

## Contested Terrains: Journalists' Emergent and Official Memories of the Struggle for Democracy in Nigeria

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*Studies of collective memories have focused on large-scale armed struggles and natural disasters ignoring, to a large extent, collective memories of unarmed resistance and civil uprisings. In the process, little is known about the nature and deployment of collective memories of such uprisings. As an attempt to address this gap, the study focused on collective memories of the struggle for democracy in Nigeria, an unarmed uprising that resulted in the arrests, incarceration, torture and even death of many citizens and journalists. From textual analysis of sixteen speeches of President Obasanjo given over a period of eight years; analysis of essays written by, 200 college students on their memories of the struggle for democracy, and analysis of interviews with the militant journalists who were in the forefront of the struggle for democracy, the paper identified convergences and divergences in the official, journalists' and emergent memories of the struggle for democracy. Whereas the three collective memories agreed that the struggle was a bitter and painful one, official memories differ from journalists' and emergent memories on the heroes, victims and villains of the struggle. Official memories also differ from others on the use to which the memories of the struggle should be put: while the official position is that the memories of the struggle should be forgotten and efforts devoted to nation building, others insist that the past should be properly remembered with blames and praises given to whomever they are due. The paper highlighted the memory contest that ensued between government on the one hand, and journalists and young citizens on the other. The paper concluded that memories of unarmed resistance and civil uprising can be as much contentious, politicised and deployed as a weapon as those of armed large-scale conflicts. There was a strong suggestion that emergent memories of the struggle are being influenced by journalists' memories.*

### Introduction

Studies of collective memories of conflicts have constellated around large-scale, prolonged conflicts with heavy human, cultural and material casualties. These include memories of the Holocaust (Carrier, 2005; Zandberg, 2010) and other genocides (Gewald, 2003; Brandstetter, 2010; Richters, 2010); colonial wars (Alexander, McGregor and Ranger, 2000; Grundlingh, 2004); civil wars (Igreja, 2008); armed rebellion and insurgencies (McEachern, 2002; Abbink, 2003), and

natural disasters (Robinson, 2009). Scholars have largely ignored the collective memories of unarmed struggles and civil uprisings against the state such as the struggle for democracy in Nigeria and in similar other countries.

Though not of a magnitude comparable to large-scale crises in terms of their courses and consequences, unarmed resistances do leave in their trails memories that are etched out "in the concrete, in

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spaces, in gestures, images and objects” just as do large-scale crises (Nora, 1989:11). Such struggles are also commemorated in national day speeches, street naming, park naming, public lectures, press releases and commemorative news reporting, and importantly in ordinary, everyday conversations. Yet, little is known about them in memory studies. With recent increase in uprisings in Africa and other parts of the world, it is important to direct attention to not just the uprisings but, years after, the collective memories of such crises. Focusing on three major contenders, this study examines the contents of the memories of the struggle for democracy fostered by a president, the militant press that was brutalised in the struggle, and young citizens in Nigeria. The journalists’ memories we described as personal memories; those of the government we described as official; while those of the citizens who had not been born in the time of the struggle we described as emergent memories. The paper concludes that memories of unarmed resistance and civil uprising can be as much contentious, politicised and deployed as a weapon as those of armed large-scale conflicts.

### **Collective Memories in Post-Conflict Societies**

Studies of collective memories have produced a vast body of literature in the course of over eight decades since Halbwachs’s pioneering work (Halbwachs, 1925). The products of these studies are too vast to sum up in this article. Therefore, in this section, I have summarised those major findings considered relevant to the focus of the current study.

Scholars often focus their studies on four major loci of collective memories: the event, the actors, significant dates, and the use of memory. The definition of the event being remembered is often a major cause for disagreement among memory stakeholders. Even with clearly historical and factual events, there are memory disagreements. For instance, the same war may be remembered as a civil war by a group, and as genocide by another.

The second locus of memory disagreement concerns the actors in the event. Questions regarding the heroes/heroines, victims and villains often give rise

to sharp differences in memories held by different groups. Often, there are rare claims to villainy but there are multiple and conflicting claims to heroism and victimhood. Victims of past conflicts often preserve a memory that both delineates who the actual victims were, as well as ensures that real or perceived non-victims do not share in this sense of victimhood. This is the case in Rwanda where in Tutsi symbolic and narrative memorials, *victims* means Tutsis, and *genocidaires* means Hutus, an equation that deliberately ignores numerous moderate Hutus that were also killed by Hutu militias and government (Brandstetter, 2010). The same obtains in South Africa where, in their commemorations, the Afrikaans lay exclusive claim to the victimhood of the 1899 Anglo-Boer war, insisting that the war did not hurt the blacks (Grundlingh, 2004).

