Cartooning Contemporary Sub-Saharan African Experiences: A New Perspective[i]

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Abstract

This essay critically analyzes the distinct meanings and aesthetics of three outspoken political cartoons that use haunting images and captions to picture contemporary sub-Saharan African issues--political corruption, social and economic privations, and conflicts. The selected cartoons--Jonathan Shapiro's "Elections in Zimbabwe" (2005), Popa Mutumula's "Conflicts and Corruption" (2004), and Tayo Fatunla's "Still Waiting for a Better Nigeria" (2005)--criticize corrupt social conditions so uniquely that their undeniable rhetorical power overshadows concerns about aesthetics. Drawing upon a wide range of theoretical works, the paper argues that cartooning can be used as a springboard for criticism, mediation, and social change in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: political cartoons, mediation, social change, aesthetics Sub-Saharan Africa

"Cartooning enables us to laugh at what we fear and at our heroes, at the taboo and at the sacred, and to greet with a smile the opinion of those who think differently to us, as a step towards attaining a true citizenship." (Cruz 2006)

African Political Cartooning: Visualizing a People's Experience

An image functions as a text that produces meaning based on real-life situations, with the possibility of multiple interpretations (Hall 1999, 309). In his famous essay, "The Thing and Its Doubles," Achille Mbembe (2001, 142) describes the image as "a conventional comment, the transcription of a reality, a word, a vision, or an idea into a visible code that becomes, in turn, a manner of speaking of the world and inhabiting it." Beyond the message that it communicates and the effect that it produces on human emotions and behavior, the longer range motive of an image is to move and mobilize the viewer and inspire him or her to act as and when required (Mitchell 2005, 37). Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998, 4-7) opines that "human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before" and the modern tendency is to picture existence because it makes communication more comprehensible, quicker and more effective. As a result, the visual is replacing the linguistic as our primary means of communicating with each other and of understanding our postmodern world. A case in point is cartooning which is a highly charged, direct, and often funny medium that delivers densely concentrated information in relatively few words and simplified code-images that have an immediate and irresistible effect for the viewer; it integrates words and pictures into a flexible, powerful literary form capable of a wide range of narrative effects (Witek 1989, 3-9). This explains the increasing use of cartoons to represent fundamental postcolonial[ii] situations such as neocolonialism, social injustice, deprivations, and violence. As "a barometer of the social and political climate of the environment from which they emerge," cartoons have become another avenue for postcolonial people to narrate the various facets of their existence (Mason 2007). It is also a popular way to deconstruct unjust hegemony because it allows artists to speak out without fear, thanks to the subtlety of images and captions.

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Accordingly, I based the present essay on two premises: first, that political cartooning is a reflection of the society and historical period that produce it; and second, that political cartooning, as an expression of corrupt social conditions, often tells untold stories and may challenge people to seek positive change. Specifically, this paper examines the potential of political cartoons to speak out when no one dares to, and to function as a critique of socio-economic and political conditions in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. Within this context, this alternative form of literature serves as a mouthpiece for the speechless and a space of protest, resistance and subversion, thanks to subtle devices that make political cartoonists freer than other critics. Notwithstanding any criticism about aesthetics, cartooning constitutes a distinctive medium of popular expression. Cartoons, particularly political cartoons found almost exclusively in news publications, visually illustrate a point of view on current issues. This artistic simulation of reality uses elements of satire including caricature and irony to express ideas; it speaks for the people; it represents the seen and the unseen, and it provides insights and meanings beyond the literal. Interpreting a cartoon requires familiarity with current issues, understanding of cultural contexts, and analytical judgments, because, beyond the obvious meaning, the viewer must seek the more profound insinuations of the image. The simple format of political cartoons makes their message more striking and more memorable than the content of the most popular fictions. For instance, they are more easily accessible than novels and other written literature, simply because cartooning employs an informed combination of images (visual perception) and texts (captions) to convey meanings. While words tend to delineate specific messages, pictures can be interpreted in different ways based on the viewer's personal experience and previous knowledge. The ambiguity of images, however, extends their rhetorical power to the extent that cartoons' effects sometimes go beyond the original intent.

The essential feature of a cartoon is not *what* it says but *how* it is said (Duus 2001, 966). In order, therefore, to attain their goal of moving audiences and persuading them to accept certain ideas, political cartoonists rely on caricature; they use simplified situations, characters (mostly pretentious, powerful, and corrupt political figures), or objects designed to stand for more complex issues. In addition, they employ a range of communicative devices such as images, captions, rhetoric, and satire[iii], which make their messages vivid and empower cartoons to evoke feelings of sympathy, sorrow, guilt, resentment, bitterness, anger, joy or laughter, which are often complemented by surprise, contradiction, ambiguity or paradox. These emotions are largely responsible for the impact of the cartoon and its effect on the viewer. Meanings arise as each viewer sees a comparison between the portrayed scene and the larger issue. The function of satire in cartooning is a slippery subject: it is elemental, universal, and yet extraordinarily difficult to analyze (Reaves 2001, 2). Historically perceived as tending toward didacticism, satire is usually intended as a moral criticism directed against the injustice perpetuated by individuals, organizations, states or social conventions, and social institutions. The ultimate goal of satire is to expose corruption in all its forms and to effect reform through such exposure. Satirical cartoons are capable of deeply impacting the mind and provoking thought, emotions, and even political action. The deep divisions across the world that greeted the publication of the infamous twelve cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad[iv] in September 2005 attest to the fact that this graphic medium is indeed a powerful vehicle for the expression of social commentaries. Sidonie Gruenberg (1944) maintains that cartoons are so powerful that they deserve the serious consideration of statesmen and educators, politicians and publicists, psychologists and sociologists, for they reflect what millions are thinking about, what they want, what they fear, and how they feel about matters of social significance. (213)

