Chapter 4

A nation in search of citizens: Problems of citizenship in the Nigerian context

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<A>Introduction: Framing citizenship in colonial Nigeria

In exploring issues of citizenship in Nigeria, we need to begin with the history of how we came to be Nigerians (or how we are not!). What is now known as Nigeria is the product of the British colonial imagination; a patchwork country whose component parts have refused to fuse as one *(*Okwori 2003*).* Although the interest in Nigeria began with trade, it moved to conquest and ownership. The British first showed a serious interest in Nigeria after Sir George Goldie (Goldie 1898) promoted the Niger Delta area: 'This heart of Africa was not a barren desert. They found that it was filled with populous and organised States, that it possessed a fertile soil and intelligent and industrious inhabitants.' This interest was pursued first as trade, when Sir George Goldie and his Royal Niger Company were drawn in to the region by the attractions of trade in rubber, timber, palm oil and, later, slaves. In return for these goods, it provided local chiefs with gunpowder, mirrors and other trivia. The gunpowder later proved useful for slave raiding and disciplining the population. The transition from a source of valued, traded goods to an owned territory was an interesting business transaction. Sir George Goldie, the director of the Royal Niger Company, sold the territory around the Niger to the British Crown for £850,000 in 1900. One may argue, therefore, that modern Nigeria began its life both as a commodity and as a corporate slave!

Once this region passed into the hands of the Crown, Nigeria was organized first into protectorates then extended to the north as the empire expanded. In 1906, the colony of Lagos was merged with the protectorate of the Niger Coast to form the colony and protectorate of Southern Nigeria. The protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria merged into the colony of Nigeria in 1914 (Ihonvbere and Shaw 1998). Each of the protectorates 'was a sprawling territory of separate ethno-linguistic groups, each with its own distinctive history, language, social custom, and beliefs. Nigeria is therefore a veritable mosaic of nationalities; it has within its borders several hundred ethnic groups with distinct languages and cultures' (Okehie-Offa and Sadiku,1996: 1).

Framing citizenship in post-colonial Nigeria

The project of forming Nigeria and of understanding who its citizens are, has been (and still is) riddled with contradictions and tensions arising from the disconnections between a primordial 'indigenous' sense of being (ontology) and the membership of an entity that is defined beyond the confines of autochthonousness. The former carries a sense of rootedness; the latter merely describes a geographical space. This disconnection is at the heart of what constitutes the major impasse in the 'national question' in Nigeria.

This disconnection is compounded by the second level of impasse, which dates back to 1939, when the southern provinces of the country were split in two, while the north was left intact as a single protectorate. The north occupies about 74 per cent of the entire landmass of the country, and according to (contested) population counts, is home to more than half of the population. This lopsided

division was retained when Nigeria gained independence in 1960, and has had, and continues to have, consequences for the conduct of elections and for the composition of the central administration. As Okeke (1992: 18) argues, 'Since the electoral system adopted in the country was based on the principles of proportional representation and majority rule, Northern Nigeria had a competitive advantage over the Southern regions in Federal politics'. This gave the north domination in political and territorial terms over the divided southern regions. Nigeria thus inherited two architectures of citizenship from its colonial past, both at loggerheads with each other: the architecture of nationhood (an inclusive identity) and that of differing ethnicities (which are exclusive).

A third impasse, exacerbating the tensions between nationhood and ethnicity, was introduced by the definition of citizenship as enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution of 1999. This allowed for three, often conflicting, criteria for acquiring Nigerian citizenship. The first is birth, and includes conditions relating to dates, parentage and indigeneity. The second is naturalization, with its own set of conditions. The third is through marriage. However, it is only a woman married to a Nigerian man who can acquire Nigerian citizenship. A Nigerian woman married a non-Nigerian man cannot bestow citizenship on her husband. There is an obvious discrimination enshrined in the constitution here. However, in all three criteria for citizenship outlined in the constitution, ethnic belonging is given greatest emphasis in the actual practice of realizing citizenship in Nigeria.

Thus, outside of registration and naturalization, it is ancestral linkage, place of birth or origin – and therefore ethnic belonging – that plays a fundamental role in

citizenship. This has practical ramifications, because many of the entitlements bestowed on citizens by the state in Nigeria are tied to such definitions. As a nation, Nigeria would like to promote the sense of oneness for all Nigerians. Yet through its political practices it has not only retained the original differentiated identities that have characterized the area since the colonial period, but has added to the sense of divided identities in its citizens.