The third locus concerns the significant dates of the events. The question may be asked: which is the significant date to remember between the day that a people were declared a colony and the day of their independence from the colonial government? The answer depends on who is doing the remembering.

The fourth prominent element in memory studies is the use to which memories are deployed. More than “subterranean currents of stories and lore” (Kössler, 2003:100) or retrospection of the past or reflection on the present, memory is a weapon deployed to political and other ends (Gewald, 2003; Igraja, 2008); memories represent a selection of the past with crucial implications for the future. It is most probably the use to which memories can be put that best explains the great intensity that attends conflicting remembrances, and why memories and remembrances often pitch one group against another.

In post-conflict societies, official and other memories often run as parallel, even opposing, forces (Cole, 1998; Werbner, 1998; Kössler, 2003) especially where communities or groups have the freedom and the resources to articulate, or at least, nurse alternative memories. Attempts by government to foster a national memory have given rise to “counter-movements” and

counter-narratives (Werbner, 1998, 1). Also, disagreement over post-conflict memories at times leads to fresh waves of hostility (van Walraven and Abbink, 2003).

In fostering an official memory of an event, the state often takes one or more of three options. First, it may construct the official memory of the conflict and seek to foster that, as the case is with Zimbabwe. The state under Robert Mugabe “sponsored a whole complex of elite memorialism” (Werbner, 1998, 8) constructing Heroes Acre where only the elite favourites of the president are buried as national heroes while many of the poor and unfavoured who fought the independence war are unremembered. Second, the state may be totally silent on the past as a way of achieving peace. This is the case in Mozambique where the government is silent on the causes, consequences, heroes and villains of the civil war leaving politicians to deploy memories of the war in verbal hostilities in the Parliament (Igreja, 2008). Third, the state may declare a rupture with the past mobilising citizens to look straight on into the future. This belongs to what Connerton (2008) describes as “forgetting that is constitutive of a new identity” and is exemplified in many nations that seek to promote constitutional liberalism (Thompson, 2009).

The foregoing underscores the multiplicity of the content, methods and motivations of collective memories in post-conflict societies. It thus explains why trans-context generalisations are difficult, even if desirable, to make. Each different context therefore merits a close examination. This is part of the justification for this study, which aims to examine the content of official and other memories of the struggle for democracy in Nigeria. In the study, we examine the different ‘definitions’ of the struggle for democracy in Nigeria; the actors depicted in the different memories; the significant dates as well as the uses of the memories. These four elements provide the analytical fulcrum for the study.

Nigeria presents a useful context for an interrogation of the manifestation of these four elements in unarmed resistance as complement to such earlier interrogations in armed struggles and separatist

movements (See Gewald, 2003; Carrier, 2005; Brandstetter, 2010; Zandberg, 2010). Between independence from colonial Britain in 1960 and 1999 when Nigeria returned to democracy, the country experienced only ten years of civilian rule sandwiched between coups and counter-coups. Between 1985 and 1999, the struggle for democracy became intense even bloody.

### **The Nigerian Press and Democratic Struggles in Nigeria**

The Nigerian Press has been prominent in the struggle for democracy since its emergence in the 1800’s. Though the *Iwe Irohin fun awon Egba ati Yoruba*, the first newspaper to be published in what is now Nigeria was primarily to promote literacy, it soon dabbled into the politics of the Anglo-Egba relations. First published in 1859, *Iwe Irohin*, though edited by a British missionary, “acted contrary to British interests” even mobilising Egba leaders to pursue alliance with France “to counter British monopoly” (Oduntan 2005: 305). The paper thus became one of the earliest nurseries for the anti-British sentiments that grew into full nationalist movements in the early 1900s.

In the colonial era, the Press was dominated by politicians who doubled as pressmen and who used newspapers as a tool in the fight for freedom (Omu, 1996). Most newspapers were linked to a political group: Herbert Macaulay had *Lagos Daily News*; Azikwe’s NCNC had *West African Pilot* which led Azikwe’s chain of six newspapers; Awolowo’s AG had *Daily Service* and later the *Nigerian Tribune*; the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) had *Nigerian Citizen*. For the most part, the newspapers were united against the colonial government. However, this unity ceased at the inception of party politics. In the 1940’s, from compatriots fighting a common enemy, *West African Pilot* and *Daily Service* became brawling opponents. This feud, according to Omu (1996), marked the beginning of a press polarized along ethnic and regional lines.

The polarization reached a critical stage with the 1959 federal elections (Ekpu, 2005). During the



election campaigns, AG promised to create states if it won, NPC opposed that while NCNC sat on the fence. Each of the Tribune, the Citizen and the Pilot made these positions their agenda and defended them. After the elections the NPC and the NCNC decided to work together, the Citizen and the Pilot teamed up and the Tribune remained in opposition. The press had no ideology of its own; it depends solely on whatever stand the proprietors took. Ironically, the situation got better during military rules, as the press united against the military in most cases. Analysts have observed that with each civilian administration, newspapers reverted to their party and regional enclaves.

