup>70</sup>

Having set out this definition, there arose the allied problem of what then to look out for and, no less important, how to find it. Since a crucial part of my argument was that NGOs or suchlike organisations, no matter how critical, do not exhaust the meaning of civil society in Nigeria, I had to devise an approach that would make possible the fruitful incorporation of a different unit of analysis. If I was not going to make a round of NGOs *per se*, then what exactly would I be doing in the field, and would I recognise it if I contemplated the object of my research?

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<sup>69</sup> The issue of values has continued to divide scholars who believe in and advocate “pure science” and those who believe that the search for purity is misleading *ab initio*. In general, the dichotomy itself encapsulates continuing differences over what research methodologies in the “natural” and “social” sciences are capable of achieving. In recent times, Ralf Dahrendorf (1992), among others, has suggested that the issue of values might be less signal than previously thought, since it is possible to choose a topic that is considered important for some (often political) reason without affecting the quality of the scientific investigation of it. See Ryan (1981), Jane Lewis (2003) and Flyvbjerg (2003).

<sup>70</sup> I say more about how I arrived at my definition in the latter part of this chapter.

## 4.2 Qualitative versus Quantitative Approaches

Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted- Albert Einstein

Given the nature of the analytic challenge that I faced, it seemed to me that a qualitative approach was better suited for my research. Since my object was to describe actually existing civil society, that is, ordinary citizens mobilising for a specific cause, it was clear to me that the quantitative approach with its emphasis on numbers might not be suitable to produce the kind of data I thought I needed. In any case, as indicated earlier, this approach seems to have dominated the field for some time, and I felt that it was time to move on to something different. Again, since the object of my research is people, a moving target if any, I believed that the kind of approach described by Keane (2004) as the “interpretive-analytic” approach might be a better vehicle with which to achieve my intellectual aims. The approach I adopted included a mingling of open-ended interviews of a number of respondents, participant observation, and textual analysis (Casely and Lury 1981, Edgar 2004).

However, while the Major Review <sup>71</sup> panel agreed with me on the appropriateness of the qualitative approach for my research, they nevertheless insisted that I submit a set of draft questions for open-ended interviews (more on this presently) and further details regarding the sample of organisations and individuals with whom these interviews would be conducted. Once this was done and approved, I was set to go to the field, but not before dealing with the fears expressed by the panel

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<sup>71</sup> The mandatory end of the year review at which PhD candidates defend their proposals. My Review was presided over by Jane Falkingham and Rebecca Tunstall.

regarding (1) the 'directness' of some of my draft questions, and (2) the possibility that many of the proposed respondents might not have the knowledge to answer such questions. The following is a list of the draft questions which I submitted to the Review Panel:

1. What do you understand by the term 'civil society'?
2. Are there other terms you would rather use to describe the institutions and organisations commonly understood as being part of 'civil society'? Please state your reasons for choosing the term(s) of your choice?
3. What do you understand by NGOs? Would you say that NGOs are part of civil society; what would your definition include/exclude in general?
4. Do you agree with some commentators that civil society is a Western idea?
5. Do you think that civil society has any relevance to Africa?
6. Please list the general characteristics of civil society in Nigeria.
7. Following from your list of general characteristics, what institutions would you say should *not* be part of civil society?
8. Would you agree that civil society in Nigeria has been in ascendance in the last couple of years? If yes, how would you explain this recent revival?
9. Is it correct to say that civil society in Nigeria has pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial forms? Please expatiate with examples.
10. What is different about civil society in Nigeria when compared to the West?
11. What is your understanding of the concept of the public sphere?
12. What role(s) do you think local customs and institutions play in the making of civil society?

13. Do you think that familial and kinship commitments impinge on the role of individuals within civil society?
14. Do you think that specific local traditions and institutions play any role in making civil society in Nigeria different from the West? Please elaborate.
15. How would you respond to the argument that an ethnically-based civil society is a contradiction in terms?

The Major Review panel's fears alerted me to a number of things, perhaps the most important of which was the possibility that I was probably expecting too much of my potential respondents, especially in terms of specialist knowledge of the subject of civil society. This could result in literally 'putting words in my respondents' mouths'. I have to confess that this fear proved justified in the field as many of those I interviewed, with the possible exception of academics, were thrown by some of the issues questions I put to them. In the end, these questions became useful merely as a guide for the interviews, as realities in the field and the changing focus of the research made fidelity to them unfeasible. Another problem which I faced centred on language, but I will expand on this at a later stage in the chapter.

While I was aware of these potential problems, it was hardly sufficient to dent my conviction about the appropriateness of the qualitative approach for the problems I was proposing to engage with. The methodology literature (for example Law 2004) makes it clear that the test of appropriateness is perhaps the most crucial in determining which approach- qualitative or quantitative- to adopt. As Gubrium and Holstein (1997) observed, amidst the "intractable quarrels over epistemology and the relative merits or demerits of different research methods" that "methods talk" does

often degenerate into, what is often overlooked is that “...different research methods are not alternatives to be chosen between a priori grounds, but methods which are more or less appropriate to particular problems....” (Bulmer and Warwick 1993, 10). What counts is the appropriateness of the method used to the objectives of the research: “Will the method produce the kinds of data needed to answer the questions posed in the study?” (Ibid).

The “culminating activities of qualitative inquiry”, according to Patton (1990) are analysis, interpretation, and presentation of findings, and I was hopeful of discharging my research aims through these broad activities.

#### **4.3 Preparing for the Field**

Travers (2001) has identified five different methods that a qualitative researcher may employ. These are participant observation, interviewing, ethnographic fieldwork, discourse analysis and textual analysis. To varying degrees, my actual field experience embraced a combination of the first three of these. I will provide a few explanatory details on observation and interviewing (being central to the qualitative method) before setting out my actual field experience.

First, observation. Patton (1990), Blaxter, et al (2001) and Bennett (2004) have emphasised the ubiquity of the observational method. According to Patton (1990, 206), “Observations can occur in *any setting where people are doing things*: cultures, communities, programs, organisations, homes, streets, places of business, classrooms, and the like” (my emphases). Still, observing any given reality comes with its own unique problems, part of which is deciding whether to be an onlooker or

a participant, and, once the researcher makes up her mind, calibrating the extent of participation or non participation.

For my study, I wanted to adopt the participant observation technique, a holistic strategy defined by Denzin (1978) as simultaneously encompassing “document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection” (p. 183). As I explained earlier, this was partly due to my conviction that it provides an excellent technique with which to understand the dynamics of people in action. To this end, and particularly in order to facilitate smooth access to respondents, before my departure for the field, I initiated preliminary contacts with some of my identified respondents in Nigeria.

The next point to address in this regard is interviews. Existing methodology literature is shot through with scepticism about the research value of interviews in general. Miller and Glassner (1998) for instance contend that “...no knowledge about a reality that is out there in the social world can be obtained from the interview, because the interview is obviously and exclusively an interaction between the interviewer and the interview subject in which both participants create and construct narrative versions of the social world” (p. 99). Fortunately, their scepticism is not shared globally. Other scholars, for example Latour (1993, 25) have argued that “information about social worlds is achievable through in-depth interviewing.”<sup>72</sup> For some, while interviews are definitely useful, only standardised interviews are acceptable.

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<sup>72</sup> See also Kvale (1996).

But standardised interviews ought not to be made an unnecessary fetish of. Bulmer and Warwick (1993) have cautioned that “a standard interview schedule administered by interviewers or enumerators is not in itself a guarantee that the results will be reliable, if, for example, respondents do not understand the question, fail to respond in terms of the alternatives provided, or believe that the interviewer is a government agent whom they must placate and give socially acceptable rather than true answers” (p. 10).

Informal and open-ended interviews, while not without their own dangers, have none of the disadvantages listed above. A particular advantage of using open-ended questions, according to Travers (2001), is that: “If you ask open-ended questions, follow up particular topics in a second interview, and give the interviewee the opportunity to comment on your interpretation of the answers, you are likely to obtain some rich, original data” (p.3). Having considered the merits and demerits of the two types of interview, especially in the light of my research aims, I settled (though not exclusively) for open-ended, oral interviews. These were to be conducted with policy makers, academics (especially historians, anthropologists and political scientists in a number of Nigerian universities), NGO officials, journalists, officials of pro-democracy and human rights groups, voluntary associations, and hometown associations. In broad terms, I wanted to find out what my respondents understood by civil society and how it is described and appreciated by a wide variety of groups, for instance, journalists, who have been crucial to its diffusion over the past decade or so.

Up until my departure for the field, I was yet to decide on the number of interviews to be conducted, partly because I was still in the process of establishing

contact with many of my potential interviewees. However, I had in mind an interview population of between 35 and 45 respondents to be drawn from the population enumerated in the foregoing paragraph.

#### **4.4 In the Field**

When I arrived in Nigeria in February 2003, the country was in the middle of an energy crisis that waxed and waned for the better part of the six months that I eventually spent there. This had a direct impact on my logistical (and financial!) arrangements as it hampered commuting from one part of the country to another. Prior to my arrival, I had, falling back on some of the network of contacts I had developed while working as a journalist in the early 1990s, arranged to interview certain individuals in the eastern and northern parts of the country while using Ile-Ife in the west as my operational base. Given the reality dictated by the energy crisis, I was only able to go to the northern part of the country and Abuja, the federal capital, in addition to travelling extensively within the west. This arguably influenced my choice of empirical illustration for my research, and I will shed more light on this presently. Lastly, while I had hoped to set up a base in Ile-Ife, the university town, I had to review my plans because of the industrial action by university staff (both academic and non-academic) which had turned the university itself into a ghost town. Even this 'minor' incident was to have its own impact on my research.

As I have noted earlier, a major plank on which my research method rested was observation. To this end, I kept a daily journal in which I recorded things that struck me as either being fascinating, odd or worrying. Most days, I merely asked



myself questions that came to me about the nature of my research after something interesting had occurred; but I did this with a profound sense of duty as my supervisor had impressed upon me the necessity of constantly nudging and reminding oneself about the object of one's research. Thus, after an interesting encounter with a certainly disillusioned Adebayo Lamikanra<sup>73</sup> on March 8, I had written thus:

The most interesting things appear to come up when you are telling people about what you are doing. The encounter with Lamikanra at the Staff Club parking lot is revealing in this context. Told that I am researching civil society in Nigeria, he shot back angrily that "there is no such thing as civil society", pointing out in the same breath that "*we (the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities, ASUU) have been on strike for three months now, yet civil society has refused to come to our aid.*" What does one make of this seeming contradiction? If there is no such thing as civil society, how can it be expected to come to anyone's aid? Perhaps the professor merely spoke in frustration? Or was his 'denial' of the existence of civil society actually a complaint about its inability to do anything about the ASUU strike? What happens when, as in this case, a civil society group (ASUU) is involved in direct industrial cum political action?

On another occasion, on April 16 2003, after interviewing Muyiwa Adekeye, Program Officer for International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), I noted thus:

Muyiwa Adekeye says that "what passes for civil society in Nigeria is an incestuous circle of close friends." His explanation? The presence of the same individuals in different organisations. Thus, when a decision on a certain issue has apparently been taken by three different organisations, for example, the same decision has merely been taken by the same individuals in three different places at three different locations."

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<sup>73</sup> Professor of Pharmaceutics, Faculty of Pharmacy, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Also renowned as a writer and social critic.

I filled my journal with observations such as the ones in the foregoing paragraphs. I was striving to have a broad idea of people's understanding of civil society, and at the same time striving to make personal sense of what was unfolding around me in the country. In short, I was simultaneously and continuously asking both my interviewees and myself questions. In the light of my encounters (and these are merely symbolic of course) with the two 'respondents' (I did not really interview the professor, did I?), I could deduce that the imagination of civil society varies, from, on the one end, civil society as 'help in the time of need' to, on the other, civil society as purely (though incestuously) 'organisational'.

Indeed, there was a lot to be said about the organisational model of civil society. Even though I had made up my mind from the beginning to transcend the conceptualisation of civil society as merely embodying NGOs and other organisations, I perforce had to include officials of a number of NGOs in my cohort of respondents. The reasons for this are evident from my earlier observations about the rise of contemporary NGOs in Nigeria. In retrospect, I am glad I did because the very process of doing this was illuminating, as I was able to 'discover' many of those things that a purely quantitative research would have been ill equipped to find. The most significant for me is the gap that exists between the apparent number of NGOs and their actual existence. I will use the city of Ibadan in Western Nigeria to illustrate.

Out of more than eighty NGOs which I counted across the Lagos-Ibadan-Ife-Ilesa belt, only ten had been established prior to 1990. The reasons for this apparent explosion have been discussed earlier. To my surprise however, many of the relatively new organisations existed only on paper and could not be found at those

addresses where fliers I had picked up had indicated they were. In the course of my research, I discovered that many (what a respondent, Mrs Sade Taiwo, called ‘one-project wonders’) had actually existed before, but had had to fold up when funding for their activities was no longer forthcoming.

Life is indeed difficult for NGOs across the country, and the situation in Ibadan excellently mirrors this harsh reality. While they were smiled at and courted by foreign donors in the heat of the struggle for democracy when there was a single, clear agenda, the return to civil rule in May 1999 profoundly altered the landscape. The new climate in the country led to the situation in which, in the words of Tope Toogun, the secretary of LRRDC, “NGOs were faced the necessity to re-invent”. This re-invention has occurred in different ways, from total disappearance to branching out into other initiatives as dictated by the new logic of donor funding. More substantively, many had to re-define their relationship with the Nigerian state, occasioning a tension between the animosities of old and a nascent amity.

On July 7 2003, I found myself in an unusual position as an NGO which I had gone to interview in Ibadan apparently struggled to meet the deadline imposed by a donor. I had phoned in the previous day to express my intention to have an interview with the Vice-President of the organisation and had successfully secured an appointment for early afternoon of the following day. To my surprise however, upon my arrival, I was asked to submit an official letter requesting an interview even though I made it clear that I had called the day before and had been told to come. My initial disappointment overcome, I went back to the nearest ‘business centre’ to draft a request for an interview and quickly returned to the organisation’s office as I had to

make another appointment in Lagos the following day. It was only then that it dawned on me that I was not expected to make it so quickly. When eventually I was shown to the Vice-President, I realised my 'crime'. Barely containing her annoyance, she shouted: "They want this, they want that. They have asked us to bring a proposal. I cannot talk to you now, since you cannot give me money instead of what I am doing right now (putting together a proposal). Come back tomorrow at 1.30 pm or thereabouts, but please call before you come o!" (parenthesis added).

Even though the woman in question later became one of my favourite interviewees, to the extent that I agreed in principle to donate a computer and books on reproductive and sexual health education to her organisation, I could not fail to deduce the (mainly financial) pressures which many latter day NGOs have had to cope with following the country's return to civilian rule.

Ironically, even those which have managed to stay afloat thus far have done so mindful of the very interesting way in which they are perceived by the larger public. This perception captures the very interesting divide, even antagonism and envy, between formal civil society organisations and the mass of the people that they were apparently established to serve. In most parts of the west and the north where I travelled extensively, I could not help but notice that many 'civil society organisations' actually lived in dread of the larger public. In many places, I could not locate the organisations I went to visit simply because they did not have signboards outside. Upon enquiry, I discovered that this was because on occasions in the past, organisations had been targeted by armed marauders who had identified 'civil society organisations' as guaranteed sources of foreign exchange.

Some of the journalists I spoke to confirmed this general impression of the organisations as oases of prosperity and lucky recipients of hard currency from the West. During my visit to a particular organisation, I could not help but notice that like many houses and businesses around, the offices were safely ensconced behind massive iron gates, and I was repeatedly frisked before I was even allowed in to make initial enquiries. Later, I discovered that the week before, the organisation had been raided by marauders on the trail of hard currency, a pattern that should be understandable to anyone familiar with the economic situation in the country and the improbable exchange rate of the Nigerian Naira to the major Western currencies. Suffice to conclude that in many parts of Nigeria, formal civil society organisations and the larger society exist in mutual dread and suspicion.

This civil society-society disconnect has hardly been helped by stories published in the print media of many such organisations being run like personal fiefdoms of the founders, and as such generally lacking in basic accountability. For me, it was the disturbing face of the civil society entrepreneurship that I have alluded to earlier. It is also a perfect illustration of the moral blur that seems to exist at times between particular civil society organisations and the state that they deprecate. This observation raises the issue of how civil society itself seems to be enmeshed in the surrounding *culture*, and the implications of that for both civil society and the state, but particularly for the former. This is not to argue that latter day civil society organisations have had only a negative impact on the society and politics. On the contrary, my aim is to show how the recent emergence of civil society discourse and organisations has introduced new rules of engagement (especially between donors and

fundings), the 'formalisation' of civil society, while at the same time never really producing the moral shift that was signalled at its birth, nor producing more positive results in terms of bringing 'development' to the people or incorporating them into the mainstream of governance.

It was difficult to relegate these and kindred issues to the background as I continued to travel in the course of my research, and it took some time before I finally settled for the format that my eventual writing up would take. After four hectic months, armed with a midget tape recorder, a car that looked more like a mobile library than an automobile, a filled journal, and rapidly diminishing enthusiasm, I knew that I had to crack the 'what does civil society mean/look like in Nigeria?' riddle by reading between the lines and interpreting the many observations I had messily put down in my journal. Crucially, it was the interview session I had with Titi Salaam, the Director of Programmes at Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC), Lagos on July 7 which did it for me. When she defined civil society as "the everyday activity of citizens; being a citizen makes you a member of civil society", it occurred to me that this was the mean of what majority of my respondents had said and seems to be the way in which civil society is *generally* imagined in Nigeria.

This is not to suggest that there was any perceptual unity among my respondents. In actual fact, the disagreement over the meaning(s) and uses of civil society could not have been more apparent. In some cases, I was able to sense a fundamental cynicism about the origins of the idea of civil society and the intentions of those who are actively promoting it. The statement by Yinusa Yau, Director of the

Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD), Kano, is a good illustration of this tendency. As he told me,

I have always viewed it (civil society) with suspicion. It is tied to privatisation. There may be something inherently civil society; but the way it has gained currency is suspect. It is part of the privatisation agenda in the wake of civil society...an alternative agent of development.

Like Yau, Nkoyo Toyo, the Director of GADA has her own apprehensions about how civil society (referring here to the clutch of organisations which had mushroomed in many urban centres) has been turned into what she calls “a career development site”.

Does it then mean that the meanings of civil society vary and might depend on what the person doing the defining means at a particular point in time? This seems to be partially correct. There appears to be a clear incongruity for example between the understandings offered by both the Professor Lamikanra and Muyiwa Adekeye as described above. Yet, what also seems to be true is that even when, as in some of the cases presented above, there is an obvious disillusionment over the uses to which the concept of civil society has been put, it has been in protest over the perceived corruption of its true symbol, which can be summarised, following Titi Salaam (above) as a platform through which ordinary citizens mobilise.

I will now address the most important reason why I was fascinated by this definition- its moral ambivalence. I realised of course that this was no perfect definition. Indeed, a perfect definition of civil society is hard to come by. As I have made clear in the earlier discussion of the origins of the term and the debates

generated in the wake of its late 20<sup>th</sup> century emergence, there seems to be not one, but many genealogies of civil society. And because its complex story traces back to a tangle of pedigrees, scholars in general tend to privilege whatever tradition best suits their purposes. Given this situation, it is imperative that I explain why I have settled for this definition.

The sole reason, as I have hinted above, is its moral ambivalence, or simply the potential for the inclusion of what might be deemed *uncivil* as an integral part of what is *civil*. The point I am trying to make is this- if civil society can be acceptably defined as the everyday activity of ordinary citizens, it only stands to reason that such citizens would manifest both ‘civil’ and ‘uncivil’ characters. This reasoning lay behind my eventual decision to describe two apparently contrasting facets of citizen action (one ‘civil’, the other ‘uncivil’) as empirical illustrations of my study in chapters five and six. In doing this, I am trying not only to demonstrate how both the civil and uncivil interleave and may co-exist within the same realm of citizen action, at the same time, I want to advance a non-normative way of seeing and understanding civil society, as well as offer additional grounds for rethinking the civil/uncivil polarity which has dominated the debate (see chapter two) for some time. As shown in the preceding chapters, incivility allegedly constitutes one of the grounds for the argument that there can be no civil society outside the West, and I believed that an approach which makes a case for seeing it as being *part of*, as opposed to being *against* civil society would provide an interesting complication. I develop this point further in chapters five and eight. The two empirical chapters are prefaced with a few details about the reasons that informed my choice.



Not that choosing the cases themselves was easy. In fact, deciding what empirical realities to privilege as cases was due in large part to a combination of serendipity and retrospection; and it was only after I had returned from the field that I could take a final decision. My dilemma seems to reflect the central muddle in the relevant literature, articulated by Ragin and Becker (2000) thus:

Are cases preexisting phenomena that need only be identified by the researcher before analysis can begin? Or are cases constructed during the course of research, only after analysis has revealed which features should be considered defining characteristics?

While there are obviously no simple answers to this poser, it has to be said that a lot also depends on the researcher's definition of a case, which in itself also depends on the subject of investigation itself, in which case the famous "What is it a case of?" question becomes especially pertinent.

What all this points to of course is the difficulty involved in choosing a case, one that this thesis aptly testifies to. For me, Becker's (2000) position on cases (their selection, etc) seems to encapsulate this most forcefully, particularly the emphasis on the tentativeness involved at every stage of the research process. As Ragin summarises:

Researchers probably will not know what their cases are until the research, including the task of writing up the results, is virtually completed. What *it* is a *case* of will coalesce gradually, sometimes catalytically, and the final realization of the case's nature may be the most important part of the interaction between ideas and evidence (Ragin 2000, 6).

In several respects, the process involved in my selection of cases epitomises this point.

Before closing this section, I should say a word about one other thing that I did as part of the general process of participation-observation: attending seminars and workshops organised by various civic organisations. These seminars often gave me the opportunity to meet several respondents at the same venue, thus enabling me to save money that would otherwise have been spent on commuting. More important however, I saw the seminars themselves as social laboratories through which I could both participate in and observe the activities of many civic associations. To this end, I attended seminars in Lagos, Ibadan, Kano and Abuja- all in the western, northern and central parts of the country respectively.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

I spent approximately six months in the field in Nigeria, returning to London in September 2003. Soon after I had finished unwinding and mulling on my experience, I wrote up a report of what transpired in the field and submitted it to my supervisor.

In retrospect, I can say that the greatest challenge that I faced was that of turning my theoretical questions into a practical investigation. It seems to me that this is one challenge that any researcher investigating civil society must perforce contend with, particularly when what we are dealing with is a concept as slippery as civil society. 'Breaking it down' and literally ensuring that my respondents and myself were, literally speaking, on the same page, was as daunting at it might possibly ever

be, and the researcher has to be prepared to endure occasional spells of frustration. At times, even what might have been shaping up as a good session could be ruined by a burst of awareness on the part of one's interviewee, who midway into the interview mysteriously realises that your tape recorder ought to have been switched off, and that he was mistaken all along to have allowed you to switch it on!

I found in this regard that the semi-structured and open-ended approach that I necessarily adopted was most suitable to deal with such unexpected vagaries. In general, it was the odd interviewee who did not think that they were doing me a favour, a situation almost always compounded by my introduction of myself as a student from an institution based in the United Kingdom. There was invariably the wry smile that betrayed 'knowledge' that I was probably being paid to gather intelligence on behalf of some foreign bodies. At the beginning of many interview sessions therefore, I found myself in the unusual position of being personally interviewed about my objectives.

On such an occasion, it is most imprudent to produce the tape recorder, and I picked up this lesson very early in the day. Whenever the tape was switched off, I took notes in long hand, and soon discovered that people were less cagey once they realised that what they were saying was not being recorded. The open-ended nature of the interviews ensured enough flexibility such that my respondents and I often strayed between the real topic of discussion, to issues about the country at large, and then back. There was hardly a session during which I was not called upon to play the role of a social critic. I frequently consoled myself by imagining that it is perhaps

unfeasible to conduct research on a subject as topical as civil society, without getting sucked into the mire of political bickering.

Besides, the Nigerian immediate environment ejaculated in other interesting ways. In retrospect, it is fair to say that I probably overestimated the amount of work that I could pack into six months of research. Without doubt, I underestimated the impact of logistics, most especially seemingly mundane things such as telephone communications and transportation. For one, I spent more money on calls than I thought actually possible due to the largely ineffectual telecommunications system (incidentally, the focus of one of my empirical chapters). As I hinted at the beginning of the chapter, transportation was also a serious problem. Even though I had a car, 'flown' in across the border from Cotonou, Benin Republic, to escape the notorious dead hand of bureaucracy at the Lagos port, petrol shortage was a constant hindrance- maybe there is no running away from the Nigerian state after all- and I could hardly afford to take it on long trips. This, coupled with the fact that it no longer seemed methodologically imperative, ensured that I did not go to the eastern part of the country as planned.

What I lost in terms of geographic mileage however, I definitely recouped from my interaction with a cross section of extraordinarily warm citizens from different parts of the country. I feel a special delight that the empirical core of my study is a critical evaluation of some of their activities. These activities constitute the core of the following two empirical chapters.

Before moving on to them (the case study chapters) however, I should add a few words about how the cases themselves were eventually chosen. As I hinted before, I had no idea what my case studies would be when I left London for Nigeria, save for a vague conviction that they had to be situations which show regular people in motions of engagement . Even then, I did not make up my mind until I was well into the field, at least not until my fortuitous encounter with one of my interviewees as described earlier. In this sense, my choice could be said to have been ‘grounded’ in the very process of research itself. I relied almost overwhelmingly on participant observation and interviewing, both of which gave me sufficient background understanding. Eventually, I was persuaded to choose the cases themselves because of the currency of the issues which they help bring into focus, and also by their simultaneous relatedness and distinctiveness. The next chapter focuses on the first of these two cases.

## Chapter 5

### The GSM<sup>74</sup> Boycott: Civil Society, Big Business and the State in Nigeria

#### 5.1 Introduction

This is the first of two case study chapters in which I try to paint two contradictory portraits of contemporary civil society in Nigeria. In broad terms, these portraits are meant to illustrate my understanding<sup>75</sup> of civil society in Nigeria as embodying the activities of ordinary citizens in the public sphere. To imagine civil society in this way is to automatically allow for a certain moral complexity. This implied nuance is evidenced by the antagonistic expressions of citizen action in the two consecutive chapters. The first analyses the reaction of subscribers to the perceived failings of mobile phone service providers in the country.