The 1999 constitution was adopted when a military government was in power. A constituent assembly was set up with representatives from different parts of Nigeria. While intended to address the divisions of ethnicity, the reliance on a group selected mainly from the elites in different areas, and the lack of grassroot participation in the process, meant that ethnic divisions became further entrenched. Two things were missing from the process. The first was that the consultation was not as wide as it could have been. The second was that some of the most pertinent questions were not asked. They were not asked precisely because the people who might have raised them did not have the chance to do so. Nonetheless, such questions are now being asked outside the process and the consequences of not putting them on the agenda of the Constituent Assembly are being felt. Among the questions that many Nigerians ask both privately and publicly are whether the different nationalities that form Nigeria need to belong to one nation. They also ask why there is no meaningful and equal participation by all the ethnicities in the governance of Nigeria. And at the local level, many wonder whether there is any meaning at all in being so-called Nigerians. For example, a paramount chief in Otuokpoti, a small riverine community in Bayelsa State, said to us: 'My friend, I cannot tell you that I will beat my chest and say that

I am a Nigerian. Look around. Does this village look like a place in Nigeria? What do we get from Nigeria?'

One important reason for not addressing these crucial issues at the time was the fear of the break up of Nigeria. Another was the political and economic interests of the elite who did not want to lose control of power. Moreover, the northern part of the country was perceived by many as a zone without adequate natural resources to sustain an independent existence. It was also argued that although the southern part of the country had huge natural resources, especially oil, it was a conflict zone, where different ethnicities were not at one with each other. The balancing politics, then, was that the north had political capital and the control of power, while the south, with more natural resources, was characterized by discordant voices and incoherence as a political force. In the end, the avoidance strategy did not work because the problems that the politicians feared might surface have surfaced anyway. The inter-ethnic clashes, the religious riots and the political waywardness that define present-day Nigeria are attestations to a failed vision. Ordinary men and women in villages across the country are still battling to understand the concept of Nigeria and what it means to be its citizen.

<A>Methodology of the research

This chapter is based on research carried out with the objective of exploring the notions of identity and citizenship that ordinary Nigerians subscribe to. To do this, we wanted to adopt a methodology that was open-ended and allowed space for people's voices as they sought to articulate their sense of belonging in their immediate 'acknowledged' communities and the imagined community that is the

larger Nigerian entity (Kabeer 2002). We therefore adopted a participatory research approach built around the notion of 'conversations', which brought together three methodologies drawn from theatre, participatory learning and action (PLA) and interviews. The conversations took three forms: conversations between methodologies; between our project ideals and peoples' aspirations; and between different members and groupings within the project communities.

In bringing together these methodologies, we sought to benefit from their interactions. We also wanted to give people the space to reflect on their everyday lives and their communities as a way of assessing where they stood in relation to members of other communities, local government and the state. And finally, we wanted to link these assessments to our overarching goal of promoting critical thinking as a process towards claiming rights. Overall, therefore, the methodological conversations were a means of extending boundaries of understanding – and in some cases, they meant transgressing boundaries, first in the imagination and then in reality. These conversations gave us stories of peoples' personal lives and their community issues and problems, which became the subject of further analysis. This chapter draws on these stories and the processes of reflection that produced them, and which they in turn gave rise to.

In each village, we started by seeking out local community-based organizations (CBOs). With their support and participation, we would begin the 'conversation' in each community with a transect walk. This is a cross-sectional walk that takes the participants across the village and allows them to note down key features of the community, its people and their relationships. The route of the walk was always

chosen by the members of the community to allow us build a picture of their geographical and social space. But in addition, it enabled us to note problem areas and significant absences. We used our conversations with community members to add detail to the picture as we went along. It was also a means of triangulating what the members of the CBOs had told us.