African periodicals such as the West African Herald, Iwe Irohin, the West African Pilot, Nigerian Tribune, La Voix, Le Guide du Dahomey, La Presse du Cameroun, the East African Standard, The Southern Times, Sunday Times of South Africa, The Mail and Guardian, The Star of Johannesburg, Sowetan, Daily Nation of Kenya, Sunday Nation, the East African, Kenya Times (formerly Nairobi Times), New Era of Namibia, and The [Zimbabwe] Herald, were instrumental in anti-colonial campaigns and post-independence socio-economic development. With the wave of political liberalization that swept Africa in the early 1990s, a great number of titles have been added to the African newsstands (Ngugi 2007). Given the African social and historical context, these publications were and are still largely political, with journalists acting as ardent defenders of human rights and social justice (Ngugi 2007; Campell 1998: 35). Interestingly, cartooning has always been an integral part of African newspapers.

Besides political news, analysis, commentary, business news, real life stories, sports, entertainment, and advertisements, the ubiquitous comic strip and satirical cartoons occupy an important place in African media publications, and because they "grant the viewer such an express visual access without much intellectual challenge, they are generally viewer-friendly and so [a]re quite popular with readers" (Olaniyan 2002, 126). However, within the context of African economies, the cover price of most newspapers is so exorbitant that it is out of reach of the common man, thus forcing them to become even more elitist in their readership and exacting a toll on the circulation of periodicals (Ngugi 2007). Yet, the avid readers, including lovers of political cartooning, will always find a way of reading the newspapers for free at newsstands, kiosks or public libraries.

During the colonial era, there was a visual representation of everyday African realities and conditions of existence, and it provided didactic messages for African people. The main objective of this early anti-colonial nationalist cartooning was to convey a radical populist pedagogy—the type to wake up a nation to a new dawn and capture popular aspirations (Hunt 2002, 96-112; Olaniyan 2002, 126-138). A case in point was the cartooning of Akinola Lasekan[v] whose conceptual universe was anchored on the necessity to criticize the injustices of the colonial system, promote African nationalism, and attack political opponents (Olaniyan 2002, 125). Before the democratic movement began in Africa in the 1990s, cartooning was more focused on general issues, and most artists dared not caricature the political leadership or some sensitive matters. However, when the socio-economic and political crisis in postcolonial Africa compelled leaders to establish multi-party systems and liberalization in the early 1990s, cartoons began to be regularly published in newspapers, commenting on diverse issues by using humor, which is at once an expression of resistance to hegemony (Mbembe 2001, 143). Caricature of social institutions and individuals, especially the political leadership, has since become popular in sub-Saharan Africa. The freedom enjoyed by an increasing number of African cartoonists to caricature and parody public figures is an indicator of a fairly robust democratic culture and the new spirit of openness and critique, reflected in a rapid proliferation of independent newspapers on the continent, particularly in South Africa (Mason 2007). Leading African political cartoonists who use their creativity to comment on societal issues include Nigerians Tayo Fatunla, Ebun Aleshinloye, Obi Azulu, and Ake Didi Onu, South Africans Jonathan Shapiro, Nanda Sooben, Andy Mason, Alastair Findlay, Napier Dunn, and Al Krok, Tanzanians Popa Matumula, Godfrey Mwangepamba (Gado), and David Chikoko, Kenyans Paul Kelemba and Frank Odoi, Botswana Modirwa Kwekaletswe and Billy Chiepe (Chomi), and Zimbabwean Innocent Mpofu, many of whom got their inspiration from early comics reading consisting of *Beano*, *Tintin* and *Asterix* (Ngugi 2007).

My work here entails a critical analysis of the distinct meanings and aesthetics of three outspoken political cartoons: "Elections in Zimbabwe" by Zapiro Jonathan[vi]; "Conflicts and Corruption" by Popa Matumula[vii]; and "… Still Waiting for a Better Nigeria" by Tayo Fatunla[viii]. Specifically, I am interested in the use of satire in the graphic representation of key issues—electoral malpractices, social and economic privations, corruption, and conflicts. The selected cartoons are based on recognizable social situations and presented in a way to stimulate critical thinking.

I. Democracy or Poli-Tricks?

Figure 1: "Elections in Zimbabwe" (Zapiro 2005). Reproduced with Permission

Figure 1 ("Elections in Zimbabwe" by Zapiro), a six-frame depiction of democracy in Zimbabwe, is an alarming political cartoon. It pictures endemic electoral scheming and corruption in contemporary Sub-Saharan African democracies in light of the Zimbabwean experience.