The two chapters can also be said to have an additional conceptual and empirical value. One major aim of this thesis is to *show* civil society in action with a view to examining the extent to which the picture that emerges, either squares with or departs from, the dominant contentions in the existing literature. In this vein, while, as noted earlier, scholarship on civil society in Nigeria and other African societies brims with claims and counter-claims, comparatively little has been done by way of empirical work to substantiate or rebut this rash of claims. The present study, in

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<sup>74</sup> Global System for Mobile Communications.

<sup>75</sup> 'Understanding' is consciously used here. As Jane Lewis has remarked, "understanding is not truth, is not a law, does not necessarily enable prescription and may vary from group to group and place to place" (2003, 197).

particular this chapter, partly attempts to amend this situation by focusing critical gaze on what might be called *actually existing civil society*.<sup>76</sup>

If that is the case, it appears that few social realities better exemplify civil society *live* than the boycott of mobile telephone services on Friday September 19 2003 by subscribers across the Nigeria. Although the boycott went largely unreported in the Western media, it remains, for many reasons, a watershed in the development of oppositional culture in the country. Four of these reasons are highlighted in the next section.

## **5.2 The Significance of the September 19 GSM Boycott**

The first is the emergence in Nigeria of the use of modern technology as a tool for democratic activism and consolidation. Philosophically, the September 19 boycott consolidates on the Nigerian democratic opposition's use of radio technology (Adebanwi 2001) to generally mobilise against military rule and, specifically, protest the annulment of the June 12 presidential election by the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida.<sup>77</sup> Yet, significant though it was, the deployment of Radio Kudirat International (RKI) for the means of political justice and anti-military liberalisation did not liberate the same kind of social energy, nor produce the same kind of social effect that the agitation surrounding the use of mobile telephones seems, at least potentially, capable of unleashing.

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<sup>76</sup> This should be understood in the light of my critique of the existing literature which appears to favour theoretical claims, which, mostly, are hardly founded on actual empirical research.

<sup>77</sup> See chapter 3.

This brings me to the second reason why I think that '9/19' (as it was popularly called in the local press) 'rebellion' is significant; its embodying of a new imaginary of popular dissent, in particular the potential for the mobile telephone to open new vistas in ordinary citizens' agitation for both economic and political self-determination in the country. What this means of course is that while the boycott at issue was specifically targeted at the mobile telephone companies, it was at the same time more than that.

In a sense, the boycott itself encapsulates and caps existing feuds between citizens-as-customers and business corporations in Nigeria, for example, the yet unresolved saga in the oil 'producing' Niger Delta (Obi 2001, Ukeje 2001, Okonta and Douglass 2003) and between the same citizens-as-consumers and the Nigerian state. Indeed, the majority of those who took part in the protest saw it as a continuation of the larger project of righting the wrongs that many believe are integral to the very idea of the Nigerian state<sup>78</sup>. The following statement by the Chairman of the Unofficial Consumers' Protection Agency (UCPA), Ojemaye Otitoka<sup>79</sup> is an excellent illustration of this mentality: "This is the spirit of this campaign. This is the real force behind its eventual success, the spirit of the Nigerian people who are speaking up for themselves finally. *Now we are crying against exorbitant GSM tariffs. Tomorrow, using the same methods we will complain about other things.*" (*The Guardian* 19 September 2003) (Emphases added).

Third, and as a corollary to the foregoing, the public protest against the perceived corporate failings and excesses of the GSM mobile phone companies

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<sup>78</sup> Ropo Ewenla, personal communication, September 2003

<sup>79</sup> Most probably a pseudonym for Dr Deolu Ogunbanjo



appears to signify the emergence of a new outlet of *voice* (Hirschman 1970), and a new modality of engagement by civil society against the state. From the way ordinary subscribers enthused freely<sup>80</sup> about the boycott, it was evident that they saw it as nothing less. Nevertheless, this is not to idealize the possibilities of (mobile) technology for democratic activism in Nigeria or generally, and I shall return to this disputed relationship later on in the chapter. Be that as it may, mobile phones, compressors or nullifiers of *physical* space that they are, evidently presage the emergence of a new *social* space of politics and agitation, indeed what might be termed a new sociality.

Finally, the 9/19 boycott and associated events furnish an appropriate context to problematise a whole series of interrelated issues. These include the insertion of technology in specific socio-political contexts, the dynamics of civil society in action, the interface between civil society and the state, and between civil society and the corporate world. An added significance of this chapter therefore may be seen in its transcending of the usual civil society-state bipolarity and aiming at a triangle of state-market-civil society which, I suggest, provides deeper illumination.

To situate this discourse, I begin with a brief exploration of the relevant theoretical literature on the possibilities of technology for democratic activism. This is followed by some background information on the context of telecommunications in Nigerian political history, focusing on how it has been a contested site in the larger struggle between state and society in general. Thereafter, I outline the GSM boycott of 19 September 2003 in Nigeria, focusing on the immediate background, the issues at

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<sup>80</sup> This chapter draws freely on my recollections and notes from interviews and informal chats with subscribers

stake, and the consequences thus far. The chapter closes by analysing some implications of the boycott for civil society in Nigeria, the GSM companies, and the state. It also reflects on the consequences for theoretical understanding of the use of mobile technology for democratic activism.

### **5.3 Technology, the State and Democratic Activism: A Theoretical Sketch**

An in-depth theoretical analysis of how technology shapes society and vice versa is outside the purview of this study (Borgmann 1984, Heidegger 1977, Cooper 2002). By contrast, the aim in this section is to explore, albeit briefly, some of the nodes at which technology (telecommunications technology in general and mobile technology in particular) and society interface. While a number of relevant studies have attempted to do this especially in the context of the Western world<sup>81</sup>, the analysis here focuses particularly on the utility of (telecommunications) technology for political and social change within the specific context of the geo-political South. Thus, while Nigeria is the main socio-geographic anchor, it actually captures many of the patterns observable in similar social formations in the developing world.

Given the preceding, one is virtually compelled to begin by admitting the existence of what is frequently described in the literature as a 'digital divide', the huge gap in technological penetration of society between the global North and South or more specifically, between Western Europe and the United States and the rest of the world. For Castells (2002), the clearest marker of the difference that exists

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<sup>81</sup> See for example Bauman 2000, plus Gaonkar and Povinelli's incisive introduction to *Public Culture's* 'Accidental Issue' on 'Technologies of Public Persuasion' Volume 15, Number 3, Fall 2003

between the two digitally divided worlds is that while one part may be appropriately described as comprising 'informational societies', the other part may not. "Informational societies", he argues, are those "in which information generation, processing, and transmission become the fundamental sources of productivity and power because of new technological conditions emerging in this historical period" (Castells 2002, 21). "Informational societies", of course, are different from mere "information societies" in which "information, in its broadest sense, e.g. as communication of knowledge, (is) critical" (parenthesis added). If this social stratification is accepted (and I am convinced that it is valid to a considerable degree), it is obvious that most African countries easily fall under the latter rubric.

This conclusion is supported by pertinent statistics. For instance, according to the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Technology Achievement Index (TAI) which "aims to capture how well a country is creating and diffusing technology and building a human skill base-reflecting capacity to participate in the technological innovations of the network age" (UNDP 2001, 46)<sup>82</sup>, most African and other developing countries are still at a rudimentary stage when it comes to using technology as a basis for social development.<sup>83</sup> Thus, while the TAI index, using a number of set values ranks countries according to these categories: leaders (TAI above 0.5); potential leaders (0.35-0.49); dynamic adopters (0.20-0.34); or marginalized (below 0.5); Nigeria and a majority of African countries are grouped as 'others' having 'no value' (Kuvaja and Mursu 2003, 7). This gloomy picture is corroborated by a recent study on "African Internet Usage and 2004 Population".

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<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Kuvaja and Mursu 2003, p. 6

<sup>83</sup> Many African/ist commentators also concur. See for example Yau 2003, Williams 2004, Cogburn and Adeya 1999, and De Alcantara 2001

According to the study, which recorded figures for 57 African countries, there are 10,075,200 (1.1 per cent) users in the continent's total population out of which 420,000 (0.3 per cent) are Nigerian users from the study's estimated population of 154,491,100.”<sup>84</sup>

Though the most populous on the African continent with an estimated 150 million people, Nigeria is ranked 7<sup>th</sup> after South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Zimbabwe (*The Guardian* 22 February 2004). Overall, there is no African country whose Internet usage is up to seven per cent of the total population.

Several explanations can be adduced for this unflattering situation, but this should not be allowed to detain us here. Still, it should be noted that over the years, the nature of the struggle for political and social resources across the continent has necessitated a situation in which successive African leaders have regarded telecommunications technology with suspicion at best, and hostility at worst.

Two quick examples will suffice. At the height of the opposition to the regime of General Sani Abacha in 1996, the junta's National Security Adviser, Alhaji Ismaila Gwarzo, obviously worried by the rate at which knowledge of the Internet was spreading among the youthful segment of the Nigerian society, publicly contemplated banning the Internet or at least restricting popular access to it. Second, one of the issues that has paradoxically put the matter of public access to affordable and reliable telecommunications on the front burner was the same regime's decision to make illegal the many telephone and related Information Technology (IT) centres which had mushroomed in different parts of the country. The General's action was widely

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<sup>84</sup> See <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm> This is the homepage of Internet World Stats, a site featuring worldwide up to date Internet usage statistics and population data for over 233 countries. Accessed on July 21, 2004.

interpreted as part of the attempt to asphyxiate civil society by denying it the critical oxygen of information and communication<sup>85</sup>. In retrospect, this move may not have achieved the desired objective given the opposition's subsequent and relatively effective use of the Radio Kudirat International (RKI) (Adebanwi 2001) to campaign for the invalidation of the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election and the return of the country to democratic rule.

Technology, in particular telecommunications technology, is therefore central to state-society relations in Africa, and plays more than a determinant role in the perennial struggle to legitimise state power. It seems hardly coincidental that the introduction of mobile telephony in a country like Nigeria has come with the return to civil rule. The truth is that military regimes, with their pathological obsession with dominating public space, will never voluntarily cede its control to contrary social forces, which is what technological liberalisation is believed to be tantamount to. I will develop this further in the following section, but it is important to note at this point that even though the policy foundation for GSM telephony was laid under the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida,<sup>86</sup> the dream was never realised until the return to civil rule in May 1999, partly because he (Babangida) saw telecommunications policy, indeed the domain of (tele)communications as an extension of his political vision, wherein every activity was tailored to suit his ambition of remaining in power *ad infinitum*<sup>87</sup>.

In essence, and as amply illustrated, the state plays more than a provincial role in technology development in general, whether we are talking about its innovation,

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<sup>85</sup> Personal communication, Seinde Arigbede, 6 August 2003

<sup>86</sup> See Ochereome Nnanna, "The Great GSM Boycott" *Vanguard*, Lagos, September 15 2003

<sup>87</sup> For a critical study of the Babangida years, see Diamond, Kirk-Greene and Oyediran, eds. (1996)

policy, or guidelines for its use. Castells (2002) has divided the impact of the state in relation to technology into two, what we might call, broadly, that of furtherance and stagnation. According to him, while

society does not determine technology, it can, *mainly through the state*, suffocate its development. Or alternatively, again *mainly by state intervention*, it can embark on an accelerated process of technological modernization able to change the fate of economies, military power, and social well-being in a few years. Indeed, the ability or inability of societies to master technology, and particularly technologies that are strategically decisive in each historical period, largely shapes their destiny, to the point where we could say that while technology *per se* does not determine historical evolution and social change, technology (or the lack of it) embodies the capacity of societies to transform themselves, as well as the uses to which societies, always in a conflictive process, decide to put their technological potential (Castells 2002, 7) (Italics added).

His favourite example is China where developments seem to have confirmed the wisdom that

On the one hand, the state can be... a leading force for technological innovation; on the other hand, precisely because of this, when the state reverses its interest in technological development, or becomes unable to perform it under new conditions, a statist model of innovation leads to stagnation, because of the sterilization of society's autonomous innovative energy to create and apply technology...The same culture may induce very different technological trajectories depending on the pattern of relationships between state and society. However, the exclusive dependence on the state has a price, and the price for China was that of retardation, famine, epidemics, colonial domination, and civil war, until at least the middle of the twentieth century (p. 10)

A more careful reading of Castells (2002) would suggest that the relationship between technology, the state and society is actually a dialectical one. While the state is wont to overdetermine the use of technology by society, society also uses technology to further its own ends, never mind that such may at times be fundamentally incompatible with the 'reason of state'. The result, for instance, is the use of telecommunications technology for various kinds of political agenda, ranging from the progressive, social justice 'Seattle' type, to the activities of terrorists with one grudge or the other against the modern liberal state. Mastery and adept use of telecommunications technology, needless to say, were crucial in the attack on United States targets on 11 September 2001. Indeed, if scholars like Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001) are to be believed, a novel form of social organisation (after tribes, hierarchies and, markets) seems to have emerged around networks using sophisticated communication technologies and decentralized organisational structures. These 'smart mobs', to borrow Howard Rheingold's (2003) apt characterisation are "self-regulated through flat governance hierarchies and distributed power." (Ibid, 163).

The surprise then, if we may call it that, is that the dialogue between technology and society is bound to result in unanticipated consequences. (Telecommunications) technology seems to be a neutral force that forces in society (civil or otherwise) can mobilise for different projects. Certainly, across contemporary Africa, telecommunications technology, most especially mobile technology, continues to establish a huge impact on the social landscape. To cite just two quick examples, mobile technology is believed to be helping Ugandan farmers deal with the vagaries of the market, while Congolese have apparently started talking to one another again after decades of bitter conflict, thanks to the introduction of mobile technology in the

Congo Democratic Republic (*BBC Focus Magazine* January-March 2004). It remains a moot point whether the same technology will be used to telling effect by combatants, if there is a recurrence of conflict in the foreseeable future<sup>88</sup>.

If the impact of technology on some aspects of social life is uncertain, the consequences for politics, especially democratic activism, are contested by scholars. Many remain outright sceptical about the democratic utility of new technologies, particularly media technologies. For Ake (2000), the public sphere brought into being by information technologies has hardly any boundaries, is too fluid, and too amorphous to elicit a sense of sharing in a social entity or to nurture political projects and democratic activism. Kroker and Weinstein (2000) agree. They argue that the new information superhighway “kills human agency and renders economic justice, democratic discourse, social solidarity and creativity obsolete” (quoted in Adebani 2001, 7). A cursory look at the literature reveals that this kind of techno-scepticism has a long history and a somewhat distinguished philosophical pedigree. For example, members of the famous Frankfurt School of social philosophy were almost unanimous in their view on the limits of media technologies, which they believed were controlled by capitalists (Zoltan 1977, Horkheimer and Adorno 1972).

Other scholars do not share their pessimism. The philosophical core of the optimists’ argument seems to have been captured in Rheingold’s statement that “communities built inside machines or on air can be used to improve the ones outside of them” (2003, 122). How this process takes place is of course the crux of the matter. Pertierra (2002) argues for example, that mobile phones, through texting, have

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<sup>88</sup> Another comparable example in this regard is the famous GrameenPhone which provides modern telecommunications services to the poor in Bangladesh. See <http://www.grameenphone.com/> website accessed on July 21, 2004.



provided people with “more freedom to express themselves in a strictly defined cultural environment” (2002, 8). For Finqualievich (2001), new media technologies undergird the emergent concept of electronic democracy, essentially “the increasing use of telecommunications technology to strengthen transparency, intra- and inter-organisational communication and public participation in governance” (quoted in Kuvaja and Mursu 2003, 18). According to him, electronic democracy transcends merely making information available on the net. Rather, it is about “changing management and organisation structures to enable citizens’ participation and access to information” (ibid).

The optimists’ argument has continued to garner considerable sympathy, especially as new media technologies continue to play an axial role in political transformations across the world, particularly in the developing world. The foremost example in this regard is the ‘coup de text’ which culminated in the overthrow of President Joseph Estrada in the Philippines in January 2001. While scholars generally disagree on the specific impact that “thumb tribes”<sup>89</sup> (see Rheingold 2003) invoking the “power of the text” had on EDSA II,<sup>90</sup> there is no doubt that the more than 100 million texts that Filipinos exchanged daily (Agar 2003, 109) were significant in the process of mobilisation against the presidency of Erap<sup>91</sup>. Although there are those who point out that EDSA II was ultimately not about people power but in reality a reflection of the middle class’s influence and power of manipulation (see for example the brilliant discussion by Vicente Rafael (2003)), the incident occupies a pride of

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<sup>89</sup> Used by Rheingold to convey an image of a barely organised mass of ‘texters’

<sup>90</sup> After EDSA I, the popular insurrection against Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. The full meaning of EDSA is Epifanio de los Santos Avenue

<sup>91</sup> Erap was Joseph Estrada’s text-compliant nickname. It means ‘buddy’ backwards in Tagalog, the Philippines’ main language.

place in the Optimist Canon, and is frequently cited as a crucial milestone in the use of technology for the purposes of social advocacy. More important, it has continued to inspire embattled and/or embittered groups elsewhere.

In the run up to the 19 September 2003 boycott in Nigeria, it was common to hear aggrieved subscribers argue that “if switching off handsets to force the hands of phone companies succeeded in Argentina and the Philippines, it will succeed in Nigeria.” Although it may be argued that the immediate object of the protest in Nigeria differed in form from that in the Philippines (one was about using the boycott to force the GSM companies to, among other things, reduce tariffs and provide better services, the other concerned using the mobile phone as a tool for political overhauling), the ends are actually similar, to the extent that one locates the protest in Nigeria within the right political context. As I have advanced, the GSM boycott was not about the GSM companies *alone*, but more crucially about the totality of the rest of society in relation to the Nigerian state and economy. I shall return to this hypothesis again at a later stage in the chapter.

From the above, there is little doubt that recent developments offer a basis for rethinking the sceptics’ position, and I propose to advance by posing a few questions: What does EDSA II in the Philippines really symbolise? How useful is telecommunications technology/mobile telephony for democratic activism? What sort of public sphere do new media technologies occasion? And how effective are they in contesting hegemony? Clearly, these dilemmas cannot be fully resolved here, but I will advance a set of hypotheses which may guide further discussions. First, new technologies of communication, in particular mobile telephones, expand the existing

territory of public expression. This expansion is important for African countries and the developing world where decades of autocracy have led to the progressive denudation of the public sphere. They thus energise civil society by critically complementing the raft of issues around which it has usually organised. In this wise, new media technologies generate a *reason* for, as well as a *means* of, social democratic activism.

How do they do this? Schmidtke (1998) has advanced four related theses on the relationship of new technologies to collective action and political mobilization. New technologies, according to him

1. reduce costs for collective action,
2. reduce individuals' costs for engagement and participation,
3. intensify the actors' sense of engagement and
4. facilitate the formation of collective identity.

While this might indeed be the case, it should be noted that how this plays out rests squarely on the immediate socio-political environment in which technology and society inter-course. As Schmidtke (1998) himself warned, at the end of the day, it is not the medium, but the social and political context that determines the contours of subsequent events.

In the foregoing, I have tried to identify some of the issues in the conceptual literature on technology, state and society. The aim has been to place the discussion in this chapter in as broad a scholastic spectrum as possible in order to help in grasping the wider ramifications of what is at issue, which is how modern telecommunications

technology, in this case mobile telephony, is interfacing with democratic politics and citizen action in Nigeria in significant ways. The larger aim remains the same; to see how mobile telephony is instigating new forms of social action, embodying at the same time a new imaginary of civil society and public dissent. Before going to the boycott proper, some background information about telephony and the state in Nigeria seems to be quite appropriate.

#### **5.4 Regimes of Jealousy**

It is impossible to understand the travails of telephony in Nigeria outside the context of the overall insufficiency of the state, with regard to the provision of public services. These include, among others, roads, sanitation facilities, public space infrastructure and, most notoriously, electricity. Such is the general dereliction of the state with respect to the latter for instance, that the general public would, in frustration, insist on calling the corporation responsible for the provision of electricity 'Never Expect Power Always' in contrast to the original 'National Electric Power Authority' (NEPA).

One testimony to the public's deep scepticism about the ability of NEPA to provide stable electricity is the prevalence of electricity generators in industries and upper middle class homes across the country. Nevertheless, the erratic nature of power supply to homes and industries has endured despite increased budgetary allocations to the sector over the years (see Olukoju 2004); and famously, despite the initiatives of several state governments, including the Lagos state government which embarked on an independent power supply scheme with the now bankrupt American energy company, Enron, in 2001 (Olukoju 2004).

The problem with a service like telephony however is that it is hardly amenable to private solutions, mainly for reasons of cost, and also because the intervention of the state is required at different stages in the process. This necessity for state intervention has dawned even more powerfully in the aftermath of the introduction of GSM services in Nigeria, and we will shed more light on this connection presently.

The telephone has been relatively central to the projection of state power in Nigeria. Crucially, it has also been a strong element in social stratification as the possession of a telephone was supposed to be an index of where one belonged on the social ladder. According to a newspaper commentator, "in Nigeria, such amenities that have long been taken for granted as essential to modern living were preserved as status symbols. Public monopolies like NITEL (Nigerian Telecommunications Limited) were nursed at tax payers' great expense in furtherance of the trend." This was arguably the subconscious background to the remark by Colonel David Mark, minister of communications under the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida that telephones are not for the poor. Earlier, we mentioned another illustration of this subconscious, namely the decision of the Abacha regime to ban the operations of telephone centres across the country. Given this situation, the question may be asked as to whether the failure of the Nigerian state to provide efficient telephony services is attributable to its familiar bureaucratic anaemia (Olukoju 2004), or perhaps a conscious policy to starve civil society of a vital source of energy.

Whether consciously or otherwise however, the reality is that prior to the introduction of GSM technology in the country in 2001, Nigeria was what might be

called a virtual telecommunications desert. Relevant figures buttress this assertion. Pre-GSM, Nigeria ranked globally as the third lowest in teledensity (average number of telephones per thousand population) after Afghanistan and Mongolia (Oparah 2003). Although the first telephone call in the country was made in 1901, up till a century later in 2001, Nigeria, with a population of 88 million according to the disputed 1991 national population census, could only boast of 450,000 lines. A majority of these lines were provided by the state-owned Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL) and a handful of private telecommunications operators (PTOs). Still, services were invariably abysmal, and the Nigerian public could not make up their minds on which was more inefficient between NEPA and NITEL. In addition, the ownership of the few existing lines lends credence to the point we made earlier about the telephone as a social delineator. The 450,000 odd lines were in the hands of less than 90,000 individuals and corporate organisations, many of which had more than 50 lines on their switch boards (Oparah, op.cit.). Furthermore, as telephones were intimately connected to social standing, new lines were almost impossible to acquire. The waiting time for a new telephone line was somewhere between 8 and 10 years, while the cost (minus installation charges) was about N80, 000 (\$800). This, at a time when the average annual salary was less than N40, 000 (\$400).

Instructively however, the issue of telecommunications, particularly of telephones never disappeared from public discourse. Indeed, if anything, other developments in the larger society made its continuous debate imperative. One was the quantum leap in the number of citizens who were compelled by the prevailing economic situation to emigrate from the country. As this diaspora swelled, so did its

needs, particularly those related to communication. This, among other factors connected with the impact of globalisation on the domestic economy served to put telecommunications issues on the front burner of public debate (Ajibewa 2003, Afolayan 2002, Akindes 2003, Herbst 1990). As a result, successive governments felt compelled to pay lip service to the idea despite their apparent insincerity. Thus, a core component of President Ibrahim Babangida's otherwise garbled strategy of economic deregulation (Olukoshi 1993, Biersteker and Lewis 1996) was a national telecommunications policy. In actual fact, the decree regulating the activities of GSM companies was promulgated as far back as 1992 (*The Guardian* 12 November 2003). However, as pointed out before, the policy could not come to fruition partly due to the Manichaeic worldview of its initiator.

Nor did his immediate successor fare any better. When General Sani Abacha took over in December 1993, he tried to hijack the benefits of privatisation and commercialisation, particularly the mobile telephone services. "His own idea was to frustrate other prospective investors out of the market and use his own local and foreign fronts to place his outfit, TELECEL, in the controlling and dominant position" (Nnanna 2003). General Abacha was succeeded by General Abdulsalam Abubakar who also saw telecommunications as an extension of state power and awarded numerous telecommunications licenses, ranging from direct tele-access to value added services (Otuya 2003).

Following his inauguration on May 29 1999, one of the first things the current president, Olusegun Obasanjo, did was to suspend all telecommunications licenses issued by the previous regime, especially those meant for mobile access. He then set

up a panel under an industry chieftain, Christopher Kolade, to audit and reassess all the licenses, at the end of which nearly all of them were cancelled.

## 5.5 The Coming of GSM Telephony

Having wiped the board virtually clean, the president decided to make public the process of issuing of licenses to operators. This was in line with the radical *glasnost* that the newly elected regime was trying to promote. At the same time, the new dispensation was clearly trying to get the best from a telecommunications market that had witnessed many profound changes over the previous decade and had in the process become quite competitive.

Cellular telephony was born in the United States,<sup>92</sup> but credit for the simplification of its previously complicated technology is usually given to the Nordic countries, from where it spread to the rest of Europe. While a comprehensive history of the mobile phone is outside the thematic ambience, one critical point is worth setting out. This is the inevitable insertion of GSM into the specific politics of societies where the technology was either developed or refined. For instance, one reason why mobile technology diffused with ease throughout continental Europe was because, in the words of Agar (2003), “the European Commission, the civil service of the European project, had seen in GSM a political tool of immense value: telecommunications (and particularly GSM) would provide the infrastructure of a Europe ready to mount a convincing economic challenge to the US and Japan, and a pan-European telecoms network would encourage organisations to think European” (Agar 2003, 60-61).

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<sup>92</sup> For a global perspective on the history of the mobile phone see Agar (2003).



The inauguration of the technology in December 1982 in Stockholm, Sweden by engineers and administrators from eleven European countries was therefore a profoundly political act. The acronym GSM initially stood for the countries involved (Groupe Special Mobile), but later became the Global Standard for Mobile Communications (Agar 2003, 56). The initially sluggish public reaction to cellular phones may partly have been accounted for by the fact that they were physically cumbersome and exorbitantly costly<sup>93</sup>, but all this was soon to change. By 1996, GSM phones could be found in 103 diverse countries, from Australia to Russia, from South Africa to Azerbaijan (ibid). In the same year, 7 million people (10 per cent of the population) in the Philippines owned a mobile phone- almost twice the number with landlines.

