BEYOND CORRUPTION: ASSESSING THE ORGANIZATIONAL POTENTIAL IN ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES OF STRUGGLE IN NIGERIA

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BEYOND CORRUPTION: ASSESSING THE ORGANIZATIONAL POTENTIAL IN
ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES OF STRUGGLE IN NIGERIA

by

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A DISSERTATION

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Despite decades of initiatives and emphasis on combatting corruption in Nigeria, systemic social change has remained elusive. I argue that the discourse of corruption itself should be called into question, specifically how it constrains possibilities for positive identity construction and social change organizing. This dissertation endeavors to disrupt the dominant discourse of corruption by uncovering alternative discourses of socioeconomic struggle that emerge from lived experience. I turned to the rich organizational landscape of Nigeria’s informal economy, performing a critical communicational phenomenology of the work lives of urban roadside food traders in Lagos who embody socio-economic struggle. The ultimate goal was to discover organizational potential for social change in the lived experience of socioeconomic struggle.

I interviewed 19 roadside food traders in the Ajah-Lekki area of the city focusing on their lived experience and negotiations of socioeconomic struggle. In line with phenomenological inquiry, my overarching question was, “What is it like to be a Lagos roadside food trader?” I characterize the lives of the traders as an experience of “bounded entrepreneurship”, comprised of five essential and
intertwined layers of struggle: 1) varying degrees of struggle for space, 2) struggle within and with place, 3) relational struggle 4) negotiating a lack of resources, and 5) emphasis on the divine as a resource. I conclude by discussing the organizational potential present in the traders’ bounded entrepreneurship.
For God, Family, and Country.
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CHAPTER ONE

Nigeria has many thoughtful men and women of conscience, a large number of talented people. Why is it then that all these patriots make so little impact on the life of our nation? Why is it that our corruption, gross inequities, our noisy vulgarity, our selfishness, our ineptitude seem so much stronger than the good influences at work in our society? Why do the good among us seem so helpless while the worst are full of vile energy?

-Chinua Achebe, *the Trouble with Nigeria*, 1983

My scholarly fascination with corruption began with a simple question posed in a rhetorical criticism course: “Does Nigeria have any iconic images that underwrite political life?” None readily came to mind. At my obvious confusion, the professor followed up with another question: “If there aren’t any iconic images, what symbols take their place?” To my surprise, all I could think of was corruption. Over the next few weeks, I became increasingly aware of the dominance of corruption in my political consciousness and lived experience as a Nigerian.

My earliest memory of whole-heartedly engaging in political discourse is inventing a cynical rhyme out of a candidate’s last name during Nigeria’s 1993 presidential campaigns with my primary school comrades. Our imaginative, recently literate seven-year old minds dubbed candidate Bashir Tofa “Thief, Olé, 419, Armed Robber”.¹ Before we understood the lofty political ideal of democracy, my friends and I learned how to discern if the ice-cream man was trying to cheat us. In secondary school, we gossiped about fellow students who were miraculously promoted to the next class even though they had failed their examinations. As we

¹*Olé* is the Yoruba term for thief; 419 is a term often used to describe fraudulent behavior.
prepared for university entrance exams, we de-stressed by telling humorous stories about *expo*\(^2\) gone wrong. I distinctly remember the rage I felt when a friend questioned my sister’s stellar performance on her final exams by asking surreptitiously, “Did she do it by herself?” I recall watching my father deftly talk his way out of giving an extortionist policeman a bribe at a hastily erected checkpoint, just outside our neighborhood. For three years, I walked by a boy in the halls of my secondary school who was given the full answers to our entrance examination by the proctor (who advised me to get in on the action). I later “learned” that these experiences were called corruption.

The dominant discourse of corruption in Nigeria is a composite of constructions of experiences such as these narrated through personal accounts, jokes, cartoons, public complaint, prose, poetry, and protest. This discourse is not only restricted to the political realm and the marketplace, but cuts across multiple spheres of daily life. At the global level, unfavorable scores on global corruption measures, 20/20 reports on Nigerian Internet scammers, and neocolonialist discourses about the woes of the maladjusted African state all contribute to this dominant discourse and the overall picture is rather grim. This preoccupation with corruption is by no means unique to the African context. As Bratsis (2003) asserts, “It would seem that there is hardly any contemporary political tendency that does not contain some form of anti-corruption agenda” (p. 9). Lucy Koechlin (2013) affirms this view, stating:

\(^{2}\) Answers to exams purchased through back channels
In the past two decades, a general consensus has emerged condemning corruption as one of the most damaging factors for development. Corruption is seen to undermine the cohesion and strength of whole societies, to threaten precarious economic and social progress made in developing countries, and to increase the vulnerability of lives and livelihoods of the poor. What is new is not only the wave of concern, but that the condemnation of corruption transcends all boundaries and sectors. The battle cry to “combat corruption” is sounded by allies as well as formerly bitterly opposed combatants, from NGO activists to grassroots movements, to CEOs of multinational enterprises and heads of government, from powerful high income OECD countries to conflict and poverty-ridden Southern countries.

(p. 1)

However, in Nigeria, the anti-corruption agenda takes on a markedly extreme form in that the country’s past, present and future are incessantly tied to corruption. Increased global fixation on Nigeria, partly due to its staggering economic growth and security issues, has only served to intensify the anti-corruption crusade. Though it is known for its immense oil wealth, investors are taking note of Nigeria’s exploding service sector, which has doubled in contributions to national GDP (World Bank, 2014). Nigeria was crowned an N-11 nation, i.e. the next set of large population countries apart from Brazil, Russia, India, and China that have the capacity to rival G7 nations in terms of new economic growth (Goldman Sachs, 2007), and based on rebased GDP figures, Nigeria has surpassed South Africa as
Africa’s largest economy (Economist, 2014). These developments exist side by side with Nigeria’s branding as the quintessence of the “resource curse” since its immense wealth and natural resources have not resulted in sustainable socio-economic growth and development (Papyrakis & Gerlagh, 2004; Robinson, Torvik & Verdier, 2006). Ironically, hyper-awareness of corruption in Nigeria has not yielded significant insight into how to organize for social change, and anti-corruption organizing is rife with challenges.

**Complicating Corruption**

International organizations such as Transparency International (TI), the World Bank (WB), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have worked for decades ostensibly to combat corruption due to its deleterious effects on development. Specifically, corruption functions as an obstacle to democratization, depletes national wealth, corrodes public trust in social institutions, and degrades the environment (TI, 2015). Each of these organizations in the course of achieving their respective missions to “stop corruption and promote transparency, accountability, and integrity…” (TI, 2011), “end extreme poverty within a generation and boost shared prosperity” (World Bank, 2014), and “help countries attract and use aid effectively” (UNDP, 2014), has been involved with anti-corruption action in varying degrees. TI is the world’s foremost anti-corruption non-governmental organization (NGO) producing well publicized instruments such as the corruption perceptions index (CPI); the World Bank and UNDP function more indirectly,
viewing corruption as one of many factors that must be confronted in the accomplishment of larger development goals such as poverty eradication.

“Though strides have been made in the strengthening of state capacity and accountability worldwide, there is little evidence that these efforts have had a significant aggregate or lasting impact on reducing corruption overall” (World Bank, 2007, p. 40). “The history of anti-corruption efforts is filled with programs that succeeded at first only to be undermined by subsequent governments and political crises later” (UNDP, 2004, p. 8-9). In the last fifteen years many countries with widespread corruption have initiated anti-corruption reforms with support from the international community (Persson, Rothstein & Teorell, 2013). “However, when they are considered together, contemporary anti-corruption reforms have a dull track record when it comes to preventing the spread of corruption”(Persson et al., 2013, p. 454).

At the national level, Nigeria’s triumphant return to democracy under the leadership of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 marked a new wave of government directed anti-corruption action; an anti-corruption bill passed in 2000 brought to life the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) followed by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) (Olu-Olu, 2006). The activities of these agencies have unfortunately been hampered by their dependence on the government for funding and support. For instance, EFCC chairman Nuhu Ribadu in 2007 was openly dismissed after bringing charges against high level politicians, and Nigeria’s current President Goodluck
Jonathan issued a pardon to his former boss, ex-governor of Bayelsa State Diepreye Alamieyeseigha who pled guilty to embezzlement (Ibukun, 2014). Why is systemic corruption so difficult to disrupt? For decades, social science scholars have attempted to tackle a question fundamental to evaluating corruption and anti-corruption action, which is how to define and conceptualize corruption in the first place.

Joseph Nye (1967) defines corruption as “a behavior that deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain private-regarding influence” (p. 419). Nye’s (1967) highly influential and widely cited definition is echoed in many contemporary definitions of corruption which usually emphasize the misuse of public resources for private advantage, and assume a clear distinction between the private and public domain (Bratsis, 2003). Another common critique is that most contemporary top-down, anti-corruption reforms and policies are informed by principal-agent models which assume the presence of “principled principals” who are willing to hold corrupt agents accountable (Persson, et al., 2013, p. 450). This framework is less useful in settings where corruption is so prevalent that social actors at all levels of society are wittingly and unwittingly implicated in corrupt practices. For instance, as Smith (2008) notes, ordinary Nigerians are paradoxically active participants in the social reproduction of corruption even as they are also its primary victims and critics. Thus, the line between victim and violator is blurred. A central challenge here is
how to capture the complex ways corruption operates in contexts where it is the rule rather than the exception.

Another problem is with an excessive concern with the “illegality of practices” (Sissener, 2001, p. 1) which might fail to capture how “people’s own assessments of courses of action do not arise from a set of culturally universal, invariable norms that help to decide if certain actions are to be classified as corrupt or not” (p. 2). In their daily lives, people employ different approaches to evaluating different courses of action based on the legal standards, social norms, and the cultural and infrastructural constraints of their society. “Beyond declarations of principle, pathetic or exasperated acknowledgements and moralistic condemnations, the social mechanisms of corruption are scarcely explored, nor are its processes of legitimation seen from the actors’ point of view” (De Sardan, 1999, p. 25). While it is vital to scrutinize systems of accountability and transparency at the state level, and explore how corruption is related to key societal issues such as governance, democracy and economic development, it is also important to study the “value systems and cultural codes which permit a justification of corruption by those who practice it, and to anchor corruption in ordinary everyday practice” (De Sardan, 1999, p. 26). In reality, it is a daunting task to conceptually and theoretically account for these value systems in ways that move beyond mere description to insights capable of stimulating sustained and meaningful anti-corruption organizing.

Also, corruption is an ambiguous phenomenon that is understood in several different ways by different stakeholders (Sissener, 2001). A central problematic of
global anti-corruption organizing presents itself here, which is how to theoretically and practically account for ambiguity while building solid frameworks for policy and research. A particularly relevant example of this problematic is the tension visible in TI’s creation of resources like the Plain Language Guide which provides definitions and examples of relevant terms such as bribery, nepotism, and corruption positing that “anti-corruption solutions need to be pursued through coordinated and deliberate action by international, national and local partners that use the same language and agree on its meaning” (TI, 2009, p. 2). While the guide is characterized as a living document designed to spark dialogue within academia, the business community, and government, it is appears to be driven by an underlying philosophy:

While the world is not free from corruption, it is a very different place than when TI began its work…there has been a marked increase in the understanding of corruption’s ills and the need to prevent, mitigate, and combat it. Yet the financial and economic crisis of 2008 has served as a reminder of what can happen when transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption become afterthoughts rather than guides for one’s actions. Having a common understanding and language for the anti-corruption movement is one channel for ensuring that such breakdowns and abuses are prevented in the future. (p. 2)

The implicit viewpoint functioning here is that it is possible to capture and finalize meaning and understanding across various cultural contexts by constructing expert
definitions. The emphasis is placed on the act of signifying as a means to stabilize ambiguity and paradox and not the power and value-laden processes by which various actors create, share, and contest meaning, and the historical, political and social frameworks that guide their constructions of reality in the first place.

**Discursive Directions**

More recent social science scholarship has begun to meet the overall challenge of conceptualizing the complexity and ambiguity of corruption by broaching critiques against the framing of corruption by organizational actors (Browne & Cloke, 2004; Bukovansky, 2006; Gebel, 2012; Hindess, 2005; Persson, et al., 2013; Polzer, 2001; Rothstein, 2011). While these scholars are not performing “communication research” their acknowledgement of the significance of meaning-making in understanding corruption and problematization of the discursive construction of corruption is a markedly communicative turn that could provide new directions for research and social action and stimulate creative conversations about corruption.

Gupta (2006) for instance notes that the “discourse of corruption varies a great deal from one country to another, dependent as it is on particular historical trajectories and the specific grammars of public culture” (p. 230). This discursive turn in corruption scholarship sees the phenomenon not just as an “act” or series of acts but as a “general enduring system for the formation and articulation of ideas in which power and knowledge relations are established in a constellation of talk patterns, ideas, logics, and assumptions that constitutes objects and subjects”
(Fairhurst, 2007, p. 7). In addition, contextually and culturally rich studies of
corruption by scholars like Gupta (2006) and Smith (2008) provide a foundation for
grounded, context-specific anti-corruption research and potential action by bringing
into view some obvious questions: How do everyday people define and construct
corruption in context? What constructions are dominant? Why are they dominant?
How is the dominant construction a reflection of the meaning making practices of
relevant stakeholders? What are the implications of these constructions?

Proceeding from this location, I draw attention to the dominant discourse of
corruption, constructed and propagated by development organizations, media,
government officials, and even Nigerian scholars, which I argue poses a severe
constraint to social change organizing. From an organizational standpoint, my
concern is that the symbolic pervasiveness of corruption discourse positions Nigeria
in a “perpetual anti-stance”, and backgrounds diverse constructions and
negotiations of socio-economic struggle that emphasize community, resilience, and
ingenuity. At this critical juncture in Nigeria’s history as an independent nation, it is
vital to interrogate how the continued centrality of discourses of dysfunction in
Africa and Nigeria promulgated by a variety of internal and external social actors
create harmful stereotypes, impede in-depth understanding of systemic social
issues, and silence alternative narratives of Nigerian lived experience that have the
potential to stimulate political will and broaden the field of possibility for social
change organizing, especially at the community level.
This dissertation represents an attempt to disrupt the dominant discourse of corruption by shifting focus to constructions and negotiations of socio-economic struggle that emerge from the lived experience of everyday Nigerian people, looking to these experiences as a source of organizational insight. To this end, I will perform a critical communicational phenomenology.

**A Communicational Look**

A disruption of the dominant discourse of corruption must begin with “complicating” the common sense understanding of corruption in which corruption is merely an “act” that occurs at shady police check-points and clandestine political meetings. It is a culturally and materially situated communicative experience sustained through everyday talk, media accounts, academic writing, cultural rituals, NGO brochures, and a wide range of societal narratives and humor. Take for instance this Nigerian joke which has several derivatives:

A man dies and ends up in hell. Once there, he finds that there is a different hell for each country, so he tries to find the least painful situation. At the door to German Hell, he is told, "First they put you in an electric chair for an hour, and then lay you on a bed of nails for another hour, and then the German devil whips you for the rest of the day." He does not like the sound of that, so he checks out American Hell, Russian Hell and many more. They are all similarly horrible. However, at Nigerian Hell a long line of people is waiting to get in. Amazed, he asks a man in line, "How do they torture you here?" He is told, "First they put you in an electric chair for an hour, and then lay you on
a bed of nails for another hour, and then the Nigerian devil whips you for the rest of the day." Confused, he asks, "But that’s the same as the others. Why are so many people waiting to get in?" The man says, "My brother, don’t you know your people? Because of the power cuts, the electric chair is not working. The contractor that was supposed to supply the nails ran away with the devil’s money, and the Nigerian devil is a civil servant, so he comes in, signs his time sheet and goes back home for private business.

The depiction of “Nigerian hell” as a space where nothing works and the characterization of the Nigerian devil as an indolent civil servant who lies on his time sheet and neglects his most instinctive duty of torturing people is an amusing albeit disturbing account of the experience of systemic dysfunction in Nigeria. Like all jokes, it rests on the assumption that the “common sense” or common understanding it narrates will be familiar and salient enough to produce mirth. It also represents several communicative choices about “how” to construct particular material conditions of struggle. These choices in turn reflect the discursive resources present in the cultural environment and constitute fields of possibility for interpretation, response, reflection, and further dissemination.

In the same way, communication demonstrates the inextricable connection between the material and discursive and “is a central organizing process that manages the intersection of symbolic and material worlds” (Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009, p. 2). However, by default, communication is still solely regarded as the transfer of information about a fixed reality in contemporary organizations.
“Such an assumption fosters a common sense view among organizational members (including managers) that communication is an uncomplicated process that does not have to be worked at, and that miscommunication is an exceptional occurrence” (Mumby, 2000, p. 84). In practice, less attention is paid to how communication constructs and constitutes reality except in retrospect or in the event of a horrific “breakdown” in communication where it becomes clear that certain communicative choices produced poor outcomes. Due to persistent one-dimensional views on communication in organizations, the communicative lens is sometimes overlooked in the analysis of organizational opportunities and problems except when related to instrumental organizational processes that are “markedly” communicative such as the dissemination of a marketing plan or conflict resolution. This trend can be observed in anti-corruption organizing worldwide where corruption has been characterized as a transparency, accountability, governance, moral, psychological, political, sociological, and cultural issue, but rarely as a communicative problem. This oversight might also reflect a lack of understanding in both scholarly and organizational circles about what communication is, how it undergirds organizing, and the wide range of insights that can be uncovered through communicative perspectives.

Craig (1999) presents the idea of a constitutive metamodel of communication which implies that communication itself can be constructed in many different ways. The focus shifts from definitional critique of communication to practical inquiry into how useful a particular “constitution” of communication is in a
given situation. In the context of organizations, it is important to question the utility of the model of communication espoused, in terms of how it aids understanding of communication and organizing. Obviously, a key feature of organizational life is the exchange of information between relevant organizational actors. However, a solely “conduit” model of communication “limits not only the way communication is conceived, but also the way organizations are cast” (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996, p. 396). For instance, viewing language as a mere artifact of culture or communication technologies as organizational tools that are always intentionally mobilized towards specific, known objectives masks the complexity of communication, organizations, and how they function together (Putnam et al., 1996). In actuality, the material presence of an organization and its various processes is a manifestation of myriad conscious and unconscious interactions that are deeply contextual, interpretive, symbolic, as well as transactional. Thus, many contemporary organizational communication scholars have turned to discourse, interactions, conversations, and text as not just mere organizational artifacts and variables but as embodiments of ways of thinking about the nature of organizing, and how these communicative activities constitute organizational processes (Putnam & Krone, 2006).

Ashcraft et al. (2009) warn against going to ideational extremes. One of the fields’ major contributions is the communication as constitutive principle; however, this view cannot easily find traction because it has not been “materialized” i.e. “that is accountable to the materiality evident in organizational objects, sites, and bodies”
(p. 2); “after all, organizations are more than what we say they are” (p. 23). In truth, communicative explanations can exaggerate the purchase of symbolism. In response, the authors present communication as the site where the material and the symbolic comingle. Thus, communication becomes viewed as:

…ongoing, situated, and embodied process whereby human and non-human agencies interpenetrate ideation and materiality toward meanings that are tangible and axial to organizational existence and organizing phenomena. Put simply, communication means grappling with the dual presence of material and symbolic elements. Communicative explanations are thus not another form of idealism; they account for the dynamic interweaving of material and ideational worlds… (p. 34-35)

Therefore, a communication lens does not make the claim that everything is discourse. Instead, it pays attention to the intersection of the material and ideational. Regarding corruption through this lens stimulates new questions about the phenomenon and potentially opens up additional frontiers of social action. Thus I argue for anti-corruption action that extends beyond conceptualizing and combatting material manifestations of corruption, but also questions the very nature of the discourse. This interrogation of the status quo in the interest of social change is a distinctly critical move.

**A Critical Look**

This dissertation takes a markedly critical approach, however, in a “balanced” sense (Deetz, 2005) filled with thought, care, and humor:
Individuals (especially students) who are upset with the general social/political/economic climate may discover critical theory in a weak sense emphasizing criticism of existing institutions. The criticisms are often abstract, elitist and polemical, lacking connection with actual human beings in actual situations, lacking depth in understanding of how institutions function, and lacking the complexity and grace that comes with humor. (p. 103)

While the copious body of literature on corruption in the social sciences provides incredible insight into social/political/economic conditions and structures that exacerbate the spread of corruption, I would argue that Deetz’s (2005) critique of critical theory in many ways mirrors the lack of balance in corruption literature:

Critical theory, along with some feminist and labor process theories, more often emphasizes thought at the expense of care and humor...the focus turns to endless interpretation and reinterpretation of theoretical texts. The conceptions become too grand and abstract, lifeless and lacking grounding in everyday experience or organizational life. (p. 104)

Smith’s (2008) ethnographic account of corruption in Nigeria is one of the most marked departures from the normative discourse on corruption in Africa. His anthropological excursion into Nigerians’ paradoxical participation in and protest against corruption provides a nuanced, thoughtful and grounded report of the struggles that everyday people in postcolonial societies like Nigeria experience in the transition from forms of organization embedded in kinship and familial
networks to those associated with the modern nation-state and capitalist global economy (Smith, 2008). While he does not overtly present his work as critical, Smith’s (2008) attention to multiple subjectivities, the voices of everyday people, and the interconnection between corruption and larger systems of inequality has a critical flair.