The human subjects are easily recognizable public officials, including the Police, the judiciary, the media, electoral officials and observers. Much may be inferred by the manner in which the cartoonist uses images and captions to depict Zimbabwean democracy--the facial expressions of the people, the repetition of the response "check" in each frame, and the roughly sketched characters. The key player (President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, one of Africa's longest serving presidents - frame 6) and the publication date (2005) indicate that this cartoon portrays the preparations for the March 2005 parliamentary elections in Zimbabwe[ix]. The initial impression is so strong that one may easily miss other implications. But a closer look reveals far more interesting facts about the corrupt and undemocratic electioneering processes in Zimbabwe. Each character or institution in the cartoon represents an indispensable body for free and fair elections that can result in enduring democracy and political stability. The Police (frame 1) is concerned primarily with maintenance of public order and law enforcement; the judiciary (frame 2) is responsible for the administration of justice; the television and other media (frame 3) are agencies of mass communication that inform the citizens about government policies and programs, and educate people about their rights and duties; the electoral officials (frame 4) constitute a commission that guarantees the right of making informed choices; and the observer missions (frame 5) monitor the conduct of elections to ensure that they are free and fair, that all parties are given equal opportunities to win.

In an ideal democracy, the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving some form of periodical elections. However, political parties and leaders seek to control forever the levers of power--by whatever means possible. The common stratagem is to hold elections, but simultaneously arrest and molest opponents and their supporters. Such parties and leaders subvert the voting process by politicizing election supervision, stuffing ballot boxes, disenfranchising voters who are in the opposition, distorting electoral boundaries, and manipulating the tabulation of results to their advantage.   Electoral campaigns are undertaken with a definite goal in mind: win the election at all cost. Consequently, candidates use all available resources, including fraud and coercion, to achieve their selfish ambition, thus ignoring the basic principles of democracy and the rule of law. In the cartoon's scenario, the first five players (frames 1-5) are tailored to suit the whims and caprices of the leader (frame 6). As they stand in front of black hole-shaped backgrounds that represent the President's pockets, they look dissatisfied but compelled to comply with the latter's wishes. They respond "check" to every presidential order. "Where material incentives [a]re not enough to induce unconditional submission," the Police is used to quash any protests or opposition and thus keep the masses in check (Mbembe 2001, 42). Members of the judiciary are in most cases appointed by the President, and as such, can only return verdicts that are favorable to the President. The media must publish stories that praise qualities that the leader does not have or face censorship, detention or elimination. Electoral officials are forced to assist in subverting the process. Accredited observers are threatened with expulsion if they see or say more than permitted, and are sometimes given pre-printed election results to report to the world that the "elections were free and fair."

The incongruity of this ingenious set of images evokes both laughter and sadness. Since all the characters and/or institutions are in the pockets of the President (frame 6), it is clear that such elections are by no means democratic. Every player in the electoral process is under the absolute control of the president. "Everything is in place," says the caption, for the "reelection" of the political party of a President who shows no sign of giving up his power. The depiction of "omnipotent" Mugabe is a clear mockery of oppressive forces of many dictatorships. The political longevity of such autocratic rulers is due to several factors, namely corrupt appropriation of national economic resources, the creation of an impressive military machinery to repress rebellions and discourage opposition, the support of former colonial powers in some cases, and the manipulation of elements of the supernatural and the spiritual[x] (Foccart 1995). The corrupt leadership bows to multiparty democracy out of convenience rather than conviction[xi], and then uses all means to impose itself on the citizens through unchallenged elections. Such leaders retain their position for decades through several subsequent sham elections as well as through the use of brutal force. For the same purpose, they alter their country's constitution to extend their tenure and handpick their successors.

This cunning way of establishing political dynasties is a mockery of democracy; Ivorian reggae musician Alpha Blondy calls it *democrature*[xii] or *poli-tricks*. Who and where then is the electorate? What is their reaction to *democrature*? These are the poor citizens, who are daily denied their basic human rights. They too, are in the president's pocket and have no voice or power. Consequently, informed artists and intellectuals like political cartoonists become the conscience of the people as they use their works to express the minds and feelings of the oppressed.

They also serve to keep the excesses of the leadership in check, and thus become instruments of "democratic surveillance," to use Michel Foucault (1980, 152-54)'s suggestive expression. In a sense, this function qualifies cartoonists 'as guardians of the public good', who use their indignant eyes to probe zones of injustice and corruption for the benefit of the collective citizenry (Duus 2001, 966). That is exactly what Figure 1 does. The depiction of the highly undemocratic electoral processes in Zimbabwe is a form of political intervention--the cartoon itself constitutes an oppositional form of social control and regulation. Thanks to its subtle but poignant views on Zimbabwean elections, Figure 1 provides good insights into the African political culture. The ability of this graphic art to acutely satirize the leadership demonstrates the power of political cartoons to "subvert […] political authority by mocking its claims to superiority and/or legitimacy" (Duus 2001, 965). This cartoon should not, however be read as a suggestion that African nations are incapable of sustaining enduring democracies, nor should it be seen as an addition to the many negative stereotypes of Africa, which already overwhelm the Western media. Although Mbembe's negative assessment[xiii] of African political cultures may apply to a few insecure or despotic regimes, sweeping generalizations and nihilist diagnoses are simply unfair and must be avoided (Karlström 2003, 60). Indeed, there have been outright successes in terms of party and press pluralism (Krieger 1994, 605; Smith 2004). A point in case is Benin. It has embraced democracy with characteristic fervor, becoming a model of reform on the African stage. The peaceful transition from a military to a democratically elected civilian leadership, as well as increased freedom of the press and strengthening of civil society institutions, have reinforced the country's democratic tendencies. Benin was in fact the first country in the 1990s to successfully effect the transition from dictatorship to a pluralistic political system. The success of fair multiparty elections, especially the 1991, 1996, 2001, and 2006 presidential elections, won high praise; very few cases of irregularities were reported. Other examples include Senegal (which remains one of the most stable democracies in Africa), South Africa, Mali, and Ghana, where multiparty politics have been restored and free and fair elections have been conducted.