Many factors were responsible for this sudden explosion in the number of mobile phone subscribers and the evolution of what we might call a mobile culture. The first explanation has necessarily to do with cost. As the knowledge of mobile technology grew and dispersed, so did the price of the average phone cascade. Essentially, consumers no longer had to make a straight choice between a mobile telephone or a small car, or indeed a car big enough to lug a mobile phone around! Furthermore, a choice of payment methods brought the mobile within reach of people who survive outside the formal economy; often without a bank account or credit record (Ashurst 2004). Besides, as the prices fell, the “continuous miniaturisation of components” (Agar 2003, 8) which had been a feature of electrical technology also ensured that the phones were increasingly lighter and more portable with time. By the

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<sup>93</sup> Agar notes that the first generation of cell phones cost the equivalent of a small car and were so heavy that you needed a car to transport them. Not exactly mobile, then!

year 2002, global subscriptions to cellular phones were reported to have exceeded the one billion mark (Agar 2003, 5).

Apart from declining cost and user-friendliness, other factors made the mobile phone a hit with the consuming public. One of these is symbolic, having to do with the way in which the mobile phone is rooted in the affirmations and processes of the modern self (Myerson 2001). Perhaps it is more than a coincidence that the mobile phone has become popular in an age which has become obsessed with individuality and assertion of personal freedom. There is something essentially liberating<sup>94</sup> about owning a mobile phone. For the owner, the mobile phone performs a myriad of 'miracles', central among which are the ability to be multi-locational or trans-locational. As the network connecting communities in the global village become denser, so too does the need for communication increase. In the words of Rafael (2003),

The cell phone gives its owner a sense of *being* someone even if he or she only a street vendor or a high school student-someone who can reach and be reached and is thus always in touch. The "manic" relationship to the cell phone is just this ready willingness to identify with it, or more precisely with what the machine is thought capable of doing. One not only has access to it; by virtue of its *omnipresence and proximity*, one becomes like it. That is to say, one becomes an apparatus for sending and receiving messages at all times (p. 405) (*Italics added*).

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<sup>94</sup> This is argument that can be stood on its head as it can also be argued that in a sense, the mobile phone possesses the capacity to 'imprison' or fixate.

One important cog in this communicative wheel is the capacity to send messages in 'text' form<sup>95</sup>. Indeed, one might argue that this is the main reason behind the global popularity of mobile phones.

What makes the 'text' so important and popular? For one, it seems mutually economically beneficial to both mobile phone subscribers and operators. As Rafael (2003) has noted, "unlike voice messages, text messages take up less bandwidth and require far less time to convert into digitized packets available for transmission. It thus makes economic sense for service providers to encourage the use of text messaging in order to reserve greater bandwidth space for more expensive and profitable voice message" (p. 404). Second, as adumbrated above in relation to the mobile phone itself, texting provides subscribers

with a way out of their surroundings. Thanks to the cell phone, they need not be present to others around them. Even when they are part of a socially defined group-say, commuters or mourners-*cell phone users are always somewhere else, receiving and transmitting messages from beyond their physical location*. It is in this sense that they become other than their socially delineated identity: not only cell phone users but cell phone "maniacs." Because it rarely leaves their side, the phone becomes part of the hand, the digits an extension of the fingers. In certain cases, the hand takes the place of the mouth, the fingers that of the tongue (Rafael, Pp. 405-6).

This is not to say that texting does not have its own social drawbacks. Much has been said for example about its perceived tendency to "disrupt protocols of recognition and accountability" (ibid, p. 408). A rigorous examination of this and related claims falls outside the thematic vision of this study. The point being made here is that it is in fact due to these and other personal and social possibilities (both

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<sup>95</sup> The first text message was sent accidentally in 1993 by Riku Pihkonen, a Nokia engineering student. At that time, it was not thought to be important. See Agar, op.cit., p. 169.

negative and positive) that the mobile phone/texting has acquired its existing global popularity. Arguably the potential to bypass, negate, subvert, undermine, antagonise, or even complement the state, as the case may be, is encoded into the very ontology of the mobile phone.

This was the global state of affairs when Nigeria began the journey to license GSM operators in 2001. True to its earlier promise, the federal government threw open the auctioning process for four mobile licenses in January 2001. At the end of the day, each license was auctioned for a whopping \$285<sup>96</sup>, and by August 2001, three of the GSM operators had begun operations. These were the Zimbabwean-owned Econet Wireless Nigeria Limited<sup>97</sup>, the South-African-owned MTN Limited, and the state-owned NITEL. So popular did mobile technology become that within a few months, the companies had exceeded their highest expectations. Initially, the companies had been sceptical about investing in the Nigerian economy because of its perceived volatility and the country's history of political instability. At the same time, they were unsure about the purchasing power of potential customers.

These fears were to give way to an almost boundless optimism after a few months. For example, by September 30 2003, MTN could boast in excess of 1.3 million subscribers while its rival Econet had more than 850,000. Within the same period, both companies combined had spread their coverage to more than 1,500 villages and communities and over 100 cities (Aragba-Akpore 2004). In total, both MTN and Econet have a total of more than 3 million lines out of which 2.8 million

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<sup>96</sup> The high cost of the licenses was to become an issue in the run up to the 19 September 2003 boycott. The GSM companies claimed that the cost was one of the highest in the world, seemingly justifying the exorbitant tariffs which the protesters also claimed were among the highest in the world.

<sup>97</sup> As at the time of writing (July 2004), it was embroiled in a long-drawn takeover bid by South-African based Vodacom, a subsidiary of Vodafone UK.

are fully subscribed (Eke 2003). Overall, within 24 months, with new investments put at \$3.8 billion (about N600 billion) and a teledensity of 2.6 telephone lines to every 100 inhabitants, Nigeria's telecommunications sector was rated by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) as the fastest growing in Africa (ibid). These figures prove to be truly remarkable when you consider that for the same period, a large part of the northern section of the country was yet to benefit from the services of the GSM companies (Otuya 2003).

The sudden explosion of GSM in Nigeria was, admittedly, part of a continent-wide momentum (Panos 2004). 95.61 per cent of African phone users use GSM. In the past 12 months, there has been a 101.85 per cent growth of GSM users in Africa, as opposed to a growth rate of 52.49 per cent globally. Vodacom, the biggest African network has over 7.5 million subscribers, while the total number of African subscribers (all technologies) is 34.3 million. The biggest market is in South Africa with 14.4 million users. This is expected to grow to 19 million by 2006 (Ashurst 2004, 20).

The unexpectedly high number of users naturally translated into profits for the companies. Thus, in its first year of operation, MTN declared a pre-tax profit of N11 billion (*Daily Times* 11 August 2003, p. 10). Naturally too, with these profits came a number of expectations, especially with respect to the quality of services rendered by the GSM companies. Many consumers believed that the companies were simply not doing enough, preferring to cash in on an unsuspecting public to the detriment of good service. The companies did not think so, insisting that they were doing enough within

the specific limitations of the Nigerian environment. In the following section, I examine the contrasting arguments before going on to the boycott proper.

## **5.6 Subscribers versus GSM Companies: Between Service and Profit**

*“Laye Obasanjo, eni to o kawo nlo phone”* (Translated: In the Obasanjo era, even the unlettered use phones) (*The Guardian* February 29 2004).

“It is true that what works elsewhere doesn’t necessarily work in Nigeria. Elsewhere in the world, GSM services are not burdened by the kind of poor quality that afflicts Nigerian subscribers. Elsewhere in the world, GSM calls are made with one dial whether GSM to GSM; GSM to landline; or landline to GSM. The question of network overload nonsense does not arise” (Kingsley Osadolor 2003, *The Guardian* 23 September 2003).

Is there anything wrong with Nigeria? Why is it that nothing works here? Why is it that government is so insensitive to the pains and suffering of its people? Why is it that evil thrives so abundantly in Nigeria? Who will bring relief and restore hope to us? Who should we run to for protection from this wicked exploitation by these phone companies when a govt that ought to protect us maintains a colluding silence? Look at the National Communications Commission (NCC). What are they doing about this mindless rip-off? Nothing, absolutely nothing, because they are all using toll free lines. So they don’t experience what we ordinary people go through in the hands of these GSM companies” (Joseph Akanbi, *ThisDay* July 26 2003).

The three statements above reflect the range of emotions provoked by the introduction of GSM telephony in Nigeria. While the first captures the popular elation and jubilation, the second and third speak to public disappointment with the quality of services provided by the mobile telephone companies. There was a clear division between those who specifically blame the phone companies, and those who think that

it was the vaguely defined, yet ubiquitous, 'Nigerian factor'<sup>98</sup> that was making its mark felt again. The disenchantment in question must be understood against the background of common expectations following Nigeria's return to civil rule after sixteen years of military rule.

Among many anticipated 'dividends' of democracy, the coming of mobile telephony was expected to signal a radical improvement in the common lot. At the very least, mobile telecommunication was expected to accomplish some of the 'miracles' associated with its introduction in other parts of the world, for instance, 'abolishing' distance by facilitating the conduct of business and interpersonal relations. Behind this, arguably, was the 'telecommunicative fantasy' (Rafael 2003) of using the mobile telephone as a means of asserting a new collective identity, remodelling the terms of engagement with the state, and, above all, seeking and achieving social parity with the ruling class which had jealously monopolised communications technology for so long. As such, it was apparently the felt impotence of mobile technology to accomplish these tasks, or at least to begin to address them on an immediate basis, that fuelled the social anger which culminated in the boycott of 19 September 2003.

Allied to this was the perceived failure of the state or the state-established National Communications Commission (NCC) to call the mobile telephone companies to order and impose sanctions as and when necessary. Apparently, it was even felt in some cases that the companies operated in cahoots with the federal authorities, a factor which made them largely impervious to the agitation of the larger

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<sup>98</sup> Used locally to 'explain' a brand of Nigerian exceptionalism which makes global processes not necessarily obtainable in Nigeria.

public. This suspicion is reflected in Joseph Akanbi's questions (see above) and conclusion (above) as follows:

Who will bring relief and restore hope to us? Who should we run to for protection from this wicked exploitation by these phone companies when a govt that ought to protect us maintains a colluding silence? Look at the National Communications Commission (NCC). What are they doing about this mindless rip-off? Nothing, absolutely nothing, because they are all using toll free lines (given to them as freebies by the phone companies). So they don't experience what we ordinary people go through in the hands of these GSM companies" (see supra) (parenthesis added).

Indeed, many people were eager to draw parallels between the activities of the phone companies and those of oil companies in the oil 'producing' areas which were similarly notorious for conniving with the state to undermine the interests of the Nigerian public (Frynas 1998).

The subscribers' case can be categorised in terms of complaints and demands. The basic complaints centred on the following:

#### *Complaints*

1. arbitrary reduction of credits,
2. uncompleted calls,
3. poor signals, otherwise known as "no network coverage" or "network busy",
4. service breakage,
5. constant changes in contract terms,
6. "usurious" tariffs (believed to be among the highest, if not the highest, in the world),
7. misleading advertisements about new services,
8. oversubscribed networks, thus making access very difficult,



9. problem of interconnectivity among networks,
10. unsolicited diversion of calls,
11. text message failures
12. artificial scarcity of recharge cards, and
13. surcharging of undelivered text messages.

To ameliorate this situation, the subscribers advocated as follows:

### *Proposals*

1. reduction of call tariff to N20 (as opposed to N50) per call per minute across the board,
2. reduction of SIM pack to N5,000 across the aboard
3. immediate implementation of the per second-billing system (as opposed to per minute-billing) by all operators,
4. free SMS service by all operators,
5. free calls during weekends and off-peak periods,
6. zero payment for all terminated and dropped calls,
7. indefinite access (as opposed to limited but renewable access period) to the GSM network for all subscribers,
8. immediate interconnection by all GSM operators, private telecommunication operators and NITEL, and
9. cancellation of compulsory expiry dates for recharge cards.

Initially, these complaints and proposals circulated among subscribers and the wider public through mere word-of-mouth, text messages, phone calls and letters and articles in the print media. Beyond this, the first concrete initiative was the decision

by Dr. Deolu Ogunbanjo and Prince Bayo Omotubora to instigate legal action against the two then operating companies, MTN and Econet. This was on March 8 2002, a date that, in retrospect, becomes symbolic for the formation of arguably the pioneer organisation to champion the cause of mobile phone subscribers in Nigeria- National Association of Telecommunications Subscribers (NATCOMS). In the words of Dr. Ogunbanjo himself, “It started when we sued MTN and ECONET last year...it was after the first hearing that we knew how much suffering Nigerian GSM users were going through. When we got out of the court so many people just surrounded us. It was a large crowd and that was where NATCOMS was formed” (see *The Guardian* 12 November 2003).

As the campaign against the GSM companies gathered momentum, similar pro-customer organisations sprang up, particularly in the run up to the September 19 protest. Notably, nearly all such organisations were formed for the specific aim of mobilising for the protest, as opposed to developing long-term strategies to combat the perceived excesses of the phone companies. As such, many of them have since fallen quiet after the protest, leaving the media as the only continuous vehicle of agitation. Examples of the many organisations which mushroomed and have since disappeared from the public view are: the GSM Subscribers Association of Nigeria, led by Ebun-Olu Adegboruwa, Unofficial Consumer Protection Agency (UCPA), Nationwide Action Against Corruption (NAAC), Concerned GSM Subscribers in Nigeria, National Association of Mobile Phone Subscribers, led by a university Professor, Bunmi Ayoade, Probity in Nigeria (PIN), and Telecommunications Subscribers Rights Agenda (TSRA).

While NATCOMS took the legal route, these associations spearheaded a popular campaign to prosecute and defeat the phone companies in the court of public opinion. To complement the strategies listed earlier, they also distributed posters and leaflets and made a representation to the National Assembly where they could count on many sympathetic ears (see Osuagwu 2003).

But it was the role of the media in the articulation of the demands that was to prove crucial in the process, thereby helping us to see the media itself in the context of the prevailing economic and social circumstances. The initial message of the protesters was circulated by text and it read thus:

FROM SEPTEMBER 7-14 2003, SWITCH OFF YOUR GSM HANDSETS BETWEEN  
10AM-12 NOON DAILY.  
IN DEMAND OF  
REDUCED GSM CHARGES  
INTRODUCTION OF PER SECOND BILLING  
& BETTER SERVICES  
DO YOU KNOW THAT  
The GSM charge of N50 per minute is the highest in the world? In the US, a minute is  
N20, in Europe N23, in China N18, in South Africa N22 and in Ghana N23. Why N50  
in Nigeria? This is a rip off! (Do not believe their story that they pay more for diesel  
in Nigeria). Right now GSM operators in the UK are about to further reduce charges  
on airtimes.  
ONE WEEK IS NOT TOO MUCH  
JOIN THE REDUCE THE GSM TARIFF PROTEST WEEK  
BOYCOTT OR SUSPEND ANY FURTHER PURCHASE OF ALL GSM  
MATERIALS INCLUDING SIM PACKS AND CARDS FROM ALL GSM  
OPERATORS FOR THE PERIOD OF THE PROTEST WEEK.

However, for some reason, this initial campaign led by Concerned GSM  
Subscribers was not popular with the majority of subscribers. Part of the explanation  
may have had to do with the fact that the organisers did not see the need to court the  
media and woo it to their cause. Not that this would have been difficult. A casual  
survey of the media would reveal widespread disaffection caused by a similarly

profound disenchantment with the services of the GSM companies. This is evidenced by some of the headlines of stories focusing on their activities. The following sample of story headlines seems to reflect the overall mood of the media: “Two years of GSM pains and gains”, “GSM providers rip Nigerians of millions daily”, “GSM is ‘Go Spend Money’”, “GSM: Two years, too many troubles”, “The Great GSM rip off”, “Lies the networks tell”, “The GSM Scam”, “Open Robbery”, “GSM Operations: A colossal rip-off”, “Grand Swindling Machine”, “GSM dream turns sour”, “GSM: Network Robbery or ‘Network Busy’?”

A word on the media in relation to the 19 September protest is apposite at this point. It is fair to say that in general the media (and here I refer in the main to the print media) lived to up to its theoretical billing as the megaphone of civil society. The efforts of the print publications at projecting the cause of subscribers were complemented notably by *GSM Today*<sup>99</sup>, arguably the first and only electronic magazine in the country so far. Edited by John Sagai Adam, the self-proclaimed *e-zine* gave ample coverage to all activities related to the boycott, both from the point of view of subscribers or the GSM companies. But the real battle between the protesters and the companies to shape public imagination took place in the print media, and some of the actions that the GSM companies took in this regard are particularly instructive.

While, as noted earlier, subscribers limited themselves to letters to the editor and articles, the companies by contrast actively courted the media. The enduring symbol of this active courtship was the decision by the companies to give free handsets

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<sup>99</sup> Established in February 2002, GSM Today’s declared aim is to “timely, educative and actionable (sic) information on GSM in Nigeria”. See its homepage at: <http://www.geocities.com/gsmtodayezine/About.html> accessed on March 4 2004.

and lines to senior editors of media organisations<sup>100</sup>. This was complemented by the huge numbers of paid advertisements which they (the companies) published in different newspapers. These two factors made the phone companies extremely popular with the media. The editors must have felt very comfortable with the arrangement, for when the GSM companies wanted the editors to return the handsets early last year, they were firmly rebuffed<sup>101</sup>.

Perhaps this was why the planned boycott was not an instant hit with the media, and part of the reason why the media eventually decided to come on board, might be traced to the tenacity of the subscribers and the pungency of the text message, which caught the popular imagination. In this regard, contrary to the earlier call to action which demanded that subscribers switch off for two hours everyday between 7-14 September, the latter text was simple and canvassed a one-day boycott. The message read thus: "Let's force GSM tariffs down. Join a mass protest switch off ur fone on fri sept 19 '03. They'll lose millions. It worked in US & Argentina. Spread Dis txt". It is also not unlikely that many were attracted to the cause by the encouraging fact that the method had already worked in other parts of the world, thus making its success in Nigeria feasible. Besides, evidence that the protest had struck the right chord could be seen in the decision of at least two newspapers, *New Age* and *The Vanguard*. Both featured a countdown to the boycott. While *New Age* encouraged its readers to follow the boycott and related events, and send their views comments to its website, *Vanguard*, for its part created a column to collate arguments and views from the point of view of both the protesters and the service providers. For some reason however, this column

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<sup>100</sup> Personal communication, Bode Opeseitan, Assistant Editor, *Nigerian Tribune*, Ibadan, September 2003.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

disappeared a few days before the boycott, spawning rumours that the newspaper had been induced to take a dive.

While it was impossible to ascertain whether this was true or not in the field, there was little doubt that it was probably too late to change the course of public opinion. Media opinion notwithstanding, many subscribers were clearly fed up with the services of the GSM companies, and the following comments from three different subscribers is a useful gauge of overall public disillusionment:

It has been horrible exchanging texts with people this past week, the first week of MTN's free texting month. It must be that people reacted to this free texting stuff so well that they have crashed the data capacity of the leading GSM network. You can't get a word of text through. The message would simply not go. And when finally your handset tells you the message has been sent, don't count on it. Put a call through to crosscheck. You will most certainly find that it was never delivered. Suddenly that purpose of text messaging is defeated. If you can never be sure that your text will be delivered, and you have to call every time to make certain, what's the point of texting? None. Except your physiotherapist recommended constant exercise of your thumb. And then, some people are bound to cry soon enough when they realize their folly...Some text I sent personally earlier in the week are still hung up somewhere in the network. (John Awe, "Textual Intercourse" *Nigerian Tribune* 14 August 2003)

The MTN network has been moving from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm. At first it was just loss-of-service for a few hours but these days, it is becoming something else. Here is a catalogue of the BITTER connection...Calls get chopped-off while you are still speaking. MTN bills you. You call, the timer is ticking, but you can't hear the other person. MTN still bills you. You can't even load your account sometimes (even using the network-code method, which is supposed to free up voice channels, doesn't work). Even when you load, it doesn't get credited for hours so don't throw away your recharge card until you see that your call credits have actually increased.

SMS takes days to get to its destination sometimes. There are times when SMS is “free” for hours on end. MTN then sucks up the bill later and leaves its subscribers in confusion. What is terrible is that these are the CURRENT problems of even after the transmission backbone. MTN used to promise us that things will get better after the backbone but these days, they say it is after the SECOND transmission backbone before things will get better. Isn't that another way of saying “Abracadabra- the more you see the less you understand? (*GSM Today*, August 2003)

Talking about GSM we have to give credit to President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration for deeming it fit to even bring it into the country. But one thing must be said also that the venture has been very very expensive beginning from when the licenses were sold. It was very expensive. Also, the commission did not see the wisdom in making sure that the GSM operators have good facilities on ground before issuing them with the license. The problem we have on ground now is that the lines are there but no good facilities that can carry them because they are already over stretched especially the last batch of lines that were sold out. You discover most of the lines you cannot use them to call because the network is already jam-packed. That is just one of the problems of the network. The other problem is the bills; they are quite high. Not just that they are high but they criminally manipulated it that you buy a recharge card now and cannot keep it for long...Then the bills keep running whether you use it or not. A friend told me that in Israel you could have a line and buy a card for fifteen days and can keep it as long as one month. But in Nigeria once the fifteen days are gone you've lost the money. Those are basically the problems of GSM here, they are very very expensive and frustrating. In nearby African countries, a SIM pack is cheaper than what we buy here (Paul Onwude, secretary Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), North-West Zone *New Nigerian Weekly* 16 August 2003)

If anything is clear from the discussion thus far, it is that the protesters did not have a monopoly of the public ear. The service providers, if we can call them that in the light of the quality delivery issues raised by the subscribers, also put their own case across as vigorously as possible. In a curious convergence with some of the claims

made by the protesters, the companies also blamed factors integral to the Nigerian state and social environment for their alleged poor services. The easiest target was electricity, the erratic supply of which they blamed for their failure to guarantee reliable signals to their customers. The MTN claimed for instance that due to frequent power outages, it used over a million litres of diesel a day to power generators at its installations across the country. The same situation apparently applies to Econet. The unreliability of power supply also affects other things. According to Emeka Oparah, the Head of Corporate Affairs of Econet, it means for example that while a base station costs \$250,000 in South Africa, the same facility goes for \$375,000 in Nigeria because it has to be reconfigured to make it compatible with the erratic power supply in Nigeria (Oparah 2003).

As a result, the GSM companies argue, rather than castigate them for charging exorbitant tariffs for their products, subscribers ought to appreciate the unique constraints imposed by the Nigerian socio-political environment<sup>102</sup>. Some of these constraints include the \$285 million dollars paid for licenses which the companies considered to be among the highest in the world, and the failure of the federal government to channel the same money into developing necessary infrastructure as earlier promised<sup>103</sup>; the huge investments in hiring private security services to protect staff and equipment; and the huge sums paid out as ransom to liberate kidnapped staff and/or protect installations from damage by social miscreants, known in the Nigerian parlance as 'Area Boys' (Herault and Adesanmi 1997).

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<sup>102</sup> This plea is undermined by research which shows that the Nigerian social milieu is hardly different from others across the continent. See Panos (2004).

<sup>103</sup> It is on record that this money was paid into the federation account from where it was eventually shared among the three tiers of government-federal, state and local.



Other social constraints which, according to the companies, justified the allegedly high tariffs imposed for services are: the relatively low earnings of Nigerian consumers and the hugely unfavourable exchange rate of the Nigerian Naira to the dollar in a dollar-denominated market; the dependence of the companies on expatriate staff who are necessarily remunerated in hard currency; and the dearth of well-trained Nigerian personnel and the attendant huge corporate investment in the training of new recruits. Finally, the service providers also claim that there are other hidden cost elements in the provision of GSM services which seem to justify the allegedly high tariffs. These are: interconnection costs, overheads, taxes and levies, interest charges and amortisation on leased facilities (Oparah, op.cit.).

The majority of subscribers did not seem to have been impressed by these arguments. Many say, for instance, that the GSM companies knew well in advance about the vagaries of the Nigerian socio-economic environment before deciding to take the plunge, and so cannot use the same environment as an excuse to either charge high tariffs or provide poor services. In any case, subscribers were convinced that the companies might have decided to invest in the Nigerian telecommunications industry *because of* the same environmental limitations, given the scope it is known to provide for corporate profiteering. They argue that it is because the companies were in cahoots with the National Communications Commission (NCC) for example that they persistently got away with their embarrassing services, and that they were only out to make profit out of poor customers. The GSM companies' case was not helped by the revelations in the media about the Central Bank of Nigeria's concern that the companies' cash flow is usually not allowed to stay for more than a few weeks in Nigerian banks before it is converted to foreign exchange for one purchase or the

other, eliciting the worry that they may only be contributing to cost of turnover (COT) of the banks rather than the overall economy (see *ThisDay* August 6 2003). This was the evidence many needed to confirm their suspicion that the companies were more interested in profit than service to their customers.

### **5.7 The September 19<sup>th</sup> 2003 Boycott and its Aftermath**

This was the discursive balance in the weeks preceding and leading up to the 19 September boycott, and many of these arguments have continued to resonate even after that event. But what accounted for the choice of Friday September 19<sup>th</sup> by the protesters? According to Ojemaye Otitoka who claims to have sent out the inaugural text message on 19 August 2003, “The choice of September 19 2003 was simply because that would be one month from the date of sending out the first message. I figured that a month would be enough time for the word to spread. In addition, Sept 19 is a Friday, and that seemed a perfect working day when Nigerians would find it easier to make the required service of dispensing with making GSM calls” (see *The Guardian* 19 September 2003).

That day has since gone down in the annals as a landmark in the history of public agitation and customer-corporation relations in Nigeria. The organisers were also convinced that even beyond the obvious symbolism, they were able to burrow a hole in the pockets of the GSM companies. According to them, an estimated 75 per cent of mobile phone users switched off their phones in apparent compliance with the boycott call, a claim which, if true, would have led to the companies losing millions of Naira. The companies themselves admitted a substantial number of customers

actually switched off their phones, but insisted that these were fewer than the 75 per cent claimed by the protesters. What we do know of course is that a number of high profile individuals joined the protesters, thus giving their case a certain moral validation. Two examples are Gani Fawehinmi, lawyer and social justice crusader, and former external affairs minister, Bolaji Akinyemi.

To be sure, the public attitude towards the boycott was mixed. Although the print media generally recorded a simple victory for the protesters, it was also apparent that a significant number of people had decided not to obey the boycott for many reasons, including the possible loss of crucial business contacts and scepticism about the possibility of the boycott to achieve the intended ends.

But no one could doubt the dent that the boycott and the fractious debate leading to it had left on the corporate image of the GSM companies, and this, it seems, was more satisfying to the protesters. This perception was confirmed when, in the weeks following the boycott, the companies embarked on a charm offensive intended to win back the larger public and disaffected customers. For example, both MTN and Econet vigorously renewed their commitment to 'corporate social responsibility' by promoting a number of high profile social causes. Both, especially MTN, have become visible in the sporting and educational arenas, and MTN's Book Aid Programme is promoted in the media as its own contribution to Nigeria's search for quality education (The Punch 12 June 2003). For its part, Globacom, the indigenous-owned corporation which began operations in August 2003 has made a considerable impact in the promotion of soccer. It sponsors the premier division of the national soccer league which has since been renamed the *NFA Globacom Premiership*, and

was a constant presence in the media in January 2004 when Nigeria settled for a bronze medal in the 24<sup>th</sup> edition of the African Cup of Nations football tournament. Many supporters who made it to Tunisia, the venue of the tournament, to cheer on the national soccer team, did so thanks to sponsorship from the company.

