

## Goodluck the Performer

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### Introduction: The “Lucky” One

When President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan lost the March 2015 Nigerian presidential election to his main challenger, former army general Muhammadu Buhari of the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC), it drew a line under one of the most astonishing political stories in recent Nigerian history. From the relative obscurity of the deputy governorship of the oil-producing southeastern state of Bayelsa, Jonathan, a former environmental protection officer, emerged in 2010 as the occupant of the highest office in the land. Along the way, he had profited, first, from the impeachment of Governor Diepreye Alamieyeseigha in December 2005. Vice President to President Umaru Yar’Adua (2007–2010), he was sworn in as president in May 2010 after the latter’s death following a protracted illness.

Because of his unusual path to power, Jonathan’s name quickly entered into popular folklore, as seen in the many gags about the danger of having someone named “Goodluck” as your “assist” or second-in-command. One of the most popular, “If your deputy is named Goodluck,” goes as follows:

In your own interest, no matter the position you are offered in any organization, if your deputy is named Goodluck, please decline. Even if it is UN Secretary General or Head of African Union, just decline. Why? Check out these facts:  
 Goodluck Jonathan was assistant head boy in his primary school days. The head boy was expelled and Goodluck took over.  
 Goodluck was assistant senior prefect in secondary school. After the senior prefect died, Goodluck took over.<sup>1</sup>  
 Goodluck was deputy local government chairman. The chairman was implicated in corruption allegations and Goodluck took over.  
 Goodluck was deputy governor to Diepreye Alamieyeseigha. He took over after the latter was engulfed in an oil concession corruption scandal.  
 Goodluck was vice president to Umaru Yar’Adua—Pericarditis!<sup>2</sup>  
 A friend just called off a wedding because his best man was named Goodluck!<sup>3</sup>

Jokes like this could hardly overwrite what was indeed a genuine quandary: accounting for the ascent into power of someone who seemed like the perfect outsider, someone who, by many accounts, was very reluctant to accept the responsibility of being president, who had in fact done his utmost to disavow the burden—or so it seemed at the time—but who, all the same, had the presidency thrown in his lap.

Across the country, speculations regarding the origins of President Jonathan’s “good luck” were rife. The most cogent (if cogent is the right word here) tended to attribute his rapid rise through the political ranks to his name—Goodluck—and, in some accounts, his wife’s—Patience. However

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much the conjectures varied, though, they seemed to agree on one crucial point, to wit: President Jonathan's remarkable rise to the Nigerian presidency could not have happened without supernatural assistance.

The following preliminary reflections focus on how President Goodluck Jonathan performed the script of a humble, unassuming, "merely lucky" political outsider who was fortuitously thrust into the ultimate political office in Nigeria via divine intervention.

I advance two related arguments. First, I contend that President Jonathan consciously used his carefully staged performances to distract from his personal insecurities as well as curry and maintain the support of the southern-based power bloc coalesced around the leading Pentecostal pastors and their congregations. Because, for reasons described shortly, President Yar'Adua's unexpected demise represented a net political loss for the northern Nigerian Hausa–Fulani power bloc, the newly sworn-in President Jonathan also desperately needed to reassure the latter while establishing personal and regime legitimacy. His performances, I suggest, were aimed primarily at keeping the powerful Pentecostal elite and their millions of congregants (based for the most part in the southern part of the country) on his side, while not losing the support of the northern power elite and population.

Second, I suggest that, in a classic move, the performances were aimed at engineering and keeping up civic empathy for a leader who, though initially favoured, became increasingly unpopular as time went on. There is no disputing that many Nigerians were thrilled when Jonathan assumed the reins of office in 2010. Many saw his relative youth (he was a youngish fifty-three) as a plus. In addition, and as mentioned above, he seemed eager to flaunt his faith, another plus in an environment in which aspirants to public office are invariably, though informally, subject to a "religious test." Third, as a zoology PhD, Jonathan was a dream come true for many Nigerians who assumed that a "well-educated" leader would bring greater sophistication to the Nigerian presidency and the administration of the country. Perhaps the most important reason why many Nigerians were taken with the new president was that they easily identified with, and indeed were inspired by, the purported "grass-to-grace" arc of his life, illustrated by the frequently repeated story that he grew up without a pair of shoes to his name. Often, then, Jonathan's performances were aimed at *impersonating* this biography, while specifically extracting maximum political capital from a combination of sincere religiosity and down-to-earth humility. Typically, impersonation is understood as a deceptive performance of someone else. Here, on the contrary, it is used to describe the performance of a biography that is semi-factual and semi-mythological, and in which details of the subject's past are continually retrofitted to match the intended persona.