II. Conflicts and Corruption, the Driving Forces of African Hardship

Figure 2: "Conflicts and Corruption" (Popa 2004). Reproduced with Permission

The captions of Figure 2 ("Conflicts and Corruption" by Popa) identify the issues at stake: a truck labeled "Conflicts - Corruption - Africa" heads toward the impassable tunnel that leads to prosperity. The cartoon addresses two pressing issues: corruption and conflict, which hinder social harmony, political stability, and economic growth in many African countries. These two evils serve as the greatest impediments to prosperity because they result in social and economic adversity and increase the prevalence of other related problems; they prevent any effective consolidation of civil society and render the state totally impotent (Mbembe 2001, 51).

In spite of all its natural and human resources, Africa is still figuring out how to become prosperous. The cartoon shows a truck in an uphill trajectory, and a darkening sky flowing into the ballooning load it carries. Corruption and conflicts (illustrated by the darkening sky that is feeding into the load) have gotten the African truck so large that it is impossible for the continent to pass through the tunnel that leads to prosperity. The road to prosperity is akin to threading the eye of the needle; it is a hard trajectory. In order to get there, governmental corruption and the unending ethnic and religious conflicts that plague many African countries must be dealt with: the excess weight of corruption and conflicts, which so easily beset success, must be shed. The situation can be paralyzing, as can be deduced from the reaction of Africa's truck driver and passengers who express utmost surprise and puzzlement, symbolized by the punctuation marks ("!" --an exclamation and "?"—an interrogation). They probably thought: "Wow! Are we ever going to pass through this narrow way with the overload of corruption and conflicts?" (See captions in Figure 2.) Corruption erodes the institutional capacity of government because procedures are disregarded, resources are siphoned off, public offices are bought and sold, and socio-economic development is undermined. According to Mbembe (2001), corruption has reached incommensurable heights and [i]t is no longer simply a matter of exploiting bureaucratic positions through sinecures that bring in extra income. […] In some cases, the situation is such that everyone collects a tax from his or her subordinates and from the customers of the public service, with the army, the police, and the bureaucracy [and even the diplomatic service] operating like a racket, squeezing those it administers. (84) The repercussions of this situation are obvious and serious: considerable distortions and inefficiency, socio-economic adversity, famine, disease, social unrest and conflict, foreign debt and political instability. The corrupt leaders, who disregard the welfare of fellow humans, continue to embezzle national resources for their selfish interest instead of attending to the needs of the masses (Obadina 2005). This greed in high places makes the leaders (symbolized by the overloaded truck, which represents Africa) so bloated and so heavy that they literally prevent forward movement on the road to illusory prosperity. (See Figure 2.)

Corruption in Africa also includes the misappropriation of foreign aid and grants accorded the continent by developed nations and international organizations. Aid meant for the needy majority is diverted and used for selfish ends by corrupt leaders who always help themselves first to whatever is available. Under these circumstances, the foreign aid strengthens the forces that foster fraud and depravity at the expense of the helpless masses. Consequently, the debt that arises from the aid given to Africa continues to increase while the problems it is meant to solve never decrease. This explains the continent's vicious cycle of socio-economic hardship and dependence on the West. Unfortunately, many African leaders are oblivious to socio-economic adversities; they claim there is no hardship in their countries and that it is all foreign propaganda. Because many of them see only opposition and rebellion in the people's pleas for mercy and justice, cartooning has to step up to speak out. Conflicts resulting from corruption are not new phenomena. Historically, corruption, injustice, human rights violations, and ethnic and religious intolerance have always led to social unrest and conflicts in human societies. In Africa, for instance, many organizations, frequently termed "rebel groups," have been formed in opposition to corrupt and/or illegitimate leadership. As a result, violence and war plague many African nations, and the battles between government forces and rebel groups result in the displacement of numerous civilians, as individuals are forcibly removed from their homes, without food, safety, protection, and health care.