In addition, the protesters could also point to a few other concrete gains. The major one perhaps is the introduction of per second billing (PSB) as opposed to per minute billing (PMB) which subscribers complained about as it meant that they automatically had to pay for the whole of the next minute for calls that exceeded the previous minute even by a second. The excuse of the subscribers had been that it was impossible to offer customers per second billing until they attained “reasonable maturity” or at least three years after the commencement of operations. However, following the boycott and the introduction of *Glomobile* which gave its customers the per second billing option on August 29 2003, Econet and MTN had no choice but to follow suit. Yet, they did not do this without attempting to claw something back-subscribers who opted to be billed on the per second billing platform were made to pay a switch over fee of N300 each (Oluseitan 2003). In addition, in an apparent attempt to recoup some of the money they conceivably lost in making the per second billing platform available to interested customers, both MTN and Econet started charging specified amounts for a range of services that were previously free. For example, access to the MTN customer service centre and the customer’s account balance (which used to be free) now attracted N6 per minute or 6k per second. To further assuage disgruntled customers, MTN also offered 100 free texts many of which, in an ironic twist, did not reach their destinations as usual.

One other seemingly positive fallout of the boycott could be noticed in the increased determination of the Ernest Ndukwe-led National Communications Commission (NCC) to ensure that the compliance of the service providers with the industry's basic regulations. To this end, it introduced the idea of the establishment of a Consumer Arbitration Panel in each of the 36 states of the country to listen to the grievances of subscribers and arbitrate where possible in disagreements between them and the GSM companies. In addition, the NCC issued a firm deadline on interconnectivity<sup>104</sup> to the companies, although at the time of writing, the companies were yet to comply despite repeated calls and new deadlines<sup>105</sup>.

The process leading to the boycott also stimulated official attention to the plight of consumers, and it is on record that on at least two occasions, the senior officials of both MTN and Econet were invited to the federal capital in Abuja to defend themselves. They were also made to appear before the Senate Committee on Commerce and Communications for the same purpose.

## **5.8 Conclusion: Mobile Technology, Civil Society and the State in Nigeria**

GSM phones are a great blessing in our lives. Chris Ngige remains Governor of Anambra state today largely because he had access to a GSM phone. In July 2003, and now a week ago, he was able to alert the larger community about plans to remove him from office with the aid of cell phones. In the past, before the aid of GSM, he would have been entirely at the mercy of his abductors. When Ngige

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<sup>104</sup> This was one of the issues behind the boycott. The service providers could not agree on the modalities for opening their trunks to one another, making it impossible at best and nightmarish at worst for users to make calls between networks. One result is the quite ridiculous sight of consumers with three different handsets for the three different networks.

<sup>105</sup> The first deadline expired on November 30 2003.

announced that the President was refusing to take his calls, or that he had blocked his calls, he was of course referring to the President's GSM phone. These new phones provide direct personal contact. We relate to them in a private manner. GSM phones have similarly reduced the distances in our lives (Reuben Abati, "How Did We Live Without GSM?" *The Guardian on Sunday* 11 January 2004)

Religion was once known as the opium of the people. That was in the heyday of Karl Marx and communism. A new age has dawned with a new opium known as GSM. In this brave new world of capitalism and globalisation, GSM is the drug that lulled everybody into excited stupor. People are daily going broke in the name of making very expensive phone calls, but like all drug addicts kicking the habit is easier said than done. Uzor Maxim Uzoatu, "GSM as Opium of the People" (*New Age* September 16 2003)

There is no doubt that the introduction of mobile telephony has radically transformed the Nigerian social landscape. By the end of 2003, there were more than two million mobile phone subscribers in the country. This transformation is what the two commentators above speak eloquently of. As Reuben Abati has noted, it (mobile telephony) has even had a totally unforetold impact on national politics, helping as it did to free Governor Chris Ngige of Anambra state from the clutches of his captors.

Evidently, it has also given civil society a new energy by providing a new cause around which to organise, and a new platform for contesting both statist and corporatist hegemonies. Furthermore, mobile telephony has come to manifest simultaneously as both the subject and instrument of agitation, lending a new dimension to the nature of the struggle for the public space in Nigeria. In this wise, it ought to be noted that 9/19 was symbolic both in the context of anti-corporatist politics in the country; and the use of technological means (the text message in

particular) as a tool for righting perceived wrongs in the domains of both politics and communications.

From the point of view of my founding hypothesis however, what appears to be even more important is the way in which the totality of the boycott, beginning from the process of mobilisation for it, through the strategies employed by the main protagonists (protesters and service providers), and down to its aftermath helps illuminate the dynamics and contours of 'actually existing civil society'. It has been shown (among other things) that ordinary citizens mobilise (in this case against entrenched business interests) using the platform of civil society; the circumstances under which civil society 'erupts' or emerges; and the nodes on the social landscape at which civil society and the state both connect and depart. At the same time, considerable light has been shed on the configuration, strengths, and inevitably, weaknesses of civil society. This is a good way of showing up the validity or otherwise of claims made in the theoretical literature in respect of civil society in social formations like Nigeria's.

I will now move on to some observations which follow logically from the foregoing and arise from the data presented in the preceding paragraphs. The first concerns the relationship between (mobile) technology and social democratic activism. It would seem from the analysis here that optimistic theoretical prognoses about the utility of mobile technology for social activism was partly justified. Through text messaging and concerted media mobilisation, the organisers of the 9/19 boycott were able to call official and corporate attention to the challenges facing mobile telephone users. And while the protest did not necessarily bring down a

government as was controversially the case in the Philippines, it at least led to a number of decisions which partly redressed the situation of subscribers. Some of these decisions have been mentioned.

Nevertheless, as in the Philippines, it could also be argued that the boycott also showed up the very limitations of the use of technology for purposes of social justice. While Rafael (2003) has noted in the case of EDSA II that the protesters neither challenged the nature of the state nor its class divisions, and that at the end of the day President Joseph Estrada was replaced by Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, his Vice President and daughter of a previous president; in the case of the 19 September boycott, it can also be observed that at the end of the day, the GSM companies appeared to have had the last word by withdrawing with one hand what they had given away with the other. But does it therefore mean that mobile technology is largely ineffectual? Again, that may not be the case. Instructively, in the Philippines, one of the first steps taken by Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was to ban “malicious, profane, and obscene texts” (Agar 2003, 109), a move which above anything else demonstrates her recognition of the potential power of text messaging.

One tentative conclusion is that mobile telephony or technology alone, while no doubt important, is hardly sufficient to accomplish specific democratic objectives. For one, it seems to be more effective when aligned with other instruments geared towards the same end. Second, and more important, its effectiveness is greatly determined by the prior strength and creativity of the social forces in whose hands it is a weapon. Technology (including mobile technology), it seems, does nothing on its own but is impacted by specific social conditions. To cite Agar’s dialectical



observation about the Filipino experience, “mobile phones are moulded by the countries they are used in and give form to the nation in return” (2003, 110). Thus, for Nigeria, while mobile telephony has no doubt come to be seen as a veritable instrument of political struggle, its potential effectiveness is bound to be determined by the way in which it is used. And while it is definitely a welcome addition to civil society’s arsenal, it may not necessarily fulfil the fondest telecommunicative fantasies about securing total victory in the contest for social and economic justice.

My next observation centres on civil society, especially how its character seems to change in relation to the issues around which it mobilises at a given historical moment. From the Nigerian case outlined above, it would seem as if social adversity and a perception of injustice (economic or political) are, at least in part, required to rouse civil society into action. In the aftermath of Nigeria’s return to civil rule in May 1999, the landscape that is civil society has been gradually reconfigured by the ‘desertion’ of many influential figures to the domain of government, a process which has led to the relative emptying out and weakening of civil society. As part of the same process, many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which had sprung up earlier to mobilise against military rule have sought to reinvent themselves, with many leaving Lagos (the former capital and seat of democratic activism) for Abuja, federal capital since 1991, to seek new opportunities. The overall result of this process, what we might call the transformation of political participation, has been to weaken civil society and expose it to the depredations of the state.

This was the situation in the realm of civil society as agitation for the boycott gathered and spread, and it comes as no surprise that many of the public voices that

had relatively fallen silent in the previous three years or so saw it as an opportunity to weigh in on behalf of the public and make themselves heard again. In this sense, the boycott could be said to have presented civil society with both a new platform for mobilising as well as a welcome opportunity to re-charge itself.

Yet, given what we have observed earlier about the limitations of technology, and mobile telephony in particular, it is obvious that civil society cannot rely absolutely on it in order to reinvent itself. Indeed, many associations sprang up in the heat of the day to champion the cause of the protesters, but as we have noted earlier, the majority of them have since become strangely inaudible, highlighting the critical need for organisational continuity on the part of civil society actors. In this wise, it is reassuring to observe that, after the boycott, some of the organisations have continued to pursue the judicial option. For example, on November 23 2003, an Abuja Federal High Court granted a group, Nationwide, permission to sue the GSM companies for failure to connect their networks (Okenwa 2003).

The final point concerns the relationship between civil society and the state. The state was a recurring decimal in the process which we have outlined in this chapter. It was attacked by civil society organisations and citizens who thought that it had failed to take firm action against the erring telephone companies. Some went to the extent of accusing it of acting in cahoots with the service providers. The latter, for their part, blamed it for not providing adequate infrastructure (like regular electricity and security) that might have made life less difficult for them and made it easier for them to satisfy their customers. They also blamed it for not channelling the huge sums paid for licenses into the development of required infrastructure for the

communications industry. Leaving the merits or otherwise of these allegations aside, what definitely emerges is that to be effective, both civil society and donors require a state that is efficient, transparent, firm, and able to enforce compliance with its wishes without degenerating into tyranny. Notably, the GSM companies failed to link up their trunks despite repeated calls from the federal authorities to do so. While it is not unknown for business concerns to try to maximise profit, experience shows that it usually takes the firmness and determination of the state to rein them in. Lastly, it is also apparent that no matter how determined, civil society, ranged against the immense powers that huge business concerns are capable of mustering, cannot create the desired changes in society alone. It requires a strong state that is resolutely committed to the rule of the law and social transparency.

In this chapter, I have tried to describe an aspect of contemporary civil society in Nigeria using the boycott of mobile phone services on 19 September 2003 as backdrop. In the process, critical light has also been shed on other relevant elements like the limitations of civil society, its relationship with the state, and with the business sector. On the whole, this may be regarded as civil society 'behaving well'. However, a major plank of this thesis is that civil society can and also does 'behave badly,' depending on the issues involved and the social ecology. In the next chapter, I explore this 'uncivil' dimension of civil society using the fracas over the eventually relocated Miss World 2002 beauty pageant as context.

## Chapter 6

### The 'Uncivil' Side of Civil Society: Miss World 2002 and Religious

#### Fundamentalism in Nigeria

##### 6.1 Introduction

*All known forms of civil society are plagued by endogenous sources of incivility*, so much so that one can propose the empirical-analytic thesis that incivility is a chronic feature of civil societies, one of their typical conditions, and, hence, normatively speaking, a perennial barrier to the actualization of a fully 'civilized' civil society (Keane 1998, 135) (Italics added).

A highly developed civil society can and normally does contain within itself violent tendencies: that is, patterns of incivility or behaviour prone to violence that can and do threaten to accumulate synergistically to the point where the occasional violence of some against some within a civil society degenerates into the constant violence of all against of an uncivil society, a state-framed ensemble of social institutions that are not merely prone to be but actually are dominated by uncivil forms of interaction, ranging from everyday rudeness tinged with veiled threats of bodily harm to systematically organised violence (Keane 1998, 136).

The precise boundary between the civil and the uncivil may be hard to define even in principle, and all the more so in practice. Alliances of convenience can be expected from time to time, spanning that boundary (as when the least civil of media barons are courted by the most respected of liberal institutions on some issue of common interest, or when fundamentalists seek the protection of civil libertarians) (Whitehead 1997, 127-128)

The previous chapter was devoted to an analysis of a facet of civil society in Nigeria; what, precisely, might be regarded as the 'civil'. This chapter attempts to show up the converse, that is, the 'uncivil'. As noted earlier, particularly in the first three chapters, one important dimension of debates about the meaning and properties of civil society

has been the issue of ‘uncivil’ society. With the recent re-emergence of the concept, the subject of incivility of civil society has returned to prominence following its use by influential exponents of the dominant liberal tradition to characterise ‘other’ societies and formations, which are believed to lack the features of a ‘civil’ society. Three of such seemingly non-negotiable features, to briefly recall Gellner (1994), are, the existence of a “modular man” (allegedly the epistemic antithesis of the “traditional man”); “economic decentralisation” (p. 29); and a cluster of associations<sup>106</sup> which are entered and left freely. Gellner (1994, 103) juxtaposes this last requirement with associations in non-Western societies which, he argues “are usually underwritten by ritual and a whole inside set of relationships”<sup>107</sup>.

Apparently, this is the tendency that Goody (2002) following Kaviraj (2001) had in mind with the reference to the historical use of civil society to “denigrate the other”<sup>108</sup>, and the attempt to contest this denigration and mount a systematic rebuttal has largely provided the inspiration for the alternative genealogy of civil society<sup>109</sup>. This ‘subaltern’ counter-narrative constitutes the conceptual framework for this thesis. Nevertheless, its emergence has not automatically led to the sudden extinction of the trope of incivility, even though it has greatly undermined the previously dominant normative idealisation of civil society.

Part of the reasons why the trope of incivility lingers may have to do with its character as a historical binary of civility. I am referring here to a fact that a

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<sup>106</sup> We have already discussed the limitations of associationalism in the second chapter.

<sup>107</sup> Other scholars of a similar disposition have also added their own list of necessary characteristics. Cahoon (2002) for instance insists that for a ‘modern civil society’ to exist, the following six features are *de rigueur*: “the autonomy of the social, the expansion of *civitas* to society. Spontaneous order, institutional pluralism, market economy, and a particular relation to culture”. (p. 225).

<sup>108</sup> ‘Other’ here could refer to either non-Western cultures or sociopolitical systems.

<sup>109</sup> See chapter three.

biographer of the idea of civil society quite easily discovers: the ghost of uncivility, to paraphrase Keane (1998), has always haunted civil society. This is an interesting paradox, for the whole point of the historical quest for a 'civil' society has been the desire to be rid of this unwanted twin. When for instance the contract theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries turned their back on the natural (read uncivil) artifice of the state of nature, it was with the hope of permanently securing the 'other', the state and civil society (Reitzes 1994). In the same vein, the contemporary hurry to abandon the dysfunctional modern state has led to a blinding race for a civil society which is monochromatically envisioned as the embodiment of virtue. This thesis hopes to demonstrate the basic falsity of this construct by using the Nigerian example to exemplify the moral ambiguity of civil society. At the same time, it highlights an important dimension of civil society in respect of which the relevant Nigerian literature has remained curiously timid.

The point then is that the uncivil is always with us<sup>110</sup>, a point well articulated by the three quotations at the head of this chapter. Part of the frustration with the register of uncivility, one imagines, is that it shatters the teleology of an otherwise unassailable narrative of Western history as a perfect progression from barbarism<sup>111</sup> to civility<sup>112</sup>. In this respect,

civilization was normally understood as a project charged with resolving the permanent problem of discharging, defusing and sublimating violence; uncivility was the permanent enemy of civil society. Civilization therefore

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<sup>110</sup> Keane observes powerfully that "zones of civility in everyday life are possible only because somewhere in the wings physical violence is stored up, set aside for rainy days- in institutional places and in quantities that effectively place it beyond the control of ordinary citizens" (2004, 66).

<sup>111</sup> It is also useful to recall here the property that Tester (1992) for instance, attributes to civil society as "a society of less barbarous manners" (p. 14)

<sup>112</sup> This thinking is also arguably integral to Kant's famous philosophy of history as a progression from civil society to 'perpetual peace'.

denoted an ongoing historical process, in which civility, a static term, was both the aim and the outcome of the transformation of uncivil into civil behaviour. From this thesis it was merely a short step to the thought that the civilising process was a march through stages of gradually increasing perfection (Keane 1998, 117).

What these seekers after the total civility of civil society fail to confront however, is the riddle described by Keane thus: “that there are times and places when civilized manners can and do peacefully cohabit with mass murder”<sup>113</sup> (Keane 1998, 128). The failure to recognise or come to terms with this basic antinomy emanates, presumably, from the broader attitude to the question of violence<sup>114</sup>, and following from that its relationship with the idea of a civil society. As a result, the cohabitation of civil society with violence has continued to generate intense scholarly heat (Fine 2000, Kaldor 2003, Keane 2003, Keane 2004), even though the critical passion itself unwittingly affirms the intrinsic relationship between the two.

Occupying one side of the intellectual divide is the contention that violence is the very antithesis of civil society. This argument is reflected for instance in Edwards’ (2004, 112) projection of civil society as, “the story of ordinary people living extraordinary lives through their relationships with each other, driven forward by a vision of the world that is ruled by love and compassion, non-violence and solidarity”. Leaving aside Edwards’ curious emphasis on “a vision of the world that is ruled by love and compassion”, one other thing that strikes the analyst about this syrupy definition is the arbitrary stress on “non-violence”. Why should civil society be free from violence? Edwards offers no rigorous intellectual justification.

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<sup>113</sup> We should regard mass murder here as a generic metaphor for violence.

<sup>114</sup> What constitutes violence and what does not of course changes across epochs; such that “what were once considered in a certain context non-violent and carnivalesque are, at a later moment and in a different context, regarded as strangely cruel curiosities” (Keane 1998, 136) For a more extensive discussion of the meaning and uses of violence, see his *Violence and Democracy* (2004)

Perhaps he is just content to embrace an anodyne definition of civil society, for in the same breath, he agrees that “civil society does indeed mean different things to different people, plays different roles at different times, and constitutes *both problem and solution*” (2004, vi) (Emphases added). The question that arises is this: if civil society can constitute a solution, especially in the sense suggested by Edwards as an agency for global transformation and solidarity, how does it constitute a problem? Part of the mandate of this thesis is to show this neglected element, and since that is the case, we may well proceed by making three related points.

The first is to concur with Edwards about what the notion of civil society aims to capture: the story of ordinary people, although I remain dubious about their capability to live “extraordinary” lives, expand the frontiers of global love and compassion, or remain eternally peaceable. Thus, at the centre of the story that this thesis tells are ordinary people (this is what I mean by enthroning “riff raffs”<sup>115</sup> at the centre of civil society discourse) struggling to protect their interests in defiance of big business and political authority respectively.

A second point is to emphasise the seeming truism of the assertion that civil society can indeed mean different things to different people and to draw on Fine’s (2000) analysis in this regard. If any moral can be drawn from the field research for this thesis, it is that the variety of conceptions of civil society is directly proportional to the number of people articulating them. This anarchical situation has two direct consequences, one of which is the caution it urges for the analyst to tread gingerly and

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<sup>115</sup> Markovitz 2002



eschew any romanticisation of what is at best an heterogenous phenomenon. As Amitai Etzioni (1999) has observed, there is indeed “no one kind of civil society, but many different types, all historically and culturally contingent”. What this also suggests, and this is the second consequence, is that the best that any researcher can feasibly hope for is an empirical-analytic interpretation<sup>116</sup> that aims to do justice to the chaos of actually existing civil society. Part of this inevitably involves a delicate and altogether arbitrary process of assigning value to chosen aspects of the social process. This is what I have done in this thesis, particularly with regard to the empirical cases that I have chosen to privilege.<sup>117</sup>

This leads me to the third point, which is that as this process of empirical-analytic interpretation requires at the outset a terminological guide, the definition of civil society advanced by this thesis logically demands engaging with the issue of violence. In the words of Fine (2000, 117-118), “if we accept that civil society is a distinct sphere of modern social life, then the task of social theory is not to idealise civil society but to understand its nature and location within modern social life as a whole- including the types of violence which it generates”. The type of fundamentalism at issue in this chapter is religious fundamentalist violence, and the argument is that it is integral to civil society especially when conceived (as we do here) as the story of ordinary people.

To be sure, to affirm, as this thesis does, that violence is integral to civil society, and that violence is not necessarily synonymous with uncivility is by no means terribly original. In any case, the other side of the critical divide to which I

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<sup>116</sup> The task of this kind of analysis, Keane reckons, is to “describe that reality, or criticize prevailing descriptions of it, in order better to clarify what is otherwise a potentially confusing and disorientating reality” (1998, 37).

<sup>117</sup> What this also means is that a different researcher may well undertake a similar research, but drawing on other examples.

alluded earlier teems with scholars who subscribe to the same position (Maren 1997, Uvin 1998, Hyden 2002, 1997, Markovitz 2002, Reitzes 1994). What we hope to add however is an empirical flavour that many of these previous studies apparently lack. As Deborah Simpson has noted in her review of Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani's study on *Civil Society* (2001), there seems to be a general tendency among non-Western scholars to engage in a "theoretical consideration of the concept of civil society, rather than an applied study of civil society itself."<sup>118</sup> Thus, while many may have readily, even legitimately, asserted that actually existing civil society is riddled with violence, empirical illustration has been few and far between.

This is one of the voids in the relevant literature that my thesis, particularly the current chapter, fills. One benefit of this, as I make apparent, is the light that it helps to shed on other aspects of the society which forms the template of the analysis. As such, in analysing religious fundamentalist violence in Nigeria, one is able to gain valuable insights into the nature of the Nigerian state, the character of the ongoing transition to civilian democracy, the nature of the ethno-religious divide between Muslims and Christians, and the overall struggle for political power of which everything else appears to be a mere aspect. That being the case, the controversy which steadily brewed and eventually consumed the Miss World 2002 beauty pageant may be inexplicable without specific (global and national) sociopolitical grounding, and it is to this that I should first turn.

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<sup>118</sup> See *Voluntas* volume 13 Number 4, December 2002, pp. 435-437.

## 6.2 Global Processes and Sociopolitical Transformation in Nigeria

Transitioning societies are often scarred by profound antinomies. To illustrate, one irony of the post-military constellation in contemporary Nigeria is the manner in which religion has become more deeply entwined with the tissue of everyday life<sup>119</sup>. A crucial aspect of this is the growing volatility of fundamentalist Islam in the northern part of the country. Since a Christian-Muslim cleavage has historically been one of the salient features of the social architecture of modern Nigeria (Boer 2003)<sup>120</sup>, it is legitimate to ask what exactly is remarkable about the new configuration.

Two issues are pertinent. One is the process by which the activation of the Sharia criminal code in many northern states has redefined the public role of Islam in the Nigerian political landscape and radically reshaped the discourse on Nigerian citizenship.<sup>121</sup> A second crucial issue relates to the global conjuncture at which the process of Islamic revivalism in northern Nigeria is unfolding. Since the events of 11 September 2001, the phenomenon generally, if controversially, referred to as “political Islam” (Mamdani 2004) has continued to engage the attention of researchers, media analysts, and policy makers. In general, the aim has been to resolve the puzzle of how, in nearly all cases, the youthful stratum of society is charmed by the ideology of religious fanaticism.

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<sup>119</sup> After a military era that lasted the better part of two decades, the country eventually returned to civil rule on 29 May 1999. In April 2003, the regime of President Olusegun Obasanjo secured a second term following a bitterly disputed election

<sup>120</sup> Who rightly, but somewhat inflammatorily, refers to Nigeria’s ‘decades of blood’.

<sup>121</sup> The Sharia bandwagon was led by the Zamfara state governor, Sani Ahmed Yerima, who made the initial announcement on 22 October 1999. The sharia bill itself was passed into law in January 2000.

While the intellectual jury is still out on this, there is no denying that Nigeria, which boasts the largest Muslim population in sub-Saharan Africa (Sanneh 2003, 232-244) has become increasingly susceptible to fundamentalist outbursts; and tellingly, the empirical fabric from which the analysis in this chapter is cut, is one illustration of such outbursts. One hypothesis underpinning this chapter therefore is that the events in (northern) Nigeria, particularly the introduction of the Sharia criminal code and the ghastly aftermath of the aborted Miss World 2002 beauty pageant cannot be fully understood outside the parameters of the global upsurge in Islamic fundamentalism. Since the concept itself has become ideologically charged in recent times, it is important to clarify how fundamentalism will be understood here.

Following the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001, religious fundamentalism has come to occupy the front burner of global policy and scholastic discourses (Ruthven 2004, Juergensmeyer 2003, Laqueur 2002, Obadare 2003). However, as the majority of these studies have helped clarify, fundamentalism is neither a recent phenomenon nor, given available evidence, the preserve of any metaphysical tradition (Almond and Appleby 2003, Bruce 2000, Ter Haar and Busuttil 2003), nor for that matter of some *kinds* of society. It is not even a strictly religious phenomenon, especially when understood in the sense articulated by Antoun (2001) as the “search for purity”. In addition, even though certain properties, ideological and organizational,<sup>122</sup> seem to cut across fundamentalist groups everywhere, the social effects produced are uneven, while the dynamics of

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<sup>122</sup> For a discussion of some of these properties see Almond and Appleby, op.cit.

fundamentalist groups, especially what they are actually *reacting*<sup>123</sup> to, are naturally shaped social specifics.

In light of the foregoing, and within the specific parameters established by this chapter, fundamentalism may be defined as an unstinting belief in the literal Truth of an inerrant sacred scripture.<sup>124</sup> Further definitional clarification will be provided later in the chapter, but for the moment I shall be content with a brief exploration of why a focus on fundamentalism is also useful, in the light of the imagination of civil society, being advanced in the thesis as a whole.

Two of the powerful normative wisdoms in the global literature centre on, first, the incompatibility of anti-secular<sup>125</sup> forces with the public sphere of civil society; and second, the purported mutual divergence between ‘traditionalist’ (read religious) forces and the alleged democratic and egalitarian properties of civil society. One influential protagonist of this perspective is the erudite British sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1998) who conceptualises fundamentalism as a refusal of dialogue that claims a perfect understanding of *the Truth*, and insists on only one view of things as possible (p. 130) (*Italics added*). Thus conceptualised, religious fundamentalism becomes an impediment to the constitution of a public sphere which presumes basic secularity and the relationality of religious *truths* (*ibid*).