Was Jonathan really a "political outsider"? What role did "pure luck" play in his rapid elevation? While these are interesting questions (and while, as referenced above, the element of "luck" was a big part of many discussions of President Jonathan's unusual trajectory), they are not my immediate focus here. On the contrary, I am interested in how Jonathan, with the help of his immediate advisers and spokespersons, capitalized on the popular narrative of his humble origins and sincere piety to secure real political advantage. At the broadest level, I hope, through the limited example analyzed here, to signal the modes through which power is staged in an African democratizing context, and the kinds of performances deployed towards the objective of achieving regime legitimacy.

## On Performance

Given its complex dispersal among a variety of disciplines from sociology through media studies to religious studies and postcolonial studies, this is hardly the place for an elaborate conceptual treatment of performance. Instead, I have elected to explain how I understand and use the term. In so doing, I aggregate, rather than discuss in extenso, the authors and traditions I have drawn on.

Following Jeffrey Alexander, who takes inspiration from, among others, Erving Goffman and Clifford Geertz, performance is regarded as any action undertaken with the intent of communicating meaning to an audience. For Alexander (and for me), “it does not matter what meaning ‘really’ is, either for actors themselves or in some ontological or normative sense. What matters is how others interpret actors’ meaning” (Alexander 2011, 83). The actor in this case is President Goodluck Jonathan, and his audience was, depending on the kind and context of performance, the country’s massive Pentecostal constituency, the people of the South South geopolitical zone who rallied around him as their own and took immense psychological pleasure in the symbolism of his presidency, or Nigerians in general. As Alexander notes, and as I clearly demonstrate here, “audiences are placed at different removes from actors, and they can be more homogenous or divided” (83).

Goffman (1967) famously argued that every face-to-face interaction is imbued with the possibility of performance. While this is true, the kind of interaction I analyze here is not face-to-face, being mostly enacted “from a distance” and conveyed to the target audience through media-tion. Though, for reasons of space, I do not go into it in any detail, the role of the Nigerian media in constructing the mythos of Jonathan as an exemplary leader (in regards to his pedigree, that is), and subsequently in projecting his performances to a dispersed audience, is of utmost importance and warrants closer scholarly attention. As part of that accounting, scholars must take seriously the Pentecostalization of the newsroom in several media houses in Nigeria. Pentecostalization here refers to the fact that many leading journalists are either avowed Pentecostals, or/and broadly sympathetic to the mission of Pentecostalism, which is crucially important because of its implications for journalists’ normative identity as bipartisan brokers in a democratic society.

I also find useful Achille Mbembe’s theorizing of the dramatization of political power in Africa. For Mbembe, what he calls the *commandement*,<sup>4</sup> as the means of producing power in Africa, operates through an economy of signs aimed at its own legitimation and perpetuation. In this economy, in which the *commandement* circulates images and ideas of itself with the objective of producing acquiescence, both the body of the *commandement* and stories about the same are site and instrument for the production and performance of power. In the Jonathan example, the parallels are obvious. With Jonathan, it wasn’t just his body, but his entire biography that was the centrepiece of a powerful political dramaturgy, a dramaturgy aimed at boosting his popularity and making him politically secure.