A study of specific cases in some African countries attests to this fact. The armed conflicts in Rwanda were caused by several political and economic upheavals as well as exacerbated ethnic tensions, which culminated in the genocide of roughly 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in April 1994. The Democratic Republic of Congo has been the site of unending local insurrections as well as multinational ethnic strife and civil wars since 1994. The Republic of Congo has suffered ethnic and political unrest since 1999. Côte d'Ivoire has been engulfed in political turmoil and social unrest since September 2002, a situation that dealt a major economic blow to what used to be West Africa's richest country. Nigeria's unending ethnic and religious riots have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives since late 1980s. Liberia witnessed fourteen years of civil war before beginning a cessation in 2003. The eleven-year civil war in Sierra Leone (1991 to 2002) resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and the displacement of more than two million people--about one-third of the population. Sudan has been embroiled in prolonged civil wars since the early eighties. The Sudanese conflicts are rooted in northern economic, political, and social domination of largely non-Muslim, non-Arab southern Sudanese. The first civil war ended in 1972, but broke out again in 1983.

The second war and famine-related effects resulted in more than four million people displaced and, according to rebel estimates, more than two million deaths over a period of two decades. A separate ethno-religious conflict that broke out in the western region of Darfur in 2003 resulted in at least 200,000 deaths and nearly two million displaced as of mid 2006 (*Global Issues* 2007; The World Bank 2007). These facts and data confirm the depiction in Figure 2 of corruption and civil conflicts as the most harmful and intractable problems that hinder the full social and economic development of the continent. The cartoon suggests that social peace, economic growth, and prosperity will become a reality only if those two major issues currently plaguing Africa are resolved. As Figure 2 shows, the overload of all forms of corruption and all kinds of conflicts must be jettisoned outright in order for Africa's truck to pass through the tunnel that leads to prosperity.

III. Still Waiting for a Better Society

Figure 3: "…Still Waiting for a Better Nigeria" (Tayo 2005). Reproduced with Permission

"…Still Waiting for a Better Nigeria" by Tayo is a political cartoon that focuses on the multifarious problems plaguing Nigeria, which is used to illustrate the African experience. Given the publication date (2005), it can safely be said that Figure 3 is a satirical illustration of the social, economic, and political woes of Nigeria in her forty-five years of independence and a succession of eleven civilian and military regimes. As a result of political instability, financial mismanagement, corruption, repression, and ethnic and religious intolerance, Nigeria, Africa's major oil producer and most populous nation continues to suffer from a host of interrelated social, economic and political problems. The situation is similar in many post-independence African states where leaders often exert authority with highhandedness reminiscent of the colonial system (Said 1993, 19). The cards strewn across the floor and surrounding the skeleton (Figure 3) list some of the most prevalent social ills, which include poor health, diseases, crime and killings, illiteracy, unemployment, emigration, religious bigotry, tribalism, political corruption, human rights violations, and inadequate social services. The cartoon is a critical ironic illustration that is accessible to a wide range of viewers, including intellectuals, politicians as well as the man in the street. While responding to popular demands for the reform of post-independence society, Figure 3 is designed, both in story line and visual language, to appeal largely to the marginalized (Olaniyan 2002, 135). Tayo's virulent critic of the postcolony is satirical and sarcastic towards those in power blaming them for the current socio-economic hardship; it summarizes the prevailing state of nothingness whereby people are denied their fundamental rights including the right to an assured, decently humane existence, "the right to individual representation, social rights, the right to work" (Mbembe 2001, 54). The cartoon perfectly captures the sense of frustration resulting from the indefinite wait before the fulfillment of the promises which the country's abundant resources and the political campaigns meant for them (Abah 2002, 161). The main caption ("Still waiting for a better Nigeria") has three implications. First, these problems have existed in Nigeria for a long time; second, there have been countless unfulfilled promises; and third, despite the disillusion, the citizenry still hopes for a transformed Nigeria.

Tayo uses a rather shocking image to convey these serious issues: a human skeleton in a cozy armchair on a floor littered with a host of social issues, and a fish skeleton on a plate at the bottom right corner. Beyond the superficial impression and overwhelming humor, a close examination of Figure 3 reveals a subtle social criticism. The central figure of the cartoon, a skeleton, is compelling for two reasons: one, because it evokes death and decay, and two, because it is similar to common images of victims of AIDS, which is coincidentally one of the captioned issues. The cobwebs at the top left corner of the image and around the window as well as the hovering flies indicate the long duration of the decay. The HIV/AIDS pandemic and other health problems cannot be ignored because they continue to wreak havoc in many parts of Africa, including Nigeria. The increasing number of infected adults will decimate the working classes, and invariably impede national development. In an effort to curb this problem the government and the health sector have found ways to distribute anti-AIDS drugs to patients. The irony of these efforts is that doctors advise patients to "take their medication with food" for the medicine to be effective. But the patients in most cases do not have easy access to food and are obviously malnourished. Taking medicine with an empty stomach could obviously do more harm than good to the patient. According to the World Food Program, hunger is the greatest threat to the fight against AIDS (2006). Two social issues illustrated by the cartoon are crime and killings, which are tied to other social problems earlier listed. As a result of limited educational opportunities, illiteracy is very high, and without appropriate skills and knowledge, young men and women cannot get jobs. The high rate of unemployment in turn causes poverty, hunger, poor health, homelessness, and in some cases child labor, which may be crucial for survival. Many young Nigerians have to prematurely assume the tremendous responsibility of providing food and shelter for their families. They also sometimes have to pay for the education of their younger siblings, in some cases by resorting to prostitution, robbery, and drug trade. Some young women would like to read sex education books, but they are illiterate. This lack of education escalates teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