While not denying the obvious merits of this view, I want to argue that what it lacks is a basic nuance which only a locally anchored analysis is able to provide. Thus,

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<sup>123</sup> This follows Castells’s definition of ‘fundamentalism’ as a ‘reactive movement’ (1996, 25).

<sup>124</sup> See Antoun, *op.cit*.

<sup>125</sup> There is of course a different debate on what secularity means, and what properties can be accommodated within its conceptual ambit. For a summary, see Berger (1995) and Anhelm (1999).

following Bangura (1992), this chapter (and the thesis as a whole) will inject the following related caveats. First, that secularity is not a sufficient condition for civility and vice versa, and that the idealistic attribution of democratic principles to civil society is undermined in many cases by empirical reality. Second, it is not unimaginable for “certain localistic and anti-secular forces (to) have the capacity to embody democratic aspirations and demands, particularly where the politics and economics of a society are dominated by one or a few ethnic groups” (Bangura 1992, 21) (parenthesis added). This appears to be the case in Nigeria. Lastly, the role played by religious fundamentalism in parts of Africa and the “Third World” is highly variable and ambivalent and therefore may not be easy to grasp without adequate attention to context. As Bangura further develops, “If the African state embodies a shifting array of secular, national, ethnic, localistic and parochial practices, then this is also true of civil society” (Ibid).

I will leave this conceptual see-saw for now and go on to mention an additional ‘local’ factor which is also important to our understanding of the Miss World 2002 controversy. This is the spread and deepening of religious (Christian and Muslim) fervour across Nigerian universities, a process which owes equally to anti-modernist piety as well as worsening material conditions in the universities (Ibrahim 1997, Obadare 2003). This also seems to confirm what existing studies have amply demonstrated about social processes within and outside Nigerian university campuses being mutually reinforcing (Amuwo 1995, Yusuf 1992).

To proceed however, I offer some background detail on the role of religion in the political calculus in Nigeria seems to be pertinent, and this is what the next section addresses.

### **6.3 Religion and Politics in Contemporary Nigeria**

The aim in this section is not to undertake a comprehensive review of the role of religion in Nigerian politics, a task already accomplished by several existing studies (Falola 1998, Ilesanmi 1997, Suberu 1997, Ibrahim 1997) Rather, the intention is to offer a snapshot that will help in locating the Miss World beauty pageant and the events associated with it within a historical continuum.

Religion and politics have cohabited uneasily throughout modern Nigeria's history, and because of the quite unique way in which religion simultaneously mirrors and sharpens the struggle for political capital among the three major ethno-national groupings, it has been constantly feared that the country might in the foreseeable future be consumed by the fire of religious antagonism (Akinrinade 2000). It has hardly helped matters that religious divisions seem to have fallen almost along the same trajectories as existing ethnic polarities, and while the Armageddon that many scholars and politicians dread has yet to arrive, the body count from historical skirmishes has been forbiddingly high.

For instance, more than a thousand lives were believed to have been lost in February 2000, when a purported peaceful protest by Christians in Kaduna state over the proposed introduction of Sharia laws snowballed into furious Christian-Muslim

clashes.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, the introduction of Sharia criminal law in parts of the north appears to have set the stage for a series of clashes in the past three years in which hundreds of lives have been lost<sup>127</sup>. This is not to suggest that there were no such clashes before the introduction of the Sharia, for indeed, Nigeria has been embroiled in various Christian-Muslim confrontations since the first major incident in 1982 in Kano. For example, Boer (2003) lists ten major religious clashes between 1982 and 2002.

These grim statistics notwithstanding, Nigerian leaders have never been loath to mobilise religious sentiments in order to secure specific political advantages. For example, it is widely believed that the late nationalist and statesman, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a Christian, set up the Pilgrims Welfare Board to curry the electoral favour of northern Muslims. More recently, in the run up to the April 19 2003 presidential election, General Muhammadu Buhari, a former Head of State and flag bearer of the All Nigerian People's Party, ANPP, was widely reported to have called on Muslims to vote only for fellow Muslims (Habila 2003). Although General Buhari later denied having expressed this sentiment, the alleged statement helps us to penetrate arguably the most critical dilemma at the heart of both Muslim-Christian antipathy in Nigeria; what Lamin Sanneh has called the Muslim conviction that "Islam should not be gambled in the cause of national sovereignty" (Sanneh 2003, 236). For greater clarity, we can couch this concern in the form of a question: to which community should the Muslim adherent pay primary obeisance- the religious (Islam), or the national (Nigeria)? Obviously the way in which this God versus Caesar question is answered has direct implications both for the conception of citizenship in the country and what

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<sup>126</sup> See Agaju Madugba, 'Anarchy in the name of religion' *The Guardian* (Lagos) 25 February 2000, p. 19; and Matthew Hassan Kukah, 'Kaduna crisis: matters arising', *Guardian on Sunday* (Lagos), 27 February 2000, p. 17

<sup>127</sup> See Andrew Iro Okungbowa, 'Tales of ethno-religious clashes', *Guardian on Sunday* (Lagos) 29 December 2002. See also Jan Boer, op. cit., pp. 114-139.



Mozaffari calls “the establishment of a secular domain through a surmounting of transcendental legitimations of relations of domination” (Mozaffari 1988).

One does not have to look too hard to discover that this imam-or-governor tension courses through and has continued to frame the dynamics of relations between Islam and the Nigerian state. In fact, even though it has been demonstrated that there is in reality no such thing as a unipolar Islamic front in the northern part of the country<sup>128</sup>, it is instructive that the various existing tendencies usually come to a consensus on the imperative to do away with the Nigerian state. What disputes there are have usually arisen over what the appropriate methodologies should be. In the words of John Voll,

The attitude of Nigerian fundamentalists toward the state and nation is clearly shaped by the position of Islam as only one of a number of competing identities in the country. There is thus an implicit, and often explicit, vision of the end of the political order as it currently exists and the creation of a new state and political identity. Even though tactics may vary... the fundamentalist position in Nigeria is inherently revolutionary (Voll 1992, 228).

Properly conceptualised, then, the basic problem seems to revolve around two fundamentals. One is the primal principle of the Nigerian constitution, in particular the basic guarantee of spiritual pluralism and freedom of religion. Thus, with reference to the 1979 constitution for example, Hickey (1984) notes that it was unacceptable to a section of influential northern Muslims because of its affirmation that “Every person

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<sup>128</sup> John Paden (2002) for instance has identified seven cross-cutting tendencies within the Muslim community in northern Nigeria. These are: the traditional non-sectarian mainstream Muslim groups; the Sufi brotherhoods; the anti-innovation legalists, especially the Izala; intellectual reformers; anti-establishment syncretists; Shi’ites; and unemployed urban youth and Quranic student movements (p. 2).

shall be entitled to freedom of religion, *including freedom to change his religion or belief*”<sup>129</sup> (emphasis added). Fundamentalist Islam, needless to add, forbids what, within its own epistemology, may be regarded as a direct invitation to heresy, the *Truth* being the preserve of its own *Tradition* and nobody else’s. I have referred to this tendency in the previous section.

A second problem, indeed a corollary of this, is the apparently secular nature of both the constitution and the political order. The basis for the Islamic objection to secularism is the perception that it is, at least as seen to be practised in the country, “an extension of the church concept of government.”<sup>130</sup> According to this logic, since the Nigerian state is a creation of the British, and is paralleled along the outlines of other Western social formations (never mind that it would actually fail all the basic tests of a decent state), it constitutes a basic impediment that every Islamic faithful has an obligation to remove. Additionally, the secular separation (at least in principle) between religion and state and the privatization of personal piety is believed to run counter to the principle in Islam whereby religion and politics are inseparable. It is in realisation of these basic polarities that Voll concludes that for Islamic fundamentalists in Nigeria, “the state is not a legitimate entity” (Voll 1992, 227). The following statement by Aliyu Dawuda, a scholar and Muslim activist, seems to capture the traditional Islamic imagination most clearly:

Any attempt to impose secularism on Nigeria or on any other country having a predominantly Muslim population is nothing short of injustice. This is because it is a Christian dogma, a Christian concept and a Christian worldview, which is parochial in nature that is being superimposed on them. *The principle of secularism, wherever it is practiced,*

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<sup>129</sup> P. 252

<sup>130</sup> See text of 1990 press statement issued by the Council of Ulama (quoted in Sanneh 2003, 236).

*is nothing short of the practicalisation (sic) of the Biblical statement which says: 'Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's';...Therefore right from the onset, secularism is not religiously neutral, it is a Christian concept, a Biblical dogma, reflecting the parochial nature of the Christian worldview. The principle and practice of secularism, in other words, is Islamically obnoxious, seriously revolting, and totally unacceptable because it is fundamentally based on what our Creator and Lord, Allah (may he be glorified) considers as the greatest crime which He never forgives once a person dies committing it.<sup>1</sup> (emphases added).*

Once this fundamental rejection is taken on board, it is easier to understand why the word “secular” itself has become a subject of endless disagreements in recent public discourses. While a majority of Christians who, it must be noted, “have not the least rudimentary notion of Christendom as a religio-political system”<sup>131</sup> insist on the country’s secular status because of the minimum guarantee of state-religion separation, Muslims prefer that the country be called “multi-religious” because of the ‘obnoxious’ (Gaonkar 2001) connotations of secularity which we have noted earlier<sup>132</sup>.

Part of the problem, therefore, is that many Christian Nigerians perceive the Islamic rejection of secularity as merely reflecting a barely disguised Muslim desire to Islamise the rest of the country. Southern suspicion of the northern ambition to “dip the Quoran into the sea” resonates constantly in the (mainly) western-based and dominated print media (Omu 1978, Agbaje 1992). At the same time, most Muslim Nigerians apparently see the broad southern insistence on secularity as reflecting the implicit aim

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<sup>131</sup> Sanneh notes for instance that southern Christian leaders actually defend secularity on ‘pragmatic grounds of equality under the law, national stability and participation in public life, rather than for theological reasons’ (2003, 241).

<sup>132</sup> Personal communication, Ibrahim Muazzam, Kano, August 2003

to undo Islamic influence in the polity at large<sup>133</sup> Given the plethora of contradictions of which the Nigerian state has shown itself to be more than capable, evidence in support of the contrasting viewpoints has not been too difficult to come by.

Two examples will suffice. When in February 1986 General Ibrahim Babangida took the controversial step of making the country a full member of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC)<sup>134</sup> (Oyebade 2002) Christians were quick to point to the move as confirming their prior suspicion. It did not seem to matter that General Babangida, who sent a delegation to Morocco<sup>135</sup>, venue of the OIC meeting, without the imprimatur of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC), the highest decision-making body in the country at that time, probably acted in order to elicit the support of the northern Muslim elite for his administration<sup>136</sup>.

For their part, Muslims find it difficult to understand why the Christians should be opposed to the implementation of the Sharia, given that it is legislated by their faith and should not, in theory, adversely affect the well-being of Christians. The reality has been far more ambiguous. While in general only Muslims have been brought to trial in Sharia courts in states where the code is operative, Christians have complained that some aspects of the law infringe on their fundamental human rights; a good example being the provision that forbids two individuals of opposing sexes (even married

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<sup>133</sup> For the average northern view of what is regarded as the 'Lagos-Ibadan' press, see Ibrahim Ado-Kurawa (2000).

<sup>134</sup> Until Babangida's intervention, the country had maintained an observer status in the OIC.

<sup>135</sup> The 'Nigerian' delegation was led by Alhaji Rilwanu Lukman, the then petroleum minister.

<sup>136</sup> This line of reasoning is developed further by William Reno (1998). Apparently, we have not heard the last of the OIC controversy. At a meeting held on Sunday, 14 June 2003, between president Olusegun Obasanjo and Islamic traditional leaders from the North, the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Muhammadu Maccido, demanded that the president attend future meetings of the Islamic body. He (the president) replied that he was not opposed to Nigeria's membership, otherwise he would not have 'invited the Islamic Bank to Nigeria'. See Sani Babadoko, 'I can't release Bama'yi, Al-Mustapha-Obasanjo', *Daily Trust* (Abuja), 15 December 2003.

couples), from using the same public transportation. The situation has also not been helped by the inconsistency of the Zamfara state governor, Sani Ahmed Yerima, who promised initially that the Sharia criminal law would not apply to Christians, only to turn round later to say that it would (Ukiwo 2003).

In sum, religion and politics have had, and continue to enjoy, a Siamese existence in Nigeria. Indeed, the irony should not be missed that most efforts to 'secularise' the public domain have merely deepened the public role of religion in the Nigerian state, a paradox which many unilinear discourses of secularism have failed to do analytic justice to. In the past couple of years, two major developments have helped in the intensification of this role. The first is the progressive loss of confidence in the state as the social bearer of welfare and development. As several studies on Nigeria's recent political history have rightly noted (Olukoshi 2002, Soyinka 1996, Ukiwo 2003), the militarisation of power and the concomitant systematic demobilisation of civil society in general have led to a situation whereby churches and mosques have taken over the structural space usually occupied by the state. As the *Washington Post* insightfully commented in the aftermath of the Miss World riots, "radical Islam ought to be seen as part of Nigerians' search for an alternative to the corrupt secular institutions that have long failed them."<sup>137</sup> This statement seemingly justifies our earlier point about the need to see fundamentalism, among other 'parochial' and 'non-secular' forces as being capable of ambivalent roles.

This general process of seeking alternatives, it must therefore be noted, is not without its altogether positive consequences, one being a general grassroots renewal

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<sup>137</sup> 'Extremists in Nigeria', *Washington Post*, 29 November 2002.

and the growth of a non-state service delivery sector peopled by non-governmental organisations, NGOs. Still, the overall effect of popular withdrawal into religious shells for civic culture in general has been exactly as Ibrahim (1997) speculated: the active promotion of intolerance and exclusion which, I argue, must be accepted as an inalienable part of the totality of civil society.

A second major development that has had a major impact for the public role of religion in recent times is the accession to power on 29 May 1999 of former military Head of State, Olusegun Obasanjo, a southern Christian. His nomination and eventual election had been widely interpreted as part of the attempt to pacify the western Nigerian political elite and public who had felt harshly treated by the treatment meted out to Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola<sup>138</sup>, the presumed winner of the 12 June 1993 presidential election which had been abrogated by General Ibrahim Babangida. The clear attempt to pacify a disaffected west notwithstanding, it would seem that many northern Muslims quietly rue and seethe at the loss of political power to a southern Christian, a sentiment that is perfectly intelligible within the specific context of the historical location of power and the resulting clamour for a “power shift” by southerners.

Out of the eleven different rulers that Nigeria has had in nearly forty-four years of independence, only three, the late General Aguiyi Ironsi, Ernest Oladeinde Shonekan, and the incumbent, President Olusegun Obasanjo,<sup>139</sup> have been southerners and Christians. The only non-Muslim northerner so far has been General Yakubu Jack

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<sup>138</sup> Chief Abiola died in detention in Abuja on Tuesday 7 July 1998, apparently of a heart attack, days before his widely anticipated release.

<sup>139</sup> This is Olusegun Obasanjo's second coming having ruled the country before as military head of state between February 1976 and October 1979.

Gowon. Thus, while southern Christians generally celebrate the fact that power at the centre, with all the associated symbolisms, has 'shifted' to the south (even though in recent times that ebullience has been tempered by the regime's alleged poor record in office), northerners must perforce contend with the frustrations of the perceived loss in influence and prestige that this situation has brought.

The foregoing, in brief, is the general background against which the Miss World beauty pageant and related events must be understood. This is not to ignore other specific factors which, in retrospect, seem to have prefigured the way the situation unfolded. These (and the Miss World contest proper) are the subject matter of the next section.

#### **6.4 The (Aborted) Miss World 2002 Beauty Pageant**

When the riots over the Miss World 2002 beauty pageant<sup>140</sup> culminated in the relocation of the contest to London, United Kingdom, it was the second time in recent memory that a beauty contest in the country would succumb to the ugliness of the larger political environment<sup>141</sup>. Aficionados might recall that the Miss Universe Beauty Pageant scheduled to host in January 1984 had had to be terminated. The organisers, Ben Murray Bruce's Silverbird Productions, had to call it off because of

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<sup>140</sup> For a global analysis of the phenomenon of beauty contests, see Banet-Weiser (1999).

<sup>141</sup> It is important to note here that even there, i.e. London, public opinion was equally divided. Indeed, there were many with broadly 'feminist' sympathies who were in concurrence with the Islamic fundamentalist opposition to the pageant, again seemingly validating my point about how the intrinsic relationship between the 'civil' and the 'uncivil'. See, for example, Libby Purves, 'Third World reveals Miss World Ugliness', *The Times* (London), 26 November 2002, and Rod Liddle, 'The Ugly side of Miss World', *The Guardian* (London), 26 November 2002.

the political uncertainty following the 31 December 1983 military *coup d'état* in the country<sup>142</sup>.

If the 1984 pageant was terminated as a result of a military takeover, the rioters of December 2002 could reasonably claim a successful civilian putsch.

There was no indication of trouble when a nineteen-year<sup>143</sup> old Nigerian computer science student, Agbani Darego, won the November 2001 series of the Miss World contest held in Sun City, South Africa. It was partly by virtue of her unexpected victory that Nigeria was selected to host the next edition in 2002. However, as the organisers gradually generated publicity for the competition, it emerged that a section of the Nigerian Muslim community was opposed to its being held in the country. The initial problem, apparently, had to do with timing, as the proposed 30 November date apparently coincided with the Muslim month of *Ramadan*. According to Dr. Lateef Adegbite, the General Secretary of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), Muslims “felt that the timing was very wrong in the month of *Ramadan*. And it was the last 10 days of *Ramadan* which is the holiest period for the Muslims in any year.”<sup>144</sup> Eager to smother the growing agitation, the organisers decided to change the date for the event to 7 December 2002.

Timing apart, the surrounding political circumstances seemed rather inauspicious. For one, the event was coming in the thick of preparations by both the government and the opposition for the May 2003 parliamentary and presidential elections. Arguably, it was in order to accumulate some political capital, and partly

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<sup>142</sup> See Nduka Nwosu, ‘Faces of a lost pageant’, *The Guardian* (Lagos), 30 November 2002.

<sup>143</sup> She was eighteen, according to some accounts.

<sup>144</sup> See the interview with Lateef Adegbite, ‘Let’s Never have Miss World here again’, *Newswatch* (Lagos), vol. 36, no. 23, 9 December 2002. This sentiment was also confirmed by Ibrahim Muazzam. Personal communication, August 2003.



because of the international prestige that it hoped that hosting the pageant might bring, that the federal government was encouraged to give it more than a symbolic backing. Eager to impress the international audience, the government actually went as far as inviting the beauty queens to Aso Rock, the seat of power, where they had tea with the president and the Chaplain conducted a prayer meeting.<sup>145</sup>

Predictably, this did not go down well with the general public, least of all Muslims who had become restless over the timing of the pageant. While the general public condemned what they saw as a cheap attempt by the government to curry external favour, Muslims were disappointed that the government could openly flaunt their involvement with a project that apparently contradicted the moral austerity of the Sharia law<sup>146</sup>. Nor did it help the situation that the contest was going to be held in Abuja<sup>147</sup>, the tinsel federal capital which has become the architectural symbol of Christian-Muslim rivalry in Nigeria. Jan H. Boer (2003) captures the Muslim mood well:

Then there was the promise that the event would not touch Muslim communities, but it was scheduled for Abuja, the capital. Clearly, the organizers were siding with Christians by implying that Abuja is not a Muslim city. It is a new capital and Muslims have been accused by Christians of imposing a Muslim face on the place. It was another declaration of the fall of an important Muslim symbol.

Finally, it should be recalled that the general social climate in which all this happened had been polluted by the saga of Amina Lawal, the thirty-year old woman

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<sup>145</sup> See Jan H. Boer, 'The anatomy of Miss World', January 2003, available at [www.gamji.com/amnews19.htm](http://www.gamji.com/amnews19.htm) (viewed 12 February 2004).

<sup>146</sup> At the time of writing, the legal status of the sharia criminal code remains unresolved. While the president has declared it unconstitutional and seems to favour a political resolution, the attorney general and minister for justice, Kanu Agabi, has affirmed its constitutionality. See Oduyoye (2000).

<sup>147</sup> The other proposed venue was Calabar, the capital of Cross-River state, deep in the south-east.

who, in March 2002, was sentenced to death by stoning by a Sharia court at Bakori, Katsina state, for having had a child outside wedlock (Kalu 2003). In actual fact, some of the beauty queens had actually refused to participate in the contest in sympathy with the convicted woman. The conscientious objectors were from Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Costa Rica, Canada, Belgium, Norway, Cote d'Ivoire, and France. Miss France, Sylvie Teller, had argued the case of these *refuseniks* as follows: "When a woman faces the most agonising death, there are more important things in life than winning a crown for being beautiful."<sup>148</sup> However, the wind seemed to have been taken out of the sail of the objectors when the object of their sympathy, Amina Lawal herself, threw her weight behind the show and pleaded that there should be no boycott. It is not clear how influential her intervention was, but the informed guess is that it probably deepened the contempt which ordinary Muslims felt for the contest.

One other issue which had not been given prominence in many of the ensuing public commentaries relates to the Islamic attitude towards public nudity. While this was barely articulated as constituting part of the basis for opposition to the pageant, it was clearly one of the crucial reasons which leading Islamic commentators mentioned in the wake of the riots.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> See *ThisDay* (Lagos), 8 August 2002.

<sup>149</sup> The organisers seemed to have anticipated this objection with their decision to cancel the swimsuit segment of the contest. Instead, there was a photo shoot (with the contestants in swimsuits) at Calabar, a safe distance from the controversial Abuja. I am indebted to Hajia Bilikisu Yusuf (personal communication, Abuja, August 2003) for this and other pertinent information in relation to the story behind the crisis. See also Laura McClure, 'What would Mohammed do?' *Salon.com* (online magazine), 4 December 2002, available at [www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2002/12/04/islamic\\_women/](http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2002/12/04/islamic_women/) (viewed 9 February 2004)

For example, Hajia Laila Dogonyayro, the chairperson of the governing board of the National Council on Women's Development, justified the action of the rioters (we shall come to this presently) by arguing that "no religion could ever tolerate the show of nudity and anything that could lead to the abuse of women's rights."<sup>150</sup> This naturally raises the question: If successive governments in Nigeria had "tolerated the show of nudity" by allowing beauty contests to be held<sup>151</sup>, what makes the Miss World 2002 different, and why has it taken those who oppose it more than forty-three years to voice their opposition?

In any case, Algeria, an Islamic state (and one which has had its own conflicts with fundamentalist Islam), was also participating in the contest and similar opposition had not been reported. The most plausible explanation would be the social circumstances described above, that made it almost impossible for any event to be seen outside a narrow religious prism. This, coupled with the way in which events following the 11 September tragedy in the United States, sharpened the anti-Western instincts of the majority of northern Muslims. This also seems to buttress my contention that any generic categorisation of 'Political Islam' without attention to context is ultimately analytically unhelpful.

It thus helps to note in the Nigerian context, that since 11 September 2001, the existing chasm between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria appears to have widened.

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<sup>150</sup> See Janine di Giovanni, 'Divine injustice', *The Times* (London), 30 November 2002, p. 27.

<sup>151</sup> Nigeria boasts of at least two national beauty contests, Miss Nigeria and Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria. Miss Nigeria is organized yearly by Daily Times of Nigeria (DTN), a publication in which until June 2004, the federal government had majority of shares. The Miss Nigeria competition dates back to 1960, the year of the country's independence. In fact, the 1960 context was attended by then Prime Minister Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the premier of the northern region, and several northern emirs. See Sultan's call for boycott of Miss World pageant political', 27 September 2002, available at [www.onlinenigeria.com/links/adv.asp?blurb=129](http://www.onlinenigeria.com/links/adv.asp?blurb=129) (viewed 10 February 2004).

Part of the impetus for the enhanced hostility has come from different reactions to the American attack on Afghanistan. While many Muslims resented the 'invasion' and demonstrated against it, many Christians appear to have backed the United States, because of the common preconception that it (the United States) is a Christian country.

There is no denying that attitudes towards the West, especially the United States, have played more than a peripheral role in religious tensions between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Many southern Christians see the United States as a Christian country. In fact, many Christian Nigerians welcome the current evangelical posturing of president George Bush, Florida chads and all, simply because it fits into their own eschatological schema. Northern Muslims resent the United States for exactly the same reasons. They see the United States as not only giving partisan support to 'Zionist forces' in the persecution of Muslim Arabs in the Middle East, but also constantly frustrating and sabotaging Muslim interests across the world. As a result, no public demonstration (not even those with apparently little or no external dimension) is ever complete without placards denouncing the United States, and proclaiming "Death to the United States and Israel."<sup>152</sup> A good example is what took place in November 2003, when placard-carrying youths protested Nigeria's hosting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). The youths denounced the Commonwealth for being 'anti-Islam'. Almost inevitably, there were placards with the legends: 'No to the Commonwealth and Its Allies' and 'Death to the United States and Israel' (Ibid).

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<sup>152</sup> See Saxon Akhaine and Muyiwa Adeyemi, 'Protest rocks Kaduna over CHOGM', *The Guardian* (Lagos), 22 November 2003.

At the same time, a deeply rooted mistrust of the West continues to enjoy prominence in the popular consciousness. An excellent illustration is the ongoing controversy over polio vaccines which many refused to take (notably, until the intervention of the Sharia council) because of the suspicion that it contained anti-fertility agents and the HIV/AIDS virus.<sup>153</sup>

Thus, while in Kano Muslim *almajirai* (unemployed youths) protested the attack on Afghanistan and the perceived support of the federal government for American efforts to apprehend the masterminds of the 11 September 2001 attacks,<sup>154</sup> separate counter-demonstrations were held in some parts of the south, notably in Enugu and Lagos. Clearly, then, in December 2002, there was no love lost between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, and Jan H. Boer was referring to this situation of mutual suspicion when he wrote that:

Neither party believes or trusts the other. Nether party lives up to their declared intentions. The battle has brought the country to a state of perpetual explosive suspension that is constantly searching the horizon for a spark to make it ignite. It is a battle that envelopes all cultural segments. The spark can be a totally unrelated event like a burglary. As long as it sets a Muslim or two against a Christian, the situation is set to ignite. Often the explosion can be predicted because tension has been brought to a feverish level. It is only the nature of the spark that cannot be predicted (Boer 2003, op. cit.)

This was the social dynamite which Miss Isioma Daniel, the *ThisDay* reporter, exploded on Saturday 16 November. In an article entitled “Miss World 2002 The

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<sup>153</sup> See Saxone Akhaine, ‘Sharia Council, medical experts okay polio vaccine’, *The Guardian* (Lagos), 18 November 2003.