In the vanguard of the pressure for a return to democracy was the press. Several civil society organisations and organised labour played prominent roles as well. In response, the military arrested, detained and tortured many journalists and activists. Some journalists were also killed. The military government proscribed many newspaper houses, and security agents seized and destroyed a total of about 300,000 copies of editions of critical newspapers (Olorunyomi, 1998; Malaolu, 2005; Olukotun, 2005; Adebani, 2008; Ojebode, 2011).

In spite of this ruthless response, the demand for democratic rule increased forcing the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida to organise an election in 1993. The presidential election which held on June 12, 1993, was described as the freest in Nigerian history and was believed to have been overwhelmingly won by Mr M. K. O. Abiola (ASC, 1994). The government, however, annulled the election without offering a reason. This was followed by widespread riot. June 12, the date of the election, became a symbolic rallying point among pro-democracy groups. The struggle for democracy continued and got even more intense under General Sani Abacha who was known to be more ruthless than his predecessors in office.

On May 29, 1999, following his victory in another election, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was sworn in as the President. Obasanjo had been a military ruler, then a critic of military rulers. His latter role had landed

him in jail when General Abacha was the Head of State. From 1999 to, 2007, the government of Chief Obasanjo, the press and the opposition variously commemorated that struggle for democracy. This study examines the contents of these memories focusing on the four elemental foci of collective memory studies identified from literature.

### Methodology

The study combined interviews with qualitative textual analysis. Through purposive sampling, we conducted interviews with nine of the former militant journalists. Among these were editor and co-founder of *Tell*, Dare Babarinsa; his former assistant editor, George Mbah; former Kaduna Bureau chief, Danlami Nmodu, and former Kano correspondent, Osa Director. Others were Sunday Dare, associate editor of *Tempo*; Dapo Olorunyomi, founding editor of *The News* and Goodluck Ebelo, one of those younger reporters that stuck around and kept *Tempo* going when nearly all the founders were in either jail or exile. We also interviewed Niran Malaolu and Lanre Arogundade. Malaolu was founding editor of *This Day* and was editor of *Diet* when he was jailed for complicity in a coup; Arogundade led the Nigerian Union of Journalists (Lagos Chapel) in the days of Abacha. These represented the journalists that kept up the heat on the military in the time of the struggle and experienced military violence.

We asked journalists to relive their experiences of the struggle for democracy. We asked them to also mention significant dates and people in that struggle. Questions proceeded from the four elemental foci identified earlier: the event, actors, dates and 'where do we go from here'—the use of memory. Open-ended questions were asked. On the average, each interview lasted about sixty minutes.

We analysed the Democracy Day and Independence Day speeches of President Olusegun Obasanjo during the first eight years of democratic rule: 1999 - 2003. We also collected 200 essays from students of four Nigerian higher institutions located in different geopolitical zones in the country<sup>1</sup>. The students were asked



to write what they remembered about the struggle for democracy in Nigeria. They were free to write anonymously or to include their names or identity number. We chose college students because they did not experience the struggle first hand. What they wrote could then be “their memory” gathered from diverse available sources. It is also a window to what will be left in the minds of the citizens in future. This is why we described their memory as “emergent memories”. The analysis of both the speeches and the essays was guided by those elemental foci earlier stated. These thus became the categories of our analysis. The presentation that follows is organised around these elemental foci which are subsumed under two major divisions: convergences and divergences in the personal, emergent and official memories.

### **Convergences: A Season of Pain and Suffering**

The memories of the struggle for democracy by President Obasanjo, the press and young citizens converge around the painfulness of the struggle. It was a struggle that brought pain and suffering to all Nigerians. In his inaugural address in 1999, President Obasanjo noted that Nigeria went through a period of “torture and death” as a result of “state terrorism and tyranny”. He also spent time on the misrule, corruption and ineptitude that characterised the government of the transition period. He picked this theme up the following year in his Democracy Day address, in a longer lament:

*The battle to restore democracy was a hard one... Many lives were lost... Many more were injured through incarceration and other forms of brutality that are painful to recall. Yet many more suffered psychologically as they had to escape from their own fatherland, leaving behind loved ones and seeking refuge in strange lands and among strange people*  
(Obasanjo, 2000a)

In 2002, he noted that in the past, many Nigerians died for democracy. However, of the eight Democracy Day

addresses presented by the President, these were the only three speeches in which he made direct references to the struggle for democracy. Great space is taken up by his description of the nation’s progress, the fight against corruption and the need for citizens to support government. By 2000, however, the President had begun to introduce a twist to his use of the word ‘struggle’. He says, in his, 2000 Independence Day address:

We have only begun the struggle  
[against poverty, corruption etc].  
The coming years are fraught with  
challenges (Obasanjo, 2000b).