The educated citizens are not any better because poor economies and financial mismanagement adversely affect job opportunities. Some of the educated citizens relocate to developed countries of the West either for greener pasture or to escape frequent human rights violations that result from social criticism that is often considered subversive by the authority. The vast majority of Nigerians are thus disenfranchised in their homeland either because they live in abject deprivation or because repressive governments force them to go in exile. The cartoon is certainly a social commentary on religious life in Nigeria. The captions "Sharia Law" and "Tribalism" bring up the question of differences in religious beliefs and ethnic affiliations, which cause intermittent ethnic and sectarian conflicts, and have threatened national unity, peace and civil order since independence. The longstanding ethnic and religious tensions were further aggravated with the recent movement to introduce the Sharia law and its criminal code that prescribes penalties for specific violations, such as flogging for imbibing alcohol, removal of hands and feet for recidivist thieves, and stoning in cases of proven adultery. While the introduction of Sharia Law in predominantly Muslim states like Zamfara, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Kano and Yobe was peaceful, the action provoked widespread opposition in states like Kaduna and Plateau that have roughly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims. It is sure to meet total resistance in the predominantly Christian south. The federal government has refused to oppose the introduction of Sharia, even though it is at odds with the Nigeria's secular constitution. The constitutional guarantees of a secular state and freedom of religion are incompatible in light of the fact that Islam rejects separation of political from religious authority and proposes a unified theocratic system of governance. The two captions "Sharia Law" and "Tribalism" indicate two social problems militating against economic growth and political stability, i.e. a better Nigeria, which the average citizen is still waiting for.

The simple words of the captions, the macabre image, and the attendant humor, demonstrate clever manipulations and aesthetic sophistication in conveying the message and underlying meanings of the cartoon (Reaves 2001, 2). They compel the viewer to wonder, "How did the situation get so bad that even skeletons (symbolizing death) await a utopia?" Indeed, despite the abundant human and natural resources of Nigeria, post-independence leadership has not done much to solve the perennial problems of a country whose body polity has been completely desiccated. "…Still Waiting for a Better Nigeria" not only speaks out but also has the capacity to mobilize consciousness concerning contemporary issues of national concern. The cartoon sadistically suggests that by the time the illusory "better Nigeria" arrives, the ills surrounding the skeleton will have killed off a massive number of Nigerians.

Here, the cartoonist relies on the absurd to convey his message; death obviates waiting for a better society; it is ironic that a skeleton whose death resulted from the prevailing societal evils highlighted by the captions would still be hopeful.   The cartoon leaves the viewer with mixed feelings: helplessness in the face of overwhelming adversities and guilt *vis-à-vis* the urgency to solve the array of pressing problems[xiv] that have thrust back a vast majority of Africans to the very brink of death (Mbembe 2001, 147). Nigerians have been waiting for a better life since becoming independent in 1960. Given their optimistic and persevering attitudes, many citizens believe the promises of a better country where all social, economic, and political issues will be addressed. They look forward to an improvement in their living conditions, but most rulers complete their terms in office not fulfilling any of these promises. Thus, the social problems resulting from the vicious cycle of evils continue to eat deep into the fabric of Nigerian society and outlive the citizens, who wait indefinitely for a better country, even when dead. It should however be noted that effective progress and prosperity do not occur overnight. Nigeria has been independent for less than five decades, and the Western experience shows that social equality, political legitimacy, and economic success were attained after centuries of changes wrought by political legislation, economic changes, and social upheavals. In order to end the wait, Nigeria needs honest leadership and responsible citizens who will judiciously manage the country's enormous resources.

Closing Notes

The cartoons I have analyzed use haunting images and captions to picture contemporary sub-Saharan African realities with power and wit.   They provide an opportunity to explore postcolonial *responsibility* in a supposedly independent and progressive region that remains entangled in the vicious cycle of underdevelopment (Brennan 1990, 63). The inventive devices used "to get their messages across despite censorship and repression" may spark desirable change, especially if the affected parties can see, read and understand the message and aesthetic of this graphic art, which is a witting call for overdue social, political, and economic reforms (Mason 2007).   However, viewers must exercise extra care because of the possibility of complex and multiple meanings of images, such as "Elections in Zimbabwe" which portrays political corruption in postcolonial Africa but also contains some ambiguity resulting from the volatility of representation and inevitable variations in interpretation and meaning. Additionally, cartooning "is a product of certain social and historical circumstances and certain power relations, and cannot escape their influence" (Strinati 2005, 99). For instance, cartoonists working for government-owned presses may be allies of the state as agencies of mass mobilization in favor of the leadership. Their works may thus be used for nationalist propaganda or for the promotion of ideas that may not always be popular. This is particularly true when the cartoonist belongs to the same political community as the officials he is supposed to lampoon (Duus 2001, 981). The cartoonist may also be used by the government against the people, especially political opponents. In addition, cartoons may express the artists' own ideas and sentiments. In such cases, the message and aesthetic of political cartooning, which are supposed to serve as indices of the artist's level of consciousness, may become subjective and even partisan. Andy Mason[xv] reports a confession by renowned political cartoonist and staunch supporter of the South African liberation movement, Jonathan Shapiro, who admits he often has to choose between his loyalty to the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and his need to criticize the inadequacies and excesses of the government (2001).