<sup>154</sup> Ukiwo (2003) op. cit., p. 125.

world at their feet”, a light-hearted commentary about the build-up to the contest and the obstacles- political and logistical- being faced by the organisers, Isioma Daniel had written, *inter alia*:

As the idea (of Nigeria hosting the beauty contest) became a reality, it also aroused dissent from many groups of people. The Muslims thought it was immoral to bring ninety-two women to Nigeria and ask them to revel in vanity. *What would Mohammed think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from one of them*<sup>155</sup> (parenthesis and emphases added).

She then went ahead and pointed to the irony that a contestant from Algeria, an Islamic country, was going ahead to take part in the show with no fuss at all, while a meal was being made of the fact that Nigeria was going to host it.

## 6.5 The Ugly Aftermath

Not even the most prescient observer could have anticipated the scale and ferocity of the reaction which greeted the publication of Isioma Daniel’s article, a spectacular eruption that seems to confirm the argument that the cause of public Muslim rage was not just the jocular allusion to prophet Mohammed, but actually multiple layers of unresolved issues in which the pageant had become embedded. In this wise, the ensuing riots were merely cathartic, and the allegation of ‘blasphemy’ was a timely opportunity to show that “Islam is a very serious religion”.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Isioma Daniel, ‘Miss World 2002. The world at their feet’, *ThisDay* (Lagos), 16 November 2002.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Lateef Adegbite, ‘Let’s never have Miss World here again’, *op. cit.*

The most immediate reaction was a spate of violent protests by Muslim youths in Kaduna and later Abuja where offices of *ThisDay* newspaper were destroyed. This was despite the fact that *ThisDay*, on realising its 'error', had issued a quick apology. Among other things, the newspaper had said:

We are sorry that the portrayal of the Holy Prophet Mohammed in a commentary written by one of our staff was not only unjustified, but utterly provocative. The supervising editor made an attempt to remove the offensive portion during the editing process. But we must say that this time, technology failed us, and gravely too...Why would we do anything that would seem to denigrate any religion, when we believe in the peaceful co-existence of Nigeria<sup>157</sup>

But the protesters were not impressed. They seized and burnt all the copies of the November 20, 2002, edition of the newspaper at its Circulation Annex on Ahmadu Bello Way, Kaduna, while the organisation itself was declared an "enemy of Islam".<sup>158</sup>

The reaction from Islamic opinion leaders was equally angry. The Council of Imams and Ulama, Kaduna state chapter, asked the Federal Government to cancel the beauty contest in the interest of peace. In a statement signed by its chairman, Sheikh Abubakar Abdulkareem, the Council said:

Ordinarily, the decision to host a beauty contest in an environment with a considerable Moslem population would insult the religion, moral sensibility of a typical Moslem, and of course, he/she would voice against it. That has been the case since the stage-managed victory of Nigeria's Agbani Darego at the last beauty contest which

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<sup>157</sup> Quoted in Saxon Akhaine, 'Muslims protest, torch ThisDay office', *The Guardian* (Lagos), 21 November 2002.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

automatically gave Nigeria the hosting right of (sic) the next contest...Let it be unequivocally stated here that Prophet Mohammed forms the chunk of passion (sic) of a conscious Muslim that any insult on the Prophet's personality unleashes the rage in the Moslem. That is why a portion of the satanic article in *ThisDay* of November 16, 2002, has dared the guts (sic) of the Moslems."<sup>159</sup>

The President of the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria (SCSN), Dr. Ibrahim Datti, in what seemed a tacit endorsement of the action of the rioters, argued that since *ThisDay* had waged a war against Islam in Nigeria, it only had itself to blame for becoming the target of a mob.

The tidal wave of condemnations reached its peak on Monday, 18 November, with the decision of the Zamfara state government, acting through the deputy governor, Mamuda Aliyu Shinkafi, to impose a *fatwa* (Islamic death sentence) on the erring journalist. The press release said: "Like Salman Rushdie, the blood of Isioma Daniel can be shed. It is abiding on all Muslims wherever they are to consider the killing of the writer as a religious duty."<sup>160</sup> Lest anybody doubted the seriousness of the state government, the *fatwa* was later reiterated by the state Information Commissioner, Umar Dangaladima Magaji, who declared that "Whoever insults any prophet, that person is to be executed. Nobody will quarrel with that."<sup>161</sup>

The imposition of the *fatwa* on the journalist took the uproar to a new plane, revealing in the process some of the fissures in the Islamic bloc that we have alluded to earlier. For instance, while clearly against the journalist's perceived 'blasphemy',

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Quoted in 'I lit the match', *The Guardian* (London), 17 February 2003.

<sup>161</sup> See Daniel Balint-Kurti, 'Nigerian sharia state holds firm on fatwa', available at [www.alternet.org](http://www.alternet.org) (viewed 4 December 2002). In the streets, protesters also passed their own fatwa on both the publisher of *ThisDay*, Nduka Obaigbena, and the editor of the newspaper, Eniola Bello; they however called on the federal government to call the two to order to stop the sentence from being carried out (see Akhaine).



the Ja'matu Nasril Islam (JNI) the Sultan of Sokoto Muhammadu Maccido, and the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs said it had accepted the apology tendered by the publishers of *ThisDay* newspaper, and thought that the *fatwa* was one upbraiding too many. The Federal Government also moved to denounce it. The Information Minister, Professor Jerry Gana, a Christian, declared it "null and void", and promised that "The federal government under the laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria will not allow such an order in any part of the federal republic."<sup>162</sup>

Several Christian groups also denounced the *fatwa*, naturally linking it with the controversial introduction of Sharia law by some northern states. The groups also called on the Federal Government to take "decisive action."<sup>163</sup> Lastly, many newspaper columnists, social critics and friends of the media remonstrated with the Zamfara state government over the *fatwa*, even though they were bitterly divided on the question of whether or not Miss Isioma Daniel had erred by her reference to the Prophet Muhammed.<sup>164</sup> There was only one journalist who wondered if the situation might not have been different had security agents acted quickly, and had there been a tradition of (religious) rioters being made to face the wrath of the law.<sup>165</sup>

In the time it had taken for tempers on all sides to cool, the cost of the damage inflicted mounted. Though statistics vary, it is generally agreed that more than 4500 people might have been displaced as a result of the riots. Between 150 and 200 people

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<sup>162</sup> See the article by Wole Shadare, *The Guardian* (Lagos), 27 November 2002.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> See, for example, Reuben Abati, 'The Word', *The Guardian* (Lagos), 29 November 2002, and Laolu Akande, 'Soyinka decries handling of *Miss World* riots by government, leaders', *The Guardian* (Lagos), 12 February 2003. Needless to say, international opinion was also divided; see Andrew Sullivan, 'The left's *fatwa* on our freedom', *The Sunday Times* (London), 1 December 2002.

<sup>165</sup> See Paul Nwabuiwu, 'Beyond Religion', *The Guardian* (Lagos), 27 November 2002.

were feared dead, at least 320 hospitalised, and property worth more than NGN10 billion (\$2.2 billion) destroyed.<sup>166</sup>

The social cost was definitely higher. Relations between Christians and Muslims in the country, fraught at the best of times, plunged to an all-time low. Many Christians thought that the entire saga could have been avoided if the federal government had intervened more decisively when the Zamfara state government controversially flew the Sharia kite on 28 October 1999. They argued that it was the climate of intolerance occasioned by the introduction of the Sharia that strengthened the hands of the rioters. Finally, it was argued that the scale of what had happened was enough to convince anybody that it was not only about religion: the North was opportunistically resorting to violence to try to impose its will, as it was wont to do anytime its political expectations were ignored.<sup>167</sup>

Muslims too generally blamed everyone else, save the rioters. Miss Isioma Daniel, the journalist, was castigated for plunging the entire country into a needless crisis through her 'carelessness'. It was also recalled that an event that was supposed to be totally 'private' had been virtually promoted to a state affair by the federal government and the handful of states that had invested in it. But would Muslim opinion have tolerated the pageant if it had not been made so 'public'? This is hard to tell, especially if one considers the statement, instructive in the light of the overall argument of this chapter, credited to Chief Lateef Adegbite, the General Secretary of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA). He averred:

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<sup>166</sup> See Nwosu, op. Cit.

<sup>167</sup> Cameron Duodu, 'Ugly saga of Miss World reveals split', *The Observer* (London), 24 November 2002.

The entire Muslim community of the country was against the staging of the contest in the first place. We think it is not a priority for the country. And, then, secondly, we feel that because of the form of the contest where people parade what they are supposed to modestly guard...You know, they just parade and in some cases in semi-nude action which we feel is indecent and, of course, is against our religion. And we are concerned about the impact that such displays would have on the young ones. *So, that was our general position because Islam has prescribed in a way, particularly, of how women should guide their modesty.* That is general (emphasis added).<sup>168</sup>

He concluded by laying down two propositions. First, government involvement in the pageant was basically wrong: "Because anything that is considered unacceptable to a significant part of the population ought not to be financed with the government's resources." Second, there should be no further involvement with Miss World: "Let Nigeria never ask for this Miss World to come here again. Let it not come again. *Because the Muslims are not happy about it.*" (Emphases added).<sup>169</sup>

These fundamentalist principles necessitate a series of questions which go to the heart of issues centring on the constitution of a secular public domain: Should the Islamic prescription on female modesty constitute the ground norm in a multi-religious society? Does an idea automatically become unacceptable because "a significant part of the population" rejects it? If "Muslims are not happy" about an event, and it does not have to be the Miss World contest alone, does the event stand automatically nullified? These and other important dilemmas form the backdrop to the discussion in the following concluding section.

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<sup>168</sup> Interview, op. cit.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

## 6.6 Fundamentalism and Civil Society: Antipodes or Siblings?

Above all, civil politics require an understanding of the complexity of virtue, that *no virtue stands alone, that every virtuous act costs something in terms of other virtuous acts, that virtues are intertwined with evils*, and that no theoretical system of a hierarchy of virtues is ever realizable in practice (Shils)<sup>170</sup> (Italics added)

The particular sentence I added in as a last minute thing actually. I thought it was funny, light hearted and I didn't see it as anything anybody should take seriously or cause much fuss. When I'd written the piece, the whole tone turned out to be breezy and sarcastic, light hearted, kind of tongue-in-cheek humour.<sup>171</sup>

In the introduction to their study of religious and nationalist militant groups, Kaldor and Muro (2003) pose, among several knotty dilemmas, the following:

“Is Al Qaeda or the Mafia part of (global) civil society? Can a movement that uses violence and extortion be put in the same box as Amnesty International, Friends of the Earth, or the World Social Forum? And what about those groups that use violence but claim that they are aiming at a greater good or acting in self-defence?” (2003, 151) (parenthesis added)

Although both agree that these questions cannot be ‘definitively answered’ (Ibid), that they think it merits analytic consideration at all is itself symbolic of a certain shift in the general intellectual attitude towards what might be generally regarded as the realm of the ‘uncivil’.

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<sup>170</sup> Taken from preface to Cahoon (2002).

<sup>171</sup> ‘Talkabout Africa Exclusive: Isioma Daniel has no Regrets’, BBC press release, 13 March 2003, available at [www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2003/03\\_march/13/ws\\_talkabout\\_africa.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2003/03_march/13/ws_talkabout_africa.shtml) (viewed 10 February 2004). Ms Daniel’s interview with the BBC was broadcast on the BBC’s African Service’s Programme *Talkabout Africa*, 12 March 2003.

As I have indicated at different points in the preceding chapters and in the introduction to this chapter, traditional liberal conceptions of civil society have historically rested on, among others, two related theses; first, that the civil is separable and ethically distinct from the uncivil; and second, that the two are short-hands for peaceful and violence-ridden parts of the world respectively. Kaldor and Muro clearly had this latter distinction in mind when they remarked as follows:

In earlier times, when the boundaries of civil society were territorial, it was easier to distinguish between peaceful societies in, for example, north-western Europe, where violence was more or less excluded from domestic affairs, and uncivil coercive societies in other parts of the world (2003, 151)

Other scholars have continued the tradition of not only distinguishing between the civil and the uncivil, but also treating them as ideational analogues of 'modern' (read Western) and 'traditional' (read nonWestern) societies respectively. Many more are apparently disconcerted by the alleged capacity of fundamentalist groups to annihilate the very space that a 'modern' civil society is sworn to expanding. For example, part of Giddens' critique of (religious) fundamentalism is that it testifies to the absence of what he calls 'reflexivity'- an attitude of "chronic revision" that "undermines the certainty of knowledge" (Giddens 1991, 20-21). Refusing to entertain or even contemplate the "methodological principle of doubt", religious fundamentalists, it is argued, provide "clear-cut answers" to otherwise morally ambiguous issues. There is a self-perpetuating logic here, for, according to Giddens, "The more 'enclosing' a given religious order is, the more it 'resolves' the problem of how to live in a world of multiple options." (Ibid, p. 142).

Furthermore, in the case of Islamic fundamentalism, (and the events described in the preceding pages seem to provide ample ammunition for this position) we are told that it poses a direct threat to the principle of secularity and plurality of religious visions, lacking which ingredients a civil society and truly democratic space can hardly be contemplated. For instance, Lateef Adegbite's argument (above) that the Miss World pageant is not allowed in Nigeria just because Muslims are opposed to it seems to be a perfect illustration of this tendency, defining as it is, not only the moral content of the imagined public space, but also the *kind* of activities allowed in it.

Following this, and as promised in the earlier part of this chapter, we can further define Islamic fundamentalism in Nigeria along the following characteristics: (1) an insistence on one thing as the only right thing, for example, the moral ugliness of beauty pageants; (2) a refusal to imagine that other arguments, apart from one's own, have any value or may even be right; (3) a rejection of secularisation, especially when understood as the "de-monopolization of religious traditions" (Berger 1995). As already shown, Islamic fundamentalists in Nigeria appear to reject both the separation of religion and politics, and the equality of religious visions, principles which are primal to the secular process. The above is by no means an exhaustive definition, as I have only isolated some of the characteristics that help to advance the argument here<sup>172</sup>.

One other argument of those who dichotomise the civil and the uncivil, is that fundamentalism (at least as conceived above) impedes the public sphere. To elucidate

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<sup>172</sup> For more on this, see Almond and Appleby (2003).

this point, a functional definition of the public sphere is crucial. Following Hoexter, Eisenstadt and Levitzon (2002), the public sphere can be defined thus: “a sphere located between the official and private spheres...The public sphere is autonomous from the political order and its influence rests on interpretations of the common good vis-à-vis the ruler, on the one hand, and the private sphere, on the other.” (p. 9). In the same vein, Chandhoke (1995) defines the public sphere as one “where all are free to participate in conditions of equality and mutual respect.” (p. 165)

On the basis of these definitions, the assumed polarity between religious fundamentalism and the public sphere becomes manifest. While the former aggressively claims “proprietary rights on the truth” and tries to get the upper hand by force (Anhelm 1999), in the latter, religion is a personal matter. The public sphere, it is also argued, is that where citizens, presuming the possible fallibility of their opinions, trade issues with their equals in the best tradition of Habermasian ‘communicative action’. It is also a site for debate and counter-debate, and its significance in the context of democratic consolidation is seemingly underscored by the functions which Iris Young is convinced it serves: opposition and accountability, influence over policy, and what she calls “changing society through society” (Young 2000, 168-173). Michael Edwards seems to capture the alleged polarity between fundamentalism and the public sphere best when he suggests that,

Fundamentalists of all persuasions refuse to accept that shared truths can be negotiated or that different versions of the truth can coexist- read blind obedience and absolute righteousness as the mirror image of dialogic politics. Such attitudes violate the basic rules of engagement of the public sphere as a place where ‘strangers can meet each other and not draw a knife’, a haven for non-violent zones of incivility, and a society that is constantly at war with itself, but peacefully (2004, 63).

The apparent merit of some of the foregoing claims can hardly be disputed<sup>173</sup>. Indeed, at a broader level, the civil/uncivil binary is itself reflective of the dualistic imagination that has historically defined the idea of civil society. Colas (1992) has listed the more prominent oppositions as follows: family/civil society; civil society/city of God, state of nature/civil society; and civil society/state (1992, xvi). The question it begs however is the extent to which these dualisms are useful in analysing what, following Jeffrey Alexander, I have called 'actually existing civil society' (2000, 10). My answer to this poser will be: Not very much. This thesis' rejection of this apparent wisdom is based on the following arguments.

The first is that rather than being an antithesis of civil society, fundamentalism may actually be useful as a symbol of the kind of civil society in existence in a particular social formation. This is ironic of course, but perfectly admissible once consideration is given to the scope of 'semantic extensions' (Nwokedi 1995, 63) of which civil society has shown itself capable. Furthermore, if the idea of civil society advanced in this thesis as the story of ordinary people is valid, then it stands to reason that their modes of social expression will be frequently coercive. I am aware that this sharply antagonises the luminous image of civil society generally projected by lovers of civility in both the global and Nigerian literatures<sup>174</sup>, but I insist that this position is logical once the observer takes a complete and 'deeper and wider interior view' (Chan 2002, 51) of existing civil society. This is part of what this thesis seeks to accomplish.

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<sup>173</sup> An example being An-Na'im's powerful observation that religious fundamentalist groups have a tendency to be "totalitarian in seeking to mobilise all the resources of a society for the realisation of their own specific vision of the public good" (2002, 61).

<sup>174</sup> See earlier chapters and earlier part of this chapter.



My second argument in this regard is to point out what I consider to be a major flaw of what Markovitz (2002) aptly calls the civil society of establishment pluralism- its lack of attention to how power is constituted and distributed within any given society, how social life in general is organised, and how rules are organised and by what process. As a result, the boundaries of civil society are arbitrarily set (and some actors banished into the wilderness of incivility) without a thought as to how differently endowed actors seek to exercise agency within a fundamentally skewed social domain.<sup>175</sup> As Markovitz (2002, 125) argues in his critique of this conception of civil society<sup>176</sup>, it merely “sets boundaries and commands social interests, like a pet dog, to stay within them”. But it fails to ask

who established the rules, or by what process. Who is to say that only “citizens” are to be members of civil society? What about non-citizens? Foreigners? Riff-raff? Lumpen? What if social interests don’t want to hold state officials accountable and make demands on the state, but desire to overthrow the state and establish new institutions and offices? (Ibid)

Within the specific Nigerian context outlined in the foregoing chapters, the establishment conception will have effectively debarred us from incorporating fundamentalist violence within the boundaries of civil society, thus styming any understanding of how the riots themselves mirror the crisis of power distribution among Nigeria’s ethnic groups, or how they are essentially about the kind of role that religion ought to play in civil society itself.

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<sup>175</sup> According to Mustapha (1998), this is one of the prime reasons why many people are wary of the perceived political and economic agenda behind the aggressive evangelisation of the idea of civil society.

<sup>176</sup> See for example Diamond (1997).

My third major argument is that ‘uncivility’ is not one thing and therefore to attribute it exclusively to certain groups (for example fundamentalists) and/or modes of action within society is to misconstrue its essence. If Keane (1998)<sup>177</sup> is right about the presence of ‘everyday rudeness’ in all societies, it can be reasonably argued that such rudeness which may eventually mutate into systematic violence exists both within the realms of the state and society at large. Part of the problem with the exclusive ascription of uncivility to defined groups within society is that it turns a blind analytic eye to the fundamental coerciveness of the state itself.

The final point in this regard is a philosophical one- that actually existing civil society has always been “intertwined with war, the ultimate expression of relationships of an uncivil kind” (Kaldor and Muro 2003, 151); or to paraphrase Colas (1997), both civil and uncivil society have always had a ‘conjoined history’, a paradox elucidated by Keane (2004, 92) as part of what he calls “the inner contradiction within the workings of civil society”. My point has been to show that existing literature, fired by the imagination of a certain conception of civil society, has largely neglected and poorly understood this contradiction. By treating all cases of violence as uncivility, and by treating all fundamentalisms as one, it fails to recognise that “each form of fundamentalism possesses its own characteristic features and particular forms of discourse in relation to its own frame of reference” (An Na’im 2002, 61).

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<sup>177</sup> See quotes at the beginning of the chapter

## **6.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented a case study which has sought to give prominence to and rethink an aspect of existing civil society in Nigeria that the relevant literature has denied or miscast. In so doing, I have also dealt with some of the issues which have frequently arisen in the characterisation of civil society in Nigeria, or indeed in the developing world. The point has been to reject the idealisation of civil society, and advance a conception that recognises it as being sometimes unorganised, and often uncivil. In the following chapter, I attempt to relate the insights generated by this and the earlier empirical chapter to the wisdoms in the both the global and domestic literatures.

## Chapter 7

### Relating Theory to Data

#### 7.1 Introduction

My reading is that civil society has now about exhausted its romantic and enthusiastic phase and is presently on the cusp of either decline or a more realistic assessment. The issues are compounded once the concept travels abroad. First, as we have seen, different societies and cultures mean different things by civil society than do Lockean, Tocquevillean, Madisonian Americans. Second, the *form* that civil society takes in different countries may vary greatly from the US model- and not all of these by any means are liberal, pluralist, and democratic. Third, there is money involved-now often big money-and there are legions of opportunists in the US and abroad waiting to take advantage of the largesse now going into civil society projects. (Wiarda 2003, 132)

In the last two chapters, I have attempted to, as Jeffrey Alexander might put it, give ‘flesh and blood’ (2000, 96) to the notion of civil society in Nigeria. In the process, I have conveyed two sharply contrasting modes of expression (the ‘civil’ and the ‘uncivil’); of ordinary Nigerians agitating and mobilising in radically different life situations. These, I have argued, emblemise two distinct possibilities of what might be called actually existing civil society in the country, part of the critical intention being to demonstrate the very moral ambiguity (Lewis 2004) of the concept. I will return to this all-important theme in the latter part of this chapter. As shown by my earlier appraisal of the literature on civil society in Nigeria, a crucial omission is the relative dearth of empirically grounded studies which can generate insights capable of communicating both local and global theoretical postulations.

The approach on which my research is anchored emerges, in this light, as a partial critique of the gap identified in the scholarship. Tentative conclusions can therefore be drawn on the meaning, nature and usefulness of civil society in Nigeria among other pertinent considerations. This is the objective that this chapter seeks to accomplish. In what follows, I try to advance a series of arguments about the character of civil society in Nigeria by directly relating my findings to existing theoretical postulates and the data elaborated in the previous two chapters. To properly locate the discussion, I follow an eclectic approach that focuses simultaneously on the global and the specific, teasing out whatever strands best illuminate the arguments put forward.

The chapter is divided into two overlapping sections. In the first, I attempt to set out my stall in terms of providing a general overview of the main conceptual issues which the study has brought to the fore. This is followed by the second section where I explicate in greater detail my ideas about civil society in Nigeria, bringing out the interrelationships between data and theoretical contention, and exploring the possibility and implications of *another* way of thinking about civil society.

## **7.2 Civil Society: Rethinking the Issues**

Arguably the best point of departure is to indicate the virtual disappearance of any trace of the classical understanding of the idea of civil society in the country. While it might be correct to say that no single, hegemonic conceptualisation of civil society has ever existed, the relative conceptual affinity between the understandings of, for

example, Adam Ferguson and G.W.F. Hegel, among other early thinkers, can hardly be disputed. Both, to offer the least contentious illustration, appear to have agreed on the idea of civil society as embodying all activities and institutions which were not directly linked to the state (Alexander 1998, 2000). In the early days of the reawakening of civil society in the former Eastern Europe, a measure of fidelity to this classical understanding was notable, despite the prevalence of tensions among different tendencies jostling to occupy and control the emerging public sphere<sup>178</sup>. For a majority of Eastern European dissidents however, civil society was ultimately reducible to two clear essences; carving out “a domain that would function independently of state regulation”, and limiting the “formerly untrammelled by the institutionalization of political, but more importantly, civil rights and the rule of law” (Chandhoke 2001, 2).

However, if there is anything that has become clear to observers of its evolution over the past decade or so, it is the fact that the idea of civil society has rarely traversed geo-cultural boundaries well. Indeed, something of its classical essence has been shed as it has spread rapidly to different parts of the world. Furthermore, the adoption, even appropriation, of the idea of civil society in diverse climates has invariably generated controversies about its meaning and usefulness. As Glasius, Lewis and Seckinelgin (2004) have noted in the introduction to their volume on civil society in different cultural and political contexts, such in fact are the complexities introduced by the meeting and penetration of civil society with and into new ‘places’ and political formations that the emerging challenge before scholarship on the idea might be said to revolve around “the importance of place and recognition

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<sup>178</sup> Witness for example the famous debate between Vaclav Havel and Vaclav Klaus over civil society and the free market in Pontuso (2004).

of a need for an empirical and theoretical engagement with the various forms taken by civil society in different contexts” (2004, 2). One particular objective of this study has been to respond to this analytic challenge, using Nigeria as empirical foil.

Clearly, then, the virtual disappearance of the classical understanding of civil society and the emergence of what, following Howell and Pearce (2001), we might call an ‘alternative genealogy’<sup>179</sup> is indeed one of the most significant developments in the intellectual history of the idea over the past two decades. Yet, if there is any means by which the insight of Howell and Pearce (2001) might be deepened, it is by pointing out what seems to be the sum total of the empirical evidence from Nigeria, which rather than a single ‘alternative genealogy’, is a chaotic conceptual spectacle of ‘alternative genealogies’, in which different groups strive to ‘own’ civil society, and make the idea amenable to individual social and political projects.

I shall proceed by illustrating with three apparently conflicting conceptualisations, all of which give clear suggestions as to the social contexts within which they can be meaningfully apprehended. The first is the (associational) idea of civil society, or what Attahiru Jega<sup>180</sup> calls the arena of interaction between the state and the family. This arena is dominated by public-minded associations like students and workers’s groups, community based organisations and professional groupings. Many of the organisations in this category had been socially and politically active in the country since the dawn of political independence but appear to have been doubly radicalised by specific political and economic developments in the 1980s, in particular the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and a cynically

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<sup>179</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>180</sup> Personal communication, August 2003, Kano. Attahiru Jega, a scholar, is a former president of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU).

manipulated programme of transition to democracy (Momoh and Adejumobi 1995). The 1980s was indeed a period of profound social upheaval in Nigeria, and the relevant literature is replete with narratives of how, in part, the developments adumbrated above set in motion a radicalising process that arguably climaxed with the vociferous rejection of the abrogation of the 12 June 1993 presidential election (see for example Olukoshi 1993, Olowu et al, 1995). According to Akinrinade, describing this deeply fascinating phase of Nigeria's recent political history,

The 'IMF debates'<sup>181</sup> were followed in 1986-87 by the public debates on the political future of the country and also initiated by the government. This officially initiated public debates provided great opportunities 'for civil associational life to flower, as numerous associations including labour, religious, student, women's, artisan and professional associations emerged to proffer and canvass positions' on the economic and political future of the country. And, once set in motion, the process was difficult to reverse. Indeed, it was the several problems that state policies had inflicted on the people that provided the second platform for the awakening of popular civil society at this time (2004, 222).