Following from Deetz’s (2005) critique of critical theory and Smith’s (2008) ethnography of corruption, my dissertation is deeply embedded in discovering alternative discourses of struggle in the everyday lived experience of Nigerians, particularly those whose voices and narratives of social, economic, and political life have been muted, de-valued, or erased in the consideration and conceptualization of pressing social issues, even though they are often the most vulnerable to these problems and targeted by solutions proposed by “experts”. In this study specifically, I attend to the organizational lives of roadside food traders whose organizational lives are often not considered a legitimate source of insight in social change organizing despite their astounding success and perseverance under adverse social and economic conditions. In what ways do they construct their own experiences of struggle, and what can we learn from these constructions? “Dialogue with subaltern voices provides a methodology for researchers to actively engage in the politics of social change” (Dutta, 2011, p. 170). However, it is important to note that engagement in social change research and praxis must be grounded in “humility, reflexivity, and openness to learning through engagement, thus shifting the traditional role of the expert from a producer of knowledge situated at the centers of
power to a listener who works in solidarity with the subaltern sectors” (Dutta, 2011, p. 170). Such an approach requires more than a detached intellectualism, but a genuine connection to the lived experience and lifeworld of participants.

**A Phenomenological Look**

In the documentary, African Voices against Corruption, TI (2014) highlights the stories of citizens in Niger, Cameroon, and Madagascar “taking up the fight against corruption” enabled by the staff in TIs Advocacy and Legal Advice Centers (para. 1). As the accounts of systemic extortion, forced engagements, educational fraud, and land seizure unfold on screen, it is almost impossible not to wonder: What does it mean to live in the shadow of these practices every single day? In the most basic sense, performances of these acts stimulate intrigue, anger, sadness, and compassion not just because they are “bad” but because they are “lived” in real ways that impact human dignity, well-being, relationships, and individual and collective identities.

Phenomenology as a human science is concerned with explaining human phenomena as “lived” or experienced by people. From a phenomenological point of view, research is a caring act that is always directed to questioning the ways people experience the world, and a desire to understand the world that we live in as human beings (Van Manen, 1990). As a philosophical movement, phenomenology has different strands, from its founding father Edmund Husserl’s eidetic phenomenology which focused on apprehending the pure, pre-reflective essence of phenomena through reflective-descriptive methods (Valle, 1998) to Martin Heidegger’s
hermeneutic approach which favors a view of lived experience as interpretive (Dowling, 2007). I will employ hermeneutic phenomenology which is appropriate for inquiry that seeks to understand and interpret the meaning of participant experiences and to discover the meaning of these experiences (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy & Sixmith, 2013).

This study begins with the lived experiences of the myriad conditions and activities that many Nigerians have become attached to while operating within an institutionalized and dominant discourse of corruption. The goal of this project is to critique this dominant discourse, disrupt it and seek balance by amplifying other discourses of struggle that emerge from the lived experiences of the marginalized, and mine the organizational potential present in broader discursive fields that not only reveal dysfunction but also possibilities for social change. This dissertation focuses on “bounded entrepreneurship” as an alternative discourse of struggle that creates space for positive identity construction and fresh theorizing about social change organizing in Nigeria. It is however essential to provide a background of the discourse of corruption to make a case for its disruption.
CHAPTER TWO

Sometimes I marvel at the naivety of non-Nigerians who analyze this country and proffer 'solutions'. The only thing more astounding to me is the blind faith of many Nigerians that some messianically righteous deliverer will arise one day and make everything okay. If you look around, you will understand the only thing that distinguishes the leaders from the led is the magnitude of the opportunity to steal obscene quantities of money. Poor plumbers and mechanics, middle class lecturers and professionals and wealthy business people are all endemically corrupt in their thinking and actions. It is an entrenched cultural phenomenon, and where people are outraged it is only because they have not gotten their own opportunity to manifest the criminal tendencies as profitably as they would like to. This will not change, and Nigeria is not unique. Everywhere on earth that you encounter countries and communities of sub-Saharan African descent, this same corruption problem dominates. Until the culture changes, it will always be so. Only time will tell if the leopard can ever change its spots.


A master narrative that I will term the “Nigerian paradox” has become almost customary in scholarly and popular discussions and writings. These accounts often highlight Nigeria’s socioeconomic influence such as its position as the largest oil producer in Africa (EIA, 2013) in tandem with one or more key misfortunes: how the British left the nation in shambles, the coup d’états that accompanied power struggles in military regimes, the ecological degradation of the Niger-Delta region, underdevelopment in the midst of immense resources, systemic poverty despite oil wealth, the difficulty inherent in forging a national identity in an ethnically diverse environment, and current barriers to democratization. The narrative can in one sense be read as the inclusion of necessary contextual information; it can also be interpreted as a sort of topoi or common-place; a ready-made sense-making script about Nigeria’s shining moments and misadventures appropriated in scholarly
articles, organizational discourse, news media reports, and public discussion. Corruption occupies a central position in this master narrative as one of the prescriptions for the resolution of this paradox. As Arnold Obomanu (2014) aptly states:

Corruption has become the bogeyman that looms over every ailment that troubles this nation; next to it are issues like tribalism, religious intolerance, loss of values, gross indiscipline, and so forth...these issues are pointed out either separately or jointly as the reason Nigeria is still crawling so many years after gaining independence from colonial rule” (p. xx).

From a communicative perspective, what is most intriguing is not just the presence of “corrupt” practices, or variation in the definition of corruption from context to context. It is that corruption has so much ideological weight in Nigeria that a wide range of social behaviors from government bribery and graft, suspect business deals, medical quackery, cheating in school, and even the use of occult powers are made sense of as corruption (Smith, 2008). It is that “no other issue so thoroughly captures popular attention and captivates collective consciousness” (Smith, 2008, p. 231). In a setting like the United States where corruption is often discursively located within specific institutions, periods, events and personages and conceived in popular imagination as Madoff-like white collar crimes and the Watergate break-in, presenting corruption as a hegemonic discourse that brings objects and subjects at every level of society into being might seem like a prevarication. The salient insight is not just whether or not there is corruption in the United States, but that
corruption has not been constructed as such a central feature of virtually every aspect of lived experience that it pervades everyday conversation and behavior. How did corruption come to be so discursively dominant and influential in Nigeria? What are the implications of this dominance? These questions are the central focus of this chapter.

**Discourse as a Starting Point**

Several organizational communication scholars have taken up the discourse approach as a framework for understanding and studying organizations and organizing (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Fairhurst, 2009; Thackaberry, 2004; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). A key feature of this approach is that scholars do not begin by examining the organization and then “backtracking” to discourse. Instead, the study of organizations begins with discourse as a legitimate starting point in organizing. Here, organizational discourse refers to the “structured collection of texts embodied in practices of talking and writing (as well as a wide variety of visual representations and cultural artifacts) that bring organizationally related objects into being as these texts are produced, disseminated and consumed” (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004, p. 3). In the process of organizing, organizational actors wittingly and unwittingly create and sustain the discourses around which organizations establish processes and practices through a variety of communicative practices. Hence, organizing is a fundamentally discursive activity in that in order to organize, there must be a set of values to organize “around”. The practice of producing and disseminating text brings organizations into being as these texts
interact with the social, political, and historical environment (Putnam & Boys, 2006). Organizational discourse scholars focus on different kinds of texts as units of discourse not merely “within” organizations but surrounding organizations. In other words, organizations exist in a material and discourse environment.

However, as Mumby and Clair (1997) note, the emphasis on discourse does not mean that organizations are not “real”:

Organizations exist only in so far as their members create them through discourse. This is not to claim that organizations are nothing but discourses, but rather that discourse is the principle means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are. (p. 181)

Critical views on organizational discourse draw out the inextricable link between power and discourse, positing that organizations are “socio-historical creations accomplished in conditions of struggle and power relations” (Deetz, 2001, p. 25). Power relations are in turn reproduced through discourse. In critical work in general, the normative emphasis is on liberation, reformation of the social order, and giving voice to marginalized groups (Poole, 2011) and the goal is to “create a society and workplaces that are free from domination and where all members can contribute equally to produce systems that meet human needs and lead to progressive development for all” (Deetz, 2001, p. 26). If organizations are created and sustained through discourse then it stands to reason that they can also be transformed through discourse. By “introducing radical doubt into sedimented
modes of thought” we are able to “foster the kind of self-reflection that enables us to recognize how it is that common sense understandings of the world arise” (Mumby, 1993, p. 24).

In this chapter, I construct a brief genealogy of the dominant discourse of corruption in Nigeria. In order to introduce “radical doubt” to the discourse, I focus on the ideological work that it performs. Following a line of social science research that problematizes and critiques the discursive construction of corruption (Bukovansky, 2006; Coronado, 2008; Gupta, 2006; Pierce, 2006; Polzer, 2001), I contend that corruption is an ideological construct that has been shaped and mobilized by powerful actors who have benefitted from its deployment. This discursive pattern potentially silences alternative ways of constructing lived experience and struggle that might be helpful to anti-corruption organizing.

**Corruption: Nigeria’s 55 Year Itch**

During the colonial period spanning from 1900 to 1960, British officials progressively occupied and gained control of the region now called Nigeria. Corruption as a symbol and metaphor emerged out of the colonial political struggle, drawing on British sentiments, and employing descriptions of African moral and mental dysfunction present in British thinking (Tignor, 1993). In a 1918 report, C.L. Temple, a British lieutenant governor of the northern Nigerian provinces, states:

> It may well be asked how it is that we are able to control, with absurdly inadequate forces, races so virile and capable, with such mental and physical endowments. The reply is, I think that there are two flaws to be found in the
mental and moral equipment of the average African. I trust that I may give no offense to my many African friends when I say that inherent lack of honesty is the first great flaw. Indeed many have told me, with regret, that they recognize this. Comparatively rarely can one African depend upon another keeping his word. Feudal discipline to a certain extent overcame this defect, but to a certain extent only, and the history of the Fulani Emirates...is full of records of the blackest treachery...where the leaders are capable of such conduct, what can be expected of the common herd? Except in very rare instances, it is a regrettable fact that this defect is enlarged rather than diminished by contact with European civilization. (p. 41)

After World War II, the British used concerns about political corruption to argue for delayed transfer of power, and in turn, their Nigerian nationalist opponents took up the debate, characterizing their competitors as venal (Tignor, 1993). Anti-corruption discourse as well became a primary way to challenge and secure state power and it produced discursive ambivalence towards the contradictory ways that the extraction and redistribution of resources was represented (Marshall, 2009). “By the time that independence was achieved in 1960, many Nigerians regarded corruption as the main issue by which they and the outside world would judge the country’s capacity for self-rule” (Tignor, 1993, p. 175). Concerning the politicization of corruption in Nigeria, Tignor (1993) further states:

A considerable amount of bribery, nepotism, and the use of political office for personal enrichment did exist in late colonial Nigeria. Evidence of
administrative malfeasance was palpable, although public awareness was not automatic. Private discussion of corruption led to public discourse, and then to its politicization. Colonial officials, troubled by the rapid pace of decolonization in Africa, and nationalist politicians, eager to embarrass their opponents and to win the favor of the British all helped to make the matter of venality highly visible. (p. 176)

In other words, beyond being a descriptor for illicit activity, corruption began to take shape as an ideological discourse, i.e. it became bound up with specific social interests (Lee, 2005) and was mobilized to protect the political interests of the ruling elite. Specifically, when considered communicatively through time, corruption in Nigerian discourse can be characterized as an ideograph or a unit of ideology and social control that functioned as a guide, warrant or excuse for belief and behavior (McGee, 1980). Just as taken for granted terms such as “democracy” and “liberty” are highly visible and politically important languages that shape collective belief and action in the United States, corruption occupies a chief seat in Nigeria’s historical narrative prescribing a context-specific “path to follow” or “something to be obtained” (Lee, 2005, p. 317).

Marshall (2009) makes a compelling argument that the mobilization of the discourse of corruption by the state had its principle effect in the exclusion of political rivals and the consolidation of control, based on a vested interest in preserving chaos. The forceful removal of military rivals was often accompanied by allegations of corruption, indiscipline, and an emphasis on disorder. For instance, in
1966, a mere six years after Nigeria’s independence from the British, the First Republic of Nigeria was overthrown in a coup d’etat run by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu. The post-coup announcement stated:

The aim of the Revolutionary Council is to establish a strong united and prosperous nation, free from corruption and internal strife. Our method of achieving this is strictly military but we have no doubt that every Nigerian will give us maximum cooperation by assisting the regime and not disturbing the peace during the slight changes that are taking place. (Obotetukudo, 2011, p. 173)

Subsequent military regimes who carried out coup d’états followed a similar pattern, excusing antisocial and coercive behavior by citing corruption and indiscipline. One year after the Nzeogwu coup, the country was in the throes of a civil war which lasted till 1970. On independence day, October 1, 1970, Nigeria’s president General Yakubu Gowon promised to hand over power to a duly elected civilian government by 1976, but in 1974 announced that the date was unrealistic (Obotetukudo, 2011). The public dissatisfaction and outcry in response to this announcement created a discursive environment that unfortunately favored his political rivals. In 1975, he was ousted by General Murtala Muhammed whose ascension speech stated:

The Armed Forces, having examined the situation, came to the conclusion that certain changes were inevitable. After the civil war, the affairs of state, hitherto a collective responsibility became characterized by lack of
consultation, indecision, indiscipline and even neglect. Indeed, the public at large became disillusioned and disappointed by these developments...the nation was thus plunged inexorably into chaos. It was obvious that matters could not, and should not, be allowed in this manner, and in order to give the nation new leases of life, and sense of direction, the following decisions were taken... (Obotetukudo, 2011, p. 69)

The increased entry of another dominant ideograph in corrective military rhetoric "indiscipline" served to further define the parameters of corruption and construct military rulers as the bearers of order and discipline. This closely parallels colonial sense-making:

This concern about African administrative corruptibility had deep roots in the nineteenth century, and colonialism was extolled for providing 'good government' in place of oppression and chaos. To justify their conquest of West Africa, the British claimed to be agents of law and order. They believed that powerful chiefs and Emirs, like those in Northern Nigeria, were inherently oppressive and venal. (Tignor, 1993, p. 177)

It must also be noted that many Nigerians welcomed corrective military regimes seeking a temporary solution to the disorderliness of civilian governments (Siollun, 2013). Various weak corruption cleanup programs were instituted by military elites in order to placate Nigerians and assure the continued monopolization of political power by the military (Mbaku, 2007). One of the first initiatives Operation Purge the
Nation was instituted by General Muhammed and involved the “purging” of at least 10000 and up to 12000 civil servants out of service (Riley, 1998).

In 1976, Chief of Staff Olusegun Obasanjo took over office after Muhammed was assassinated in an abortive coup, and peacefully handed over office to the civilian government of Shehu Shagari in 1979 (Obotetukudo, 2011). The Shagari regime, which was Nigeria’s second attempt at democratic government, was ejected by yet another military coup. New head of state Major General Muhammdu Buhari stated in his ascension speech:

> While corruption and indiscipline had been associated with our state of underdevelopment, these twin evils in our politics have attained an unprecedented height over the past four years. The corrupt, inept and insensitive leadership in the last four years has been the sources of immorality and impropriety in our society...we deplore corruption in all its facets...with no corruption in all its processes, this government will not tolerate kickbacks, inflation of contracts, and over-invoicing of imports, etcetera...corruption has become so pervasive and intractable that a whole ministry has been created to tame it. (Obotetukudo, 2011, p. 94)

What followed was another key anti-corruption program: the infamous War Against Indiscipline, which had as its main goal the instilling of discipline and integrity in civil servants (Mbaku, 2007). The continuing ideological usage of corruption paired with indiscipline became a powerful force in the coercive and often ridiculous practices sanctioned by Buhari’s anti-corruption initiative. For instance, citizens
were said to have been forced by law enforcement officials to make orderly lines in front of buses and civil servants who were late for work were made to do "frog jumps" (BBC News, 2003). Like preceding anti-corruption programs, it failed to create the institutional arrangements necessary to curb corruption and did not adequately engage the Nigerian people; instead the government policed minor issues and trivial behaviors (Mbaku, 2007). As Siollun (2013) notes, “the military doctor became infected by the ills it came to cure...it continually promised to eradicate corruption, yet military officers were indicted for corruption” (p. 4).

In the military era, the discourse of corruption functioned ideologically as a warrant for coercive action and democratic inaction, strengthening the construction of the Nigerian state as chaotic and in need of forceful intervention, and conveniently attaching corruption to certain personages so as to legitimize disciplinary behavior. However, as we move into the longest standing democratic period beginning in 1999, corruption becomes gradually more disembodied and the Nigerian context itself is increasingly constructed as intractably corrupt. Corruption is talked about as if it has a life of its own. One of the prime ways that this occurs is through the use of sickness and war metaphors that construct corruption itself as the most formidable enemy of the state. For instance, in his inaugural speech in 2011, President Goodluck Jonathan states:

The bane of corruption shall be met by the overwhelming force of our collective determination, to rid our nation of this scourge. The fight against corruption is a war in which we must all enlist, so that the limited resources
of this nation will be used for the growth of our commonwealth. (Vanguard, 2011)

Olusegun Obasanjo, former military head of and first democratic president of the Fourth Republic of 1999 states in his inaugural address:

Corruption, the greatest single bane of our society today, will be tackled head-on at all levels. Corruption is incipient in all human societies and in most human activities, but it must not be condoned. This is why laws are made and enforced to check corruption so that society will survive and develop in an orderly, reasonable, and predictable way. No society can achieve anything near its full potential if it allows corruption to become the full-blown cancer it has become in Nigeria. (Obotetukudo, 2011, p. 130)

Ideologically, the usage of corruption as a warrant for violence and coercion shifts to an explanatory framework for the state of the nation, which simultaneously heightens the sense of urgency for action, but evokes hopelessness and inevitability. If the country is terminally ill and full on war against an ill-defined entity known as “corruption” is required to bring about change, then specific, identifiable courses of action towards specific, identifiable goals are pushed into the background in favor of some grand treatment or scheme. This characterization of corruption as a societal sickness is not peculiar to Nigerian political rhetoric. Key figures in the anti-corruption movement such as Transparency International (TI) founder Peter Eigen stated at the release of the CPI in 1997, “We know that publication of the CPI has contributed to raising public awareness of the cancer of corruption” (TI, 1997, para.
The World Bank President at the time, James D. Wolfensohn also seconds this by saying, “The international community simply must deal with the cancer of corruption, because it is a major barrier to sustainable and equitable development” (World Bank, 1997, p. 2). This discursive trace is visible in individual and organizational text both locally and globally. Anti-corruption group BribeNigeria (2014) for instance states in their header:

Corruption is an endemic disease that has eaten up every facet of the Nigerian society. Together we can defeat the worst enemy that have crippled our nation, reduced our citizens to poverty and deprived our nation of any sustainable development.

A recent opinion piece boldly titled “Corruption-Nigeria’s Non-Curable Disease” stated:

Corruption in Nigeria is one of the deadliest growing and non-curable disease. It is like cancer which is hard to cure, unless it is detected in the earlier stage... corruption is the Nigeria's biggest enemy, and the only way to get rid of it is with a full-scale assault. Anything short of that is useless.

(Yahaya, 2014, p. 1-2)

Surely, widespread state and public awareness of corruption is the first step to change? Not necessarily. As Lee (2005) explains, a study of ideographs reveals political irony, i.e. incongruity between actual and expected results in the mobilization of a discourse. For instance, while global anti-corruption agencies and scores of science scholars have carved out a central space for corruption in global
discourse, change has remained elusive in systemically corrupt environments. The current high degree of attention to corruption has led to extensive analysis and the elaboration of anti-corruption strategies (Brinkerhoff, 2000). However, since 1998, the average Corruption Perception Index (CPI) for sub-Saharan African countries has decreased from 3.6 to 2.9 (Persson et al., 2013). In fairness, systemic corruption is arguably the most difficult to combat as politicians may perceive themselves to be powerless in the face of corruption’s complexity (Brinkerhoff, 2000). However, as we examine the track record of not just tangible anti-corruption reform but also corruption discourse, we must ask the question: does corruption talk stimulate social action? While it is vital to note that people all over the world are collectively rising against corrupt and abusive governments around the world, in their individual encounters with public officials, a significant number of citizens in the end still seem to perpetuate rather than fight corrupt exchanges (Persson et al., 2013). More attention needs to be paid to the fact that corruption as a discourse in various contexts is deeply political in a way that shapes organizational possibility. My arguments so far should not be interpreted as an exercise in denial about the seriousness of Nigeria’s condition or as a call to stop talking about corruption. Rather, I am pointing to the importance of interrogating “why” and “how” we talk about corruption, and the implications of its “devil” status in Nigerian discourse. Here I am concerned with how corruption forms a discourse backdrop i.e. “a general and prevalent system for the formation and articulation of ideas in a particular period of time” (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p. 1126) against which social change in
Nigeria is enacted, so much so that discussions surrounding social, political, and economic issues are virtually inseparable from it.