This introduction of a new ‘struggle’ seemed to cast a shadow on the old “hackneyed” struggle for democracy.

The militant journalists whom we interviewed held sad memories of the pains and suffering of the period of the struggle. They gave graphic details of their sufferings and those of the citizens during the struggle. Stories of forceful abduction by the government security agents, torture and murder were related. Niran Malaolu said,

For 147 days I was not allowed to have a bath, and I was beaten everyday [Rolling up his trousers, he pointed at his legs]. These are wounds...all these... [I got] from being beaten...all because I stood for democracy and justice.

The experience was about the same for all of them. Osa Director related how he was abducted and chained in Kano and kept in prison for months. Danlami Nmodu related the uncertainties of the time: “as [a]

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<sup>3</sup>Nigeria is zoned into six geo-political entities: North Central; North East; North West; South East; South South, and South West. Essays were collected from Kano State Polytechnic, Kano (North West); University of Jos, Jos (North Central); Delta State University, Abraka (South South) and University of Ibadan (South West). Author is grateful to those who assisted in collecting the essays and to the students: David Ayandele (Kano); Danladi Galadima (Jos); Patrick Ijeh (Abraka) and B. R. Ojebuyi (Ibadan).



militant journalist then, if you went out from your family, it was just safe to assume that you would not return home". The struggle was "prolonged, painful, painful beyond words" Dapo Olorunyomi said.

The journalists also spoke about the suffering of the general populace. The civilian populace was being brutalised by the military; there was no freedom of speech, and people could not even gather to discuss freely. Dare Babarinsa said,

*The military excesses against the unarmed people of the country, the abduction, sheer cruelty visited on people was such that men and women of conscience, even when they thought they were relatively beyond the tentacles of the military, could not just keep quiet. And many journalists were among these people of conscience.*

George Mbah who spent over three years in prison over a phantom coup plot could not put his suffering in words. To put such experiences into words was impossible (yet). Rather, he spoke about the sufferings of the "helpless masses under Abacha".

All the 200 contributors of the essays described the period of the struggle as a time of pain and suffering for Nigerians. One wrote:

The sight of the "oppressed creatures", bruised individuals, people who had resigned to fate, whose muscles had been thickened against the autocratic rule of the military, but whose painful silent cry was noised everywhere is what come to mind whenever I think of the struggle for democracy from 1985 – 1999 (Ibadan 01).

Another described the period as one "characterised by all manners of evil and criminal activities...and

nobody dared talk about him (Abacha) in public else, the person would be long dead" (Jos, 01).

Many gave further details of the civic disturbances that arose after the annulment of the June 12 election and the inter-ethnic twists that resurged: "Yoruba people and Ibo people were killed in the North; Hausa people were slaughtered in the West" (Kano, 09)

From the foregoing, there appears to be remarkable convergence among the memories of the Press, the President and citizens with reference to the painfulness of the struggle for democracy in Nigeria. However, as further analyses showed, this appeared to be just how far the convergence went.

### **Divergences**

There is divergence between the official memories on the one hand, and the personal memories of the journalists and emergent memories on the other, over significant dates and significant actors in the struggle for democracy in Nigeria.

#### ***The Dates: June 12 versus May 29***

In all his Democracy Day and Independence Day speeches, President Obasanjo did not mention the date "June 12". The only significant day for him was May 29, the day Nigeria returned to democracy. In his first inaugural address, he declared:

The official decision to declare May 29 Democracy Day is partly intended to be some of our tribute to those who sacrificed their lives so that Nigeria would see democracy (Obasanjo 1999)

Three years later, commenting on the report of the Human Rights Violation Investigation Commission (HRVIC) known as the Oputa Panel, named after its chairman, he decreed:

... May 29 of each year will henceforth be Democracy and Human Rights Day. I believe this annual reminder will enhance the attention given to

human rights. It will still remain a day of thanksgiving, reflection and celebration. (Obasanjo, 2002a)

On the contrary, references to the June 12, 1993 elections ran through nearly all of the essays. "The struggle for democracy reached a strong climax with the June 12, 1993 elections" (Abraka, 44). "...the historic June 12, 1993 elections which most observers deemed to be Nigeria's fairest and freest...MKO Abiola won" (Kano, 11). "On June 12, that year, Nigerians showed the military that they wanted democracy" (Ibadan, 05). "People went mad when that June 12 [election] was annulled. That was why Nigerians said it is [was] fight till finish to push out the soldiers" (Jos, 17). But there were also ample references to May 29, 1999 as the day "Nigerians finally realised their dreams" (Jos, 17). It was the date that "the cumulative misrule of the generals coupled with local and international hostility persuaded them to surrender to democracy" (Ibadan, 12).