A second conceptualisation is the imagination of civil society as the domain of social and political life occupied (some would say taken over) by non-governmental organisations. As noted in a previous chapter, the majority of these NGOs only came into existence from the early 1990s in response to specific dynamics in the international policy environment, most especially the emergence of new donor-recipient relationships. As such, they are, by and large, profoundly disconnected from

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<sup>181</sup> Upon coming to power in a military coup d'état on 27 August 1985, General Ibrahim Babangida threw open the question of whether Nigeria should take a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The previous regimes of Alhaji Shehu Shagari and General Muhammadu Buhari had failed to reach an agreement with the IMF because of the latter's perceivably stringent conditions. See Biersteker and Lewis (1997)



the larger society<sup>182</sup>, leading to the awkward situation in which NGOs and the larger society have come to exist in mutual mistrust and suspicion<sup>183</sup>. On the whole, their emergence has coincided with the steady marginalisation of organisations in the former category (see above). They have also brought an entire baggage (of specific means and ends) with them, including new rules of engagement with the state, a comparatively new dynamic of donor-recipient intercourse, and perhaps most important, what I call the 'formalisation of civil society' which has not necessarily produced better results in terms of engineering social development and bringing the majority of the people into the mainstream of governance. Yet, this criticism has to be tempered with an understanding of the material conditions that made their (the NGOs) emergence possible.

As several studies have argued (see for example Wiarda 2003 and Mustapha 1998), the explosion of NGOs in the general African context beginning from the late 1980s must be situated within the context of the 'proletarianisation of the middle class' (Asobie 1991), a direct fallout of the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). For the rump of a middle class hit by the ascendant economic regime, the idea of civil society was a godsend, simultaneously embodying both a political strategy for re-negotiating existing unfavourable relations of power and, even more significantly, providing an economic strategy for private resource accumulation. This was the specific social conjuncture in which the NGO sector in Nigeria mushroomed in the 1990s, becoming in the process the acceptable 'face' of civil society that international development agencies have sedulously courted and 'empowered'. I have registered this observation at different points in the thesis, but let

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<sup>182</sup> Studies of the history of NGOs in other parts of the world have observed a similar pattern. See for example Boussard (2002).

<sup>183</sup> Refer to discussion in the methodology chapter.

me temporarily draw a curtain here by drawing on the didactic observation of Wiarda (2003) in regard of the same phenomenon of socially irresponsible or 'absent' NGOs across the developing world in general. According to him,

In the developing countries that I know best, whether the issue is agrarian reform, community development, basic human needs, family planning, sustainable development, and now civil society, the same people always seem to form the local commissions and agencies that show the aid donors how and where to spend their monies. It is not merely love of public policy issues that motivates these persons; having been in quite a number of their homes, I can report that, as in political Washington, they have learned to "do well by doing good"; that is, by profiting personally and/or publicly by jumping quickly on the bandwagon of every new U.S. initiative that comes down the pike. Indeed, quite a few of these individuals are widely admired in their own countries on nationalistic grounds for having, over a forty-year period, milked and hoodwinked the (usually) American donor agencies while enriching themselves and rising to positions of prominence in the process (2003, 144).

He continues,

Of course, most of us will respond that "*my* friends and contacts would never do that and in any case there are controls in place"; but my experience is that the locals are at least as practiced as the donors at political machinations and are adept at taking advantage of these programs for private gain." (Ibid).

As the associational sphere has been marginalised by NGOs<sup>184</sup>, and NGOs themselves have become largely discredited (a public commentator angrily denounces them as "the hotbed of grand stealing and deceit")<sup>185</sup>, an analytic space opens up for a

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<sup>184</sup> There is of course an alternative reading of the notoriety of NGOs, which is to argue that they are merely the latest vehicles of elite manipulation, in which case the problem is the elite and not the NGOs themselves.

<sup>185</sup> See Kunle Fagbemi, 'These Perilous Times' *New Age*, Lagos, May 18 2004

third plausible conceptualisation of civil society, which is the activities of individuals in society, organising for the attainment of specific social objectives. This is the understanding that I have privileged throughout this thesis, partly as a way of breaking out of the NGO-as-civil society gridlock, and also because of my conviction that it provides a more useful explanatory framework to understand the energy that has animated the most significant developments in the Nigerian social process over the years.

Second, it is arguably the most important step in any attempt to relocate political action within the domain of individual citizens, as opposed to associations, many of which tragically end up frustrating the popular objectives for which they were set up<sup>186</sup>. I will address the implications of this position for global theorisations of civil society in a moment, but let me quickly add a final point here on the apparent merits of locating civil society within the popular sphere as I have tried to do.

This point relates to the romanticism which is inherent in the literature on civil society in Nigeria and indeed outside the West in general<sup>187</sup>. While it is understandable that the formative scholarship on civil society in non-Western formations had to be necessarily reactive, no thanks to some of the claims made about these societies in the Western oeuvre<sup>188</sup>, what has curiously remained neglected in that process is the kind of analysis that provides a well-rounded portrait of social action in these societies. This is akin to what Keane (1998) refers to as using the language of civil society to “develop an explanatory understanding of a complex

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<sup>186</sup> For further discussions on the limitations of voluntary associations, see Mustapha (1998). See also Bangura and Gibbon (1992) and compare their views with those of Naomi Chazan (1988 and 1994).

<sup>187</sup> See chapters three.

<sup>188</sup> See the discussion in chapters one and two.

sociopolitical reality by means of theoretical distinctions, empirical research and informed judgements about its origins, patterns of development and (unintended) consequences” (Keane 1998, 37).

Part of what I have tried to do here therefore (and this is just one example), is to re-think the problematic of the ‘incivility’ of civil society by positing that what is derogatorily attributed to some cultures in the relevant literature, might actually be an implicit ingredient of all actually existing civil societies, Western and non. This argument also has implications for the related debate on the relationship between violence and civil society, one that has been the cause of much deep-seated rancour among scholars (note, for example, the contrasting positions taken by Keane, 1996 and Fine, 2000).

The perspective being canvassed here also bears a certain affinity with Habermas’s on the inherent plurality and moral ambivalence of civil society. Civil society, according to Habermas, is “the arena in which pluralistic public opinion makes itself felt as an independent source of power. But of course *some voices express themselves more loudly than others in the arena of public opinion, and not all the opinions expressed in an unconstrained public arena will be equally ‘civil’*”<sup>189</sup> (italics added). One implication of this is that the idea of civil society as the bearer of a “moral project” (Perez-Diaz, 1998) (and this is a vision that is rampant among many institutions seeking to ‘empower’ civil society in Africa) is fatally undermined, especially as it would seem as if civil society (which many uncritically pose as the

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<sup>189</sup> Quoted in Whitehead 1997, p. 119.

moral antipode of the state) is itself embedded in conflict and contradiction. I will pick up this point again later in this chapter.

This seems to be the proper juncture then to begin to gather together the different strands of arguments advanced thus far, particularly in the light of evidence provided in the two cases. The first thing is to observe that we seem to have reached a critical milestone in the evolution of the understanding of civil society, which is arguably the same point that Wiarda is trying to make in the extract that I have used as the epilogue to this chapter (see above). Though the situation in Nigeria is doubtless cacophonous, it paradoxically validates the position of Glasius et al (2004) that civil society is “a site of struggle, multivocality and paradox” (p. 14). This argument has been reinforced by the two empirical scenarios in this study. This incipient phase in the understanding of civil society (at least I am suggesting there is one) has crucial implications for civil society conceptualisation at the global level, particularly within the useful framework proposed by Hess (2000), following Alexander (2000). Noting that the idea of civil society has undergone what they call a ‘renaissance’, both have advanced a tripartite schema to understand what might be called, the changing hermeneutics of civil society.

In the first tier is ‘civil society 1’ which is civil society as understood by the early thinkers, including Ferguson and Hegel. ‘Civil society 2’ is “the version criticised by Marx as being determined only by capitalist interest”. Third and last is ‘civil society 3’ which is “a society that has become differentiated, one in which the binary opposition of state and civil society has been enriched by various ‘in-between’ institutions, mainly in the public sphere” (Alexander 2000, 92). They conclude “It is

this latter concept of civil society which is now being used, as a normative as well as descriptive starting point” (ibid). Sjorgen (2001) appears to lend credence to the schema with his observation that “actual civil societies are not shaped in the same way today as when the concept was first elaborated, and they will function in other ways, due to drastically different structural and cultural frameworks of society” (p. 22).

From the point of view of this dissertation, Hess (2000) and Alexander’s (2000) evolutionary perspectives would seem to be largely valid, although a purist might justifiably lodge an objection on grounds that it is rigid in parts, constructed, and ignores the fact that most understandings of civil society appear to combine elements from the three constructed conceptual epochs. Still, it provides useful historicising, and given the data from Nigeria, perhaps it is time to begin to speculate about an emergent ‘civil society 4’, which is about individuals’ modes of social expression within a given formation. I have already pointed out the merits of this emergent typology.

To advance, I will broaden the discussion on how different ‘publics’- and the state in Nigeria are using civil society, and what this struggle to ‘own’ civil society means (or should mean) for existing understanding of the idea. To accomplish this, we need to briefly revisit the context in which the discourse of civil society arose in Nigeria. As I have noted before in earlier chapters, the discourse in Nigeria arose in the late 1980s and early 1990s within the context of popular attempts to expand the political space (Ibrahim 1997), reclaim politics for the purpose of popular justice and social emancipation, and put a ‘human face’ on the neo-liberal policy of Structural

Adjustment. Nwokedi (1995, 63) rightly observes that “up until the widespread demand for political reform in the region beginning in the late 1980s, the use of civil society as an analytic variable in the study of sub-Saharan politics was an exception rather than the rule”.

Part of the attraction, as many have noted, is that there was something definitely roseate about the idea of civil society. Fresh from its recent retrieval from the shelves of political theory where, presumably, it had been gathering intellectual dust for centuries (Gellner 1994, 1996), civil society clearly had a nice ring to it. Among other things, “civil society as a term sounds lofty, non-partisan, citizen-oriented, participatory, and democratic; and who could argue with those attributes?” (Wiarda 2003, 130).

Yet, this appeal was, in retrospect, a double-edged sword. While pro-democracy and human rights groups enthusiastically adopted it, the mass media eagerly promoted and sold it as the long sought after ‘missing link’ in the frustrating search for democracy and social justice in the country. Civil society thus became, in the words of Beckman (2001), a matter of ‘strategy’, and it would seem as if for all concerned, it was the impeccable embodiment of all democratic and egalitarian principles (Gibbon and Bangura 1992). Any note of caution was promptly drowned in the prevailing rapture.

The interesting point however is that it was not only segments in society which, having realised its perceived utility, decided to adopt the language of civil society. The state also did, but naturally not quite for the same *kind* of ends. Thus, one

fascinating aspect of the social career of civil society in Nigeria, since the idea captured the popular imagination in the 1990s, has been its cynical instrumentalisation, particularly the process by which the state in Nigeria hijacked the discourse, using it to complicate the social process and promote an agenda that ran parallel to the democratic aspirations of the people. At the very least, this would seem to reinforce the anxiety in the literature regarding the possibility of using the idea of civil society in the cause of the 'uncivil'.

Still, the process involved offers a fascinating study in the susceptibility (some would say weakness) of actually existing civil society. More important, it is also a timely reminder of how the struggle for the public space is never really settled. Indeed, if any wisdom could be extrapolated from the data, which I will present shortly, it is that the state will spare nothing in its attempt not only to stifle public dissent, but also to re-define public space and shape the organisations therein, in its own image. Consequently, the many possible outcomes of any encounter between the state and civil groups are pre-determined by, among other things, the degree of social embeddedness of the groups, the changing nature of their social projects, and the character of the state in question.

Prior to the 1990s, the Nigerian state had mostly regarded civil groups in the country with suspicion. A report published in 2000 by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) notes thus: "the state in both the pre and post-independence era has demonstrated a strong tendency to intervene in the regulation and activities of civil associations in the modern sphere in particular" (IDEA 2000, 124). By the early 1990s, as the Nigerian economy took a turn for the



worse, even groups with a limited and conservative agenda were forced to change tack and pile pressure on the government.

Expectedly, the state did not take kindly to what was seen as the interrogation of the reasonableness or otherwise of its economic policy. According to Olukoshi (1997, 458), “the state, in seeking to force through its programme, made efforts to weaken and destroy the organised power of the popular and other social forces opposed to market reforms, forces which are central to the vibrancy of civil society and the struggle for democracy”. Beyond this however, and this is the rub, it also took the altogether unique step of buying into the discourse of civil society, *manufacturing*, so to say, its own civil society. According to The IDEA report cited earlier, the state under President Ibrahim Babangida for instance “created selected civil associations in opposition to others” (p. 122). This process of state manufacturing of ‘civil society,’ or more precisely its associational manifestation, arguably reached its apogee under the regime of general Sani Abacha, president Babangida’s successor but one<sup>190</sup>.

A major dimension of the Abacha regime’s overall strategy to undermine ‘authentic’ civil society was to create or give tacit support to what might be called ‘official civil society organisations’. In general, such organisations had the overarching objective of campaigning for the transformation of General Abacha into a civilian president. The majority were established with direct state funds, or at least with officialdom’s express imprimatur. It is estimated that by the time General Abacha died suddenly in June 1998, there were over a hundred such groups. The following is an arbitrary list of the more influential of these organisations:

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<sup>190</sup> Abacha came into power in December 1993 after ousting the Ernest Shonekan-led Interim National Government (ING) in a bloodless coup d’etat.

1. Vision '98
2. Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha '98 (YEAA), led by Chief Daniel Kanu
3. National Council of Youths Association of Nigeria (NACYAN)
4. Sani Abacha Initiative for National Transformation (SAINT)
5. General Sani Abacha for '98 Presidency National Mobilisation and Persuasion Committee, led by Dr. Godwin Adzuana Daboh.
6. National Movement for Peace and Stability (NMPS)
7. Movement for National Stability (MONAS), led by Senator Tony Anyanwu
8. National Mass Movement of Nigeria, led by Alhaji Bukar Mandara
9. Traditional Rulers Forum (TRF)
10. Professionals United for Peace and Stability (PUPS)
11. National Association of Patriotic Professionals (NAPP)
12. Media Democratic Forum (MDF)
13. Northern Elders Forum
14. Union of Democratic Elected Representatives of Nigeria (UDERN)
15. Movement for National Consensus (MONAC)
16. The 4<sup>th</sup> Force
17. General Sani Abacha Movement for Peaceful Transition (GESAM), led by Chief Yomi Tokoya

As I have noted earlier, these and similar organisations constituted the arrow head of the campaign to 'draft' General Abacha into the political fray and 'persuade' him to transform into a civilian president in 1998; and almost as a rule, the latitude given them to express themselves was never extended to other associations within the public space, prompting a social commentator to observe wryly that the idea of civil

society sat well with the Nigerian authorities only to the extent that it did not conflict with their own ideas about the moral properties of the public sphere.<sup>191</sup>

I have undertaken this brief historical tour in order to illustrate a number of points, the most significant of which is that, such was the allure of civil society as an idea, and such was the power of the attributes romantically attributed to it, that everyone wanted to be part of civil society, including the state. Not only did the state corrupt the very notion of 'voluntarism' by forming or encouraging the formation of associations with little or no civic content, it also virtually hijacked the public space by ensuring that only such associations as suited its warped vision were permitted to operate within it. The essential difference between the two sets of organisations centred on the issue of autonomy. According to Olukoshi (1997, 451), autonomy was crucial as it "distinguished the civil associations at the forefront of the national democratic reawakening from a host of anti-democratic organizations...that were *set up to enable the state to intervene directly in civil society and to influence and shape the generation of ideas and mobilization of opinion in that arena* (italics added).

This is not to suggest that the groups "at the forefront of the national democratic reawakening" did not have their own problems. Indeed, what the evidence about the two sets of associations seems to underscore, is the need for greater caution in appraising associations in general, as the building blocks of civil society. In clear contrast to claims by scholars like Bratton (1989), civil society in Nigeria seems to be more than the sum total of associations within any given polity, and the existence of

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<sup>191</sup> See Wilson Uwujaren, 'Season of Inertia' *The News*, Lagos, 4 May 1998, pp. 15-23.

associations alone does not necessarily suggest that a vibrant or democratic civil society will follow.

What all this points to is that the reality of civil society in Nigeria seems to be much more ambiguous and messy than existing literature (both local and global) has portrayed. For one, the reality of actually existing civil society has to be separated from the discourse of civil society, and I would argue that this all-important delineation has been largely overlooked. The implication is that the *idea* and the *thing* itself are often confused in a way that does justice to neither. The approach I have adopted in this study is predicated on a felt need to balance the two, doing what Keane (1998) imaginatively calls using civil society “as an idealtype to describe, explain, clarify and understand the contours of a given slice of complex reality.” (p. 37). The ‘given slice of complex reality’ is Nigeria, and in what follows in the second section of this chapter, I will attempt to explain what civil society looks like, expanding where necessary on some of the points I have made, especially whether and how the picture that emerges squares or conflicts with relevant positions in the literature. To consolidate the analysis above, I will focus largely on the two empirical scenarios with a view to analysing their implications for theoretical understanding of civil society in Nigeria.

### **7.3 Civil Society in Nigeria: Interrelating Theory and Practice**

An obvious point of departure is a re-statement of the justification for the scenarios themselves. Since this is also folded into a particular understanding of civil society, it is only logical that I spell it out as clearly as possible. I have defined civil society in a

quite liberal manner<sup>192</sup> as the activities of ordinary individuals in society organising for the promotion of certain ends. As I admitted in the methodology chapter, the inspiration for this definition drew partly on my encounter with Titi Salaam, the Director of Programmes at Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC) who defined civil society as “the everyday activity of citizens; being a citizen makes you a member of civil society”.

This definition is far from perfect, but I see in it a window of analytic opportunity to engage with ‘the flesh and blood’ of civil society in a manner largely ignored by existing literature. For instance, there is the immediately recognisable problem of the concept of ‘citizenship’. The questions may be posed for example: What do I mean by citizens? And who are these Nigerian citizens who feature so prominently in my conceptualisation? By citizens here I refer to individuals who possess Nigerian citizenship, irrespective of their status or class in the social hierarchy. This, for me, represents an important and enriching departure from existing conceptualisations. Thus, while not overtly engaging in any subtle or rigorous theorising of citizenship<sup>193</sup>, I seek to enthrone an understanding that takes into account the everyday activities of *regular* Nigerians. More critically, I also seek to make their actions the fulcrum of social discourse in a way that has been neglected by existing civil society narratives.

This approach has a subtle but profound implication for the association between civil society and citizenship. Arguably the most influential analysis of the

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<sup>192</sup> As Jane Guyer (1994) has warned, “too tight a definition cramps the ethnographic endeavour”! (p. 226).

<sup>193</sup> For a useful introduction to the subject of citizenship and civil society, see for example Janoski (1998), Prockaska (2002), Kymlicka (2003) and Parekh (2004).

historical evolution of civil society on the African continent, Mahmood Mamdani's (1996) analysis of civil society in a colonial setting as being "the preserve of a small urban middle-class population and permanently excluding rural populations" (Glasius, et al 2004, 11) set a benchmark in the analysis of how the language of civil society has been used to bifurcate the urban and the rural in Africa. Nevertheless, while his thesis has been justly celebrated, what seems to be the logical fallout, an intellectual project that offers a conceptual corrective to the situation which he brilliantly analyses has been neglected. This is what I have tried to do in this study, bringing what he (Mamdani) memorably calls the "domain of custom" within the ambit of civil society discourse.

To be sure, the emergent picture is far from pretty. But for us it serves at least two purposes. The first is to debunk the mythology (and this is implicit in Mamdani's work) that ordinary citizens are somehow morally separable from the dominant middle and upper classes. In my analysis, I have tried to show that while existing discourses may indeed have marginalised the rural and the urban poor, its moral superiority (whether at the level of political or private action) is more imagined than real. Second, and to develop what seems to be another fallout of the Mamdanian thesis, the approach that I privilege also helps us to look beyond the middle classes to the real agency of change in the developing world; ordinary people. Finally, if as Chandhoke (1995) has rightly lamented, a major problem with the dominant conceptualisation of civil society in the developing is its restriction of agency to what she calls, in truly Mamdanian fashion, "the urban sectors and the articulate middle classes" (p. 187), the intention here has been to restore rights, "political articulation" and "political presence" (ibid) to those who have historically been denied it. Indeed, it

may be right to say that my portrait of civil society is really about what these ordinary individuals are doing, in order to activate their citizenship.

An objection to this approach might be levelled on grounds that I have been playing god with definition, and the riposte to that would be that this is unavoidable given that, as I have made clear above, we seem to have entered an era in which it is virtually pointless to be talking about civil society in relation to one normative “authorised definition” (Beckman, Hansson and Sjorgen 2001). However, I would also argue that even in this new ‘anarchical society’, it is still possible to detect some commonalities that cut across the ways in which civil society is being imagined in the non-Western world. I have expounded this at some length in the latter part of the second chapter, but suffice to reiterate here that one theme that appears to course through these newer conceptualisations, is the use of the language of civil society, to indicate a broad coalition of citizens and other nonstate actors, in varying social contexts, organising for the attainment of defined social objectives.

To draw this aspect of the discussion to a close, I focus briefly on one other reason why a ‘people-centred definition’ is important and point out the specific implications of my approach for one of the nastiest controversies in the theoretical literature. Within the larger debate about what are, or should be, the attributes of a *real* civil society, much tension has gathered around the subject of ethnicity in particular. Is it in or out? Could ethnically based associations be regarded as a part of civil society for instance? Is an ethnically based civil society not a contradiction in terms? This has remained a sticky point in the literature (Chan 2002, Chandhoke 1995, Trager 2001, Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998, Azarya 1994) although in fairness, the

debate has never been carried out on a level playing field. For one, even in the larger political science or sociological scholarship, ethnicity has never really enjoyed a good press. Rather, it has endured a dubious career as either “the final explanatory variable of just about everything happening on the African political scene”, or “an irrelevant conceptual obstruction to proper analysis”(Doornbos, 1991, 53).

Ethnicity’s image has been further dented by a series of analyses by scholars for whom ethnicity may well be the fundamental cause of all social conflict in the contemporary world. According to Barber (2001, 58) for instance, the *most important* issue in modern times is “...whether the more tenuous bonds of citizens can survive the pounding of blood brotherhood...” (Italics added); and not surprisingly, he concludes that “Societies that depend for their unity on mono-cultural particularism or a kind of tribal fervour are likely to break into civil war (Yugoslavia) or forfeit their democracy”). (Barber 2001, 65). Suberu’s (2000, 123) vision of the ethnic is similarly dim: “In Africa and beyond, ethnic (as well as religious and regional) identity conflicts have hobbled the capacity and legitimacy of governments, drained the integrity of states, and *ravaged the cohesion and coherence of civil societies.*” (Italics added). For Seligman, “the continuity of corporate ethnic loyalties in a polity undercuts the very definition of universal citizenship and trust on which civil society is based.” (quoted in Srebrnik 2000, 8). Finally, Horowitz (1985, 12) argues that: “In divided societies, ethnic conflict is at the centre of politics...Ethnic conflict *strains the bonds that sustain civility* and is often seen as the root of violence....” (Italics added).



The emergence of civil society discourse appears to have given this category of literature a fresh impetus, and much intellectual labour has been dissipated on the question of whether or not civil society is compatible with ethnicity or vice versa (Monga 1996, Ukiwo 2002, Boas and Saether 2000, Arzaya 1994, Young 1994, Barkan 1991, Osaghae 1998, Agbu 2004). One can see the point of this debate, especially the attempt on the part of many Africanist scholars to save what might be called the entire ascriptive dimension of social life on the continent from being demonised. Indeed, for many, the defence was taken up with almost ideological vigour, especially as the salience of the ethnic factor in their societies was used increasingly as a symbol of ‘incivility’<sup>194</sup>.

Still, I would like to argue that it is ultimately a misguided debate as it rests on a dubious foundation of a necessary relationship between associations and civil society, the contradictions of which I have focused attention on before. Again, there seems to be an abundance of what Schopflin (2000, 1), in a related context, refers to as “cognitive closure”, as many scholars have curiously overlooked the role ethnicity has played in the resurgence of civil society in, say, Russia<sup>195</sup>.

But my grouse with this perspective runs deeper. One fundamental problem, in my view, lies in the assumption that there is one idea of civil society, an “authorised version” with an inerrant list of properties that must be the benchmark for civil society everywhere. To say this is to do violence to the very “multivocality and paradox” (Glasius et al, op. cit.), not to mention diversity, which is supposed to be the hallmark

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<sup>194</sup> See chapter two.

<sup>195</sup> According to Chan (2002), ethnicity indeed has many uses, among which are ‘as a means of resistance or, at least, protection on the part of threatened citizens. Thus, it is capable of being described both as a prevailing and countervailing phenomenon’ (p. 66)

of the concept civil society. As Reitzes (1994) insisted, “one cannot argue that simply because certain conditions which inform classical and Western liberal democratic theories do not exist, civil society does not exist. All that the absence of such conditions tells us, is that a particular *type* of civil society does not exist” (p. 110).

It is possible indeed to have an approach to the conceptualisation of civil society that recognises this inherent diversity, and I would like to argue that it is one that uses individuals in society, by which I mean their activities, as its basic unit of analysis. This constitutive ambiguity clearly shows up in my two empirical scenarios. But what do these scenarios *in particular* tell us about civil society in Nigeria, and how do we begin to re-think existing theoretical ‘knowledge’ in the light of the scenarios? This is what I analyse next.

One important preliminary observation is how the discourses of civil society in Nigeria stand in virtual contradistinction to the reality of actually existing civil society. Linking the two by eschewing the romanticism inherent in the literature is one task of this study. This is not to suggest that the two ‘faces’ of civil society that I have revealed exhaust the whole gamut of civil society in Nigeria. The choices, though dictated by the background to my research and the declared objectives, have been necessarily arbitrary. What this seemingly translates into is two levels of plurality, in the sense that while there is no single understanding of civil society in Nigeria, there is equally no universal way of appraising the reality of civil society.

Thus, for this study, my choice of context was dictated by the extent to which I believed they are able to capture the fluidity and ambiguity of the subject at issue, as well as illuminate the inner structure of its relationship with the state. Let me begin

with the first empirical scenario, which is about how, through the symbolic instrumentality of a collective switch-off, ordinary mobile phone subscribers organised to compel the phone companies to provide a better range of services. While, as I have admitted, the results have not been immediate,<sup>196</sup> what is of interest is the *process* by which individual subscribers pooled their efforts in order to attain a defined common objective.