It is also important to question the discourse of “anti-corruption” and the implications of organizing around an “anti” stance. Social change activities potentially become channeled towards opposition rather than proposition. For instance, anti-corruption research has rightly focused on figuring out why corruption continues to persist at such a scale and re-conceptualizing corruption in the service of better policy and practice, as opposed to encouraging caring about one’s country. The focus is on elimination rather than creation. Scholars therefore have to question their own constructions of corruption and the implications of those constructions. The revealing of this key irony though is not an attempt to poke holes in all the work that has been done thus far on corruption. Instead, irony as a complex form of evaluation opens up semantic space for resistance; irony can result in the loss of some of the emotive force of an ideograph, leaving it open for question and critique, and suggesting lines of counter-argument and alternative political narratives (Lee, 2005). Obviously, Nigeria has problems with rampant illegal and unethical practices that continue to be performed with impunity at every level of society. I am not arguing for a game of pretend where everyone suddenly pretends bribery and graft do not exist. Instead, I posit that the symbol of corruption, with all its ideological baggage, is limited in its ability to stimulate self-reflection and thus social change. I call for a widening of the range of political language and narratives of struggle that are productive of organizing and potentially transformative.
Nigeria is at a crossroads between its tumultuous past, precarious present and promising future. The continued growth, ingenuity, creativity, and enterprise that can be observed in a nation that has been labelled as a ticking time bomb, dismissed as a failed state, and described as “rotten to the core with corruption” is a clear invitation for deeper thought about how people are sustained in the profound struggles that accompany everyday activities in Nigeria. In The Politics of Everyday Life: Making Choices, Changing Lives, Paul Ginsborg (2005) offers a simple yet hopeful insight that is highly relevant to social change organizing from below:

To build power from below is certainly a much more arduous, less remunerative, and less possible occupation than exercising it from above. Yet even in the most unpropitious circumstances, the human capacity for solidarity, resistance, and organization finds spaces in which to flourish. (p. 21)

Turning to lived experience and the politics of the everyday, I explore the organizing potential present in everyday negotiations of struggle to discover extant discourses and strategies employed by people who might be seen as the least likely to bring about economic, political, and social change. Specifically, the next chapter brings into view the organizational lives of roadside food traders in Nigeria’s vast informal sector.
CHAPTER THREE

Silence. No voices, no sounds in the night, just silence. The man walks into the hall, meeting the eyes of his waiting wife. These eyes are flat, the eyes of a person who has come to a decision not to say anything; eyes totally accepting and unquestioning in the way only a thing from which nothing is ever expected can be accepted and not questioned. And it is true that because these eyes are there the air is filled with accusation, but for even that the man feels a certain tired gratitude; he is thankful that there are no words to lance the tension of the silence.

-Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, 1968

In his widely acclaimed novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah describes the trials of the protagonist “The Man” whose refusal to be polluted by his corrupt environment is met with the disdain of everyone around him, including his wife who craves the high life. “The Man” can be seen as a metaphor for the conscientious few who swim against the tide of systemic corruption and whose ethical negotiations of daily life are seemingly futile. In vivid and sometimes revolting descriptions designed to depict the rottenness of a systemically corrupt society, Armah artfully captures the essence of being socially, economically, and politically trapped, the material and discursive oppressiveness of corruption, and its relentless colonization of individual and collective identities.

As illustrated in the previous chapter, the institutionalized construction of corruption through time in Nigeria has contributed to a widely held commitment to the idea of corruption as intractable and virtually insolvable. This is reinforced by unabashed displays of extortion, resource misappropriation, rent-seeking, bribery, and graft as well as corruption’s prominence in daily political talk. Railings against
the infamous General Abacha or President Obasanjo are accompanied by self-deprecatory jokes about personal involvement in corrupt activities; and while Nigerians overwhelmingly construct a cause-effect relationship between bad leadership and corruption, they demonstrate an awareness of their complicity in widespread corruption (Smith, 2008). It is in this challenging material and discursive environment (where nobody seems to find it odd or disturbing that the condition of the country is constantly likened to a terminal cancer) that anti-corruption agencies, communities, and social actors have endeavored to effect social change.

One of the most damaging consequences of the dominance of corruption discourse is its possible impact on political will which refers to the “intent of societal actors to attack the manifestations and causes of corruption in an effort to reduce or eliminate them” (Brinkerhoff, 2000, p. 242). As an essential ingredient in anti-corruption action (Brinkerhoff, 2000; Kpundeh, 1998; Pope & Vogl, 2000), political will goes beyond a momentary commitment to act towards a set of objectives, but also consists of a commitment to sustain the cost of social change actions over time (Brinkerhoff, 2000). This sort of unwavering devotion to the fight against corruption is even more difficult to achieve in settings where corrupt activities are a norm; willing social actors may experience great difficulties in mobilizing any sort of meaningful collective action due to lack of institutional support and functioning democratic mechanisms, and be unmotivated to pursue individual action because attempts at resistance will be inconsequential and possibly risky (Kpundeh, 1998).
Through the Lens of Struggle

A closer examination of everyday life and organizing reveals the process of “struggle”: a communicative process of “ongoing, multiple and unpredictable calls (power) and responses (resistance) in which power and resistance are often indistinguishable” (Fleming & Spicer, 2007, p. 58). In the face of supposedly intractable societal problems, it might appear that nothing is happening and no productive social action is taking place. However, when observed through the lens of struggle, it might be possible to find taken-for-granted pockets of action. In critical organizational communication research, there has been a move away from describing the social actor as a “cultural dupe” who is being worked on by ideological processes and a movement towards more complex and dynamic discursive processes that shape meaning and identity (Mumby, 2000). Rather than stop at a description of how people are being victimized by “corruption”, it is important to acknowledge the countless material and discursive practices people at all levels of society employ in their negotiation of social issues created by corruption, and their witting and unwitting complicity in corrupt acts.

When the individual, local, and global are intertwined in positive and negative ways and when alternative practices accrue at an individual, familial, and civic level, notable cumulative effects are possible (Ginsborg, 2005). Perhaps because of their debilitating effects, it is often easier to appreciate this notion in reference to widespread corrupt activities. However, a sole focus on these negative effects narrows public and organizational imaginativeness. The stark contrast often
made between the diabolic world of power and the liberating world of resistance is naïve and unreflective of the ambiguity and ambivalence of social relationships and arrangements (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). In addition to familiar narratives of unscrupulous officials who abuse public resources for private gain, there are more complex organizational narratives which include organizational members both spontaneously and strategically forming social arrangements to deal with the practices that they might also be implicated in. In the continuous exchange between power and resistance that constitutes struggle, actors create new possibilities and potentialities through their communication. Therefore, struggle is not presented here in a pejorative sense as some sort of breakdown in communication or organizational processes. While struggle can be destructive, it also has the potential to be transformative in that it is productive of identities, social arrangements and institutions (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). When we apply this idea to organizing for social change, struggle can be seen as an ongoing process by which power and resistance unite in the search for justice (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Power here is not merely located in a leader or some other normative authority figure; power is created in communication, and resistance can be read as a form of power. When we begin to look at intractable social issues through the lens of everyday struggle, there is the potential to discover power in the realm of the supposedly powerless.

In anti-corruption organizing, an increasingly acknowledged source of insight is everyday negotiations of struggle. In Transparency International’s (TI) (2014) documentary African Voices against Corruption, the stories of everyday
people in Niger, Madagascar, and Cameroon are featured as they resist land seizure, extortion, and other injustices in collaboration with TIs Advocacy and Legal Advice Centers. The narratives follow the classic principal-agent structure. A victim of corruption contacts the local TI chapter, TIs experts provide legal advice and support, and the situation is resolved or is at least placed on a straight, transparent route to resolution. At the risk of cynicism, these stories are hopeful but dissatisfying. On one hand, they show the possibility of functioning anti-corruption agencies that can provide institutional support to citizens in the face of gross abuses of power. On the other hand, it applies, perhaps with too heavy a hand, the convenient tale of the “principled principal”, victimized by a public official. It lacks the political complexity that is a reality of living with systemic corruption every day.

In fairness, a documentary designed to depict TIs current work in African countries cannot be expected to provide an adequately critical account of the lived experience of corruption. Though I approach these narratives as a productive starting point for critique; they are due for two communication-centered contributions. First, there must be a disruption of the principal-agent binary in favor of more complex tales of everyday struggles around corruption. Second, these tales must be linked to larger historical patterns and systems of local and global socioeconomic inequality, and the governmental, developmental, and organizational actors that are part of these systems. Many corruption accounts reinforce stereotypes, linking corruption with timeless cultural traditions, perpetuating notions of backwardness that shroud how the relationship between corruption and culture can only be understood in the
context of larger patterns of inequality (Smith, 2008). The above contributions in combination potentially address the extremes of vilification and valorization that tend to emerge when local lived experience is in focus. While the democratic impulse that celebrates local knowledge and bottom-up organizing is admirable, it can confound our understanding of the linkages between the local organizing and top-down developmental action; more theoretically and empirically sophisticated treatments of the two are required (Ganesh, 2007). Indeed, African Voices against Corruption and similar documentaries provide a rich site of inquiry into how global agencies such as TI interact with the local to construct institutional discourses that hold implications for both local and global organizing. Thus, while one of the goals of this project is to amplify citizen voice, I proceed with Dempsey’s (2009) critique of valorizing discourses of the local in mind; while it is often conceptualized as a “pure” and “authentic” space and contrasted with the powerful, hegemonic global, the local is also deeply gendered, classed, and raced. The focus instead is on broadening the range of organizational possibility by seeking alternative discourses and experiences of struggle that have been silenced or deemed illegitimate.

In his construction of rich, ethnographic tales of corruption in Nigerian culture, Smith (2008) gives a more “complicated” account of corruption, specifically, scam emails:

But those who are actually getting rich from the hundreds of millions of dollars that are reportedly lost to Nigerian 419 scams are not the thousands of young people writing scam letters in the internet cafes...these young
people reap little or nothing and they participate with considerable
ambivalence...in an ideal world, almost all of these young people would
prefer to do something different. In the abstract, Nigerians, including the
scam writers I interviewed, know that 419 is inimical to their interests and
those of their country. On the other hand they are extremely cynical about
the prospects for success without participating in the larger system of
corruption. (p. 52)

As their chances of legitimate employment and advancement plummet while oil
barons and service sector giants continue to gain more wealth in partnership with
international investors, some Nigerians turn to scamming, kidnapping, oil-
bunkering, and other illicit activities to cut themselves a piece of what is known as
the “national cake”. Like less romantic versions of Robin Hood, they take from the
rich or anyone else who is gullible enough in a twisted effort to balance the
distribution of wealth. As it is often said in Nigeria, “why I no go chop?”

However, other forms of enterprise are created and thrive, amidst immense social and
economic obstacles. This is where my inquiry into the lived experience of
socioeconomic struggle begins.

**Urban Roadside Food Traders in Lagos**

The creativity and organizing potential of struggle can be observed at every
street corner in Lagos. Enterprise is visible even in the most unexpected places, and
every shortcoming is turned into a business opportunity. For instance, in a small city

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3 In context, this means “why in the world won’t I take my share or literally “eat”?”
packed with over 20 million people (Kay 2013), horrific traffic jams locally known as “go-slow” are the norm; hawkers expertly weave through queues of cars that continue for miles, selling various items from cold drinks to socks. The urban landscape is full of stalls, shacks, and depots selling everything under the sun and providing numerous services such as hair-braiding, cobbbling, sewing, and grinding pepper.

Figure 3.1 Traders on the side of the Ajah-Lekki Expressway

The frenetic pace of enterprise seems chaotic and random at first. However, as Robert Neuwirth, author of *Stealth of Nations* posits, this system of unregulated, untaxed economic activities is not haphazard, but “a product of intelligence, resilience, self-organization, and group solidarity, and it follows a number of well-
worn though unwritten rules” (p. 18). Describing the informal economy which he refers to as “System D”, Neuwirth (2011) states:

System D is a slang phrase pirated from French-Speaking Africa and the Caribbean. The French have a word that they often use to describe particularly effective and motivated people. They call them *debrouillards...they say* that inventive, self-starting, entrepreneurial merchants who are doing business on their own, without registering or being regulated by the bureaucracy and, for the most part, without paying taxes, are part of “*l’economie de la debrouillardise.*” (p. 17)

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that more than half of jobs in the non-agricultural sectors of developing countries are informal; if agricultural workers are included, the estimates rise to about two billion people (OECD, 2009). In sub-Saharan Africa over 80 per cent of non-agricultural jobs are informal (OECD, 2009). By working around inefficient systems of governance that continue to exist in developing nations, people all over the world including Lagos, Nigeria have created an “economy of aspiration” (Neuwirth, 2011) making use of the limited resources at their disposal to carve out a living.

While the notion of running a business without the assistance of the government might seem like a heroic notion when viewed from afar, the informal economy must not be romanticized. Though Nigeria ranks 31st in the world with a GDP of over $470 billion, 70% of the population live below poverty line (CIA World Factbook, 2014). This brings into sharp relief gaping disparities in the distribution
of wealth. With few legal means for upward mobility and scanty social services, many Nigerians (many of whom are children) must simply make their own opportunities or suffer abject lack. Fleming and Spicer (2007) call for more attention to capitalism, wealth distribution and class relations in critical work, arguing that the “thematic of capitalism is downplayed as irrelevant in these new times of work relations” (p. 187). The informal economy is one of the most tangible manifestations of economic struggle in Nigeria, and represents an organizational arrangement produced out of the struggle over resources. Taken this way and not as some sort of economic aberration, then it is important to ask how organizational members in the informal economy construct their experiences of struggle.

A cursory glance at everyday commerce that makes up the informal economy in Lagos confirms the particularly extensive and varied role of petty traders.
Some of these traders are itinerant like the “hawkers” described above who carry their wares physically and sell to moving vehicles or prefer the relative calm of residential areas, school and church gates, or other business zones where they are not prohibited from trading. Other petty traders are stationary; they simply find advantageous positions in the city and set up shop, meeting the demands of whatever area they are located.

![Figure 3.3 Food sellers on the side of the Ajah-Lekki Expressway](image)

Of particular interest here are petty traders who sell food items. They serve an important economic function in Lagos, providing cheap sustenance to those sweating it out in miles of go-slow, those stuck at work in busy city centers, and poor students and workers who need to stretch their naira. Fruit stands all over the

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4 Naira is Nigeria’s currency
city provide a convenient spot where people can quickly buy fresh fruits and snacks that do not bear the overpriced mark of international grocery store giants and fast food chains that have flocked to overpopulated city. In a sense, they are the “fast food” of the masses. These food vendors are also a cultural phenomenon. Like the hot-dog stand in New York, their existence serves to culturally define urban lived experience in Lagos. Most Nigerians can relate to the experience of rushing out of their school gates so as to reach the ice-cream man first, counting out exact change so that a hawker wouldn’t run off with their money in traffic, listening carefully for the cries of an itinerant plantain seller\(^5\) that passed by their neighborhood every other day, or buying roasted corn, yam and *suya*\(^6\) on the side of the road. On busy city days, one must keep an eye out for smaller child traders who sell their wares to assist their families economically or are orphaned. The presence of these child traders reveals a darker side of petty trade and enterprise in Lagos that makes valorization impossible.

Taken together, roadside food traders in Lagos are some of the most dogged entrepreneurs in Nigeria, and are often ignored as subjects of focused organizational study. The relationship between petty traders and the government has always been complicated and in some cases contentious. For instance, military governments’ attempts to rid the country of manifestations of indiscipline sometimes involved destroying the means of livelihood of small privately employed

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\(^5\) Hawkers that sell in residential areas often move from street to street and sometimes they shout out the name of the product they are selling  
\(^6\) Spicy roasted meat sold grilled on sticks
persons like motor mechanics, food vendors and petty traders by pulling down their sheds and kiosks in the name of urban environmental sanitation (Osoba, 1996).

Currently, in the push to decongest the city streets, the Lagos State government has endeavored to create designated market areas and lock up shops to accommodate traders; however, the rent prices of these shops makes them out of reach for many traders (Adelaja, 2014). Thus roadside petty traders have found themselves on the wrong side of modernization and economic development, embroiled every day in an economic and political struggle to keep their livelihood amidst the changing tide of the city. Reports of abuses of power against traders have surfaced such as the seizure of goods and demanding of bribes by Lagos’ Kick against Indiscipline task force (Baiyewu, 2013). Therefore, in the context of Nigeria’s already nebulous economic environment, the organizational life of the street trader represents a particularly precarious and vulnerable form of success that involves working with the realization that it could all be over at a moment’s notice. In Nigeria’s hierarchical and often elitist society, their political voice has been historically marginalized and discredited. Though roadside traders are major players in Nigeria’s economy, and experience profoundly the effects of Nigeria’s shifting economic landscape, little is known about how they make sense of their work and these developments. What is it like to constantly live and work in the social and economic margins of society with few avenues for advancement? This is a question that is fundamentally about meaning; a phenomenological question.
Phenomenological questions are meaning questions, i.e. they ask for the meaning and significance of certain phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990, p. 23). To do phenomenological research is to question the essence of something in order to learn more about what it is “really” like (p. 42); how can one gain an understanding of the phenomenon of interest in a way that enables more thoughtful action? In line with the principles of phenomenological inquiry, I pose the foundational question in this study: what is it like to be a Lagos roadside food trader? As an embodiment of socioeconomic struggle in contemporary Nigeria, inquiries into the work lives of these traders not only provides insight into alternative constructions of socioeconomic struggle, but also into how these struggles are negotiated, and potential entry points for social change.

In this chapter, I have endeavored to overcome the inertia of the dominant discourse of corruption in Nigeria by looking through the lens of struggle, and drawing attention to the organizing potential in everyday negotiations of struggle among roadside food traders in Lagos. While there are many material barriers to the fight against corruption, I have argued that the discursive backdrop against which many Nigerians live and work is limiting and in need of disruption. This disruption can occur by returning to complex accounts of lived experience and negotiations of socioeconomic struggle. These accounts also have the potential to reveal significant entry points for social change. In the next chapter, I discuss the phenomenological method more fully in combination with the critical-interpretive approach to organizational communication.
CHAPTER FOUR

We need bankers from Goldman Sachs and legal minds from Clifford Chance. But we also need financiers who know the saving habits of market women in eastern Nigeria, and lawyers who know how to move around a Lagos high court. Most importantly I feel that diasporans must accept that, with the internet, knowledge is migrating faster than we can pack our bags. We are arriving on a continent where the natives are armed with local expertise and knowledge of the outside world. We are arriving to be partners, not lords and masters. So let us tread softly and tread humbly.

-Chibundu Onuzo, Guardian, 2013

Popular and scholarly discourse on “African issues” has often been critiqued for its neocolonialist tendency to position the African Other as dependent and in constant need of intervention. African scholars practicing in the West or anywhere else for that matter are not immune to these tendencies. The exalted ground we stand on as supposed expert cultural insiders who can speak for “our people” necessitates the formation and on-going exercise of critical self-reflexive practice, and recognition of the potential hegemony of our voices. In addition to self-reflexivity as a foundational step in “unlearning privilege” (Spivak, 1990), I take on a postcolonial perspective as a sensitizing critical practice, which entails examining academic discourse against a larger backdrop of Western hegemony, neocolonial, and racial politics (Shome, 1996). In enacting my overarching goal of disrupting the dominant discourse of corruption by calling attention to alternative discourses employed by Nigerian roadside food traders in the informal sector, I run the risk of performing the same essentialism that I decry. In support of the argument that some measure of essentialism is unavoidable in the quest to challenge dominant
constructions of the Other, Spivak (1990) advocates a strategic essentialism that guards against creating the notion that the identities that one constructs in the service of opposition are “fixed”. Instead, it is a temporary essentialism mobilized for a specific political reason and in the interest of catalyzing social change efforts. Shome (1996) further recommends that one not lapse from strategic essentialism into actual essentialism where one begins to believe in the cultural essence created through academic discourse. So far, in my accounts of the centrality of corruption in Nigerian discursive space, and my depictions of Nigerian informal sector and its members, I have endeavored to “tread softly and tread humbly” acknowledging my positionality as a Nigerian from a middle class family who grew up insulated from much of the struggle that I am attempting to study. In this chapter, I describe my methodology which combines hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962; Van Manen, 1990, 2007) with critical-interpretive approaches to organizational communication research (Deetz, 1982).