The next stage was to translate what we saw into a community map. The map was drawn on the ground, usually by CBO members, and helped visually to 'fix' structures and people into relation to each other. The CBOs decided the important structures that needed to be reflected in the map, such as churches, mosques, wells, clinics and so on. When the map was done, it provided a picture of the social structure, settlement patterns and geography of amenities within the community. In each place, as the map was drawn we would interpret and analyse it, noting the resources available to the community, where the access roads passed and to what destinations. We were interested to see who lived in which part of the community because of what it revealed about its power relationships. The map also allowed us to see what was absent.

However, the transect walk and the mapping exercise only involved a few members of the community speaking on behalf of the rest, because it is not possible or constructive to attempt to involve the entire community in such exercises. So, to reach out to a wider community, we used an approach called theatre for development (TFD) to 'dynamize' the map, allowing the issues to jump into life and provide space for further discussion. TFD is a genre of theatre that constructs its plot from the stories and experiences of ordinary people. As Abah

(1997) has argued in his concept of 'perforaltics', TFD also draws its performance style from the performative instincts and practices of the communities. It is, in other words, a theatre of songs, stories, dance and dialogue that draws from everyday life. It is usually performed by the members of the community, addressing their own concerns in their own voices and languages. The use of theatre allowed us to expand the conversation on issues of citizenship, entitlements and exclusion, and to explore different factors that influenced rights claims.

The construction of each dramatic performance began with interviews carried out within people's homes or at their places of work that were based on a checklist of issues developed by the research team and CBO members. In each community, a minimum of 50 people were interviewed. Later, members of the CBOs and the research team sat down together to analyse the various stories we had heard from different people and the issues they raised. The key issues and concerns prioritized by the CBOs became materials out of which the drama was made. This drama was then subjected to critique and analysis when the wider community watched it. The critique would usually happen in two ways. One was when members of the community who were not part of creating the drama entered into the performance space to make changes to the argument in the drama. In making such interventions, people not only changed the narrative of the drama, they also intervened in the community's perceptions of citizenship issues. Their intervention was part of the process of analysing the issues and adding important details. The second form of critique and analysis occurred when we asked our audience to break into small groups to further interrogate the

issues raised by the drama and to explore how it resonated with their own realities.

In general, therefore, the approach adopted in the research was to maximise participation from a wide spectrum of the population, to allow as much debate and reorganization of ideas as possible, and then to let the communities in which we worked develop their own future action plans on the various issues identified. Overall, the combination of TFD, PLA and semi-structured interviews that made up our methodological conversations continues to be used to explain and make visible the complexity of issues around citizenship, to promote understanding of citizenship, to challenge perceptions and to explore what people want for their future.

<A>Citizenship stories

We argue that the project of forming a unified Nigeria with a common identity requires the translation of the principles guiding citizenship within the constitution into the reality of people's lives. However, there are many conflicting factors that continuously serve to thwart this translation, including ethnicity, religion, gender and governance. Usually these factors work together, and they have multiple layers of meaning that contribute to defining people's understanding of their own identities. Our research teased out these meanings through walking, mapping, acting and talking. The stories of citizens' frustrations that we heard in the areas in which we worked were many.[1] We tell one here and provide a summary of the drama that sought to enact the problems it raised.

Sunday Ogbaka's story

Sunday Ogbaka was born in Otukpo, Benue State, about 30 years ago to an Igala father and an Idoma mother. He has lived all his life in this Benue town and married an Idoma woman from the place. All their children were born here, like Sunday himself. He is an active member of the Eupi community where he lives, in Otukpo. He is, in fact, one of the advisers to the chief. Based on the length of time he has lived here, his involvement in community activities and the fact that he is married to an Idoma woman from Eupi, Sunday ought to be regarded as a truly *bona fide* member of this community. But, as he declares, "I am Igala because my father is from Igala land. I must return to my place, which is Igala land. That is my real place." When asked why, he said, "Here I cannot be chief but in Igala land I can be chief. Politically, I do not have a problem, but when it comes to cultural options, I am not accepted and cannot take part … All my children are Igalas too … my wives are like my tail; they must go where I belong." Sunday Ogbaka is no more than an Igala man living in Idoma land.