When journalists spoke of significant dates, they also took a bifocal approach. They referred to June 12 as the date that the nation took a major decision, "the day that Nigerians spoke with one voice in favour of democracy forgetting their ethnicity, religion and every other thing" said Niran Malaolu. Yet, May 29, 1999 is important for it marked, in the words of Osa Director, "the end of all assault occasioned by military dictatorship".

To celebrate May 29, and be silent on June 12 is to insult the popular conscience and collective memory of the entire nation. How could there have been a May 29 if there was no June 12? If Nigerians didn't set out on a journey, how could they have arrived there? asked Lanre Arogundade.

The journalists showed amazement, even anger, at the government's refusal to recognise June 12 as a

significant day and to honour, post-mortem, the winner of the June 12 president election. Osa Director thought,

The president seems to have sworn never to pronounce the words 'June' and '12' in his entire life. He doesn't even want to mention it. Yet it was in the spirit of June 12 that Nigerians fought for his release when Abacha jailed him.

They thought that President Obasanjo hated the mention of June 12 because that election was more clean and peaceful than the one that brought him in as president in 1999. "So it's like a contest, and Obasanjo does not like to hear that someone's thing is better than his own" (Danlami Nmodu).

#### *Actors: Heroes, Martyrs and Perpetrators*

The official memories of the struggle for democracy did not name specific victims or villains of the struggle. In his inaugural address of, 29 May 1999, President Obasanjo acknowledged the contributions of "the great and gallant Nigerians who lost their lives in the cause of the struggle for liberty, democracy and good governance...friends of Nigeria in many lands...Nigerians living in foreign lands...home-based Nigerians". The only specific name mentioned in this regard was that of General Abubakar, the military ruler that organised the transition programme. The Nigerian press was not mentioned.

The following year, the President made similar reference to these unnamed heroes "who sacrificed their lives". In his Independence Day address of 2000, the President gave a long list of distinguished Nigerians and heroes but they were soldiers, politicians, businessmen, literary artists. These were mentioned in connection to nation building in the pre- and post-independence era. On that list was Chief M. K. O Abiola who got mentioned not for his role in the struggle for democracy but as one of those "younger leaders who have gone to the great beyond"; Wole Soyinka was also mentioned, again not for his part in the struggle for democracy, but for being one of those "literary men"



who “rose to lofty eminence in their respective specialities” (Obasanjo, 2000b).

The President then began what could have been a list of pro-democracy heroes. “This nation still has people whose very names are synonymous with the struggle for freedom, liberty, human rights and good governance”, he said, but he did not give examples of such people. In the end, he foreclosed any possibility of naming the heroes of the struggle for democracy in Nigeria in these words: “In other words, the real hero is the ordinary Nigerian, alive or dead” (Obasanjo, 2000b).

On the contrary, the emergent memories are filled with names of those who actively participated in the struggle for democracy. Most of these heroes are also described as victims. Each of the, 200 essays mentioned the Nigerian press as both hero and victim of the struggle for democracy in Nigeria: A contributor from Jos writes, “the press especially takes [deserves?] the highest praise as it had to practise guerrilla journalism (hide and seek) to enlighten the populace on the need for democracy” (Jos, 35). Emphasising the sufferings that the journalists went through, another from Ibadan, wrote: “...prisons were the second home of journalists—many of them were jailed, maimed and killed” (Ibadan, 34). And yet another wrote:

I remember how many faithful journalists who would not sacrifice the integrity of their profession on the altar of “corrupt and autocratic” rule of the military perished under guerrilla journalism. Many journalists were tortured, humiliated, imprisoned or even killed. These people laid down their lives...to bring democracy. I am persuaded that the role journalists played in the struggle for democracy in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasised (Ibadan, 01).

It is noteworthy that many contributors noted that not all the journalists of the time made these sacrifices. The heroes were those “who would not sacrifice the

integrity of their profession...” A contributor from Jos drew the line between journalists “who were used for both championing the cause of the military and [those used for championing] the cause of democracy”. The entire tribe of journalists was not made of heroes only. Another contributor noted that “many newspapers were established by some Nigerians to support the military but there were many genuine journalists ready to die for democracy” (Abraka, 10).

Hero-organisations regularly mentioned by the young citizens were the National Democracy Coalition (NADECO), labour unions, tanker drivers union, pro-democracy groups, market women association, university staff unions, student unions, and motor park leaders. These had mobilised their members to take part in the series of protests, boycotts, sit-ins and confrontations that made it difficult for the military to ignore citizens’ quest for democracy.