**Methodology**

My process of inquiry is qualitative; therefore the goal is to build a complex, holistic picture of the social problem discussed in its natural setting (Cresswell, 1997). Also consistent with qualitative work is the assertion that research is value-laden and the researcher's role can be both enabling and constraining (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). “Communication as both a field and a practice must be critically conceived not as a series of fixed representations, but as the process in which such fixed representations are overcome” (Mumby, 1993, p. 23). The control orientation
of most organizational research must give way to a dialogical approach that explicitly recognizes organization members as playing a role in the knowledge constitution process (Mumby, 1993). The dialogic approach guards against “finalization” and “monologue” during the research process (Frank, 2005), and the “research report must always understand itself not as a final statement of who the research participants are, but as one move in the continuing dialogue through which those participants will continue to form themselves, as they continue to become who they may yet be” (p. 966-967). This is the opposite of what is often encouraged in many professional circles where there is often pressure to be recognized as a professional based on the ability to utter a final word about another (Frank, 2005).

Also of great importance to this research study is Frank’s (2005) insight that research does not merely report but it “instigates self-reflections that will lead the respondent not merely to report his or her life but to change that life” (p. 968). Therefore, research – and the extensive analysis that accompanies it – is potentially transformative and emancipatory for not just the respondent but also the researcher. There are few other instances in everyday life where an individual or researcher’s frame of reference is so open to challenge and vigorous questioning. Critical research cannot retain its emancipatory impulse if it continues to marginalize those it studies (Mumby, 1993). This study endeavors to bring those under study as fully into view as possible pulling from the tenets of critical interpretive approaches to organizational communication and the practice of hermeneutic phenomenology.
Critical Interpretive Approaches to Organizational Communication

“Interpretive work examines how organizational reality is socially constructed through words, symbols, and actions” (Putnam, 1982, p. 200); furthermore “the constructed reality, then, is actively maintained through the communicative experiences and the meanings enacted from these behaviors” (p. 200). Interpretive work is largely ethnomethodological, i.e. it is concerned with the ways in which people construct common sense knowledge; here organizations are viewed as “accomplishments” or the outcome of the social process of constructing common sense knowledge (Putnam, 1982). By researching these social processes, valuable insights can be unearthed not only in service of understanding people and situations, but understanding the systems of meaning that compose the situation and connect it to the larger sociocultural context (Deetz, 1982).

However, a few shortcomings of interpretive work should be noted. According to Deetz (1982), when transformative social change is the objective, the insights gained from an interpretive lens must become critical. The overarching goal of social reconstruction and change requires three main tasks for the critical researcher: understanding, critique, and education (Deetz & Kersten, 1983):

Understanding requires descriptions of the social reality in the organization and the forces that form, deform, sustain, and change that reality. Critique focuses on examining the legitimacy of consensus and reason-giving activities in an organization and the forces bearing on them. Education develops the capacity of organizational members to engage in self-formation
through participation in organizational practices and decision making that is free and unrestrained. (p 148)

Thus, critical research not only reveals blockages in understanding and their sustaining forces, but also potentially illuminated avenues for appropriate action to overcome systematically distorted communication (Deetz, 1982). It seeks to disrupt ongoing social reality so as to catalyze liberation from dominant forces that constrain decision-making (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Another key feature of critical work is that it calls to attention the fact that organizational reality is not merely constructed spontaneously or consensually; negotiating meaning is a deeply political process that is constrained by power structures which are further reproduced in the process of negotiation (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Organizational actors consistently seek to fix meanings that are conducive to their interests (Deetz, 1982).

However, in doing critical research, there are some obvious concerns. Mumby (1993) refers to this as a crisis of representation which brings to bear certain key questions about studying human communication: what is the role of the researcher in making knowledge claims? How does theory and research politically function to shape our understanding of self and other? Mumby (1993) suggests looking at critical research as a political and poetic process whereby “the researcher gives up the pretense of a closed authority and recognizes the negotiated, intersubjective nature of the representation process” (p. 20). “Critical organizational scholars must demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to the political dimensions of
the research process by engaging in studies that attempt to break down the bifurcation between the researcher and those being studied” (Mumby, 1993, p. 20).

Phenomenology cannot be practiced without deep engagement with the lived experience of others, and thus challenges the traditional barriers between the researcher and the participant.

**Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

“Phenomenology arose as a philosophy in Germany before World War I and has since occupied a prominent position in modern philosophy” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132), and can be initially characterized as the unprejudiced descriptive study of that which appears to the human consciousness, in the precise manner that it appears (Moran, 2000). This understanding of phenomenology emerged from the school of Franz Brentano, and was developed by Edmund Husserl and his successors, aiming to return “to the things themselves” (Moran, 2000). In The Idea of Phenomenology, Husserl (1913/1983) states:

*Pure or transcendental phenomenology will become established, not as a science of matters of fact, but as a science of essences* (as an “eidetic” science); it will become established as a science which exclusively seeks to ascertain “cognitions of essences” and no “matters of fact” whatever. (p. xx)

All phenomenology begins in the “lifeworld” or *lebenswelt* i.e. the world of the natural attitude of everyday life which Husserl conceptualizes as original, pre-reflective, and pre-theoretical (Van Manen, 1990). “As the originator of philosophical phenomenology, Husserl also articulated the central insight that
consciousness is intentional, that is, that human consciousness is always and essentially oriented toward a world of emergent meaning; consciousness is always of something” (Valle, 1998, p. 5). Since in his conception, experiences are constituted by consciousness, they could be rigorously and systematically studied based on how they appeared to consciousness (Valle, 1998). His key methodology of “epoche” or “phenomenological reduction” involves apprehending or meeting the phenomenon of interest as free and as unprejudiced as possible so that the phenomenon can present itself as free and unprejudiced as possible and then be precisely described (Dowling, 2007). In other words, “Husserl proposed that one needed to bracket out the outer world as well as individual biases in order to successfully achieve contact with essences” (Laverty, 2003, p. 23). Thus, Husserl’s phenomenology is often referred to as descriptive phenomenology.

Husserl’s successor Martin Heidegger departs from this purely descriptive phenomenology and moves us into a more interpretive, hermeneutic phenomenology. Like Husserl, Heidegger begins with lived experience and the lifeworld. In Being and Time, Heidegger (1962) states:

Thus "phenomenology" means αποφαινεσθαι τα φαινομενα -- to let that which shows itself be seen from itself, in the very way in which it shows itself from itself...but here we are expressing nothing else than the maxim formulated above: “To the things themselves!” (p. 58).

However, his focus is more on interpretation, “emphasizing our language, history, and commitment to a culture that we inherit in an intuitive sense called “embodied”
knowledge” (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991, p. 265). Thus, the goal of hermeneutics is not the extraction of concepts and theories, but the discovery of meaning and understanding (Benner, 1985). While Husserl attends to the epistemological question of the relationship between the knower and the object of study, Heidegger’s emphasis is ontological, concerned with nature of reality and ‘Being’ in the world, and he did not believe that people can “bracket out” the pre-understandings and historicality of their experiences (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology can also be described as “a critical philosophy of action...it deepens thought, radicalizes thinking and the acting that flows from it” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 154). To perform phenomenology is to be so confronted with the force of human experience that one feels compelled to act in particular directions. It is a “philosophy of action always in a personal and situated sense” and “a person who turns to phenomenology does so out of personal engagement” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 154).

Consistent with the critical drive of this project, I take on a more hermeneutic approach.

“The method of phenomenology is that there is no method” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 35). However, Van Manen (1990) provides six interlinked research activities that undergird hermeneutic phenomenology. First, the researcher turns to a phenomenon that seriously interests them and commits them to the world.

“Phenomenological research is a being-given-over to some quest...a deep questioning of something that restores an original sense of what it means to be a thinker, a researcher, a theorist” (p. 31). Second, the researcher investigates the
phenomenon or experience as it is lived, “actively exploring the category of lived experience” and positioning oneself to becoming full of that lived experience. This is achieved through interaction with multiple sources of data such as the researcher's personal lived experience descriptions, the tracing of the etymological sources of words, idiomatic phrases, and experiential descriptions from others obtained through observation, protocol writing and/or interviews, literature, art, and phenomenological writings. Third, the researcher contemplates the essential meaning of the phenomenon through the analysis of themes. “True reflection of a lived experience is a thoughtful, reflective grasping of what it is that renders this or that particular experience its special significance” (p. 32). Fourth, phenomenological research involves active writing and rewriting. “It is precisely in the process of writing that the data of the research are gained as well as interpreted and that the fundamental nature of the research questions is perceived” (Van Manen, 2006, p.715). Fifth, phenomenology requires maintaining a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon of interest and the fundamental question or notion under study. “The researcher cannot afford to adopt an attitude of so-called scientific disinterestedness” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 33). Instead, the researcher must become animated by the phenomenon of interest in a “full and human sense” (p. 33). Sixth and finally, it is important to balance the research context by considering parts and whole. In other words, the researcher must constantly evaluate the overall design of the study/text and measure the significance that the parts play in the total textual
structure. When placed in the context of social change research, Heidegger’s (2000) response to critiques of the practicality of philosophy are most apt:

> It is entirely correct and completely in order to say, “You can’t do anything with philosophy.” The only mistake is to believe that with this, the judgment concerning philosophy is at an end...even if we can’t do anything with it, may not philosophy in the end do something with us, provided that we engage ourselves with it? (p. 13)

Phenomenology is a kind of action-oriented research, but not in an external, top-down, expert, or contract research sort of way; it is personally engaged research done by people and an appeal to how we understand things and stand in life (Van Manen, 1990).

**Data Collection**

The lifeworld is both the source and object of phenomenological research (Van Manen, 1990, p. 53). Therefore, the researcher should seek to gain access to the dimensions of a particular lived experience while realizing her impact on that lifeworld. The primary modes of access into the lifeworld of roadside food traders in Lagos, Nigeria were interviews and observations of traders. The specific goal of the hermeneutic phenomenological interview is to gather experiential narratives as a resource for developing deeper understanding of a phenomenon, and develop a conversation with an interviewee about the nature of an experience (Van Manen, 1990, p. 66). Thus, in this case, the goal was to gather rich experiences that would shed light on the lived experience of street traders. Close observation can also be
employed as a means of relation that still maintains a “hermeneutic alertness” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 62) as the researcher must constantly be on the lookout for stories, anecdotes, experiences, and moments of significance that shed light on the phenomenon. Conversations with the traders were tape recorded, and I journaled my observations during and after the interviews. I also turned to local popular media as a source for experiential data on street traders, and as a personal reflective writing practice, I maintained an account of my experiences through a fieldwork blog.

**Sampling**

Due to the fact that my knowledge of the population and the organizational setting was limited, I identified my participants using an emergent sampling method which is particularly useful in qualitative fieldwork (Patton, 2002). In emergent sampling, the researcher takes advantage of opportunities to gain rich information as they learn more about the context of study; thus this sampling method is also called opportunistic sampling (Patton, 2002). However, during the course of the study, in the spirit of dialogue and critical self-reflexive practice, I allowed the conversations I was having with the traders to guide decisions, my communicative style during the interviews, editing and rewording of questions, the relevance of certain questions, and the eventual direction and focus of my analysis. Three significant shifts must be noted. First, the initial interview protocol gave way to a looser structure, and the order of questions was determined more organically in the course of conversation and particular interest areas of participants. Second, it
became clear that some of the earlier questions in the protocol concerning Nigerian identification (see appendix) did not seem to resonate with participants. The traders were more engaged with questions that were very concrete and connected to their immediate surroundings and experiences. Therefore, I did not push these questions, and omitted them in some interviews. Third, many of the traders had some difficulty or seemed uncomfortable answering my questions about corruption. While some had a clear idea of their thoughts on corruption, the term itself did not appear to make sense in some instances. It was challenging to explain it to them without imposing a particular translation of corruption. Therefore, if the participant had difficulty with conceptualizing corruption, I skipped the question.

The recruitment of study participants was of course guided by their membership in the target group (i.e. adult roadside food traders). Rather than being a shortcoming, the emergent sampling method opened up opportunities for deeper understanding of the lifeworld of the traders. For instance, after speaking to some of the traders, I discovered that there are established cooperatives organized around particular fruits or vegetables that influence price caps and locations of stalls. Due to this knowledge, I was able to organize a very productive interview with an active member of a pepper cooperative.

**The Traders**

Fieldwork was conducted in the period between June 23rd and July 28th and 15 female and 4 male (N=19) roadside traders were interviewed in the Ajah-Lekki area of Lagos Island. For ease of access, I targeted mostly stationary traders, since
they are not as mobile as their itinerant counterparts. The Ajah-Lekki area was utilized for reasons of access and patterns of development in the Lagos Island area. First, given the relatively short research period and the daily traffic jams in Lagos, it was important that I had easy access and proximity to the research site. Second, the Ajah-Lekki area is one of the newer sections of the city, and Lagos, which is immensely overcrowded, is continuously expanding in the direction of Ajah-Lekki. New housing developments, estates, companies and other projects are constantly in motion, making struggles over space and the livelihood of the traders very salient in this area.

Due to the general suspicion that many people have of anyone “official” and the current political environment, I had to tread lightly in terms of the information I revealed or requested. This methodological decision was further reinforced when I was asked by traders on a couple of occasions if I was from the government. In these instances, I told them that I was a student doing research for my final project. I did not ask them their age, religion, ethnicity or other deeply political questions. Instead, I let these identifications emerge based on the trader’s comfort level with these topics. The traders had varying levels of English proficiency and education, so I adjusted my interview style accordingly; hence some interviews were conducted partially or fully in Pidgin English. Interviews were conducted at the trade stalls at varying times of day between noon and 4 p.m., so interviews were sometimes interrupted by the flow of customers. This resulted in interviews that were short
and somewhat fragmented. However, each conversation was remarkably illuminating as will be seen in the profiles of the traders given in chapter five.

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were succinct and lasted 17 minutes on average. A few interviewees elected to stop talking because they were tired and in some cases felt like their answers were inadequate. In other cases, they spoke fast so that they could continue attending to their business, and were often very direct and to the point. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher “near verbatim”, leaving out disfluencies and side chatter, but including Pidgin English, slang terms, and local lingo.

Using the transcription process as a means of hermeneutic reflection, and through careful listening, I highlighted words, phrases, stories, and anecdotes that were of immediate significance to the phenomenon of interest. I also wrote down initial thoughts and impressions of the data. When all the interviews were transcribed, I created a master document that included all the interview transcriptions with short headings that briefly described key points about each trader. This yielded 73 pages of text. I then proceeded with thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis in phenomenological research involves the determination of the experiential structures that make up the particular experience under study (Van Manen, 1990). As a critical writing practice and reflective starting point, I revised my field journals to bring to remembrance key ideas and impressions in the field, and wrote out profiles of each of the participants. Each profile was a means of
searching for the meaning and significance of each interview text, as it related to the central phenomenon. This method of isolating themes is called the wholistic reading approach and involves asking the question, “what sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 93)? In line with this approach, I then constructed phrases that summarized the thematic significance of each interview text, and edited the vignettes I had previously included in the master text.

As mentioned earlier, I had initially assumed that corruption talk would play a more prominent role in my conversations with the traders. While they discussed a variety of illicit activities such as bribery and graft, they did not primarily describe these activities as corruption unless I explicitly introduced the term. This greatly influenced the focus of my analysis and the construction of the results. Therefore, in the concluding chapters, rather than a forceful imposition of corruption into the interpretation of the interview text, I have touched on it lightly as relevant to the implications of this study. Overall five essential themes were isolated by reading and reflecting on each profile and transcript, and locating recurrent aspects of the lived experience under study. Through a process of writing and rewriting, phenomenological reports of the essential themes were created with a strong orientation to the foundational inquiry, “what is it like to be a Lagos roadside food trader?” In summary, their lives are characterized by 1) varying degrees of struggle for space, 2) struggle within and with place, 3) relational struggle, 3) negotiation of the lack of resources, and 4) connection with the divine as a resource. These themes
will be discussed in chapter six. In the following chapter, I present profiles of the traders, highlighting their lived experiences as embodiments of socioeconomic struggle.
CHAPTER FIVE

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person...start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story...of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes...but there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them...I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person...every time I am home, I am confronted with the usual sources of irritation for most Nigerians: our failed infrastructure, our failed government, but also by the incredible resilience of people who thrive despite the government, rather than because of it. Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, The Danger in a Single Story, 2009

In her famous talk, The Danger in a Single Story, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie revisits a familiar refrain; using her experiences as an African woman, she discusses the social and political implications of dominant narratives, but even more importantly, the potential for disrupting these narratives by telling multiple stories about people and places. Thus far, I have problematized corruption as a dominant story of Nigerian socio-economic struggle, pointing to its disempowering and marginalizing tendencies, and suggesting a turn towards alternative discourses of struggle that broaden the field of possibility for identity construction and sustained organizational efforts. In the next few chapters, I present the results of a critical communicational phenomenology which seeks to describe...
socio-economic struggle in contemporary Nigeria as “lived” by everyday Nigerians. I have argued for exploring the voices and experiences of members of the informal economy (in this case roadside food traders) as a vital and silenced story of social and economic struggle in contemporary Nigeria.

It should be reiterated at this point, that the search for alternative narratives of socio-economic struggle represents more than a romantic, patronizing quest to “hear” the voices of the marginalized. Social science research as a prominent discursive field can be a platform for creating and sustaining new understandings and meaningful dialogue between policy makers and the community. It is not an overstatement to say that such dialogue can create important entry points for changes in policy, and how these policies are implemented and reported by creating spaces in local and global policy forums for listening to subaltern voices (Dutta, 2011). Thus the ethos of this study is not to “be in the shoes” of roadside food traders, but a first step in the creation of a dialogic forum, “that offers subaltern groups opportunities for constructing alternative narratives that stand in resistance to the status quo” (Dutta, 2011, 188). It is vital for such an endeavor to be interlinked with lived experience.

As discussed in the methods chapter, in line with phenomenological inquiry (Van Manen, 1990, 2007), the question posed is, “What does it mean to be a Lagos roadside food trader?” This question further “materializes” the somewhat abstract phenomenon of socio-economic struggle by presenting it as a primarily embodied experience. Interviews with 19 roadside food traders yielded five essential themes
that together form a rich and illuminating narrative of the lived experience of socio-economic struggle. However, a fitting and dialogic transition to the discussion of these themes is a synopsis of the contributors. According to Van Manen (1990), in the analysis of a phenomenon, it is important to discover themes which should not be thought of as categorical statements and conceptual formulations or abstractions; instead, as mentioned earlier, in phenomenological inquiry, theme refers to structures of experience that make up a phenomenon. In other words, it is a way to “get at” and describe the content of the notion under study. In order to bring clarity to the methodological significance of themes, Van Manen (1990) turns to real situations that are concrete occasions of a particular phenomenon. The examination of these situations as examples of the phenomenon has the potential to open up a deeper and more reflective comprehension of the relevant phenomenon.

Profiles of Traders

Inspired by this approach, I begin with phenomenological profiles of the 19 roadside food traders interviewed. These profiles should be read as mini organizational or entrepreneurial case studies that are in some way an example of the embodied phenomenon of socio-economic struggle. These concrete examples will then be distilled into the essential themes discussed in chapter six. In line with Frank’s (2005) admonishments about the finalizing effects of the typical social science research report, I have not made any attempts to “polish out” paradoxes, ambiguities, and all evidence of struggle. In contrast, workplace struggle and
political contestation are a constitutive feature of all organizations, rather than an aberration (Fleming & Spicer, 2007).

**Adedunni**

Adedunni works just outside the walls of a large multinational corporation in the Ajah-Lekki area. This organization hires a considerable number of workers, many of whom are lower level technicians. Thus, there are a vast number of *bukas* and traders selling affordable food items to serve the wave of hungry employees. Adedunni sells honey and *boli* which roasts and sells relatively quickly in a crowded city like Lagos; so sellers sit or stand by their charcoal roasters, replenishing the fires with coals and fresh plantains. Her work reflects socio-economic struggle in its most basic form; responding to a basic need that others cannot or will not fill. Like many residents of Lagos who go to great lengths to look presentable at all times, Adedunni is dressed sharply in a brown *iro and buba*. She is a Yoruba lady who appears to be in her early forties, so my guide and I greet her appropriately, addressing her as “Aunty” and “Mummy” out of respect. She graciously accepted our invitation to interview even though she was busy, and a horrible traffic jam had caused her to be late for work and lose some business. Behind her was a *buka* where many workers were already assembled for lunch. As I interviewed her, some of them watched curiously, and at some point, an elderly man came to watch. When she was asked what she thought of corruption, he interrupted

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7 Pseudonyms have been used
8 Shacks or small canteens that sell local cuisine and a variety of cooked staples
9 Plantains roasted over a charcoal fire
10 A traditional Yoruba attire
and tried to help us negotiate the meaning of corruption in Yoruba. At the time, I thought it strange that she had allowed him to colonize her interview without protest, and I promptly reminded her that there was no right or wrong answer, and her opinion was important. In retrospect, her acquiescence could have been due to his age, as Yoruba culture highly venerates age. These cultural codes are very apparent in the conduct of business, sometimes to the detriment of the business owner, i.e. a trader might allow someone older to cut the line, even though a younger person is first in the queue. Adedunni is a devout Muslim, and her beliefs highly influenced her code of conduct in her business. Her beliefs also guided her preference for association. She was only interested in groups that were affiliated with her faith, and was already a member of a prominent Islamic group called the Nasrul-Lahi-Fatih Society (NASFAT) from which she obtains resources and support for her business.