There are many issues raised by the story of Sunday Ogbaka. His identity in Idoma land remains that of an Igala man because he cannot be regarded as an indigene of Idoma since his father was Igala. This means that Sunday's ethnicity is Igala, and that he cannot claim the entitlements of someone born to an Idoma father. The story thus illustrates the significance of ethnicity as a factor in the citizenship question in Nigeria. However, there are other dimensions as well. There is gender. Although Sunday was born to an Idoma woman, that does not make him an Idoma person because ethnic identity is traced and bestowed

through the father's lineage. And it is this that determines the entitlements that one has access to and the spaces for action within which one can participate. The impossibility of Sunday being considered an indigene of Otukpo, the limited nature of his entitlements in the place where he was born and bred, despite the fact that his mother is a full-blooded Idoma, reflects the second-class status of women in that society.

This is not only true in Benue but all over the country. An example of the implications of this exclusionary notion of citizenship was demonstrated during the April 2003 elections. Then, a man from Benin Republic, Deinde, married to a Nigerian woman and living in Adedoro village in Ogun State, was prevented from voting. His wife and the members of the community in which he lived argued that he had lived among them for ten years, had three children by a 'daughter of the community' and that the community accepted him. However, as an account by John Ikubaje of the episode in *This Day Newspapers* relates, community members who were ready to argue forcefully on his behalf had to back down when it was explained to them that the Electoral Act, which is based on the Nigerian Constitution, stipulates that 'a person shall be qualified to register as a voter if such a person is a citizen of Nigeria' (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999). And since marriage to a Nigerian woman does not confer citizenship on her husband, Deinde could not be considered a Nigerian.

It was stories like the ones above that informed a drama that we enacted, in which Agaba, who had settled in another part of the country from where he was born, experiences discrimination and abuse:

Agaba charges into the office of the local government chairman, where a budget meeting is in session. He is wielding a machete and prancing about as if possessed. All the councillors and the chairman run for cover. Agaba demands to know who the chairman is as he has urgent matters to discuss with him. As he charges forwards and backwards, he swears, "I am going to kill someone today, in fact more than one! As many as will tell me that I do not come from this place! What does it take to come from this place after I have lived here for 30 years and had twelve children here? If it is a football team they want I have produced it! So, what is it? What have I not done for this community? I will truly kill someone!"

When one of the councillors finally manages to calm him down he narrates the story behind his "madness". He has lived in this community for 30 years, paid all his tax here and had all his twelve children in this town. He has used his wealth to build roads, help pay teachers' salaries and other such community development needs. Now, three of his children have gained admission to the university and the state would not give them scholarships. "Do you know why? They are telling them that they do not come from this state! Where do they come from, every one? That is why I am going mad, and I am right to do so, do you hear!"

The chairman crawls out of hiding to listen to Agaba's story. He is, however, not sympathetic. He acknowledges Agaba's contribution to the development of the community. But he concludes his narrative by

emphasizing "difference" rather than "integration" in Agaba's behaviour, when he points out that the money that he had ploughed into community development had been made in his place of sojourn, not in his place of birth. In other words, the community has a claim on his wealth. He drives the point of difference home when he finally declares that, "No matter how long a wild cat stays in the homestead it is still not a home cat!" The message is clear: Agaba would never be completely accepted in this community. After a deep breath, and in a very subdued voice, he asks, "If they say I am not from here, what about the children? Where do these children come from?"

Agaba's story points to several factors of importance in the realization of citizenship rights in Nigeria. It is a story about the denial of rights and about the forces at play in that denial: ethnicity, location and gender. Although religion does not come out prominently in Agaba's story, it is part of its sub-text and was a strong issue outside the fiction of the drama. In the follow-up discussion that took place after the performance, one of the ways suggested for Agaba to be fully accepted in Kubau, Giwa and some parts of Sabon-Gari was to *saki jiki* (relax the body), which is a euphemism for taking on the dominant cultural identity in the place where one lives. In the parts of Kaduna State where this suggestion was made, *saki jiki* meant adopting the Islamic way of life and believing in the Koran and *Shari' a*.

<A>Reflections from the field

Whenever we sat down with groups of people after the performance to discuss the issues raised in the drama, one clear point that always emerged was that while ethnicity, gender, religion and location were key factors in the citizen story in Nigeria, the discussions of solutions by ordinary Nigerians invariably located the crisis within a larger frame of politics and governance. Many believed that the political class was manipulating ethnicity and religion for political ends. Therefore, they saw good governance – by which they meant principles and practices that did not play on nor emphasize ethnicity and religion – as the route to citizenship rights.