The most immediate extrapolation therefore has to do with how the world of business or the economy is intimately linked to civil society, an observation which makes problematic the tendency in the literature to draw watertight distinctions between the two. For example, as Edwards (2004, 28) has noted, “both Walzer and Lasch have insisted that civil society is a sphere of life- a market-free zone- in which ‘money is devalued’, while Cohen and Arato conclude that ‘only a concept of civil society differentiated from the economy (and “bourgeois society”) can become the centre of a critical social and political theory in market economies.” Edwards (Ibid) deflates this position by citing the example of “the market women of Sierra Leone... who (acting collectively) thronged the streets of Freetown in 1996 and again in 1997 to ensure that democratic elections went ahead”. The Nigerian scenario provides additional justification for believing in the mutual inseparability of the domain of economy and the world of civil society.

A corollary matter is the implication of the scenario for the general boundaries which are deemed to exist between civil society and the state, civil society and the market, and the market and the state. Young (2000) for instance argues that the

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<sup>196</sup> As at the time of composing this thesis, many of the issues leading to the boycott have remained unresolved. See Everest Amaefule, ‘Nigeria lags behind in mobile penetration’ *The Punch*, Lagos, 17 May 2004.

primary duty of civil society is, by fostering “individual and collective self-determination,” to “limit the ability of both state and economy to colonize the lifeworld” (p. 189). This suggests one possible *kind* of relationship between civil society on the one hand, and the state and economy on the other. In this vision, civil society eternally patrols its borders from the rampages of both a coercive state and a selfish economic realm.

Beyond Young, the literature is replete with a variety of theoretical permutations on the possible relationships between civil society, the state and the economy (Pelczynski 1984, Osaghae 1994), a confirmation, if any were required, that there is indeed no single overarching relationship. With respect to the duo of civil society and the state in particular, it must be noted that discussions of how they stand in relation to each other actually dominated the early scholarship on the origins of civil society (Taylor 1975, Parekh 2004). Therefore at the moment, echoes of the debate between the disciples of Hegel and Marx respectively remain audible in contestations over whether civil society was a *moment* of the state, as Hegel contended, or its basis, as Marx stubbornly held; although as I have made clear in the second chapter, the position of each on the state-civil society interface, is ultimately intelligible only within the larger corpus of their individual works (see also Markovitz 1998).

Still, the state-civil society-economy borderline remains heavily contested, and the subsisting impasse might be overcome perhaps by allowing the context of analysis itself to speak. For if there is anything that has emerged from existing disputes about how and where the three intersect, it is that while a scholarly face-off might centre on,

say, the state or civil society, only rarely is it about the *same* state or civil society. For all their unanimity about various aspects of society for instance, there is a haunting suspicion that each meant something radically different by civil society or the state (Markovitz, op. cit.). What, therefore, does the Nigeria's *specific context* tell us about this all-important triangle? The first, as I have hinted, is to underline the futility of imposing a rigid analytic schema on them, for rather than being distinct compartments, what we have on the ground is more of three *overlapping zones of action* with consequences for one another. In the case of the GSM boycott in Nigeria for example, we see an excellent demonstration of how mass disgruntlement with a basically economic activity (the use of mobile phones) set the background to a social and political action- the subscribers' boycott. The boycott, in turn, had consequences for the market and the state as both GSM service providers and state functionaries respectively had to respond to this unprecedented action on the part of civil society.

Arguably, this was partly the case because the *interests* of the three were at stake. While the state stood to gain from and therefore sought the GSM companies' compliance with the rules and regulations operative within the industry<sup>197</sup>, the companies themselves had a clear profit motive while civil society had to ensure that service was paramount. This apparent conflict of interests shaped the reflexes of the three domains in the showdown that was the September 19 2003 boycott.

Another point highlighted by the boycott is the inadequacy of seeing both the state and civil society as oppositional domains, which are eternally locked in conflict, an insight that I hinted at in the fifth chapter. Instead, what the boycott tells us is that

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<sup>197</sup> Although it was accused of conniving with the GSM companies at times.

civil society and the state are linked by *necessity*. In this specific case, civil society needed the strong will of the state, and if necessary some of its coercive apparatus (about which, more presently), to keep the GSM companies in line. Thus, while civil society, in strict Tocquevillean typology, may be necessary to check and balance the state, it may also need the same state once the strategic balance alters and, as in this scenario, the immediate *bete noire* happen to be actors in the economic realm. Of course this is not to suggest that both civil society and the state are then returned to permanent amity, but they may continue to cooperate until they are forced to confrontation again by more fundamental tensions. A realisation of this necessary flexibility may be crucial to our understanding of state-civil society relations in Nigeria and many parts of the developing world.

This logically leads to the next point, which focuses on how civil society actually needs a strong and effective state, in order to be able to realise itself or its objectives. A corollary to that is about how even the economic domain itself requires the kind of social infrastructure that only a welfare conscious state can provide. I will explain this in some detail. By a strong state here, I only mean one that is able to ensure compliance with laid down rules and regulations, both in the economic and other spheres of social life. As we have seen right up to and in the aftermath of the September 19 boycott, a recurrent theme was whether the Nigerian state could make the GSM companies improve their services, by insisting on some irreducible standards. Seeing how important the state was to its calculations, the organisers of the boycott took a number of steps, all of which were geared towards getting the state behind civil society.

For example, there were successive representations to both the upper and lower national houses of assembly, a vigorous and sustained media campaign, and representations to state officials at various levels. Civil society also used the instrumentality of the legal process in order to seek legal redress for perceived injuries. In actual fact, the idea for the formation of one of the associations which emerged to champion the cause of the subscribers, the National Association of Telecommunications Subscribers (NATCOMS) came outside a courthouse following a hearing<sup>198</sup>. The general point therefore is this: that perhaps the burden of civil society might have been lightened if the state had been more effective in terms of putting pressure on big business. In this respect, civil society definitely could do with a strong and effective state.

The logic of that of this is that the course of action embarked upon by civil society may be directly linked with the conduct of actors within both the state and the economy. We observe in the example of the boycott that the idea for the protest only came about in the context of the perceived reluctance of the GSM companies to reduce tariffs and improve their services, and the perceived unwillingness and/or ineffectiveness of the state to call the companies to order and make them improve the quality of their services.

For the companies themselves, there is no doubt that the state was a crucial factor. Indeed, a major plank of the GSM companies' defence was that acts of omission or commission by the state, had driven them into a corner and left them with little or no choice in terms of the tariffs levied for their services. Apart from their

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<sup>198</sup> See *The Guardian*, Lagos, 12 November 2003.

complaint that the cost of obtaining operating licenses was steep, the mobile phone companies found a ready-made excuse in the erratic supply of electricity. This situation, according to the companies, prompted a search for alternatives (e.g., acquisition of generating sets) which inevitably had implications for the cost of service<sup>199</sup>. In sum, the companies were convinced that the quality of the service they provided would have been better, and the cost definitely cheaper if the relevant infrastructure had been put in place by the Nigerian state.

With respect to civil society, the state and the market therefore, what emerges from the discussion thus far is a fascinating scenario whereby processes in one sphere provoke reactions and other processes in the other spheres, thus revealing what appears to be a fundamental connection among the three realms. In addition, it seems that the *kind* of actions taken by civil society (media mobilisation, legal action and finally a mass boycott in this case) may have been directly related to the nature of the issue at stake and, also, to the way in which the other side reacts.

Some issues, of course, generate intense passion (I come to this presently) and the reaction to them may be virulent. In this particular case however, while civil society was certainly upset on the one hand by the inadequacies of the mobile phone companies, and on the other by the perceived connivance between the companies and the state, things never threatened to get out of hand both because of the nature of what was at stake and, perhaps more important, because at the end of the day, only a minority of the population could boast of having mobile phones. To gain a little perspective, although it is estimated that by the end of 2004, there will be in existence

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<sup>199</sup> For more on this see chapter five.



nearly 5.5 million telephone lines in the country<sup>200</sup> (an increase of over 1000 per cent over the measly 450,000 available in 1999), it has to count as a dismal figure in a country of more than 120 million people.

Given this situation, it stands to reason that the common reaction would have been more vehement had what was at issue been different, perhaps a different and more fundamental aspect of the lifeworld. It is this factor, I would argue, that determined the different *kind* of reaction by civil society to the controversy surrounding the Miss World 2002 beauty pageant. Indeed, I have chosen this scenario because of the glimpse it affords us of a totally different dimension to civil society. There is also the allied opportunity to rethink yet another sticky point in the literature, in this case the relationship between civil society and coercion or violence.

The question is: why did civil society act with evident ‘civility’ in one instance and apparent ‘incivility’ in the other? To develop further the argument which has run throughout this thesis and which I have also taken up above, the answer is two things: context and subject matter. It seems to me that part of the reason why there was so much vehemence on the part of the protesters against Miss Isioma Daniel’s tongue-in-cheek statement report in *ThisDay* newspaper was, one, the fact that passionately-held religious beliefs of the people were at stake, and two, because of the context in which the statement was made. I have already devoted considerable space to these twin issues in the chapter on the beauty pageant. Here however, it is the implications for the theoretical understanding of civil society that are of concern, and

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<sup>200</sup> See Berthrand Nwankwo, ‘Government targets 5.5 million phone lines before next year’ *The Guardian*, Lagos, 18 May 2004

the central issue, as I have said, is that of the relationship between violence or coercion and civil society.

The tendency to imagine an antithesis between civil society and violence is part of the normative baggage, and I have said this much in this chapter and earlier chapters. To roughly summarise this perspective, civil society, to be civil society at all, must be devoid of violence, a force which only the state should be in legitimate possession of. It is not difficult to see one of the main problems with this position, which is its presumption of the prior legitimate constitution of the political unit under discussion. How, for instance, might civil society change a violent authoritarian regime without recourse to some form of violence? My position therefore is not to deny the threat that violence constitutes to the social fabric, but rather to insist that it be not dismissed as uncivil *a priori* without a rigorous appreciation of the context. As Parekh (2004) has argued, there is a serious problem with the view that assumes coercion to be “inherently evil” and “identifies the state with it (that is coercion) and civil society with its absence” p. 30 (my parenthesis). For, as he rightly says, “The distinction between the coercive state and the noncoercive civil society is too crude and sharp to do justice to either...Just as the state is not exclusively coercive, civil society is not wholly noncoercive” (p. 31).

Which raises the question: is a coercive civil society still to be regarded as civil society, or is it an *uncivil* society? If we agree with the position advanced by Parekh that “not all coercion is inherently undesirable” (2004, 31), it follows that it is not inconceivable that civil society would sometimes resort to coercion. In any case, the task of the researcher, as articulated by Fine (2000) who takes Keane to task for

the latter's alleged avoidance of "any conceptualisation of the intrinsic relationships between civil society and violence" (p. 113), is "not to idealise civil society but to understand its nature and location within modern social life as a whole- including the types of violence which it generates." (p.118). This is what I have attempted to do with the scenario which puts in perspective civil society's reaction to the Miss World beauty pageant.

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

We then arrive at an important terminus. If civil society is not to be idealised civil society, it behoves the researcher to paint as sincere a portrait of what it is as possible. This reality is usually messy, and part of what I have tried to do is to convey this messiness as vividly as possible. It would seem, from the data presented in this thesis, that a 'pure' civil society, one that is completely shorn of violence or coercion only exists in the normative imagination. Part of the problem, to be sure, has to do with the way in which violence has been historically conceived and its almost effortless association with incivility.

The problem is compounded by the clear cultural baggage that being labelled 'uncivil' carries, having been used historically by generations of Western social theorists to essentialise non-Western societies and formations. The earliest scholarship on civil society in Africa and Asia was thus understandably reactive, anchored on the imperative to reject this normative attribution of 'incivility' (I have outlined this process involved in this demonising in an earlier chapter). Part of what I have done

therefore is to re-interrogate, re-define, and ultimately absorb the very notion of incivility.

In the next chapter, I will draw together the main arguments and findings of the thesis as well as examine some implications for development policy on civil society in Nigeria and, to some extent, the rest of Africa.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Conclusion**

This concluding chapter draws together the data and arguments from the thesis as a whole. In comparing the findings from the research with positions in the wider theoretical and development fields, an attempt is made to establish the implications of the research for both theoretical understanding of and policy on civil society.

The last two decades have witnessed the rising popularity of the idea of civil society. The global quest for a civil society has been inspired in part by widespread disillusionment with the state by a wide spectrum of social forces, and the attendant search for an alternative anchor of social development. In addition, the wave of democratisation which swept the globe beginning from the mid 1980s saw a renewed faith in the power of civil society as vector of a new egalitarian project. The unwitting upshot was a particular vision of civil society as an organisational form that enhances the democratic and developmental agenda. This 'missionary position' on civil society was promoted with ecclesial fervour by Western donor institutions, who reified latter day NGOs as models of civil society in the developing world

What this mainstream conception (Beckman's 'ideological construct')<sup>201</sup> occludes however is the ambiguity which has historically dogged the idea of civil society, and the moral muddle which seems to be one of its essential properties. Against this paradoxical background of its soaring fame and plummeting clarity, I set

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<sup>201</sup> Beckman (1996)

out to find what the notion of civil society might mean in Nigeria, a further intellectual impetus having been provided by lingering doubts about its usefulness in elucidating social processes in non-Western formations.

Bearing in mind the limitations of the idea of civil society for “theoretically grounded empirical work” (Beckman, *ibid*) the research began by posing some critical questions, among which were: What does the idea of civil society suggest in Nigeria? What does actually existing civil society look like? How do the notion(s) and reality of civil society in Nigeria relate to postulations in both global and indigenous literatures? The study attempts to answer these questions by using a qualitative methodology which draws on data from participant-observation, interviews, a critical analysis of the literature, and two contrasting case studies.

The findings in the field provide grounds for questioning some of the assumptions in the literature (domestic and global) concerning the form, character and possibilities of civil society in Nigeria. The first relates to the definition of civil society in Nigeria which extant literature (see chapter three) largely upholds as embodying the civic associational spectrum, particularly the urban-based NGO sector<sup>202</sup> that has flourished in response to specific local and international dynamics. As a corollary, civil society is also largely envisioned as an inevitable moral ally in the country’s specific historical quest for democracy, social justice and good governance.

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<sup>202</sup> As clarified in the thesis, this is not to deny that there are obvious organisational, thematic and aspirational differences among NGOs themselves.

As indicated throughout the thesis, there are clear grounds for invalidating these assumptions. First, in clear contrast to the conceptual homogeneity presumed in a section of the literature, the research found a diverse perceptual landscape which suggests that civil society is differently understood by different social actors and groupings within the Nigerian context. This has clear implications for international development policy towards civil society in Nigeria and the rest of the continent in general which has rested on a particular understanding of civil society.

More important, it seems to validate Beckman's (2001) point about civil society being a 'strategy' used by different multiple actors for the pursuance of varying aims. As he argues, "Different types of actors seek to create or identify themselves with certain kinds of civil societies, and thereby attempt to justify either policy intervention, activism and fund-seeking-or, for that matter, research projects and theoretical introductions to conference books" (Beckman 2001, 5). Thus, as discovered in our research, the use of civil society as strategy was not limited to NGOs and other actors in the wider society, but also appealed to the military-dominated state which bought into the organisational understanding of civil society, cynically creating its own civil society organisations with the ultimate object of undermining more 'authentic' forms.

Yet, for Beckman, rather than foreclose the need for critical investigation, this conceptual diversity and/or corruption ironically makes it even more imperative. One way of making some progress might be to distinguish between the term itself on the one hand, and on the other by the sets of issues that have been invoked by its frequent use (Beckman, *ibid*). This, in part, is what this thesis has attempted to do, aligning

popular perceptions of civil society to an interpretation of its perceived role in the project of counter-hegemony.

This provides a basis for invalidating a second assumption in the literature about the mandatory organisational form of actually existing civil society. This thesis proposes a contrary non-organisational understanding of civil society that articulates it as the story of ordinary citizens in a variety of real-life (and often morally conflictive) situations. This is the immediate background to the two empirical case studies at the core of the thesis. The first describes the process culminating in the boycott of mobile phone services by disaffected subscribers on 19 September 2003, while the second describes the chain of events provoked by the eventually abortive attempt to stage the Miss World 2002 beauty pageant in Nigeria. Both are presented as the 'civil' and 'uncivil' manifestations of actually existing civil society in Nigeria respectively.

The civil/ uncivil opposition has been a constant, though contested, presence in both classical and contemporary social theorising of the idea of civil society. Indeed, the alternative genealogy of civil society which provides a conceptual framework for the thesis, was inspired in part by the innuendo of incivility which seems constitutive of a dominant section of the Western anthology. Putting a new conceptual spin on the notion of incivility, thereby reappropriating it as an ontological property of civil society, this thesis shows that the civil and the uncivil are indeed simultaneously existent aspects of civil society. I reject on the one hand the *particular* attribution of uncivility to civil society in Nigeria (and Africa), and refute on the other the largely indigenous claims about its essential goodness. Rather, it is suggested that



uncivility, especially when defined in terms of recourse to violence, is endemic to *all* civil societies.

The examination of both the civil and uncivil aspects of civil society through specific empirical illustrations is itself a departure from largely monochromatic analyses of civil society, either in relation to democracy, or the state. By viewing existing civil society in Nigeria through the optics of two morally opposed *moments*, the thesis manages to throw light on, not only civil society itself, but also the state in Nigeria, existing power configurations, (Islamic) religious fundamentalism, ethnic divisions, and civil society in relation to the economic sphere. It shows the profound inadequacy of looking at civil society only in relation to the state or democratic objectives. Furthermore, in placing ordinary people at the centre of our analysis, the thesis arguably contributes to the identified theoretical imperative of privileging those who, historically, are excluded from participation in the public arena.

One of the older controversies about the character of African societies has centred on the issue of ethnicity. While not among the core concerns here, this thesis has been forced to give it some consideration, especially as it has continued to feature in the dispute over the attributes of a civil society. It is argued in the thesis that the debate itself rests on two dubious assumptions: that there is a necessary relationship between associations and civil society; and that there exists an authorised version of civil society with an inerrant list of properties which must be the touchstone for civil society in all formations.

The almost fundamentalist advocacy of the gospel of civil society by international development agencies, institutions and donors has rested partly on the Tocquevillean ideal of civil society as a realm of civic associations which provide checks and balances to the excesses of the state. The thesis muddies this picture by suggesting that actually existing civil society not only evinces contradictory reflexes, but also betrays different kinds of relationship with the state. Thus, its position constantly shifts between being a virulent opponent of the state, to being its desperate ally, both possibilities conditioned by the nature of the issue(s) at stake and other dynamics in the society.

Although this study has urged a particular way of understanding civil society in contemporary Nigeria, it by no means suggests that this is the 'authorised' way to investigate the phenomenon. Indeed, if anything, it seeks to underscore the proposition that there is not a single way, but several, of examining and/or understanding civil society. While a "common vocabulary" (Rodenbeck 2004, 22) of civil society might be impossible, indigenous idioms, through critical re-imaginings from 'the ground', can lead scholarship in interesting directions.

This seems to be the case already with the emergence of what the thesis has referred to as the 'alternative genealogy' of civil society, including the bohemian, yet creative, ways in which the notion of civil society is being understood (Chan 2002). This, it may be argued, constitutes a crucial milestone on the path towards what Crawford Young (1998) proposes as the next logical thing on the theoretical agenda in Africa- making civil society part of the continent's intellectual capital. Far from presuming the nobility of civil society, this call to 'ownership' ought to be seen for

what it is: a call for a more searching and systematic engagement with the concept, grounded in the histories and cultures of the continent.

This realisation, presumably, ought to put a much needed curb on the widespread faith in the agency of civil society as envisioned by Western donors and policy makers. Contrary to its equation with what Bratton (1994, 6) describes as “the current explosion of associational life in Africa”, an equation that simultaneously simplifies and distorts, this thesis suggests that the idea of civil society may be more usefully understood as a morally ambiguous narrative of the activities of ordinary citizens in changing contexts. The demonstrated untenability of a single, authoritative and morally coherent vision of civil society ought to open up fresh analytic perspectives and, presumably, squash donor infatuation.

## Appendix A Chronology of Regimes in Nigeria since Independence

Abubakar Tafawa Balewa	October 1960- January 1966
General Aguiyi J.T. Ironsi	January 1966- July 1966
General Yakubu Jack Gowon	July 1966- July 1975
General Murtala Muhammed	July 1975-February 1976
General Olusegun Obasanjo	February 1976- October 1979
Shehu Usman Shagari	October 1979-December 1983
General Muhammadu Buhari	December 1983- August 1985
General Ibrahim Babangida	August 1985- August 1993
Ernest Shonekan	August 1993- November 1993
General Sani Abacha	November 1993-June 1998
General Abdulsalam Abubakar	June 1998- May 1999
Olusegun Obasanjo	May 1999-

## Appendix B Defining Civil Society: Table of Thinkers<sup>203</sup>

John Locke	“Where, therefore, any number of men so united into one society, as to quit everyone his executive power of the law of nature, and to resign it to the public, there, and there only is a political, or civil society.” (170, 223)
Adam Ferguson	“In other words, civil society was an imagination which attempted to identify, represent and legislate some basic unity in the experience of being human, and an essential sameness about what it involves to be an individual who lives a life of external compulsion and obligation.” (1767/1980)
Georg W. F. Hegel	“Civil society is the territory of mediation between the family and the state where there is free play for every idiosyncrasy, every talent, every accident of birth and fortune, and where waves of passion gush forth, regulated only by reason glinting through them.” ( <i>The Philosophy of Right</i> , quoted in Hall and Trentmann 2005, 129)
Karl Marx	“Civil society is the ensemble of contractual relations embedded in the market.” (1926, 82)
Ferdinand Tonnies	“Gesellschaft, an aggregate by convention and law of nature, is to be understood as a multitude of natural and artificial individuals, the wills and spheres of whom are in many relations with and to one another, and remain nevertheless independent of one another and devoid of mutual familiar

<sup>203</sup> This is by no means an exhaustive list. Nor is it my intention to privilege these thinkers in any way. My choices here were determined by, among others, the frequency with which these names have appeared in recent scholarly discourses. In addition, I also wanted to give an indication of the conceptual diversity which was noted in the thesis.

	relationships.” (1887/2001, 78)
Alexis de Tocqueville	“Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds- religious, moral, serious, futile, extensive or restricted, enormous or diminutive...If it be proposed to advance some truth, or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the Government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.”
Antonio Gramsci	“But how will each single individual succeed in incorporating himself into the collective man, and how will educative pressure be applied to single individuals so as to obtain their consent and collaboration, turning necessity and coercion into “freedom”? Question of the “Law”: this concept will have to be extended to include those activities which are at present classified as “legally neutral”, and which belong to the domain of civil society; the latter operates without “sanctions” or compulsory “obligations”, but nevertheless exerts a collective pressure and obtains objective results in the form of an evolution of customs, ways of thinking and acting, morality, etc.” (1971, 242)
Ernest Gellner	“Civil society is a cluster of institutions and associations strong enough to prevent tyranny, but which are, none the less, entered and left freely, rather than imposed by birth or sustained by awesome ritual.” (1994, 103)
Mahmood Mamdani	“The history of civil society in colonial Africa is laced with racism. That is, as it were, its original sin, for civil society was first and foremost the society of the colons. Also, it was primarily a creation of the colonial state. The rights of free association and free publicity, and eventually of political representation, were the rights of citizens under direct rule, not of subjects indirectly ruled by a customarily organised tribal authority. Thus, whereas civil society was racialized, Native authority was tribalized.” (1996, 19)
John Keane	“Civil society is an ideal-typical category...that both describes and envisages a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected non-governmental institutions that tend to be non-violent, self-organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that ‘frame’, constrict and enable their activities.” (1998, 6)
Adam Seligman	“For civil society is, most essentially, that realm where the concrete person- that particular individual, subject to his or her own wants, caprices, and physical necessities- seeks the attainment of these “selfish” aims. It is that arena where the “burgher” as private person seeks to fulfil his or her own interests. Civil society is thus that arena where- in Hegelian terms- free, self-

	determining individuality sets forth its claims for satisfaction of its wants and personal autonomy.” (1992, 5)
Nelson Kasfir	“In its broadest reach, civil society can be conceived as including all public political non-state activity occurring between government and family...Civil society can be defined more narrowly so that it includes all kinds of public non-state activity, but only when the members of civil society are challenging the state.” (1998, 4)
Patrick Chabal	“Civil society is... a vast ensemble of constantly changing groups and individuals whose only common ground is their exclusion from the state, their consciousness of their externality and their potential opposition to the state. Those very few members of the <i>polis</i> who have no such consciousness (for the state in contemporary Africa is overwhelmingly the central political referent) are politically amorphous, though not necessarily insignificant, members of civil society.” (1992, 83)
Jean-Francois Bayart	“Civil society is not necessarily a discrete entity completely external to an equally discrete source of power...Moreover, civil society is not necessarily embodied in a single, identifiable structure. It is by its very nature plural and covers all sorts of different practices; any unity there is requires human creativity. Finally, civil society is not merely the expression of dominated groups. It encompasses not only popular modes of political action but also the claims of those socially dominant groups which are no less excluded from direct participation in political power.” (1986, 112)

## Appendix C: List of Interviewees

In the course of researching this study, I spoke to several individuals here in the United Kingdom and in Nigeria. On a few occasions, I also made use of electronic mail to correspond with identified respondents. The list presented here (following no particular order) is by no means conclusive as it omits the names of many other people with whom I had ‘conversations’ or ‘chats’ which have proved to be no less

essential in developing my understanding of the subject. All interviews in Nigeria were conducted between February-September 2003.

1. Hajiya Bilikisu Yusuf
2. Professor Adebayo Lamikanra
3. Ms Nkoyo Toyo
4. Dr. Seinde Arigbede
5. Dr. Abubakar Momoh
6. Ibrahim Muazzam
7. Dr. Charmaine Perreira
8. Dr. Jibrin Ibrahim
9. Professor Charles Taylor
10. Professor Stephen Chan
11. Professor Attahiru Jega
12. Professor Adigun Agbaje
13. Ms Titi Salaam
14. Mr Tope Toogun
15. Ms kemi Williams
16. Mr Charles Abani
17. Mr Clement Wasah
18. Mr Muiyiwa Adekeye
19. Mr Otive Igbuzor
20. Mrs Sade Taiwo
21. Mr Sola Olorunyomi
22. Mrs Grace Ebun Delano

## 23. Professor Victor Ayeni



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