**Bose**

Bose is a young woman in her early thirties who runs a *buka* on an undeveloped plot of land in an upper-crust estate in the Ajah-Lekki area. Estates (which are large gated housing communities) are immensely common in this area and are continuing to proliferate as they provide a haven from the Lagos hustle and bustle. Also many estates in this area have their own infrastructure and strict security protocol; in a city like Lagos where law enforcement is a shambles, many are willing to pay for added security. She serves many of the workers employed by wealthy people who live on the estate. Her shop is flanked by two other *bukas* and
there they will remain until someone decides to buy the land. So while she has worked on this piece of land for years, there is still an abiding sense of placelessness. Outside of her business, she was not a member of any associations, and she did not seem to be very motivated to join any. In her estimation, the only point of joining any sort of group would be if financial assistance was available when it was needed; there would need to be a measurable economic incentive. Her hope was that the government would build decent and affordable lock-up shops i.e. small apartments located in shopping complexes or markets. One of the most interesting parts of our interaction was her response to the question, “What would you be willing to fight for?” She smiled tiredly and said she didn't have power. This is not surprising when considered in the context of Lagos. There is an overwhelming “present-ness” to Lagos lived experience that doesn't leave much room for reflective thought. Bose’s response brings to mind a proverb that we were told growing up that stated, “Opportunity comes but once”. The sense we were left with was that you had to be present in the moment and always on the look-out for an opportunity that could pass you by forever if you were not hyper-vigilant. Her experiences also reiterate the connection between space and socio-economic struggle. Gaining territory or stable space is a key means of obtaining power. When you cannot legally enter into a territory nor have very little hope of doing so, then the obvious effect is a sense of powerlessness. Her honest admission stands in contrast with the contemporary myth of Nigerian “hustle” and resilience against all odds. This myth could also be dangerous if it became too dominant as it downplays the government’s
role in facilitating the economic success of citizens, and normalizes the extreme stress and unacceptable conditions under which many Nigerians live and work.

**Ese**

Ese is in her late thirties to early forties and runs a *buka* right next to Bose’s. There isn’t a shortage of customers, so there doesn’t seem to be any rivalry between the two business owners, at least on the surface. Initially, she was tentative about the interview; however, after some friendly encouragement, she opened up, particularly around the topic of the Chibok school girls. Like Bose, she was reluctant to join any association which she saw as being too much *wahala*; she also felt that being a member of an association would hold her back from attending to her primary concern which was providing for her children. When asked about her long term goals, her answer was simple: “*build house for my children...the suffer that you suffer, you will not allow your children to suffer.*” Her response cuts to the marrow of socio-economic struggle in contemporary Lagos which in many cases is primarily an issue of survival. The aspiration to entrepreneurship is one that is colored by personal and contextual constraints and has to be negotiated based on one’s unique circumstances. Interestingly, unlike some others food traders, she had been able to hold on to her business location for fourteen years, and actually paid rent to the management of the estate. The informal sector is often defined based on the fact that workers are undocumented, untaxed, and generally unstable; however, the term “informal” is in some cases misleading. The traders follow formal processes for

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11 Trouble or drama
securing their space, maintaining that space, and conducting business. Theirs is a life of expected and somewhat organized improvisation.

**Labake**

Labake, who is a woman in her thirties, runs a live chicken and egg stall located on the roadside of a popular market place in the Ajah-Lekki area. Some marketplaces are more organized than others; however, most are a mix of stalls where the vendors pay rent, and other stalls that have just been set up where space is available. The overall effect is one of immense congestion. My interaction with her was marked by intense frustration and anger against those in power. It was almost as if she had been waiting for an opportunity for catharsis; to tell someone about how the masses were suffering because of an incompetent government. Her angry complaints were also comical, and as she spoke, the other traders around her listened, sometimes giggling when she hurled insults at the government, particularly the Lagos State governor, Babatunde Fashola. Her particular bone of contention was with the government’s callous response to everyday suffering. In particular, she emphasized one of the number one fears in Nigeria which is the inability to pay your child’s school fees. Primary and secondary education is not free, and the cost of sending your children to a decent school is increasingly exorbitant. She was very concerned about the future of the youth who she felt would have no choice but to resort to illegal or demeaning jobs. Specifically, she felt that the options for young women had been narrowed to prostitution and for young men to gangs. When asked about her willingness to join associations, she made it clear that her children
came first before any kind of association. Here we see that not only is there a low incentive to organize through associations, but also because of the difficulty of everyday life, associational potential is stifled because it is not a priority. Furthermore, its position on the priority list might reflect its perceived social usefulness.

**Bimbo**

Bimbo is a lady in her fifties who sells fish on the outskirts of a marketplace in the Ajah-Lekki area. Our conversation brought into sharp relief the importance of continued understanding and theorizing about the economic motivation for work. While organizational communication research has endeavored to account for the diversity of goals and motivations present in the world of work, for many people around the world, the stark reality is that working “just for yourself” or “to find meaning” is an unrealistic luxury. When we talked about what made her happy about her job, she stated that as long her products were selling and she was taking a profit home, she was happy. To make a profit at all under such difficult work conditions was an admirable feat. Bimbo was also wary of groups and associations; she was happy to work on her own and attend to her own affairs as long as she was making her profit. However, she felt that “word-of-mouth” and information sharing was highly important. The reticence to join associations perceived throughout most of the interviews appears to be directed more towards formal associations and cooperatives. Rather than alleviate socio-economic hardship, some seemed to suggest or outrightly state that joining associations would be detrimental to their
success and at best a distraction. Also, from a more practical standpoint, Bimbo like many other workers wakes up at the crack of dawn and leaves her house between 5 and 5.30 in order to beat the traffic. In addition, she mentioned additional concerns about entering a 419 vehicle\textsuperscript{12} or a kidnapper's car. After working 12 hour days in some cases to make a decent profit, there is little time or energy left to join any sort of association which might not be much help in the first place.

**Shukurat**

Shukurat is a lady in her thirties and was one of the few I interviewed who had a designated shop. A bright yellow generator was stuffed into her tiny shop to make sure her fish freezer was running constantly; for those selling meat products, a generator is a key piece of capital due to prolonged power cuts. She often seemed self-conscious about her answers, wanting to get them right, and kept on asking her male friend sitting nearby to help her. He interrupted the interview a few times, and I placated him by telling him I would interview him after talking to her. The infrastructural issues in the country have created many industries; generators have now become a necessity, as power cuts now extend for days. Running a business with power and basic resources such as a line of credit is difficult enough; many traders do not even have these basics, demonstrating their perseverance and understanding of the business climate in Lagos. Shukurat dreams of being able to expand her business, have people work for her, and open different branches around the city. However, as she emphasized, money was an obstacle. One thing that

\textsuperscript{12} A car disguised as a taxi usually to perform some kind of scam or rob occupants
alleviated the pressure was her involvement with LAPO Microfinance Bank which is a local organization that supports enterprise and the businesses of Nigerians who would otherwise have little or no access to financial services on a sustained basis. Despite the challenges, she was very positive of about Lagos and the Ajah-Lekki area in particular. Due to Lagos’ massive population, her fish which she obtains from larger markets sells quickly. Prior to being in the Ajah-Lekki area, she worked in the Apapa area which she described as “too rough”. Apapa is one of the oldest regions on the Lagos Mainland; many of the older regions of the city have incredibly degraded infrastructure making work life even more difficult.

Ufong

Ufong is a woman in her early to mid-forties with a very prominent fruit and vegetable stall on the side of the Ajah-Lekki expressway. Her stall clearly outshined two other vendors that were stationed behind her, and there was a steady stream of customers. She was extremely friendly and willing to participate because a relative of mine was her regular “customer”. A point she emphasized was that Lagos was not for lazy people; determination and perseverance were necessary to deal with the challenges of finding and transporting merchandise, working long hours in different kinds of weather, and dealing with troublesome customers. Every other day, Ufong travels to the outskirts of Lagos at the crack of dawn to purchase fresh produce from farming communities. This is not an unusual practice for many roadside produce

13 LAPO offers low interest small business loans to help small and medium scale entrepreneurs meet their capital needs. These loans can be obtained with no collateral and can be paid back in installments.
vendors, and they perform the vital service of transporting fresh fruits and vegetables into the city, and selling fresh goods at a decent price. This journey usually takes several hours because of the frequent traffic jams. Her accounts of her daily struggles offer an important counter-narrative to the singular perception of roadside traders and hawkers as nuisances. There is little attention paid to their skill and value to the economy as a whole. Like many of the traders who were mothers, she was worried about the youth and their future prospects; it was one of the things she felt that she would fight for in the country. Another prominent feature of our conversation was her faith in God, which she viewed as her number one source of support. Like most of the other traders interviewed, partnering with others or joining an association was not worth the trouble. Specifically, she felt that associations would rob her of some of her autonomy and agency to make decisions about her business as she saw fit because of their rules and regulations. Furthermore, her experience with partnership ended up in antagonism and quarrels and so she had no interest in any future partnerships.

**Onyi**

Onyi, who sells groundnuts, is a young woman in her twenties. To her, Lagos was a land full of opportunity where one could make it if one were willing to hustle. In Lagos, one sells goods at a decent price compared to selling in a rural area where other people either grow their own crops or have little to no disposable income. She occupies a middle ground between a hawker and a stationary trader. Instead of going through the traffic jams with her tray on her head like most hawkers, she finds
hot spots in certain busy regions, and positions herself there until she is asked to move. While some might describe her job as difficult and maybe even dangerous, she did not seem to think so, and viewed it as pretty straightforward, requiring flexibility in bad weather or adverse situations such as when her and other traders are driven from their positions. Flooding is rampant in the city during the rainy season, and it is often a struggle to find a spot where one can still be seen. In addition, traders are sometimes asked to leave without warning by Lagos state officials seeking to decongest the streets or by the authorities in charge of new housing or office developments in the area. She was frustrated however for being persecuted for choosing to do honest work instead of stealing. Her sole source of support was her mother who she regarded as a sort of business mentor who had made something of herself by selling water and soft drinks. Another feature of her interview that provides an important counter-narrative to the negative stereotypes of street traders was her desire to make a difference. As she stated, “I must do one tin wey they go see history, them go say dis be the pesin wey do am...dey go dey use am remember me”.

Hamza

Hamza is a man in his late thirties to early forties who had recently moved to Lagos from the north due to escalating violence from the Boko Haram sect. Not only had their activities affected people’s safety, but their ability to make a decent living. He was clear that his focus was to come to Lagos, make money, and go back to the

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14 “I have to do something that when people look at history, they will remember me.”
north. He was scrupulously neat with his fruit arranged beautifully, and his robe buttoned all the way to his neck despite the intense heat. The whole time we talked, he multitasked, continuing to cut and prepare fruit for customers. During our interview, an “official” in uniform came by the stand and began to shout at him, questioning his presence in the space. A self-described man of peace, he did not even seem flustered and continued to speak in a quiet, professional tone, refusing to be bated. I learned that these intimidation tactics were part of larger dance which resulted in the extortion of bribes from traders. Some of these “officials” are merely security guards in uniform who use the tenuous situation roadside traders are in to their advantage. In this way, roadside traders are constantly conducting business between a rock and a hard place, unable to get relief from the authorities. The contribution he wished he could make to the country was to supply the government and law enforcement with weapons to combat the expanding resources of Boko Haram.

**Danladi**

While my conversation with Danladi was short, it was very insightful. He is a man in his forties who sold ice-cream. He is one of the many street traders utilized by large corporations to sell their products in the congested streets. This is a long-standing business model utilized by many organizations in Nigeria and it demonstrates the blurred line between the formal and informal sector. Rather than being separate parts of the economy, they are very interdependent, and the informal economy performs many key services such as this for the formal sector. For Danladi,
Lagos was an ideal location because it was where the money was, and in his mind, money was power and action was made possible by money. His ideal situation would be to have a business where he had people working for him. He was a devout Muslim and felt his number one source of support was Allah. To him, it was pointless to talk to anyone but Allah about his problems because everyone else had problems that were just as profound.

Ronke

Despite incredible odds, some traders like Onyi’s mother are able to accomplish immense success from their earnings. Ronke for instance, who was a woman in her thirties, owned her own land with her husband, and sold on the roadside in front of their property. Strangely, while she was a land owner, she was still subject to people that are referred to as “the owners of the land”. She was not the only one to reference these people, and there seemed to be a silent acceptance of this system of authority though no one was able to give me a clear explanation of who exactly these people were. One possibility is that they are somehow affiliated with the Oba, the traditional head of Lagos. She was very content with the fact that her vegetables moved quickly unless there was a fast. She worked in an area where there were enough Muslims to cause a slump in sales during fasting season. She shed some light on the occupational hazards that street traders have to deal with in the absence of proper equipment. In her case, the process of smoking fish was an extremely unpleasant experience, so much so that she described it as the hardest part of her job. Like many of the other wives I spoke to, her husband was the person
she turned to when problems came up. Familial ties are crucial in Lagos where there are high levels of public mistrust, which unfortunately in many cases are warranted.

**Musa**

Musa was a young man in his late twenties to early thirties who shared a stall with friends in an unlicensed market area in front of a housing estate. He sold potatoes, carrots, and other vegetables. Initially, I almost passed him up for an interview because his English was very limited but he was determined to participate. Unlike many of the traders I interviewed, he was part of an association in Plateau, Jos which is located in the north of Nigeria, and produces some of the best fruits and vegetables in the country. This was where he got his supply of merchandise. Musa is part of a complex web of street traders who support rural-urban movement of food around the country. Since Nigeria is a very religious country, it is no surprise that Musa like many of the others I interviewed viewed his faith as a key source of strength and support, and a way to make sense of and transcend daily challenges.

**Ore**

Ore was an elderly woman in her fifties with two university age sons who stood close by as I interviewed their mother. She sold bags of oil and other cooking products on the roadside, and had her own shop, which was rather beaten down, but better than what many have. Her main motivator was profit and her family, and she was part of a group that collected contributions and dispersed money to members that needed help. Also, in order to sell certain products in the area, she
was required to join the “group”. She also talked about a group of people she called *Ijebu* who come into town from a neighboring rural area, position themselves where all the traffic is, and supposedly steal all the customers. She also shed some light on the gender and cultural norms within the informal sector. According to her, there were certain products that Yoruba men “don’t sell”, i.e. tomatoes, peppers and other produce items. The only men that supposedly sold these items were Hausa men. Not only are certain jobs strongly gendered, but apparently, certain kinds of food products were gendered as well. As a whole, as can be observed around the world, certain genders and ethnicities become associated with different trades and skills, and Nigeria is no exception. Hausa men for instance are supposed to make the best *suya*, and the male dominance of *suya* spits around town can almost be likened to how grilling and barbecuing has been designated as a male cooking activity in the West.

**Clara**

Clara is a woman in her forties who sells peppers, tomatoes, and cooking condiments; she also offers pepper grinding services; and her shop stood beside a rain-damaged road and was flanked with other shops. She was one of the few who were actively involved in an association, and apparently, the pepper and tomato association was mandatory for all who sold in the area. One of her primary struggles with the group was the intergroup tension that was a prominent feature during meetings. Since the Ajah-Lekki area is predominantly Yoruba speaking, there was no provision made for those who spoke different ethnic languages and she was
just expected to catch up. She believed that in Nigeria as a whole, this lack of a single national language spoken by everyone was a source of division, intolerance, and intergroup tension. More than the other interviewers, she made a connection between her conduct in business and the larger political and social environment in the country, and felt personally responsible for training her children to be honest. While she was grateful to the association for helping her with tasks such as securing a business location, she was not naïve about the group’s shortcomings and issues. These will be discussed further in the next chapter.

**Temi**

Temi is a woman in her twenties who works with her mother in a large *buka* located outside a large organization in the Ajah-Lekki area. When I arrived at the space, there were surprisingly few customers for lunch time. This was partly because of the seasonal fast as well as the fact that they had moved their shop yet again to accommodate the organization’s expansion. She was a political science student in a local university and was finishing up her certificate. In particular, she seemed very passionate about socio-economic disparities in Nigeria and how there was a lack of policies to aid the upward movement of everyday workers. While she was a student, she did not see herself trying to get a job in her degree area after graduation. Youth unemployment in Nigeria is astronomical, and to her, it made more sense to go into some kind of business where there would be a steady flow of patronage, such as hairdressing. She represents the diversity in this population group as a whole; many straddle the fence between conventional aspirations like
going to college and getting an “office job” and making it work with whatever business ventures are available.

**Bola**

Bola is a soft spoken woman in her early thirties who had made the transition from being a hawker to having her own stationary stall. She described hawking as extremely difficult work and was grateful to have somewhere stable to sell her plantains. She had been at her location since 1997. One reason for her stability was that she had a landlord. This was rather confusing as she was just on the side of the road and not in an actual shop. In the street trade business, location is everything. If your stall is located in a rapidly developing area, then you will likely be uprooted. However, developing areas often have a lot of traffic and are thus more profitable. Like Ore, she also had a problem with the Ijebu people who she viewed as a hindrance to her business. Particularly heinous to her was that it was difficult for her to compete with them because they came straight from the rural areas bearing fresh produce, and were mobile marketers. It appears that in the apparent chaos of street trade, there are unspoken rules of fairness and protocol that when broken, give rise to turf wars. While traders do not have legal ownership of some of the spaces they occupy, there is a sort of symbolic ownership, and dictates that govern how that space ought to be used.

**Asha**

Asha is a young woman in her twenties who runs an orange stall on the roadside of a market area. Out of all the interviewers, she was probably the most
vehemently against joining any kind of association which she saw as a waste of money. I learned that to become part of some associations, you are not only required to pay monthly dues, but must present yourself at one of the weekly meetings with a crate of soft-drinks, in some cases liquor, and different items, as well as an introductory fee. While some associations do help in terms of assisting traders in securing a location, there is a lack of accountability and transparency to the process and in many ways associational life reflects the undemocratic culture in larger society. Depending on the type of produce you sell, you must be part of the formal association regardless of whether you find it beneficial or not. From my conversations with the traders, I was unclear as to whether these associations were linked to the state government or they were autonomous. Thus, associational life which has the potential to be an instrument of democracy and resistance to problematic policies of the state becomes a hegemonic system where rent-seeking behaviors continue to thrive.

**Toro**

Toro is a student in a local university and sold smoked fish on the roadside of a popular market. Like Ronke, she mentioned that the process of smoking fish was very unpleasant and one of the hardest parts of her job. In the absence of proper smoking ovens (and the funds to obtain such equipment), many traders used makeshift spits and available firewood, smoking fish, meat, and other items over open flames and smoke. Interestingly, while competition was intense between traders, she described the area she worked as a family where one got the opportunity to talk
to people every day. At the same time, she emphasized the necessity of standing your ground and fighting with a few people. Like any set of organizational relationships, the interactions between traders are complex and multifaceted, characterized by solidarity and a suspicious separateness. While many are reticent about joining associations, they are heavily connected with others through familial, kinship and friendship networks, preferring these over new, formal ties.

**Dipo**

Dipo is a young man in his twenties who helps out at his mother’s friend’s fish shop. In the absence of opportunities for youth unemployment and even channels for discovering different employment opportunities, familial and friendship networks play a crucial role in matching out-of-work youth to employment opportunities. Dipo had some interesting thoughts about the economic pressures that men in particular face in Nigeria. These pressures demonstrate that patriarchy is traumatic for both men and women. Men in Nigeria are expected to dominate at all times and in all things. He felt that things were easier for women because society did not expect the same things from them.

All of these profiles in one way or another emphasize different aspects of the phenomenon under study which is socio-economic struggle as embodied by Lagos roadside food traders. While there are multiple layers to these accounts of struggle, in the following chapter, I will synthesize these accounts into some central problematics, and sketch out the contours of the lived experience of these traders more closely.
CHAPTER SIX

…but the thing wey me I dey see there na they supposed to no dey disturb us because na hustle we dey hustle...no be say you go thief something...them say you should dey work, and then you go still dey disturb us...

...what I think is that they shouldn’t disturb us because we are just hustling...it’s not as if I am stealing anything...they say you should work but they will still disturb us...

-Onyi

A complex blend of frustration, resignation, determination, confusion, and optimism can be perceived in stories of socioeconomic struggle that the traders shared. Interestingly, the traders did not primarily describe their experiences of struggle in terms of corruption, unless I introduced the term. This was quite surprising as corruption “talk” is pervasive in multiple layers of society and is constant mode of sense-making about the socioeconomic condition of Nigeria. Therefore, the themes presented in this chapter shift focus away from the formal discourse of corruption.

To capture the “full mystery” of socioeconomic struggle as lived by Lagos street traders in thematic form would be impossible; instead, the essential themes presented in this chapter are a means of discovery and exploration (Van Manen, 1984, p. 21). They are “fasteners, foci, or threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated” (p. 20). In response to the central
question, “What is it like to be a Lagos roadside food trader?” I offer the proceeding themes.