So each time in the performance that Agaba asked his last question, about where his children come from and whether they should be entitled to a scholarship, we found that members of the audience who intervened always began by re-making government and changing the governance process. They always removed the corrupt chairman, they allowed room for more debates and they sought to balance the distribution of development projects in the wards. And each time this 'rewrite' took place by the community members who entered into the fiction of the drama, three things happened:

1. Whenever the drama was revised, the new performance that the audience now watched offered a different perspective. The first version offered a lived reality; the second an altered and desired one.
2. The community members symbolically broke through a number of barriers by entering into the drama space. In Anchau, one woman looked at the community map, and after locating the place in which the drama was being enacted

observed that it was in the space of *masu arziki* (the rich and influential). When ordinary members of the community entered the drama, they were effectively transgressed into a space from which they were normally denied access. In addition, they had made their voices heard from within that space of influence. This is was an empowering act for them, even if only momentarily.

3. It provided an opportunity for immediate feedback from the community. The altered narratives they gave to the drama told us where their interests lay. They were articulating messages that policy-makers needed to hear and needed to address in the lives of the community.

Another critical point in the process of reflection initiated by our 'conversations' was in the making and analysis of the community map. The act of condensing what had been seen on the transect walk into a small space on the floor challenged the taken-for-granted ways in which members of the community saw their community. That was why, after looking at the map of Anchau–Takalafiya that the women had drawn, Hajiya Aishatu Goma observed that the Sarki's[2] palace, the mosque and courthouse were in close proximity to each other and that it constituted a space that ordinary people enter only when they are summoned. They do not go there voluntarily. Another woman said it was a space of power and another observed: 'You go there to face judgement.' These interpretations contrasted with those of the men, who saw the trinity of Sarki's palace, mosque and courthouse as a 'place for justice'. This difference of perception and interpretation is, of course, reflective of the difference in the power positions of the two groups. The men make the law and the women are at the receiving end.

It was also by looking at the map in Kargi that many of the people saw a critical difference between those who lived inside the walled part of the town and those who lived outside of it. The *yan ganuwa* (those who lived inside the wall) had more entitlements than the *yan karkara* (those who were outside the wall). The *yan karkara* are usually non-indigenes or settler communities (Abah and Okwori 2003).

At the end of our encounters with members of different communities, which would normally take about seven to ten days, one critical question always raised by them was 'What will happen next?' Members of the community organizations and members of the community at large always wanted to know what would be done about the issues raised, what would be the concrete results of the research for them. They had participated actively in the different stages of the research process: mapping and analysing their communities, understanding its power structures and identifying the key political and developmental actors in their lives. Their question could be seen as a manifestation of the critical capacity that their participation had helped to build. However, our response to their question was to throw the challenge back to them. We argued that the critical steps were most effective when they were decided on by the community for themselves and not by outsiders on their behalf.

We therefore encouraged the communities to develop community action plans (CAPs). These served as our response to the community's desire to act on issues raised by the research beyond the immediate life of the research. They helped

the community to chart its needs and priorities, to determine necessary interventions and to identify who within the community or outside should be responsible for carrying them out. The construction of CAPs was integrated into our interactions with the community. It followed a process of critical examination of the issues and problems generated through the different conversations of our research process: the transect walk; the mapping exercise; the focused group discussion sessions; the interviews; and during the post-performances interactions.

After the various issues and problems had been catalogued, members of the community brainstormed on those they considered to be their priority, what needed to be done, who should do it and where to find support. They also set time-frames within which certain tasks would be done, developed the budget for each action and worked on where and from whom the community would find the necessary resources. Many of the problems that they identified as priority issues required more resources than most of communities we worked in could afford on their own. They would need the local government to support them or take over the issue. But their experiences to date with local government did little to encourage them to believe that such support would be forthcoming.