In summing up his ideas of the ambiguity of the modern political cartoon, Duus says that while the cartoonist helps to maintain a "democratic surveillance" on the government, he also contributes to the construction of a national imaginary whose legitimacy and authority is never questioned (2001, 989). For his part, Mbembe suggests that "[t]he question of truth is, effectively, resolved by the reader, not only through the mimetic and allegorical relation as such, but also through the direct relation of familiarity and plausibility that exists between what is narrated and everyday experience" (2001, 160). Some critics also have concerns about the simplistic and mechanical format of cartoons-- their lack of delicacy and sophistication (Gruenberg 1944, 205-8).   However, Duus vehemently defends the art: "it is precisely the commonplace qualities that tempt us to trivialize the cartoon--the simplicity of its language, the directness of its message, and the mechanical character of its production--that make it of such value to [scholars] of history, culture, and society" (2001, 995). Ernst Gombrich corroborates by hailing the art for that simplicity, even "the condensation of a complex idea into one striking and memorable image" which makes cartoons irresistible and meaningful (1963, 130). A great cartoon is the product of sophisticated intellectual, cultural, aesthetic, and emotional maturity welded together by a unique language. In fact, "the language of the cartoon at first was not the language of the masses but of a cultivated, educated minority able to understand the allusions, the incongruous connections, and the conundrums that were the stock-in-trade of visual satire" (Duus 2001, 966).

In order to effectively interpret political cartoons, an understanding of the historical, literary, and cultural references used by the artist is indispensable; otherwise the viewer would be excluded from the communication. While the message of political cartoons is often so obvious that even the illiterate--culturally or otherwise--can grasp it easily, some cartoons are so subtle that understanding them often requires a certain degree of cultural literacy or inside knowledge of political affairs, especially when complex cultural referents are involved (Iwashita 1996). The distinctive devices used by cartoonists are almost universally intelligible and enable them to reach the largest possible public. As such, concerns raised by some critics about the aesthetics of cartooning should in no way overshadow this undeniable advantage. The exploits of political cartooning give the art "its full potential as a vehicle for the expression of political opinion" (Duus 2001, 976). Cartoons are not just appealing to the eyes but they also speak out. They show the readers different ideals through artistic satire; they reveal a side of political culture not found in other texts and other archives; and they also provide access to "everyday" reactions to politics that even public opinion polls cannot capture (Duus 2001, 995). Through an ironic interplay between images and words, Zapiro, Popa, and Tayo open a space for a critique of African socio-economic and political issues via genuine reflection, deliberation, and reassessment of governance and national policies in which viewers are actively involved. As one views their cartoons, "there is a powerful sense of people naming the inequality they suffer from, and recognizing, often with humour or bitter irony, their own struggle and endurance […] the elite's excessive and exploitative consumption […] the desire for change […] and the belief in the possibility of change" (Barber 1997, 5-6). Cartooning thus becomes an excellent way to speak to and for people thanks to the powerful combination of the catchy images and succinct words.

The role of cartoons in the critique of African realities has grown so considerably that this medium has become a significant social force. Reaves reiterates this idea when she reminds the readers about the extraordinarily persuasive power an editorial cartoonist can wield over our subconscious noting that we absorb lasting impressions that mold our opinions without our awareness (2001, 7). For her part, Gruenberg (1944) classifies cartoons as a powerful social device, stating: [T]hey do penetrate the thoughts and sentiments of multitudes, and affect attitudes, they constitute a social force that goes beyond differences in "taste." For better or for worse, they are more potent than many of the other instruments for influencing people's understanding and attitudes […] they have become an integral part of the progressive democratization of our culture. (208-9) The selected cartoons successfully re-imagine and interrogate the social injustice and tribulations which the common man experiences in many parts of the African continent; they speak for the speechless and the powerless; they communicate with the otherwise unreachable, and criticize the powerful, so that there may be informed dialogues that may eventually engender social change.

Endnotes

[i] I am especially indebted to Cartoonists Jonathan Shapiro, Popa Matumula, and Tayo Fatunla for permission to use their cartoons for this essay. Many thanks to Dr. James Diedrick, Professor of English and Dr. Douglas Falen, Associate Professor of Anthropology, for reading the manuscript and for offering suggestions for improvement.

[ii] "The notion 'postcolonial' identifies specifically a given historical trajectory -that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization" and the socio-cultural, economic and political atmosphere that ensued (Mbembe 1992, 3).

[iii] Satire is the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, ridicule, sarcasm, or allegory to expose and criticize human vices and follies, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues. It is often an intended means of provoking or preventing change (The Oxford American College Dictionary 2002, 1210).

[iv] On 30 September 2005, Jyllands-Posten, the largest-selling newspaper in Denmark published twelve cartoons showing the Muslim Prophet Muhammad in a variety of humorous or satirical situations. These depictions of the Prophet met with outrage across the Muslim World. The controversial cartoons, as first published in Jyllands-Posten are available online at http://www.aina.org/releases/20060201143237.htm

[v] Akinola Lasekan (1916-1974), Nigeria's pioneer political cartoonist worked for the West African Pilot, "the most crucial single precipitant of the formative Nigerian awakening" for over two decades (Olaniyan 2002, 124).