The Life of a Street Trader Involves Varying Degrees of Struggle for Space

To say that Lagos is crowded is an understatement. It might be more accurate to describe it as bursting at the seams. As a result, space comes at a very high price. Space is almost always a salient metric from which to begin a discussion of Lagos lived experience, or lived experience anywhere for that matter. Space can be considered in more mathematical terms as length, breadth, and height or it could be examined in terms of how Onyi describes it above; linked to the enactment of identity and agency. Understanding space phenomenologically rather than geometrically or physiologically seems to be fundamental to understanding the meaning of human existence (Chiang, 2011, p. 41). The lived experience of space for the Lagos street trader is characterized by struggle to attain and retain it for the purposes of enterprise. The struggle for space is also a struggle for meaning; a location where one’s aspirations and identity can be performed.

Unsurprisingly, a recurring challenge of doing business in Lagos noted by the traders was “finding” space. An obvious economic consequence of the shortage of space in Lagos is the exorbitant price of real estate. Lagos is the New York of Nigeria, and has become increasingly more crowded and more expensive to live and work in. Combined with low levels of public trust, a lack of established systems of
accountability, and poor law enforcement practices, landlords often demand one to two years rent in advance to protect themselves from shady tenants. As we conversed, Ufong described the difficulties of renting an “inside” or indoor space:

Ufong: “Something that is hard about doing business in Lagos is having space is very hard...or renting or having money to rent shop...you know shop is so expensive in Lagos.”

Me: “...like if you wanted to get a small shop like how much is rent?”

Ufong: “Like this area now, before you can get a shop...the lowest one maybe inside will be 15,000 Naira per month and you pay 2 years in advance...”

Me: “That’s a lot of money.”

With the high cost of rent, other prices have mounted. Bimbo for instance expressed concern at the high price of goods in the market. While some tradespeople have been able to gain enough success to rent or even buy their own shops, the average street trader is excluded from normative spaces of enterprise such as shopping malls and trade complexes due to high rent costs.
In response and out of necessity, street traders have reconfigured highways, residential streets, undeveloped or unclaimed land, and marketplace aisles into spaces of trade, much to the chagrin of the Lagos state government and some residents.

Traders negotiate space shortages in different ways. Rather than characterizing traders as strictly itinerant or stationary, it could be said that their spatial choices exist somewhat on a continuum. Some traders who sell closer to the highways erect posts on the side of the road and dart back and forth to meet cars. Others might have their children or work partners selling in the streets while they are themselves located at the roadside. However, the move from hawker to stationary trader is considered by many as a progression in the attainment of space since hawking is extremely hazardous and dangerous work. Hawkers walk several miles a day in the sun and rain, in and out of traffic jams and busy city centers,
risking being knocked over for a small profit margin. Bola was glad that she no longer had to do it.

However, the challenges do not end with the attainment of space. Even in marketplaces, one might still be driven out, as in Ufong’s case:

Me: “So do they just ask people to leave like that?”

Ufong: “Yes...just like that.”

Me: “Is it because it’s too crowded or...?”

Ufong: “I don’t know...even that time people were not even much....I just went to the market...I just got there one day....they just said they don’t want this line again...”

The struggle over space involves the ongoing task of retaining that space due to rapid development in different parts of the Ajah-Lekki area. As Temi explained:

...this is a wastage of money...because we have not used up to two months here before we started...my mom alone gave them 10,000 Naira...and they came last two weeks...and they came to request another money and we were now like “Is it every month we will be paying?”...instead of this we should have a lock shop...if that is what they want to do, they will give us a lock shop....not using all these rules...if the person won’t turn against my advice...I wouldn’t advise anybody to come here and sell because this place is not a peaceful place at all because they might come at any time....this place is developing every second, minute, hour...

15 Stalls are usually arranged in lines by the roadsides and aisles of markets for maximum visibility
As described in chapter four, there have been concerted attempts to “clean-up” city spaces, the most extreme of which is destroying stalls or driving traders away with little to no warning. Temi expressed her frustration at this practice which she and her mother had been subjected to on more than one occasion:

...we were here before then they moved us to the other side...they’ve been building and building and building and it’s not easy...and now the policy of Fashola now is that he doesn’t want you to stay on the main road so just look at it now! Just imagine. When they send us out of this place, where are we going to go? Are we going to the mud?

In Lagos, where people are always on the lookout for enterprise, some have capitalized on the desperation of traders to hold onto specific spaces, including crooked security guards. While I was speaking to Hamza, a “uniformed” man suddenly materialized and began to shout at him, questioning his right to set up his stall in that particular space. I was informed by Hamza’s friend nearby that this man was not in fact a policeman but “security” looking to make some money. These intimidation tactics usually precede demands for “payment”.

The struggle over space both physical and symbolic. Public discourse around space and roadside traders is complex and paradoxical. My fieldwork began shortly after one of the latest “clean-up” sweeps in the Ajah-Lekki area, and the hawkers had been pushed from the traffic aisles to the margins of the highway. The effects of these endeavors are usually short-lived and the hawkers eventually return. When they do, it is not uncommon to hear people moan, “So these hawkers have come
back again” as if their presence in the roads and the risking of their lives were merely an attempt to annoy everyone. Sometimes, traders and hawkers are blamed for the congestion on the highways and roadsides. Such accounts fail to mention underlying factors such as the over-crowding of the city due to rural-urban drift, artifacts of poor highway construction and city planning such as the massive “roundabouts” that create traffic bottle necks on the Ajah-Lekki Expressway, the lack of pedestrian bridges, failing infrastructure, ill-considered road design without convenient turning lanes, exits, and U-turn points, and lack of governance. While traders do exacerbate these issues in some ways, scapegoating them for city congestion is not only unfair, but has serious symbolic implications. This is just one of the ways that street traders are delegitimized, maligned, and erased from public conversation about the direction of entrepreneurship in contemporary Nigeria.

Unfavorable constructions of roadside traders and urban space exist side by side with everyday discourses that express the key role that roadside traders have come to play in the lives of city dwellers. It could be argued that some traders’ use of space while imperfect is rather efficient. Some are conveniently located along the highways where drivers or pedestrians can stop without straying too far from the highway. Ufong’s stall for instance is located advantageously right in front of one of the many “informal” U-turn spots located in the middle of the highway. As a result, her business is brisk. Certain spaces on the highway have become marked by vibrant street trade. In the vivid style that Nigerians give directions, you might hear, “Keep on driving until you reach that place where all those Hausa boys sell
pepper…” As families make their way home in the ever-present go-slow, the observation that there is no more bread or plantain in the fridge is a cue to immediately examine the roadsides for the next available stall. This experience can be likened to looking for the most conveniently located 7-Eleven.

![Figure 6.2 Stopping for fruit on a rainy day](image)

The struggle for space is sometimes mediated by local associations organized around specific produce. Clara’s pepper and tomato association for instance helped confirm that her space was not too close to other traders selling the same product. For a membership fee and other tokens, such as a crate of drinks and liquor, she was able to gain access to this group. While I was unable to get a clear description from the traders of the leadership of these produce associations, Clara made it clear that
attendance in the pepper and tomato association was compulsory in her area. Those without association benefits either reconstruct their broken stalls or find another location through word-of-mouth or other means. Despite these struggles to obtain and retain space, Shukurat paradoxically said, “Lagos is fine, and it’s free...so you can work anywhere you like.” For traders like Hamza, running from the Boko Haram wahala in the North, his stall in Lagos is a haven where he can make money, no matter how temporary or stressful. The struggle over space in Lagos that pervades the lifeworld of street traders is far from romantic; it is a war of necessity that must be engaged and that the traders continue to fight relentlessly as there are few alternatives. The ongoing contests over space illustrate organizational creativity in the midst of enormous constraint, and provide a possible entry point for organizing socioeconomic transformation in Nigeria.

The Life of a Street Trader Involves Struggle with and within Place

Socioeconomic struggle as lived by street traders is deeply placed, i.e. it involves grappling with the social and economic opportunities and shortcomings associated with a particular place, but also the process by which traders strive to become part of the social and economic meaning and fabric of that place.

Nigeria, as lived place and the site of socioeconomic struggle is hardly ever described in moderate terms. On one end, accounts like Clara’s abound about the warmth of local culture and the closeness of relationships that help mitigate every day experiences of struggle:
...we are like brother’s keeper. We take care of each other...like this business that I am doing is not come out of my husband’s pocket alone; the initiative is coming from the church...they want to know that you are able to feed yourself, not depending on somebody alone; that’s what I love in this country because...in Nigeria any home you enter whatever you want to eat...they will welcome you, cook for you...I love my country.

On the other hand, complaints about the incompetence and negligence of leadership are always present, specifically as it relates to the distribution of resources. Temi believed that core of the problem was selfishness:

Selfishness...that’s our politics...They are in there stealing the money...let’s just put it that way you know...there are a set of people who are just sitting there...They don’t care about the people; they doesn’t care about them at all. They only want the interest of their own and their children.

Shukurat referenced this same selfishness of leadership when she said,

“...leaders...they will eat the money by themselves, between themselves they don’t use to give us money...we don't use to see the money.”

Labake had so much pent up frustration that she shouted most of the interview:

It is almost impossible to achieve any goal in this country. Yes I want to do many things but anything I make in this business, we use to eat me and my children. There is nothing left for anything we have from hand to mouth...I have been here for years selling beside the road. Nothing has improved. No I have not moved to any other place. Let things improve and meet me here.
Lagos, as lived place also defies moderate descriptions. It is the living manifestation of the popular statement, "Naija na war oh\(^{16}\)", or as Musa who hails from a more tranquil state in the north of Nigeria plainly put it, “I no like this wahala...Lagos na wahala.” The struggle is present not because of a lack of economic activity but in the excess of activity.

In terms of scale and infrastructure, Lagos is struggling to house its 20 million inhabitants and those who continue to arrive every day. Producing a third of Nigeria’s GDP, “Lagos has become almost as alluring to yield-hungry investors as it is to the 4,000 or so economic migrants who turn up each day” (Cocks, 2013, para. 4). Everyone wants a piece of the pie. A local I talked to discussed how foreign investors continue to pour in, determined stake to stake their claim. “The hotels are full!” he said emphatically. In the beautiful ocean fronts of Victoria Island (and the former site of the famous Bar Beach), the evidence of increased foreign investment continues to rise every day. Eko Atlantic City, dubbed the “Hong Kong” of Lagos is being built by the Lebanese Chagoury Group on reclaimed land, and will be the most exclusive area in Lagos (Lukacs, 2014). A driver said to me as we rode by the construction site, “They say it’s for the big boys”. The Dubai-like project has drawn much controversy due to ecological and economic inequality concerns. In the words of Lukacs (2014), “protected by guards, guns, and an insurmountable gully – real estate prices – the rich will shield themselves from the rising tides of poverty and a sea that is literally rising” (para. 8). However, many see this project as an advantage.

\(^{16}\) Nigeria is war
for Lagos; a way to create new jobs and a way for Lagos to take its rightful place in
the global economic hierarchy. Diasporic Nigerians, humorously and somewhat
acidly known as IJGB’s\textsuperscript{17} are increasingly making their way back with shiny foreign
degrees, hoping to make money in a socially responsible way or do their bit for
social change. Residents from Nigerian states that are not experiencing the
economic boom in Lagos are flocking in daily. “Lagos may also assume the role of an
archetype for the urbanization process at work in the global South” (Ilesanmi, 2010,
p. 243). This is an archetype that is exemplified by the striking paradox of vast
demographic expansion in a context of extensive economic decline (Ilesanmi, 2010,
p. 244). Lagos as lived place is a site of socioeconomic struggle where a variety of
local and global actors intersect, some of which have more power to symbolically
and materially engage in the battle for Lagos. Whose economic vision for Lagos will
prevail? This question is inextricably linked to what groups are considered to be the
“right step” towards modernization and development.

Unfortunately, more often than not, street traders have found themselves
constructed on the wrong side of economic progress. Human rights issues such as
child labor and endangerment, and the obviously dangerous aspects of hawking
have not helped their cause. Still street traders insert themselves into the Lagos
economic discourse by constructing themselves as enterprising, hardworking, and
existing within the overall hustle. As Ese said, “If you work hard in Lagos you can

\textsuperscript{17} This stands for I Just Got Back
make it...if you are lazy you will not succeed. Stating the advantages of trading in Lagos as opposed to “the village” or rural areas, Onyi said:

...there is nothing you can carry come Lagos... you say this is how much you want to sell it...they must bought.... yes like now this ground nut you can’t carry am go village say this one is hundred naira they can’t bought it...that is one...and two Lagos...money dey there if you dey hustle...

Anything your bring to Lagos, you can set a price and they will buy it...like these groundnuts, you cannot take them to the village and say, “this is 100 Naira”; they can’t but it...that’s one ...then two, Lagos...the money is here if you hustle...

Ufong, praised Lagos effusively saying, “For me there is no state like Lagos, you understand, because me I have been to other states; I’ve seen the way they behave...in fact Lagos is the place!” Lagos is where people go to “make it”, and has come to represent money and prosperity. Similarly, Clara said: “Lagos is the center of excellence...whatever you do you will bring out money...if you are in Lagos and you are not prospering, I wonder...it’s a land of opportunity where you can get what you want.” Most of the traders, expressed their work lives in purely economic terms, providing a reminder that other reasons for work such as personal fulfilment and “self-actualization” are a luxury to many around the world. In gold rush-like descriptions many of the traders attested that they liked working in Lagos, not just because of some romantic attachment to the place but because they could do brisk
business, and materially enter into socioeconomic struggle in a significant way. Adedunni was grateful that at least she could wake up in the morning and have somewhere to go to for work. Like Danladi said with reference to the crowds, “the population dey here more than other place...and money dey here...anywhere population dey, na there money dey...” Most of the traders I spoke to make very little profit per unit, but due to the masses of people, there is a chance to make profit based on sales volume. In spite of the harsh conditions in the city, they were willing to persevere. Ore said that as long as she is eating, drinking and is clothed that she is happy to be living in Nigeria.

However, there is some danger in over-selling narratives of resilience and perseverance, which can be easily translated into an excuse for not developing necessary social services. To avoid veering into stereotypes of the African content to suffer and smile, it should be noted that as much as the traders appreciate the advantages afforded by Lagos, they do not necessarily enjoy the break-neck hustle, especially when it affords little opportunity for upward mobility. The traders’ perseverance should not be interpreted as contentment with the status quo. Ronke expressed a desire to expand her business into wholesale food supply. Musa wanted to be an importer. Bose who sold out of a dilapidated buka wanted the government to step up and make more shops available so that they could conduct their business in “nicer” environments. Shukurat desired to have people work for her. In fact, she humorously noted, “I want to achieve many things oh. I want to have money. I want

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18 The population is more than any other place; where there is population, there is money.”
to build house. I want to buy motor\(^{19}\). I want to buy plane. I wish to buy everything!"

Danladi poignantly expressed his aspirations:

\[ I \text{ never enjoy anything now but I just dey manage this work...maybe get your own company...get boys wey go help you do the work so every day by day, maybe like one million a day dey enter your account....I never enjoy now; I just dey continue dey softly-softly...which time go reach when God say my time to get money. } \]

I am not enjoying anything now; I am just managing this work...maybe one day I will get my own company and get boys to help do the work so that maybe a million a day will enter my account...I don't enjoy now...I am just continuing patiently waiting for the time when God will say it is my time get money.

Despite these challenges, food traders have capitalized on the immense opportunity present in Lagos. There are 20 million people in the city, all of them have to eat, and most of them must do so cheaply. Street traders feed the city quite efficiently at affordable rates. If all street traders were suddenly eliminated from the city in favor of grocery chains, this would significantly affect the price of food. The broke college student and struggling young professional, depend on the \textit{buka} for a cheap, but filling and delicious lunch. The parent on a tight budget who cannot afford the grocery chains shops at open air markets and enclaves of food sellers by certain

\(^{19}\) Car
highways. Interestingly, buying from street traders can be viewed as a way to support local farming especially as many street traders I interviewed get their items directly from nearby farmers. However, they transport this food at incredible cost, traveling to neighboring rural areas, paying for their own transportation to and from the village, and risk getting trapped in terrible traffic jams on the way back and losing some of the day’s profit. However, they never boasted about this in conversation. In fact, what might be observed as a hardship to an outsider was actually constructed as making life easier. In conversation with Ufong, she talked about how she transports food:

Me: “So with all these challenges is there something that you do every day to make things easier…just simple things that you do?”

Ufong: “Things I do that make the business easier for me know I go outside Lagos to buy these things…I get cheaper and bring it to Lagos then I sell it you know within two three days it finishes that is why I gain a lot of customers.”

Me: “So do you have to travel far?”

Ufong: “Yes I travel far.”

Me: “How many times a week do you have to travel?”

Ufong: “Like twice in a week.”

Me: “So twice in a week...do you just go very early in the morning...”

Ufong: “I might leave today; then I come back tomorrow.”

Adedunni said that as long as she was making profit, she didn’t find anything difficult about Lagos. Even Onyi who exists somewhere between stationary trader
and hawker described her role in a matter-of-fact way when I asked her about difficulties in her work:

*The hardest thing? There is no hardest thing. This one I will go bought it...I will siddon, select it, after I select it finish, I will leave my pikin for house, carry am come outside....and then the rain dey come nothing can hide...if the sun too much...nothing can do...you go dey inside that rain...if they pursue you, you go carry your market put am for head and let them go then go then drop am back*

The hardest thing? There is no hardest thing. I buy the groundnut, sit down and pick what I am going to sell. When I finish, I leave my child at the house (with her mother), and carry the groundnuts outside...if the rain comes, you can't hide. If the sun comes, there is nothing you can do...you will stay inside that rain...if they pursue you, you take your tray, put it on your head until they go, and then drop it back

Struggles in place also take on an intergroup dimension as there are fights for territory within the ranks of street traders. Ore and Bola complained of “mobile marketers” from Ijebu and Ekpe, nearby rural areas. These people apparently come in from the rural areas with fresh produce and sell in highly advantageous spots. Ore and Bola didn't think it was fair and wanted those people driven away. Thus the struggle over wealth distribution extends beyond the classic battle between the elite and the under-privileged. It exists between street traders who have created rules about the proper ways to benefit and who should benefit. Still, there was also a
sense of intergroup solidarity in Adedunni’s accounts of how everyone was just striving to make it and that you could never find a lazy person in Lagos.

In all of this, it is impossible to ignore the Nigerian capacity for humor. Some even described Lagos with all its problems as fun. As Ufong pointed out:

Ufong: “Okay I enjoy my business because I meet with different people...different characters (laughter).

Me: “Can you tell me something...can you tell me somebody funny that you have met before...?”

Ufong: “...somebody might come now, “ha madam how much is this your watermelon...those big size?”....you say maybe 1000 naira...some of them, they scream “WHY ONE THOUSAND NAIRA! FOR WHAT? HA MADAM WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME RUBBISH?” Me I don't get angry. Some of them they will talk “ha madam you don’t used to angry”...me I am a business person...I can't eat them...”

In classic Nigerian style, emotional outbursts are considered to be extremely funny, even in the moment. In fact, while Labake ranted about Fashola and the government during her interview, her nearby traders chuckled at her intense display of anger. In short, in pondering what the lives of street traders are really like, I conclude by saying that they are constantly engaged in struggles with place; to insert their meaning into a place that already seems determined by so many other powerful actors. This also involves struggle with the physical limitations of that place with few resources to overcome those limitations. Still, there is much organizational potential to be found in their love for their city’s enterprising environment. Like entrepreneurs everywhere else in the world, they are doing the best that they can with what they have, embracing the hustle for what it is, and in some cases with good humor.
The Life of a Street Trader is characterized by Relational Struggles

After being shouted down and sent packing by an angry trader, I had cause to reflect on my assumption that traders would want to connect with me or anyone for that matter. Without thinking about how annoying an inquiring presence would be, I invaded this trader’s space, as others probably have, under the presumption that her time was up for grabs. There is always an assumption that the less privileged will want to connect through conversation without pondering the cost of that connection. To be a street trader is to negotiate the cost of relationships and connection. The precariousness and difficulty of everyday life and work makes decisions about whom and what to include in your life particularly salient.

Nigerian culture is often typified as collectivist (Hofstede Center, 2015); however, my interactions with the street traders revealed several problematics of this supposed collectivity. Overwhelmingly, the traders were reluctant to form partnerships, be members of associations or in some cases, get too close to certain people as they felt it would just make their struggle more difficult in many ways. I had this conversation with Ese:

Me: “Would you ever join any kind of association?”
Ese: “Mm-mm!”
Me: “Why?”
Ese: “Because of wahala....I don’t want problem...if I doesn’t have any work to do, I will find my way with my children...”