Individual heroes were many. Frequently mentioned names were Gani Fawehinmi, Abraham Adesanya, Arthur Nwankwo, Wole Soyinka, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Beko Ransome-Kuti, Ken Saro Wiwa, Olusegun Obasanjo, Bola Ige, Shehu Musa Yar’Adua, Abubakar Umar, M. K. O Abiola, Kudirat Abiola, Dele Giwa and Anthony Enahoro.

However, villains were few. The military, as an institution, was portrayed as the major villain in the struggle for democracy for “not allowing democracy to take roots” (Kano 16), and “for prolonging their stay in power, accumulating wealth and spreading corruption which they said was the reason why they initially overthrew the politicians” (Abraka, 24), and for being “generally unfavourable to Nigerians” (Kano, 12). Emphasis was stronger however on individual villains.

Sani Abacha was by far the most regularly mentioned person who inflicted the greatest pain on pro-democracy activists and the nation.

Abacha...bared his fangs. He assembled a notorious gang of personal security made up killers and sadists. He killed his opponents and

drove political activists to exile...even Pope John Paul failed to persuade insensitive Abacha to slow down. He insulted even Mandela and made Nigeria to miss (hosting) 1996 Nations' Cup...General Yar'Adua ended up dying in Abacha's 'gulag' (Ibadan, 12)

Another wrote, "when Abacha died, I knew our very own enemy had kicked the bucket" (Ibadan, 17). Ibrahim Babangida's name followed that of Abacha for persecuting the press, scuttling the democratic process and victimising the opponents. Many still connected the death of magazine editor, Dele Giwa, to Babangida's machinations.

Babangida was a pain without release, freedom in chains... He took us through many political summersaults... he clamped politicians and finally annulled Nigeria's adjudged freest election on June 12, 1993 starting a process that consumed the winner, M. K. O. Abiola (Ibadan, 15).

Others noted as causes of pain and suffering included "Alhaji Rafindadi, a notorious head of the National Security Organisation under Buhari and Idiagbon" (Ibadan, 27), and "General Buhari who left us a copyright of draconian decrees in a sadistic pattern..." (Jos, 12).

When the journalists recounted their experiences, they mentioned several people who did heroic deeds. We categorised these into four: Nigerian citizens whom they often referred to as "the poor masses"; pro-democracy activists and organisations (local and foreign); fellow militant journalists and support staff in media organisations; and whistleblowers within the military. Sunday Dare observed that "for over ten years, the masses held out. They refused to be intimidated. Those are the heroes".

Names of pro-democracy activists listed by the journalists were the same names listed by the contributors (already discussed). The interviewees,

however, did not name Olusegun Obasanjo as a hero but they added names of international organisations and that of the then American Ambassador to Nigeria, Mr Walter Carrington. They declared that Mr Carrington helped those fleeing from "Abacha's sharpshooters" and risked his life by attending "public meetings of pro-democracy groups and even funerals of those shot by the military".

The journalists also added a crucial set of heroes: whistleblowers within the military. Ebelo Goodluck said,

we always had information from the few progressives within the military. For instance, we knew Abacha would soon die. These ones took very great risks, you know. They would have been instantly killed if detected.

Danlami Nmodu attributed the success of underground journalism partly to assistance from these whistleblowers.

Many times, not all the times, they warned us, saying they've found out where you are hiding o. They are on their way to get you. Even, at a point, they told Dapo to leave the country because his death warrant had been signed.

Villains remembered by the journalists included the military as an institution: "If the soldiers had left us alone since the time of Shagari, we would have corrected most of the errors in the system" (Niran Malaolu). Others were individuals most of whom were also named by essay contributors. A name that recurred and was peculiar to the journalists' list of villains was Zakari Biu described as "the torture expert in the days of Abacha, one of those who stood firmly against us and against democracy, and who jailed Obasanjo" (Dare Babarinsa).

### ***What is Next?***

Remembering is hardly an end in itself; often, it is a prelude to action or inaction. This section of the paper deals with the use to which the memories of the struggle

for democracy were supposed to be deployed. In his Democracy Day address of May 29, 2002, President Obasanjo declared:

the Government is happy to accept the recommendation of the [Human Rights Violation Investigation] Commission in respect of concrete efforts at immortalising our heroes and heroines (Obasanjo, 2002a)

but he did not mention these heroes and heroines. Neither did he mention how these people would be immortalised beyond declaring May 29 “Democracy and Human Rights Day...a day of thanksgiving, reflection and celebration”. Rather, as he did in previous addresses and the ones that followed, he spent time on the urgent need to “put the unsavoury past behind us” (Obasanjo, 2000a) and “move forward resolutely and together, leaving the vexations and frustrations of the past behind us” (Obasanjo, 2002a). This is the new, current and urgent struggle, making “Nigeria a country ... which in future we can all be proud of” (Obasanjo, 2000b).