[vi] Jonathan Shapiro, who goes by the pen name Zapiro, is an established political cartoonist from Cape Town (South Africa) whose work date back to the politically turbulent 1980s. When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established Zapiro was working on retainer, producing political cartoons on a weekly basis for the national weekly newspapers The Mail and Guardian and Sunday Times and on a daily basis for Sowetan and the Cape Argus. Zapiro lampoons in many cartoons the way 'justice' was meted out during the course of the TRC as well as fundamental inadequacies he finds in its task of "truth-finding." He covers important issues such as social injustice, corruption, health, and violence. He sends cartoons internationally.

vii Popa Matumula started his career as a freelance illustrator and a cartoonist in 1987. He was the first in Tanzania to draw cartoons that challenged the one-party system in the bi-weekly political tabloid, Fahari. Popa's cartoons have been published in leading newspapers in Tanzania and internationally in publications such as New African (UK), Newsweek (Korean edition), Los Angeles Times, The Post Star (US), KOSA Report, and Zeitschwift Entwicklungspolitik (Germany). He has also exhibited his works at home and abroad.   His favorite themes include health issues, environmental matters, political corruption and conflicts. In 2001, Popa won the United Nations Ranan Lurie Political Cartoon Award with honorable mention.

viii Tayo Fatunla is one of Africa's leading comic artists, whose work is published internationally on regular basis. He first worked for Nigerian national newspapers such as Punch, Concord, Guardian and Daily Times before joining West Africa, a London based news weekly magazine in 1989. Tayo has done cartoons for BBC's Focus On Africa magazine and the BBC Hausa educational booklet on AIDS and drawings for journals (New African, Thamesmead Times, African Business in Britain and Courrier International in Paris) and in books (Od'd On O.J., Human Rights, Cartooning AIDS, and Ecotoons). Tayo has had his work exhibited in Britain, USA, France, Egypt, Nigeria, Finland, and Italy. His cartoons are on permanent display at the International Museum of Cartoon Art (IMCA), Boca Raton, Florida.

ix Although there were some improvements in the conduct of the 2005 Zimbabwe's parliamentary elections compared with previous polls, independent observers found a number of serious shortcomings in the electoral system and the environment in which the voting took place: there were serious irregularities and malpractices, including, ballot box stuffing, altered polling results, disenfranchisement of voters, and inconsistent application of electoral procedures. For instance, the ruling ZANU-PF had at its disposal the resources and privileges of incumbency, which it employed to its own advantage. For more information, read "Amnesty International 2005 Report on Zimbabwe" (http://web.amnesty.org) and "Allegations of Fraud in Zimbabwe's Parliamentary Elections"(http://www.electionguide.org) - Assessed 06/15/11.

x Some leaders use mysticism and religious institutions such as Christianity, Islam, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, traditional secret societies, and religious syncretism mixing Voodoo, witchcraft, and ancestor worship with orthodox faiths, to build a cult of themselves --Eyademaism, Mobutism, Houphouetism, Bongoism, etc.-- in order to gain control over the minds of the citizens by convincing the masses that they are the ideal leaders for their respective countries (Ellis and Haar 1998: 176-201; Ngolet 2000: 55-58; and Toulabor 1993: 277-97). These symbolic and ideological systems are invented to maintain and perpetuate their domination over the citizens. It is an atmosphere of adoration and celebration in which any opposition to the regime is nearly impossible.

xi The late Presidents Houphouët-Boigny, Mobutu Sesse Seko and Togo's Gnassingbe Eyadéma and former President Arap Moi, adopted multi-party political systems against their will - but they then subverted them by sponsoring splinter parties to divide the opposition.

xii The neologism "Démocrature," coined by Alpha Blondy, is a combination of "democracy" and "dictatorship" to depict a special political dispensation that does not respect human rights and freedom of expression and in which polling results are blatantly rigged to impose unpopular leaders who operate without meaningful legal restraints. It is virtually impossible for anyone to challenge the autocratic leadership or contest election results (Baradat 2000: 79).

xiii For more information about Achille Mbembe's assessment of African political cultures, read his "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony" (1992).

xiv Frantz Fanon's essay "On National Culture" (The Wretched of the Earth, 174-190) provides a detailed analysis of the continuous erosion of living conditions and the socio-economic crisis in postcolonial African states.

xv Andy Mason is a cartoonist and comics publisher and a director of Artworks Publishing in Durban, South Africa.

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Figure 1: "Elections in Zimbabwe" by Jonathan Shapiro (a.k.a. Zapiro). First published in Sowetan, March 30, 2005,
          http://www.cartoonist.co.za/zapiro.htm - Accessed 04/12/11.
Figure 2: "Conflicts and Corruption" by Popa Matumula (a.k.a. Popa). December 14, 2008,
          http://www.vmcaa.nl/bongotoons/engels/popa/overzicht.htm-Accessed 04/12/11.
Figure 3: "…Still Waiting for a Better Nigeria" by Tayo Fatunla (a.k.a. Tayo). First published in This Week, Lagos,
          Nigeria September 29, 2005,
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