In reference to the sometimes volatile interpersonal relations she encountered, Asha explained that if you had too much patience with people, in this case
customers, they would get out of hand. “The person cuss me I will cuss my own back”, she said indignantly. Due to the contentious nature of some of her interactions, she was even careful about who she offered advice to:

Me: “Okay so if somebody comes to you and say I want to start doing this business that you are doing, give me advice of what I should do what I should not do...”

Asha: “The business wey you dey do...dey go take am dey go follow you fight.”

Me: “...so if you start teaching them they will start fighting with you?”

Asha: “Yes.”

Ufong had had an experience with a partner in a former business who she said had threatened to kill her after a quarrel. Needless to say, she had no interest in any more partnerships and was content to conduct business on her own, highly valuing her autonomy. She also disliked the regulation of prices by the fruit association and felt that it was a threat to her ability to make independent decisions about the price of her fruit. Overall, a central feature of our discussion in this area was that there had to be a real economic incentive for joining an association, as fees and dues were expected, and their first priority was taking care of themselves and their families.

Labake said, “Yes, we have an association but I have not joined because the membership fee is too high for me. I have to look after my children first. I cannot afford to pay the membership fee.” Bose was very pragmatic in her view on associations which she would not join unless she had the assurance that in times of need, they would offer financial assistance. For those living not month-to-month but

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20 They will use it as an opportunity to fight with you
day-to-day, losing a day’s wages to a meeting that might not even be helpful was not worth it. Associational life is rendered even more difficult because in Lagos, one cannot simply “swing by” a meeting unless one lives in very close proximity to the meeting site. Trips are planned carefully around rush hour traffic and bad roads. I heard a comment about how one does not run several “errands” in a day in Lagos; instead you hope you can get the most important thing done.

Other reasons for the reticence to be part of associations had to do with the sense of temporariness of place. Bose said she did not know of any local associations because she was in a temporary spot; an underdeveloped piece of land in an estate which she would be promptly moved from when the owner decided to start developing. Why get attached to a particular location or community?
However, despite these challenges and the somewhat low incentive for partnership and association, some of the traders were members of local groups. Temi educated us on the necessity of sometimes going along with unsavory social arrangements, one of which she called “God-Fatherism” which required a trader wanting to start a business to pay homage to a central figure:

Temi: “You know, you want to get something...like there are these people that they call Baba Isalé21 (I laugh). Eh-heh! God-Fatherism...shey you get22?”

Me: “You have to now go and...”

Temi: “You know! You will be begging them...”

However, other group memberships were not described so insidiously. Adedunni was a member of a Muslim association called NASFAT, that she said offers her assistance when she needs it and patronizes her side business selling honey. Clara credited an empowerment program at her local church for her start in business as noted above. Religious organizations play a key role in community organizing not only because some of them provide tangible support, but because they give access to social networks that people perceive as more trustworthy. Due to widespread mistrust, these kinds of organizations are an important mediator to organizing. Also, Shukurat spoke favorably of a local microfinance bank known as LAPO which offers short term, low interest loans to small to medium enterprises.

An important type of association to consider is those organized around specific types of produce. For instance, Clara was a full time member of the local

21 Directly translates in Yoruba as Father of the Bottom. Connotatively, could mean the Father of those at the Bottom.
22 Shey you get means “do you understand?”
tomato and pepper seller’s association. Bola was also part of a fruit seller’s association. Some of these groups support traders in finding spaces as mentioned above, but also in the resolution of disputes. Bola for instance experienced a conflict with another trader who suddenly decided to demand more money for some produce Bola had purchased from her. She brought up the problem at their meeting and the mediators made them both share the extra cost. There were also associations within the marketplaces Asha and Bola work that have “elders” who help in everyday problem solving. Other connections were a little less formal. Temi, her mother, and other traders in their immediate area contribute money to a central pot to “pay off” officials. Their group has a president and a treasurer. Both Hamza and Musa had partnered with others to help them gain access to a regular supply of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Still, even those affiliated with associations were not naïve to the shortcomings of these associations. Clara’s narrative about her experience joining her association at the start of her business demonstrates some of the traders want nothing to do with local associations:

Immediately I started, somebody came to me and said “are you a registered member?” I said “please how do I become a member?”...if they give you their secret...meeting day is so, so, and so day; come there and you will get some information, so I went there...I had to meet one of the Mamas...she said okay, come so, so, and so time, that it’s going to be like general ...so when they start, “they said who are you?” ...They gave me the floor...I said I want to
know what can I do to become their member...the list of things in fact, it will blow you off because for you to sell tomato it’s a different thing, for you to have machine\textsuperscript{23} it’s a different thing...2 crates of mineral\textsuperscript{24} for tomatoes....2 crates of mineral for the engine....things were two-two\textsuperscript{25} ...and before I could talk, 2,500 to register...so when I have told them all this, they now sent the group of people to come and check the place whether it’s closer to the next person that is doing the same thing...

In addition, since Yoruba is the primary language spoken in the Ajah area and at the meetings, she had trouble following what was happening. When she mentioned her difficulty, she was told that she was going to have to learn. Not only does interethnic struggle play a role in associational life, but class distinctions can also come into play. As Danladi mentioned:

\begin{quote}
Nigeria, if you get money, people go know you; if you no get money again they no go mind you...na people wey get money na them wey dey siddon they do meeting; person wey no get money no dey do meeting.
\end{quote}

In Nigeria, if you have money, people will know and recognize you; if you don’t have money, nobody pays attention to you...it is people who have money that sit down and do meetings; people who don’t have money don’t do meetings.

\textsuperscript{23} Tomato grinder  
\textsuperscript{24} Soft drinks  
\textsuperscript{25} She had to provide items both for selling tomatoes and peppers and offering grinding services
While many of the traders were focused on their task of providing for themselves and their families, this was not due to a lack of concern for the community or anything external to their own lives. Labake was passionate about economic justice for the masses, and was troubled that the only alternative college graduates had were illegal activities and prostitution because of high rates of youth unemployment. Ufong, Toro, and Ese shared this concern for the youth and also children. Specifically, Asha stated: “I will go the school, give them anything wey I get.” Her statement complicates the stereotype of street traders callously sending their children out into the streets to work. As Ese intimated in the previous chapter, there is no desire for their children to experience their suffering. In fact, one of Labake’s anxieties like many parents in Nigeria were rising school fees for primary and secondary education. In addition, Ronke, Hamza, and Ese, Toro, Musa specifically referenced security issues with Boko Haram. As Ronke stated:

…and then maybe Nigeria have peace, no more problem...not that Boko Haram should come and disturb us should come and kill us we don’t want that....you know when Nigeria have peace...you sef wey dey inside go get peace.

...then maybe Nigeria will have peace and no more problems...we don’t want Boko Haram to disturb us and kill us all...when Nigeria has peace, those within it will have peace.
Clara repeatedly brought up the issue of interethnic discrimination, linking larger issues to unwillingness of people across ethnic lines to love and respect one another:

I would focus on people to change…..love…..if you love yourself… you will look at another person…that’s Gods creation. I am supposed to treat that person as I treat myself…let there be one language…I think there is a language barrier in Nigeria…most of the thing I am selling…some people ask me “do you know this thing?”…I will ask my neighbor, she will tell me in English and I will buy it and when they come, because they see most of the things that they like…they are Igbo they will speak Igbo to me. I will tell them no I am not; some will start to buy; some will just walk away.\(^\text{26}\)

In the midst of these challenges, it is important to question what takes the place of associational and organizational arrangements that are essential to the running of a business. What replaces formal organizational institutional support for those who cannot or will not participate in established associations? Family, friendship and kinship networks played a very prominent role in the lived experience of socioeconomic struggle. Ronke, Bola, Clara, and Ufong turned to their husbands for advice about work issues. Ufong’s husband keeps her company during her late work hours, as sometimes she doesn’t leave her stall until midnight. Onyi and Toro’s mothers were a source of advice and support. Through word-of-mouth, some of the traders helped each other locate spaces for business. Shukurat for instance had

\(^{26}\) Clara who is from Calabar consults with her Igbo neighbor on ingredients to buy to attract different customers. When they see her stock, they assume she is Igbo.
obtained her tiny shop through a contact. Ufong’s trusted group of friends formed an information-sharing network and gave each other financial support:

   At times they go to market, they can call me if they see something where they know that this thing is good; they bring it and we can make money, you understand...we help each other in the money aspect of it...we make small contribution, maybe weekly we give to one person, other week we give to the other person

To connect or not to connect, that is the question; or perhaps it isn't. The key issue question undergirding the decision to connect appears to be “how does this serve me?” Based on past experiences or observations, connecting with associations or others for business is completely out of the question for some due to the high social and economic cost of such connections. Traders like Clara have no choice, and make the most of associational life. Other’s like Ufong organize and collaborate on their own terms, demonstrating that the potential for organizing can be expanded when people have a hand in constructing the rule book.

**The Life of a Street Trader Involves Negotiating a Lack of Resources**

Entrepreneurship is a creative process of organizing, managing an enterprise, and assuming the risk involved in the enterprise (Inyang & Enuoh, 2009, p. 64). Entrepreneurship is difficult and risky anywhere. Combined with the existential challenges of operating a business in the streets of Lagos, it is quite overwhelming to contemplate the daily work life of the traders I interviewed. Like most small business owners and working people in Lagos, the traders wake up very
early to beat the traffic. Those like Ufong who travel to buy produce arise at the crack of dawn. Then as Bimbo informed me, one had to be careful what kind of transportation to board so as not to fall into the hands of kidnappers or 419 people. In the rainy season, the morning commute might involve wading through the flooded streets to catch a bus, sending up a silent prayer that the driver will not get stuck in a watery pothole. This is a common sight in Lagos.

The road in front of Ore’s shop which had just been fixed was already damaged again due to shoddy construction and poor drainage. As one set’s up shop and anticipates the day, the hope is that one’s profit will not be lost to bribes. If you don’t have access to running water, you must fetch it from somewhere. If there is no electric supply (which is the case more often than not) you crank up your generator if you have one. As Shukurat said, “What is difficult is the NEPA. We don’t use to have light every day. They used to use light to flash us flash us flash us...” If you run

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27 Scammers
28 The national electric power authority
out of diesel for your generator, you must purchase it and hopefully there isn’t a
scarcity of fuel, as this will drive up your daily overhead. Since there are few places
for street traders to access small business loans or a line of credit, one might have to
pass up a great opportunity to buy products in bulk as Bola noted. When the day is
over, it is time to battle the traffic again. Some like Ronke had the benefit of having
her own land and working right in front of her house. Ore and Bola also worked near
their homes. However, others do not have that luxury.

When I asked most of the traders if they enjoyed their work, most of the time,
they tied enjoyment of their work to being able to sell off all their goods and make a
profit. Most answered like Ronke who said, “I like this work because anytime wey I
prepare my market people used to buy..."29 As Adedunni stated above, it was a joy to
just be able to come to work, and Ore stated that money was her number one
motivating factor and what made her wake up again the next day and face the grind
again. Due to the considerable chances of making a profit, Lagos was worth the
endless grappling with shortage. There appeared to be an acceptance of the cost of
working in the streets of Lagos that proceeded more from realism than denial.

Labake embodied the frustration many feel at continuing to work and work
and not seeing any real progression or overall upward mobility. The constant
shuffling leaves little strength for social issues. As a local pastor said incredulously
when I asked him about volunteerism, “Volunteer! People are too poor to

29 “I like my work because people buy my products.”
volunteer!” But this is not necessarily for lack of desire. In a conversation with Ronke:

*Me:* “Okay so if say you get time, you get connections wey you fit do something good for Nigeria may Nigeria progress wetin you go do?”

*Ronke:* “…I fit do something…but now that I’m still manage.”

Me: If you could do something to make Nigeria progress, what would it be?

Ronke: I could do something…but right now, I’m still managing.”

These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that street traders live materially and symbolically on the periphery. Lagos’ many limitations can be resisted with just the right amount of money. The traffic doesn’t seem so brutal in a sleek Mercedes with a skilled driver at the helm. The well-off have generators strong enough to provide power to a three story house, or install solar panels on their roofs. Extreme poverty is flanked by elaborate housing estates where one can live in relative peace, quiet, and security.

These hardships only serve to magnify the success of these traders, however precarious that success might be. By reconfiguring the societal margins they live and work in, they have become not only significant economic phenomenon but a cultural fixture. For instance, in many residential areas, roadside traders who seek a less hectic business center than the highways, create mini convenience stores that sell household basics like bread, matches, kerosene, oil, gas, and soap. In my childhood neighborhood of Ijupeju, I remember with fondness an Igbo woman who ran a well-stocked convenience store out of a Volkswagen bus with her young flock of
apprentices. Long after she erected a more permanent structure, her shop was
dubbed “bus place” by residents in the neighborhood. Several Hausa and Fulani men
who worked as guards also constructed mini-stalls where they also sold household
items and child friendly sweets and biscuits. As children, we knew which
proprietors had the best selections of sweets, the best prices, and were the most
likely to dash\textsuperscript{30} you extra sweets as reward for being a regular customer. It appears
that in their negotiation of pervasive shortages, street traders have creatively
carved out a niche that is both resisted and embraced by members of the
community. The notion of entrepreneurial creativity usually evokes images of wide
open spaces ripe for exploration and limitless latent opportunities just waiting to be
uncovered. However, marginality may, ironically stimulate entrepreneurial activity
within the lower classes, various ethnic or immigrant groups, and by women who
cannot otherwise find jobs or career advancement in mainstream institutions (Ray,
1985, p. 96). The lives of street traders in Lagos display a different kind
organizational creativity. It is a creativity birthed within boundaries and in the
margins of society where one must improvise and walk off the beaten path due to
lack of access to the resources. It reveals a key paradox of lived experience:
limitation and invention often dwell in the same space.

\textbf{Street Traders Emphasize the Divine as a Resource}

Religion and attendant references to the divine are as forcefully present in
every day Nigerian discourse as they are absent in many Western public spaces.

\textsuperscript{30} The social custom of giving a free gift of money or other items
After Danladi engaged me in a rousing theological debate about the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity – a notion he found ridiculous as a Muslim man – I had cause to reflect on how the pervasiveness of religion and spirituality enters into organizational lives and negotiations of socioeconomic struggle. Religion is virtually inescapable in Nigeria. The backs of buses and group tricycles known fondly as Keke *Marwa* after the governor that instituted them are garishly printed with references like “God is good” and Insha’Allah[^31]. Nollywood movies featuring bloody rituals, campus vixens, and 419 dealings conclude with the epithet “In God we Trust”. Neighborhood mosques and churches blare prayers and messages over loudspeakers, sometimes at the crack of dawn. Pop stars strangely juxtapose ostentatious displays of materialism and the sexual objectification of dancers with thanks to God. It would not be an exaggeration to say that an account of Nigerian lived experience would be incomplete without a discussion of religion and spirituality. Perhaps less extreme than references to the divine amidst gyrating video vixens is the simple belief that many Nigerians have that they are not alone in the world and that there is a higher power that looks out for them in every area of life. This primacy was also reflected in conversations with the traders whose belief in God governed their ethics, decisions, and aspirations.

First, the divine was a key site of identity construction for the street traders, i.e. the divine was deeply connected to how they made sense of themselves as individuals and community members. Rather than erase this from their daily

[^31]: If God wills.
business dealings, it is a common practice to display one’s religious identity through stickers and artifacts in spaces of enterprise. Also, religious practices are prominent in many organizations, as well the daily lives of street traders. During prayer times, some Muslims can be seen beside their stalls praying and washing their feet, and Christians pray loudly before the day starts, often involving their employees. Amulets and charms hang in full view at the stalls of those who worship traditional deities. While people of different religions openly proselytize one another, open forms of worship are customary and are often respected, even across difference. Asha for instance was watching the fish of another trader who had darted off to a nearby Mosque for prayers.

Second, an acknowledgment of the divine guided many of the traders’ general orientation towards life and business. In a humorous exchange with Danladi, we talked about local disputes:

Me: “You don quarrel with anybody for this area?”

Danladi: “I no dey fight; I’m a gentleman (chuckles) I be son of God.”

Me: “See you (I say in jest at his Fela reference)…okay I will just leave that one.

Danladi: “Even though you slap me sef…”

Me: You just go look?

Danladi: “I no dey fight somebody.”

In terms of orientation towards life, Ufong emphasized how important it was to give thanks to God in everything:

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32 Afrobeat King, Fela Kuti’s hit song “Gentleman” is a popular cultural reference.
...we thank God for everything, no matter the situation no matter the tribulation, I'm still happy to be a Nigerian...You know the Bible says in everything give thanks to God...no matter anything, we give thanks to God...no matter anything we come across every hour every minute every day you know we still keep on...

As mentioned earlier, Clara thought the key to dealing with widespread intergroup struggle was for Nigerian’s to begin to regard one another as God’s creations. She had also refused to produce the required token of Schnapps during her initiation into the pepper and tomato sellers association. Adedunni linked her Muslim faith to her refusal to cheat or swindle anybody in business. She believed that since God was the rewarder of all things, she would not benefit in any way from dishonest practices in her business. In short, a belief and faith in the divine functioned as a moral compass in life and business affairs.

Third, the traders overwhelmingly viewed God as the first stop in problem solving. In the words of Danladi:

*I no go call human being...how I go call human being wey get problem? Na God you go call now. Abi for your own side, na human being you go call?*

*I won’t call on a human being...why would I call a human being who already has problems? It’s God you call. I mean, would you call a human being?*

This link between the divine and problem-solving is connected with membership in faith based organizations which are an important meeting point and space to obtain
counsel and draw strength. Many churches and mosques are beginning programs to assist members with small business loans. In the case of Clara, her pastor – an experienced banker and business man – gave her advice on how to navigate a tricky issue at the start of her business. Onyi in her matter-of-fact way said when I asked what she does in the face of problems, “Eh there is nothing I can do apart from only God.” Ronke talked about how God had given her wisdom on what to do in her business in the first place:

...you must ask God...God is this one my way? If God tell you that it’s your way, eh-heh! You will follow...I used to sell fresh pepper. Anytime I bought that pepper, before I will sell am finish, nobody will ask me except the day it finish or it spoil finish before they begin to ask me...from there I won’t gain anything; I’m losing my money...I go to pastor. As I go to pastor as I go pray they say that’s not my market this is my market...

...you must ask God...God is this my way? If God tells you that it’s your way, fine! You will follow...I used to sell fresh pepper. Nobody would ask for pepper until it was spoilt...I was losing money. I went to my pastor and prayed and he said that was not my market but this is my market...

Unfortunately, the purchase of religious organizations has been compromised by numerous con artists who set up “churches” or “fellowships” to fleece particularly those who are poor and desperate. Some like Clara who is a devout Christian was
especially troubled by this and was particularly watchful of corruption in the name of God. We discussed one situation in particular that vexed her:

“...even in some churches you will see ushers stealing money, you can see somebody, even a pastor lying...Immediately I start this shop, one man just come give me card and said madam you need prayer...I said “Who asked you?!” Because when you start praying like that they will say, "Madam you will have to give"...I was sitting down here and my neighbor now came...the man said, “Ah! They are going to initiate you into the witchcraft world”...I was so annoyed in my ear...I said, “Mr. Man, if you don’t know what to give to this woman, move!”...Did God say that? No!

Openness to faith and spirituality has provided many traders with a source of strength and support as they navigate the difficulties in their lifeworld. However, this openness also leaves many vulnerable to the machinations of confidence artists.

It is often recognized that entrepreneurship is to a great extent a form of art, a practice-oriented endeavor that requires a sensitive and committed engagement with a range of phenomena in the surrounding world (Berglund, 2007, p. 75). The themes or “focal points” in the lived experience of street traders highlighted portray the complex conditions under which street traders artfully respond to the and organize around the contingencies of their lifeworld. From these experiences, we can gain insight not only into the specific lives of these traders, but into an “informal”, vulnerable, and precarious entrepreneurship of survival which makes up
a dominant portion of economic activity in our contemporary globalized world, and has perhaps not received the attention it merits.
CHAPTER SEVEN

*Small something, big something, help no small no big*

Small or big, help is help

-Musa

The starting point of this dissertation was an interrogation of the dominance of corruption as a central political symbol in Nigeria. I argued in chapters one and two that the historical discourse of corruption as an organizing backdrop for social change efforts in Nigeria is limited in its ability to stimulate positive identity construction and organizational creativity. In order to disrupt this discourse, I performed a phenomenology of the lived experience of Lagos roadside food traders as a key embodiment of contemporary socioeconomic struggle in Nigeria, looking to their lifeworld for alternative discourses of struggle. The goal was to discover the organizational potential present in rich accounts of socioeconomic struggle as lived by Lagos roadside food traders. In other words, lived experience is utilized as a starting point for conceptualizing entry points for social change organizing.

One of the chief shortcomings of the corruption discourse is its overwhelming, disempowering effect, particularly in societies that are systemically corrupt and where corruption as a pervading social issue seems intractable. “Stories about particular individuals and specific situations usually have the opposite effect; by giving unwieldy problems a human face, they also bring them down to a human – and thus manageable – scale” (Loeb, 2010, p. 127). In relation to overarching goal of
finding organizational potential in the everyday, I weave the different layers of struggle discussed in the previous chapter into the central idea of “bounded entrepreneurship”.