Finally, I am taken with sociologist Jean-Pascal Daloz’s idea of conspicuous modesty, whereby for a certain political actor, it is “evidence of one’s ordinariness and one’s humble devotion to the public, which will carry conviction and strengthen the claim to act as ‘representative’” (2007, 210). For Daloz, although conspicuous modesty ostensibly rejects the “self-glorifying quest” of elite political actors, it is in fact of a piece with it to the extent that its ultimate aim is the acquisition of social

legitimacy. In his dramatizations, President Jonathan frequently played this card of ostentatious humility.

### **Between North and South**

One argument advanced in this essay is that President Goodluck Jonathan's self-presentation as a God-fearing "anti-politician" of humble origins was motivated in part by the need to ingratiate himself with the cream of the Nigerian theocratic elite and the millions of congregants for whom their word is, quite literally, law. At the same time, accepting and projecting the image of someone without any political ambition seems to have been calculated at assuaging members of a Northern Nigerian power bloc that felt "cheated" out of their slot following the unexpected passing of Umaru Yar'Adua on May 5, 2010.

When Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) handed over to the late Yar'Adua in May 1999, it was with the tacit understanding that the North was getting back what it had voluntarily ceded to the geopolitical South West in 1999 as a gesture of reconciliation, following the annulment of the June 12, 1993, election and the death in detention of its clear winner, Chief M. K. O. Abiola. With Yar'Adua's death, the North effectively lost its slot, which explains why Jonathan felt it necessary to put its political luminaries at ease. The fear that Jonathan would go ahead and consolidate himself in power—a move that would disrupt the political class's quiet entente regarding "zoning"<sup>5</sup>—was arguably at the core of the constitutional crisis which ensued after Yar'Adua became incapacitated and could no longer discharge the duties of the office of the presidency effectively.

In the event, throughout his tenure, Jonathan struggled to balance his appeal to two sociopolitical constituencies who could not be more different—on the one hand, an influential Pentecostal super-pastorate with deep pockets and a large following, and, on the other hand, a power bloc entrenched in the majority Muslim geopolitical North. For this reason, in most cases, his performance of the pious, politically unambitious man of modest origins was all-encompassing.

### **"No Shoes, No School Bags..."**

Preparing to take charge of his first Federal Executive Council (FEC) meeting as the country's substantive president after Yar'Adua's passing, Jonathan, no doubt conscious of the symbolism of the moment and the intense gaze of the press cameras, removed his trademark fedora hat, clasped his hands, and closed his eyes in prayer. This was a calculated performance of piety and humility, an overture to the Pentecostal constituency signalling that he, as "one of them," was "in charge" (behind him, strategically positioned, was the crest of the Federal Republic of Nigeria); and, at the same time, a gesture of ostentatious humility choreographed for the consumption of the generality of Nigerians. Jonathan would retread this pose of gratuitous modesty and pornographic piety (specifically calibrated to seduce the watching public) throughout his presidency. I will illustrate with three different moments from his presidency.

Moment One: As president, Jonathan visited several times with the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and the symbolic Godfather of the theocratic elite, Pastor Enoch Adeboye. On at least two such occasions, in December 2012 and February 2015 respectively (the latter no doubt part of a desperate appeal for votes in the then approaching

presidential election of March 2015), he knelt down before Adeboye, who then went ahead to pray for him, his family, and the country.

Moment Two: In October 2013, Jonathan became the first Nigerian head of state to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In his entourage were Information Minister Labaran Maku; Special Adviser on Media and Publicity Reuben Abati; State Governors Gabriel Suswam (Benue), Theodore Orji (Abia), Peter Obi (Anambra), and Godswill Akpabio (Akwa Ibom); Executive Secretary of the Nigeria Christian Pilgrims Board Kennedy Okpara; and then President of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor. At the Wailing Wall, Jonathan knelt down for prayers before Pastor Oritsejafor and other members of the presidential entourage.



President Goodluck Jonathan in Jerusalem, October 2013. Photo: State House Photos/Sahara Reporters.