While strongly supporting the urgent need to move the country forward, the journalists and some of the young citizens emphasised the need to properly commemorate the struggle and name heroes of the struggle. Dare Babarinsa asked, “How many of those

who put their lives on the line, who were martyred for the sake of democracy, have been given national honours?” And Osa Director explained further,

It is not that we want honours but can’t government properly document history? Even if it is a simple interactive session where the government says ‘gentlemen, we appreciate your role in getting us to where we are’. That’s all.

Many of the contributors to the essays thought the heroes of the struggle for democracy should be properly remembered. One wrote:

Today, the dividends of democracy are enjoyed nationwide, but that should not be without respect to the spilled blood of our slain and poisoned heroes. Democracy should be celebrated with those that lost their lives in the 1993 struggle in mind (Jos, 30).

Given the point that these contributors had mentioned the heroes and martyrs of the struggle, it is clear that they were not referring to the “ordinary Nigerian” as the one to be remembered.

We now summarise the foregoing “memoryscape” in the following table:

	<b>Official Memories</b>	<b>Journalists’ Memories</b>	<b>Citizens’ Memories</b>
<b>Nature of the Event</b>	(Muted) Pain, suffering, horror	Pain, suffering, horror	Pain, suffering, horror
<b>Significant date</b>	May 29, 1999	June 12, 1993	June 12, 1993
<b>Actors: Heroes and Martyrs</b>	The ordinary Nigerian	Specific members of pro-democracy groups	The press; specific members of the pro-democracy groups
<b>Actors: Villains</b>	Wicked people/wicked leaders	The military, Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha,	The military, Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha,



		their soldiers	their soldiers
<b>Next line?</b>	'We must move forward; leave the past behind'	Proper remembrance and commemoration needed	Proper remembrance and commemoration needed

Memories of the struggle held by the militant journalists were the most expansive, followed by those held by the citizens. Official memories are silent on names of actors and victims though one of the victims was now the president. All remembered the era as a time of horror and suffering.

### **The Context of the Contest**

The foregoing raises a number of questions: why would the official memories omit the names of heroes and perpetrators of a struggle in which the president himself was a victim? What about June 12 which attracts journalists and citizens but repels the president? How do we interpret the official oeuvres in the context of memory studies?

President Obasanjo's refusal to mention heroes of the struggle for democracy is a reflection of decades of animosity between him and the press, and between him and some leaders of the pro-democracy movement. President Obasanjo's disdain for the press, which dated back to the 1970s when he was Head of State, has been quite overtly expressed. He banned 'journalists and dogs' from his residence and proudly announced that he did not read Nigerian newspapers because 'they write nonsense ... [and are] always abusing me' (Abati, 2007, 42; Andrews, 2007). This disdain can be found in many of his public outbursts against journalists, such as: "You people in the press, you must be deliberately ignorant, misinformed, uneducated or mischievous" (Abati, 2011). The fact that the press fought for his deliverance from incarceration and possible execution by Abacha did not smoothen the relationship.

Not only the press, but also many of the pro-democracy activists were not Obasanjo's friends.

Importantly, the pro-democracy groups did not support his candidacy for presidency in 1999. The groups wanted a sovereign national conference, not an election. When a section of that group decided to venture into politics, they did not support Obasanjo whom they accused of making irreverent comments about their ideological and political progenitor, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, back in the 1980s. More importantly, Chief Obasanjo had distanced himself from the pro-democracy groups in the period of the struggle. Therefore, it could be said that the press and the pro-democracy groups fought against Obasanjo's incarceration and possible execution by Abacha based on principle, not on relationship.

But there was a real sense in which fighting for Obasanjo also helped the case of the pro-democracy groups by increasing the international sympathy and support which they already had. It was certainly advantageous to have on the list of those one is defending a former Head of State who enjoyed some global honour for handing over power to civilians voluntarily in 1979. Therefore, in the memory contention that ensued, while the press especially loves to remind President Obasanjo that they saved him from Abacha's gallows, he harshly treats them as opportunists who capitalised on his fame to garner international sympathy and support. He, therefore, would rather not name any heroes than to name the press and the pro-democracy groups as heroes of the struggle for democracy.

President Obasanjo's silence on June 12 elections is also a part of the memory contest. Nigerians still speak of that election as the "freest and fairest" in the history of Nigeria. This is in sharp contrast to the 1999 elections that brought Obasanjo in, or the 2003 elections that gave him a second term. The press and

citizens often put this contrast in bold font. Therefore, if President Obasanjo commemorated June 12, that would mean accepting that he rode to the presidency and remained there on the wings of an inferior even fraudulent electoral exercise. That explains the ascendance given to May 29 as democracy day, the day that the President was sworn in.