Making a contrast between open and bounded entrepreneurship, Ray (1985) defines bounded entrepreneurship as that which exists “when an individual becomes an entrepreneur, less by choice, than life circumstances, and when core decisions are severely circumscribed by family, government or other environmental factors (p. 93). Applying some of Ray’s (1985) basic ideas to the realm of organizing and to the lived experiences of Lagos street traders, I conceptualize bounded entrepreneurship as “entrepreneurship that occurs around multiple layers of social, cultural, economic, and political struggle, thus constituting boundaries that considerably limit the range of organizational possibility.” Bounded entrepreneurship can also be conceived as not just a site of constraint, but also creativity. While these boundaries can stimulate organizational inventiveness as evidenced by the traders in this study, they can also create conditions that hinder the collective social action that is necessary to significantly disrupt them. However, in this chapter, I focus on bounded entrepreneurship as resistance through enterprise, and its potential as an organizing resource and alternative discourse of collective identity.

In chapter three, I argued that to address the extremes of vilification and valorization extremes often present in narratives of local lived experience, there must be more complex tales of everyday struggle around corruption and these tales
must be linked to larger historical patterns and systems of socioeconomic inequality and the various agents that are part of these systems. As Danladi’s comment in the previous chapter shows, there is a class component to associational life and deep-seated class distinctions are a feature of community-level organizing. When the perception (and reality) that no one listens to you unless you have money is placed in conversation with the increasingly prevalent macro discourse that frames Nigeria and Lagos in primarily economic and investment terms, a key insight emerges. On the surface, discourses on the economic progression of the nation are a welcome change from the usual dysfunctional media fare. But as intoxicating as the economic energy around Nigeria and Lagos is, as this discourse continues to emerge, it is imperative to question how its effects bind the entrepreneurial activities of the economically marginalized. The focus on Nigeria as some sort of neoliberal economic exemplar is somewhat troubling when one considers the indirect impact of these discourses on those who are already in the economic periphery and considered illegitimate. The dominant characterization of a nation or region becomes a powerful mode of evaluation of its practices and people, and a warrant for action locally and globally. In their insightful critique of the New Africa Initiative (Polity, 2001) – i.e. a development pledge launched by prominent African leaders in 2001 – Taylor and Nel (2002) speak to the problematics of Africa’s insertion into the larger global neoliberal project:

At first glance, the high energy diplomatic initiatives...suggest a positive development for the continent. After all, rather than continuing to point the
blame for the continent's woes at the colonial legacy or on a philosophy underpinned by dependencia, both 'explanations' having increasingly lost their currency in the North, this grouping is engaging the developed world on its own terms, arguing for liberalization and free trade and for globalization...But it is this very acceptability and 'fit' that carries within it the danger that the message of this group will serve to legitimize (perhaps unwittingly) existing global power relations rather than restructure them. Asserting that Africa must 'gel' with the world, as one report put it, without interrogating the structural situation within which the continent (and the South in general) finds itself, is highly problematic. Furthermore, the agenda that they seek to push holds within it seeds for a further marginalization of the majority of Africa’s peoples while granting a highly privileged stratum of African elites the potential to benefit from the ongoing globalization process. (p. 166)

Paradoxically, the neoliberal discourse uplifts even as it crushes, because in its treatment of economic progression, it consistently fails to aggressively address the class distinctions that have historically and systematically silenced the economically marginalized, barred them from participation in political and socioeconomic life, excluded them from socioeconomic advancement, and erased their voices. The effect of this erasure is widespread lack of acknowledgment of the vital role of street traders and the informal economy. Similar to the dominant corruption discourse, the neoliberal imaginary of Lagos and Nigeria is also limited in its ability to
stimulate positive individual and collective identity construction among the economically marginalized. This constrains possibilities for collective action against socioeconomic barriers because “processes of social change are organized around specific identities that drive the ability of collectives to recruit and retain members, and to participate in communicative processes of social change (Dutta, 2011, p. 234). This is portrayed powerfully in the documentary Pray the Devil Back to Hell (Disney & Reticker, 2008) where Christian and Muslim Liberian women united under the idea, “Does a bullet know a Christian from a Muslim?” The powerful symbols employed in the movement such as wearing white, head-ties, and ultimately their threat as mothers to strip naked (which is an abomination in African culture) exemplify a creative instance of organizing across difference by identifying and mobilizing evocative symbols shared by all the women. The action of these women portrays how identities offer the defining framework for collective action, determining the range of strategies and ways in which these strategies are negotiated and expressed in order to bring about social change (Dutta, 2011, p. 234). Therefore, a communicative entry point for street traders and other economically marginalized populations is resistance of imposed identities that oppress and restrict collective social action, and the mobilization of collective identities that buttress the contributions of the sector to the community and nation at large.
The Organizing Potential of Bounded Entrepreneurship

Organizational members are said to be organizing when they engage in the process of co-orientation i.e. orient themselves jointly to each other as well as to a shared concern (Taylor & Robichaud, 2004). However, the starting point for any kind of organizing is conversation, which works to establish a basis of action among disparate actors and coordinate organizational members as they respond to material and social environments; through this process, words become action (Taylor & Robichaud, 2004). However, an oft ignored element of this process is how social actors determine whether or not to join the “conversation”. In the case of some of the traders in this study, the personal, social, and economic cost of collective action was higher than they were willing to pay partly due to the boundaries within which they conduct their business ventures. Sadly, the costs of collective action appear to be most profound for those who stand to gain the most from socioeconomic revolution. As shown in the previous chapter, many of the traders approached community organizing with caution and in some cases outright unwillingness based on the perceived social safety of these arrangements, convenience and usefulness, minimal risks to livelihood, loss of autonomy, financial cost of membership, and whether or not there were tangible, economic benefits to participation. This is perhaps one of the many reasons why it is difficult to sustain bottom up social change efforts in Nigeria and many African countries, particularly around corruption. For instance, compared to the rest of the world, Transparency International’s (TI) presence in African countries is quite sparse. The cost of
organizing here is going through TIs rigorous chapter accreditation process and complying with continuous reviews. At the level of everyday lived experience, time, energy, education, and dealing with the possible social backlash that is to be expected in a systemically corrupt society are also costs that must be considered.

![Countries and territories with a Transparency International chapter](current as of November 2012)

Fig 7.1 Transparency International’s chapter coverage area (T1, 2012)

However, this fundamental “cost” boundary to collective action reveals a potential entry point for social change organizing, and that is enhancing and communicating the incentive for organizing and finding creative ways to support those who choose to pay the cost of organizing for social change. People, especially those whose livelihoods are already hanging in the balance must feel willing and able to engage in “conversation” about collective social action.

Bounded entrepreneurship as an alternative identity and organizing discourse draws attention to the remarkable entrepreneurial skill of the economically marginalized in Nigeria, their social, cultural, and economic contribution to the cities they work in, while still making visible the multiple layers
of struggle that they navigate in order to survive. Discursively, its potential lies in its favorable construction of the economically marginalized as entrepreneurs who are connected to a larger framework of placed socioeconomic struggle in Lagos and Nigeria, and like most entrepreneurs have innovatively responded to their environment. It is a notion similar to debrouillards\(^{33}\) (Neuwirth, 2011) which emphasizes the enterprising self, and does not problematically erase the reality of feeling restricted and burdened by environmental constraints. Materially, bounded entrepreneurship as process demonstrates a form of socioeconomic resistance: continuing to produce in the margins.

However, the impact of alternative discourses of struggle and identity is lost or diluted without spaces of reflection, political discussion, and collective performance, where the voices and contributions of the economically marginalized can be amplified and networked. In my relatively short interactions with the traders, they did not seem to realize their own power with respect to the socioeconomic and cultural contribution they make to the city. Since communities (and communities of action in this case) are built on common discourses about the identities of community members (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006), the spaces in which these discourses can emerge and the means through which they can be disseminated are an important consideration. Some key ideas presented by the Communication infrastructure theory (CIT) are useful for imagining how such spaces might be accessed. Communication infrastructure is the basic

\(^{33}\) p. 44
communication system available within a community and is relied upon by residents for the information needed in their everyday lives (Wilkin, Stringer, O’Quin, Montgomery & Hunt, 2011, p. 202). It consists of everyday neighborhood stories propagated in a wide variety of ways that people, media, and grassroots organizations create and disseminate (i.e. neighborhood story-telling network) and the resources of residential areas that promote communication between residents (i.e. communication action context) (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 176). Applied to organizing, it could thus be said that communication infrastructure development involves “identifying specific community storytellers on whom residents rely for achieving goals in their everyday lives” as well as “isolating elements of the communication environment that enable community storytelling” (Wilkin et al., 2011, p. 203). From a critical perspective, a crucial part of identifying community storytellers and enabling elements of the communication environment is questioning how powerful community storytellers co-opt emergent identity constructions and organizational arrangements for their interests. A diversity of storytelling networks can play an important role in empowering necessary resistance and dissent. Clara’s story of how she refused to give her association a bottle of Schnapps is the sort of humorous and relatable tale that encourages others to resist hegemonic practices in their own associations, and the organizing potential of these tales can be increased when disseminated through trustworthy storytelling networks at the “micro” (e.g. family, friends, neighbors) and “meso” (e.g. community organizations) level (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). While it might seem like a small
victory, Clara was particularly proud of the fact that her actions stimulated a
discourse in the association about broadening the range of drinks demanded of
traders. In addition, the strengthening of community storytelling networks
increases awareness among traders’ of their similar experiences, concerns, and
constructions of struggle and their social environment, e.g. the constant need to
“manage” shortage, “hustle”, and retain space through questionable practices. The
realization of a common language and common sense of reality through storytelling
has the potential to stimulate in-group solidarity and establish a basis for
conversation and action.

Related to the communication action context, safe places where traders can
obtain and share information without having to produce crates of “minerals” or fight
through language barriers as well as network with other traders who they can trust
are necessary. As the entrepreneurial spirit of the traders and specific
organizational arrangements like Ufong’s information and resource sharing network
suggest, Lagos traders, though bounded, are well able to develop the organizational
structures that suit them when they have access to trustworthy networks and
contexts.

Materially, the boundedness of Lagos entrepreneurship stimulates the
development of strong family, kinship, friendship, and community networks, which
take the place of formal institutions as a means of socioeconomic support. It is
important for organizational inquiry to check assumptions and biases about the
structure of these arrangements as they emerge. For instance, inquiry should not
brush past the role of friendship networks such as Ufong’s group which emerge more organically, allowing each woman the flexibility to conduct her business as she sees fit. This is not to say that this sort of arrangement is automatically more preferable or any less problematic than other kinds of associations. While there is marked benefit to organizing within one’s own social group network, for broader level societal impact, communicating across difference and beyond familiar, kinship, and ethnic networks will ultimately be necessary to increase impact. However, the inclusion of these arrangements disrupts the assumption that all grassroots and community-level organizing have to look a certain way to be “legitimate” and this opens up space for imagining how these networks could be creatively mobilized to incentivize community organizing. It was also clear from the previous chapter that religious organizations play a role in providing safe conditions for gathering, information-sharing, and network-building, as well as encouragement and empowerment. However, as was also noted in the previous chapters, some of these organizations are not above reproach. The other side of the coin is that the social action of some of these organizations might also be hindered by unscrupulous community members. A local pastor for instance told me a story of a young man who had run off with the money the church had given him to start a business. Since there are few established formal systems for “finding people”, these kinds of partnerships require an immense amount of trust. When I asked if he was angry, he simply said, “We cannot stop doing what we know we are supposed to do because of one person’s actions”. While this particular church was determined to continue
doing their part, this draws attention to why other organizations may not want to get “too involved” in collective social action.

In summary, none of this works without the development of democratic sensibilities in Nigeria. The effects and symbols of military rule and intervention are still present in civic culture. Police men for instance carry automatic rifles in the streets as if armed for war or insurrection, and often speak to citizens with disrespect and harshness. The poor (who they have little to gain from) and women usually bear the brunt of this ill-treatment. I was astounded by how openly my female interviewers were rudely interrupted by nearby males as they shared their perspectives. This might be a reason why many women’s groups in African contexts thrive on their own, without the interference of male voices. In public discourse, undemocratic and hegemonic tendencies are openly on display and have trickled into associational life. An organizational entry point therefore is the crafting of spaces that are truly democratic and encourage dialogue and organizing across difference.

Methodological Considerations

This study yielded many rich conversations and insights. However, there were some key issues that reveal opportunities for further study related to contextual factors, recruitment of traders and the data collection process.

Contextual Factors

As has been expressed numerous times, mobility can be a challenge in the Lagos area due to the traffic jams. Thus movement had to be planned carefully. For
instance, one of my first interviews involved speaking to a man who sold pepper. The interview did not go well, but it took so much time to reach the research site, that after the failed interview, there was little time left to go into a different part of the city before rush hour. In addition, my research period was during the rainy season and since this study involved interviewing traders outdoors at their stalls, my ability to conduct interviews was impacted by the weather. These factors were exacerbated by the relatively short research period. In addition, because of the volatile political climate due to escalated security issues, and the generally cautious attitude Lagosians adopt, friends and relatives concerned for my safety advised against going to the same site too many times so that people wouldn’t “know my face.” I was told stories of recent kidnappings of expatriates and a student who was visiting from abroad as a cautionary tale. While I am unsure about how widespread these situations were, I felt it necessary to heed their warnings. In retrospect, these challenges could have been mitigated by better knowledge of the area which would in turn enable more strategic recruitment of participants.

**Recruitment**

My initial plan was to conduct longer interviews with the traders in the course of their work day. However, when the interviews began, I realized that there were several constraints that I would have to navigate, the chief among which was committing the faux pas of “blocking their market”. In other words, I did not want to be a hindrance to their work and dealing with this constraint was more difficult in practice than anticipated. Even for those that I caught at a less busy time, I tried to
be sensitive to their environment and not take up too much of their time. Due to an earlier volatile experience with a trader described in the previous chapter, I was careful not to invade their space for too long. I also had to negotiate varying education levels and some potential participants could not continue the interview because they simply didn’t understand what I was saying or were uncomfortable with the whole arrangement itself. I experienced one situation where the participant really wanted to participate but couldn’t understand me at all. Another woman only made it through the first question and got frustrated. These struggles are not unique to this study, but are normal in field work. However, they do provide an opportunity to reimagine traditional qualitative methodology and interviewing in different research contexts. While the shorter, more fragmented interviews during the traders’ work hours were difficult in practice, it was virtually impossible to disengage or be passive. This interview format demanded sensitivity, constant attention to contextual cues, and sharpened my awareness of the practical aspects of the traders’ lived experience.

Data Collection

Needless to say, the process of data collection was quite challenging. The biggest limitation was the time frame of the study. It would have been ideal to have at least one more month to do some more inquiry into specific associations and obtain a broader range of perspectives. There was still more to be explored about some of the murkier organizational arrangements that I learned about from the traders. Another major limitation was the assumption that I made about the salience
of Nigerian identification. For instance, when I asked what they felt was special about Nigeria, I received blank looks from some of the traders. After I was told by two traders that they didn’t know what was special about Nigeria because they hadn’t been anywhere else, I began to tailor this question to their immediate surroundings, using their earlier responses to determine if this question was relevant to them. Finally, some of the recordings were extremely time-consuming to transcribe because of the feedback sounds picked up from the highway and markets.

In general, the lesson to be gleaned is that fieldwork requires a balance between flexibility and focus, especially work that involves a population that the researcher has no familiarity with.

**Implications and Concluding Remarks**

For years to come, Nigerians and those with interests attached to the nation will probably continue to wonder what it will take to initiate and sustain authentic social change efforts in communities all over Nigeria. I have noted the importance of attending to the perceived cost and low incentive for organizing in Nigeria, particularly amongst the poor and marginalized who already live at the periphery of society. My notions of social change were perhaps too lofty and removed from lived experience. I mentally cringe at the naiveté of this exchange with Shukurat:

Me: “...do you think you guys help each other?

Shukurat: “Nobody to help each other jaré³⁴ because there is no money jaré; everybody is managing. I cannot help another person.”

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³⁴ An expression of emphasis that has no particular meaning in context
Me: Since you started this business would you say there was somebody that has really really helped you or no?

Shukurat: “It’s contribution that helps me.”

My conception of “help” was so embedded in my own privilege that I almost missed the significance of this exchange. However, as Ybema and Kasteeg (2009) note:

Without wanting to romanticize the frustrations that come with doing fieldwork, we believe that confusion, estrangement, loneliness, wonder, annoyance, and any other distancing emotion experienced during fieldwork, while hardly joyful, can be vital sources of inspiration for a researcher. These emotions may put the researcher at a reflexive distance from the field, a marginal position from where s/he may see things differently. (p. 106)

As a citizen-researcher, I found myself thoroughly challenged and changed by my ignorance, discomfort, sense of inadequacy, and limited understanding of the research context. This allowed me to move between both “familiarity and strangeness” and my curiosity and sensitivity were continually stirred as I could never rest in my position as cultural insider (Ybema & Kasteeg, 2009). With reference to the representation of the everyday, Chaney (2002) states,

It seems that in order to “know” everyday life we have to be able to represent it; and our representations incline us towards certain sorts of knowledge. It may be that forms of representation we are expected to use convey a sense of order that is possibly deliberately misleading, and thus actual experience of everyday life will be more open-ended and unpredictable than the imagery allows. (p. 2).
In my attempt to represent the perspectives of Lagos roadside food traders as an embodiment of socioeconomic struggle, my goal has been to paint a picture of the complexity and disorderliness of their lived experiences in order to incline further research in a more “complicated” direction. However, in the spirit of dialogue, I emphasize the unfinalizablity of the traders. “One can say, at most, “This is how I see this person now, but I cannot know what she or he will become” (Frank, 2005, p. 967).

In summary, if the goal of the anti-corruption movement is to free the world from the debilitating effects of corruption, it must be careful to retain this emancipatory ethos in its effort to tell the stories of the marginalized, serving first the interests of those it attempts to defend. This requires a critical examination of the discourses the movement mobilizes and co-opts, and their effects on specific locales and social actors. Methodologically, this dissertation demonstrates a productive union between phenomenology and the emancipatory objectives of critical organizational communication research. Such methodology requires an engagement with the “politics of witness” which involves taking the stories we encounter and the conclusions we draw to the “village square”, and sharing these stories with as many people as possible so as to “refute myths that justify callousness and withdrawal” and possibly “help those who are habitually ignored or silenced to find their own voices or platforms” (Loeb, 2010, p. 148).

The most important change was perhaps a sense of freedom from the discourse of corruption and its effects on my own political will and consciousness. I
emerged more imaginative and energized by the possibilities observed for social change in my country. Rather than conceive yet another intervention, based on preconceived terms and understandings, I have attempted in this dissertation to not “speak for” the traders, but simply allow their perspectives to “speak through” my work. In this way, I hope to become a part of the story-telling network of the economically marginalized.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Understanding Nigerian Identification
1. What makes Nigerians different from others?
   a. What does it mean to be "Naija"?
2. What are some things about Nigeria that make you feel good? Proud?
3. What are some things about Nigeria that make you feel sad? Embarrassed?
4. If you could change one thing about Nigeria what would it be?
   a. What would you be willing to do?

Assessing Everyday Sense-Making
1. What do you enjoy most about your work?
2. Is it fun to work in Lagos?
   a. What makes it fun?
3. Is it also hard?
   a. What makes it hard?
4. What do you do every day to make your work life easier?

Assessing Organizational Potential
1. Tell me about your day from when you get here till when you leave.
   a. Who do you work with?
   b. Who is your competition?
2. Is it easier/harder to do this work as a man/woman? In what ways?
3. What do you want to achieve?
   a. Who helps you achieve it?
   b. What do you need to help your business grow?
   c. What would you change here to help your business grow?
4. Have you ever had to move? Why?
5. Do you talk to other people who also do this job? Who?
   a. What do you talk about? Problems? New opportunities?
   b. Do you do anything together to make your work easier or to help each other’s business grow?
   c. Is it helpful or not? How do you help each other?
   d. Who is most helpful? Least?
   e. Do you prefer to talk to people in the same trade, gender, area, etc.?
6. Do you talk to other people who do not do this job? How are they helpful?
   a. What do you talk about? Problems? New opportunities?
   b. Is it helpful or not? How do you help each other?
   c. Who is most helpful? Least?
7. When you have problems with your work, what is the first thing you do?
   Other things?
8. If someone wanted to do your work, what advice would you give them?
   a. What does it take to make it in Lagos? Nigeria?
9. Have you had to quarrel or fight with anyone to do your work?
a. If so, who do you turn to for help?
10. Are you a member of any local groups?
   a. Which ones?
   b. What do they do?
   c. How are you involved?
11. Which group will you never join?
12. What would you fight for to make life better for traders working in
    Lagos/Nigeria?
   a. With whom?
   b. Have you fought for anything before? With whom? If not, why not?

Assessing Understanding of Corruption
1. What does corruption mean to you?
2. How does it affect you daily?