Moment Three: On March 7, 2015, at the palace of the late Ooni of Ife, Oba Okunade Sijuwade, Jonathan, reportedly at the instance of the Ooni, knelt down in the centre of a circle of Yoruba Obas who pointed their traditional staffs of office at him and prayed for his success in the approaching election.<sup>6</sup>

The sheer political force of these moments cannot be overemphasized; the image of the leader of the world's most populous black country kneeling down in humble surrender symbolizes a self-abjection that, I submit, is in fact a mode of projecting and acquiring power. Nevertheless, the point I am trying to make here transcends the physical symbolism. What I mean is this: integral to these rituals is a kind of voluntary self-degradation whereby a political actor, in this case the president of Nigeria, confesses to his "ignorance" in matters of governance and humbly asks for God's "wisdom." As I have argued elsewhere (Obadare, forthcoming), this wilful repudiation of the very

basis of his authority (an admission of incapacity, in fact) is effectively a project of avoidance, the staging of a ruse that subtly extends the ideology of the state, disguises its impunities, and hence furthers its legitimation.

## Bio-Politics

Nor was President Jonathan's performative repertoire limited to physical acts like constantly kneeling down for prayer and affecting piety. As I mentioned earlier, also key to his self-presentation as a "lucky" leader whom God singled out for "favour" was his ostensible "up by my bootstraps" life story, a narrative that Jonathan himself rehashed at every opportunity. Here he is, for example, on September 18, 2010, while declaring his candidacy for the presidential primaries of the People's Democratic Party (PDP):

I was not born rich, and in my youth, I never imagined that I would be where I am today, but not once did I ever give up. Not once did I imagine that a child from Otuoke, a small village in the Niger Delta, will one day rise to the position of President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. *I was raised by my mother and father with just enough money to meet our daily needs. In my early days in school, I had no shoes, no school bags. I carried my books in my hands but never despaired; no car to take me to school but I never despaired. There were days I had only one meal but I never despaired. I walked miles and crossed rivers to school every day but I never despaired. Didn't have power, didn't have generators, studied with lanterns but I never despaired.* In spite of these, I finished secondary school, attended the University of Port Harcourt, and now hold a doctorate degree. (emphasis added)

Here (as on other occasions), Jonathan was giving credence to, and seeking to extract political capital from, the story of his humble origins.

In this, Jonathan was not alone, as many of his spokespersons frequently bolstered his story. So too did others outside of his immediate "court," especially those who were either invested in the success of his administration for political reasons or indeed genuinely believed that he was a "miraculous" figure with an unprecedented pedigree and a (typically unspecified) historic mission. Father Matthew Hassan Kukah, the current Bishop of the Sokoto Catholic Diocese, provides a compelling instance of both. In a newspaper article, Kukah suggested that, other than sheer luck, or what he called "a monumental act of divine epiphany," there is no rational sociological explanation for President Jonathan's journey to the summit of political ambition in Nigeria. For Kukah, "This man's rise has defied any logic and anyone who attempts to explain it is tempting the gods." He then went on to add, questionably:

This man has never spent any money to purchase a form of [*sici*] declaring his intention to run for public office in politics. This man does not seem to have been sponsored into politics by any known godfather. Like the rest of us who are considered children of lesser gods, he comes from an insignificant family and a village that hitherto, could not easily be found on the national or state map. He does not seem to have invested heavily to become either Deputy Governor or Governor. ("The Patience of Jonathan" 2010)

In this account, Jonathan's success owed to no calculable agency on his part, but instead to a series of fortunate (for Jonathan, that is) coincidences. By just being there, Fr. Kukah seems to suggest, "all these events have cascaded on his laps [*siz*] within a period of a mere 12 years." "Dr. Jonathan has done absolutely nothing to warrant what has befallen him. I am sure I can safely say he has neither prayed, lobbied nor worked for what has fallen on his lap."

To be sure, the notion that nothing except a combination of luck, coincidence, or providence could "explain" Jonathan's career was, as already mentioned, very popular at the time, and the following statement by Orji Uzor Kalu, governor of the eastern state of Abia (1999–2007) was not atypical:

Those who followed [*siz*] consistently the metamorphosis of President Jonathan from a university lecturer to a deputy governor, then governor, vice president and now president, will see a definite pattern—a pattern never witnessed in the annals of the country. The enigma of the man Jonathan does not lie in his meteoric rise to the apogee of the nation's political hierarchy. It lies rather in the hand of God upon his life. Anybody may say or write whatever he likes about him, but one thing nobody can dispute is his manifest covenant with God. It is epitomized succinctly in Jonathan in practical, unambiguous terms. Can anybody tell the difference between Goodluck Jonathan and David the son of Jesse?