In addition to this is the point that by 1999, June 12 had come to be seen as a South-West, Yoruba affair. Obasanjo, though a Yoruba man, won the 1999 elections as a result of the support from the northern part of the country; he lost in the Yoruba states. As an acclaimed de-tribalised Nigerian, and as a show of loyalty to the northern supporters, it was in his interest to be silent on June 12. Also, flagging the June 12 card would be a costly error that would ruin his second-term chances. In fact, the only way to retain northern acceptance was to be as anti-June 12 as he possibly could be.

In setting up an official memory of the struggle for democracy that could support his political ambitions, President Obasanjo deployed three tactics. First is to set up an imaginary superhero, the “ordinary Nigerian” as the hero of the struggle for democracy. In Nigeria, the expression “ordinary Nigerian” or “average Nigerian” is a politicised expression that stands for the unknown and for every Nigerian. It conjures the image of a poor person who has been through abuses and misrule by corrupt politicians and the elite. This expression invokes the compassion of everyone such that whoever is said to be competing with or standing against the interests of the “ordinary Nigerian” is everyone’s enemy. By setting the “average Nigerian” up as the hero, the President makes it insensible for anyone to desire to be co-named as the hero. The “ordinary Nigerian” thus became a blackmail tool.

Second is to fabricate an alternative, even more urgent and current struggle: the struggle against poverty, illiteracy, hunger and many more. With more than half of the population living below poverty line, a high unemployment rate (19.7%), and 43% adult illiteracy in English (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011), the government truly had an urgent job at hand. But this

could hardly be the reason for the presidential amnesia. Rather, by naming his administrative efforts as a ‘struggle’ and foregrounding that over all else, President Obasanjo seeks to neutralise the importance of the ‘struggle for democracy’ which is rather old and does not put bread on the table. This is similar to what Grundlingh (2008) observed in South Africa with reference to black’s claim to victimhood in the Anglo-Boer war, where, by setting up blacks as co-victims of British ruthlessness in that war, President Thabo Mbeki sought to neutralise Afrikaans’ exclusive claim to victimhood.

Third is to take a long jump backwards to the post-independence era to honour the “founding fathers of the nation” in his speeches. In the usual Nigerian balancing act, he ensures that these post-independence names are drawn from across ethnic and religious zones in Nigeria even when that meant including some relatively unknown ‘fathers’ of the nation.

Journalists’ memories are personal and involved. They are based on personally experienced difficulties in which individuals played symbolic roles as heroes, villains and victims. The experience of pain and suffering is too personal and the relics are too many and too real to be glossed over in the interest of nation building. Both the experiences and the individuals involved in the story stand out in the memory landscape.

The memories held by the press and young citizens are largely similar, which sets up the official memory as indeed a minority one. Many of the citizens noted that they were either not yet born or too young to remember what happened in the struggle. Eye-witnesses (“When I was”) were rather few. Many gave agency to “my parents”, “my auntie”. Many more however gave agency to the press: “I read in the papers”; “As we read in the papers...” It is impossible to establish hard causality here but it is hardly reasonable to underestimate the role of the press in fostering the memories that these citizens reported. “Collective memory making is a ritual of the press that has been well documented by scholars of journalism”

(Robinson, 2009:236; see also Zelizer, 2008; Zandberg, 2010).

It is a bit counter-intuitive that youths who are known to be pro-innovation and forward looking want the past to be properly commemorated. This can be understood within the context of the overall attitude of Nigerian youths to the Nigerian political leadership. Young people in Nigeria are generally dissatisfied with the performances and conduct of politicians and public officials. There is the general belief that the Nigeria of their dreams was lost somewhere in the past with the annulment of the June 12 election.

It is important to note that there is a fragment of opposition politicians who came out of the pro-democracy groups that opposed the military government who now share elements of the counter-official memories of the journalists and the emergent memories of the young people. Within their jurisdictions, these political leaders commemorate elements of those collective memories such as celebrating June 12, and honouring heroes of the struggle for democracy. These annual remembrances of the dates and heroes that the federal government of Chief Obasanjo ignored may be part of the reason for the counter-official nature of the emergent memories, and serves to strengthen journalists' collective memories of the struggle.

### Conclusion

The official memories of the struggle for democracy in Nigeria differ remarkably from the personal memories held by the militant journalists that actively participated in the struggle, and the emergent memories held by young Nigerians. The President's silence on the date and heroes and perpetrators in that struggle is a political tool deployed to ensure his victories in elections, and also a tool for personal vendetta. In silencing the unofficial memories of the struggle, the president deployed strategies that are apparently noble but in effect a blackmail. In spite of these, the press seems to be successful in moulding the memories of the struggle held by citizens.

Whether it is a large-scale crisis involving cataclysmic losses such as the Holocaust and genocides, or whether it is unarmed uprisings involving parties with grossly asymmetric military prowess, memories of a crisis will always be contested and instrumentalized. Propelled by forces specific to their locality, memories will also always wear unique complexions.

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