To address this, the Theatre for Development Centre took on the role of relating the stories of these citizens to policy-makers. During this project, we organized a dissemination workshop for 75 serving and aspiring councillors and chairmen in Kaduna State in February 2003. During the workshop, we told the people's stories to illustrate the crises of citizenship and of the 'poverty of governance'

through the use of drama. The politicians were asked to break into small groups to discuss the issues we raised, and to then state what they would do to solve the problems if they were voted into office in the next general elections.[3]

The workshop gave us a good opportunity to make the politicians publicly spell out their vision of good governance and commit themselves to a certain course of action. So we presented each one of them with a certificate of commitment. This required that each write their promises on the certificate, and it would then become an accountability checklist to measure their performance against. What we played on here was the love of certificates by Nigerians, which they always use to enhance their political or other profiles!

On the community side, the CBOs started to use their action plans as a basis for negotiating political power and participation in governance. In the campaigns leading to the April 2003 elections, communities such as Sab-Zuro and Anchau in Kaduna State began to ask political aspirants to enter into a contract with the community that they would address the issues in their community action plan as a condition for voting them into office.

<A>Conclusion

We hoped to use our conversational approach to draw out stories from the ordinary citizens of Nigeria about what they understood by citizenship, how they related their membership of 'acknowledged' communities, defined by ethnicity, religion and so on, to their membership of the 'imagined' community of the nation-state, and what being a Nigerian meant to them. We found that the reality of the

Nigerian situation is that, although citizenship is constitutionally determined by both ancestry and by place of birth or sojourn, in practice Nigerians always revert to and insist on ancestry as the true and recognizable determinant of citizenship.

However, the research process evolved along the way into more than the telling and hearing of stories. The combination of TFD and PLA not only served as a powerful medium through which people could tell their stories, and through which others outside their own communities could hear their stories. It also encouraged multi-layered conversations between people and hierarchies of authority at village, district and local government levels – conversations that become forms of empowerment when community members began to map their needs and to use these inventories as a contract for governance and as an accountability checklist.

Our experiences in the field also helped to highlight aspects of the contradictory understandings of citizenship that had not been apparent to us beforehand. On the one hand, when asked about their primary affiliations, most of those we encountered prioritized their ethnic identities over that of their nation. On the other hand, when faced with dramas enacting issues of citizenship and entitlement, those same people identified issues of governance as the main obstacles both to the *just* realisation of entitlements as well as to their identification with Nigeria as a nation. Some of these issues of governance revolved implicitly around official practices tying entitlement to ethnic affiliation.

This threw up a conundrum for us. Was Nigeria a state without citizens? Or were Nigerians citizens without a state? If the former was the case, it implied that those

who made up Nigeria are still entrenched in their different ethnic nationalities and will resist all attempts to force a common sense of nationhood. On the other hand, if the latter is the case, it suggests that the failure of ordinary Nigerians to see themselves as a single nation reflects a failure on the part of the state. If the state had promoted principles of access and entitlement that were independent of ethnic and other particular identities, rather than subject to divided definitions of citizenship, might not it have brought into existence a sense of common nationhood? This was an important insight for the research team, and it helped us to understand the gap between the theory and practice of citizenship in Nigeria.

However, we want to conclude by observing that the research has, if anything, raised more questions than answers for us. As we continue to deal with the contradictions and conflicts in the citizenship agenda and the search for good governance, these are the questions that we will continue to seek answers to:

- When a nation is constructed on ethnic foundations and in such a way that the different ethnicities prioritize their own nationalities above the federation, are the people in the geographical space that is now called Nigeria citizens with no state, or is the country a state without citizens?

- Are there forms of governance, or architectures of citizenship, that would overcome this conundrum and allow those who live in the geographical space called Nigeria to attain a common and inclusive identity that transcends their ethnic and other exclusive affiliations?

- Given the disparity between the quest for nationhood, which the concept of Nigeria implies, and the reality of ethnic bases of citizenship and belonging, are we dealing here with several nations in one? And may it therefore not be necessary to renegotiate what Nigeria should or should not claim to be?

While we search for the answers to these and many other questions, Nigeria still remains an experiment after 43 years of independence.

<A>Notes

1. The nine local government areas were: Kubau, Kujama, Sabon Gari, Giwa, Jaba and Zangon Kataf in Kaduna State; Ohimini, Otukpo and Gwer East in Benue State.

2. Sarkis are traditional rulers that exercise power and jurisdiction over a set of villages or communities in a ward.

3. The local government election, in which chairpersons and councillors are voted into office, has not been held as the federal government is still studying the recommendations of the committee set up to study the local government system.

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