In retrospect, Charles A. Imokhai's gushing biography of Jonathan (referenced earlier), published and launched with much fanfare one week before the March 28, 2015, presidential election, was the perfect capstone to Jonathan's political glorification.

## Conclusion

In the foregoing, I have taken a broad approach to performance as any action undertaken with the intent of communicating meaning to an audience. The primary performer in this example is former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, and the audience, as I have shown, varied, depended on the context and type of performance. Jonathan's performances were boosted by the many within and outside his immediate entourage who, for political, ethnoreligious, and other reasons, asserted his uniqueness in Nigerian history. The material mobilized for these performances by President Jonathan was religious piety, political naiveté, and a humble pedigree. The actual performances comprised parading private devotion publicly, bouts of ostentatious humility, and a reconstruction of Jonathan's biography as the stuff of a "grass-to-grace" providential drama. These techniques were aimed at currying sympathy for the president, displacing attention from his maladroitness, and securing political legitimacy for his administration.

If the ultimate goal of these performances was political, how did Jonathan fare? Early on, in his honeymoon period, Jonathan enjoyed a high popularity. However, as time went on, his popularity plummeted. There were many reasons for this. Not only did his administration appear to condone corruption, its official stance notwithstanding, but Jonathan's insincere attempt to distinguish between "stealing" and "corruption" did him no favours. Essentially, it disrupted the biographic impersonation I described earlier and ran against the "character" he created in his public performances. The serial gaucherie of his wife, Patience Jonathan, also cost him a few friends, pointing to the difficulty of controlling other people's performances (his wife's, in this case) in order to maintain a role. In the end, Jonathan's sluggish reaction to the abduction by Boko Haram

terrorists of a reported 276 students from Government Secondary School, Chibok, Borno state, in April 2014 probably sealed his fate.

In this wise, the Jonathan administration was a most eloquent testimony to the potency and limitations of performances as a political strategy. While, initially, many were won over by his public displays of piety and humility, even they would eventually lose patience with him as his luck ran out. In retrospect, it seems that the trope of a “lucky” outsider who somehow wiggled his way to the nation’s highest office could only be sustained by remaining “outside.” Once inside, the performance proved difficult to maintain.



Protesting the Nigerian government’s removal of fuel subsidies, January 2012. Photo: George Osodi, Panos Pictures.

## Notes

1. In his 2015 biography (*The People’s Choice*), written apparently with the subject’s authorization, Charles A. Imokhai makes no mention of Jonathan having been either an assistant head boy in primary school or assistant senior prefect in secondary school. In secondary school, he was secretary of the Food Committee, prefect of Masterson House, and later on chair of prefects.
2. The heart condition that reportedly caused President Yar’Adua’s death.
3. Instructively, the tenor of jokes about Jonathan and his wife, Patience Jonathan, changed as soon as the Nigerian public soured on his presidency. In one, a telling commentary on Jonathan’s perceived political timidity, Goodluck gets married to Patience but fails to produce a child named Courage.



4. For Mbembe, commandement “embraces the images and structures of power and coercion, the instruments and agents of their enactment, and a degree of rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey them, without, of course, discussing them.” It is “the authoritarian modality par excellence” (Mbembe 1992, 30).
5. A basic understanding that the Nigerian presidency will be rotated between the north and the south as a strategy of conflict avoidance.
6. Understandably, this act of submission to “traditional” rulers did not go down well with his Pentecostal allies, many of whom tend to associate the “traditional” with the “demonic.” But the key thing to keep in mind here is Jonathan’s eagerness to submit, which is of a piece with his propensity to stage humility, all with the intent of retaining power.

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