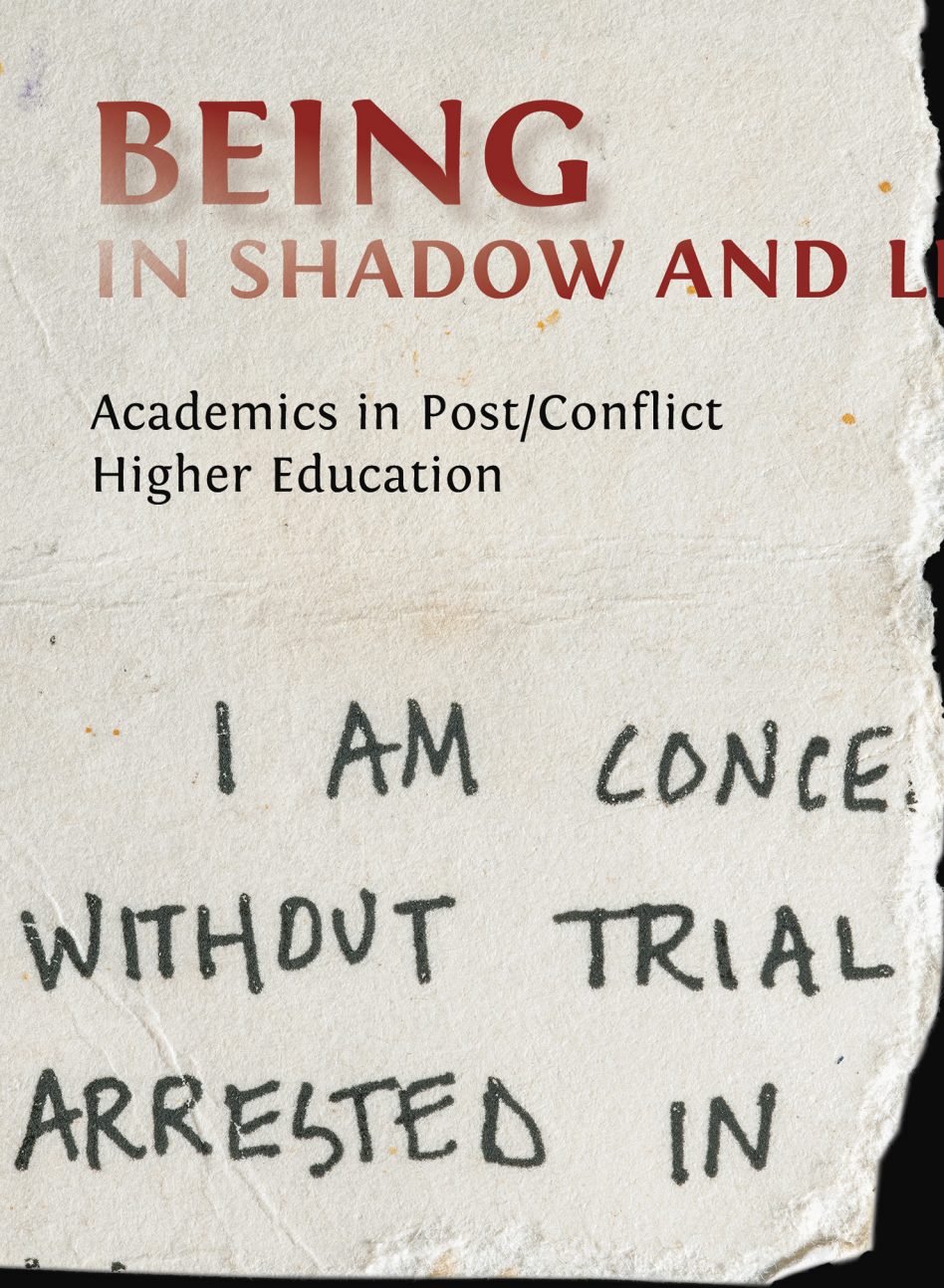
BEING
IN SHADOW AND LIGHT

Academics in Post/Conflict Higher Education



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9. The Lone Voice in the Academic Wilderness: Nigerian Academics' Experiences in Industrial Conflicts

Gregory O. Ugbo and Henry Chigozie Duru

Setting the Scene

The imperative of quality education in national development is incontrovertible in this era of education renaissance in the African context (Waswa and Katana, 2008). African educational systems have faced turbulent challenges since the emergence of formal education in the nineteenth century, with varying degrees of resilience across African countries. The Nigerian educational system has had its fair share of challenges which have ranged from poor funding, skilled workforce retention, teachers' welfare, etc. (Arowosegbe, 2023). The (mis) management of these challenges has generated conflicts that have, at times, further compounded the problems of teaching and learning within the country, which leads to unpleasant experiences for all concerned. The impasse at the time of writing between the Nigerian Federal Government (FG) and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), which led to the suspension of all academic activities in Nigerian public universities from February 14, 2022 till October 14, 2022, exemplifies this situation. Exacerbating existing challenges, Nigeria was still in recovery mode from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that severely altered the global academic calendar, especially for nations lacking the digital affordances to transition to virtual learning. Nigerian universities lost two academic years during 2020–2021 and 2021–2022—and counting, since the 2022 strike was only suspended without a resolution to the issues that made

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the strike inevitable. Warning strikes and threats of strike have continued to disrupt Nigerian public universities' academic programmes at the time of writing this paper.

In this chapter, analyses of discourses were undertaken within the context of structural and economic conflicts that have arisen from unmet needs in the educational system, particularly the Nigerian higher education system, as demonstrated by the ASUU-Federal Government conflicts. The discourses were approached by analysing narratives around the issues relating to a strike, as projected in the media. In other words, the chapter discursively and reflexively explores how issues were framed in the media by reviewing how the government, media and other stakeholders represent and understand the underlying causes of the conflict espoused by the academic union. In doing so, the qualitative content analysis method was adopted to review media reports for emerging themes. This, combined with the first-hand experiences of authors as ASUU members, enabled us to make some extrapolations on the general situation of other academic staff under the umbrella of ASUU in Nigeria.

The relevance of this discourse is premised on the dynamic with which Nigerian academics, especially those based within Nigerian universities, have had to contend: perennial problems of abandonment, scapegoating, victimisation, suppression and blackmail, from the Nigerian government, parent-stakeholders and students (Arowosegbe, 2023; Bello and Isah, 2016). This is despite such academics negotiating career growth in hostile work environments and politics of control which militate against maintaining minimum global standards in personal development. This, at the same time, poses a great challenge to the academics' responsibilities to preserve the nation's knowledge base, values and cultures through teaching, research and community services.

This chapter, therefore, explores how academics negotiate their survival and development for global competitiveness in a climate where the extant political structure tends to promote priorities other than education; how they endeavour to uphold the structure of national existence through research, teaching and community services in the face of obvious alienation; and how this perceived 'outsider' in politics and policies achieves a balance under oppressive regimes that have always

subsumed the academics' existence within a collectively subdued population. What are their coping mechanisms amidst unreconcilable priorities related to university education which often result in total down-tools and disruption of academic calendars and programmes, and further injustice in terms of delayed promotion, suspension of salaries and scapegoating? As authors, we expected that the outcome of this curation would add a Nigerian perspective to the lived experiences of many university academics internationally who are increasingly entrapped and victimised in vicious webs of conspiracies, yet who remain voiceless. The critical discourses from this chapter will signpost a revolution towards ending, or at least possibly ameliorating, the incessant industrial conflicts that not only disrupt teaching and learning in Nigerian universities, but erode the personae of the academics at the receiving end, who are often neglected.

Industrial Conflicts in Nigerian Universities: ASUU-Federal Government Conflict in Context

ASUU, as the name implies, is an umbrella body of all tenured academics in Nigerian public universities. ASUU membership excludes tenured academics in private and some state-owned universities in Nigeria. It is a registered union through which academics negotiate their welfare and demand the maintenance of the best standards. Conflicts between ASUU and the Federal Government have a long history worthy of recounting. As documented by Odiagbe (2012), ASUU was established in 1978 as a response to 'the need to address the deterioration of education in the country especially under the military rule but [...] [it] emerged into what was already a highly politicised environment' (p. 57). The intention behind the establishment of the ASUU had been misconstrued to be politically motivated, despite available evidence showing that the root cause of the incessant ASUU-Federal Government industrial conflict was hinged on poor remuneration and working conditions that resulted in high brain drain of academic staff (Bello and Isah, 2016; Ugar, 2018).

This history cannot be isolated from the general role the Nigerian military played in the entire evolution of the higher education system since independence from British colonialism. Odiagbe (2012) noted that military incursion into the Nigerian political sphere resulted in

the decline of the premium value and respect originally accorded to Nigerian civil servants within the middle class, and within which Nigerian academics were positioned. Before the military interruption of Nigeria's democracy in 1966, the Nigerian academic enjoyed high recognition in terms of remuneration and social status (Aidelunuoghene, 2014). The Nigerian professor, for instance, was the highest paid civil servant after the Chief Justice of the Federation, and even higher than the highest-ranking Nigerian military officer (Salihu, 2019). This helps to explain the class struggle between Nigerian academics and the political class currently controlled by former military czars. The political undertone of this struggle is demonstrated by the ready perception of ASUU as a rebel or traitor group by military/political elites. For instance, the 1986 strike against Babangida's Structural Adjustment Programme led the FG to accuse ASUU of attempting to topple Bangida's government (Odiagbe, 2012, p. 53). This propaganda was peddled and propagated by the then military government even when the government—in connivance with the World Bank and other international institutions—hid under the cloak of privatisation to remove education subsidies just at the same time that other sectors were undergoing deregulation. ASUU was subsequently proscribed in 1987 for opposing the government's move to privatise the higher education sector, which impacted the commencement of high student fees to acquire higher education (Aidelunuoghene, 2014; Bello and Isah, 2016; Ugar, 2018).

Recounting the high level of communication gaps that existed between ASUU, the government, and public, Aidelunuoghene (2014) observed that since the ASUU's establishment in 1978 there has been a consistent breakdown of communication between the Federal Government and the union. The primary reason they give for this is that the breakdown is a result of government's failure to honour agreements. From the National Universities Commission's (NUC) records, ASUU has embarked on over twenty-three strikes between 1992 and 2013. The causes range from funding for the sector, such as increasing annual budgetary allocation for education and for institutions—e.g. for universities' revitalisation and the funding of state universities—and for staff—e.g. the payment of Earned Academic Allowances; to matters relating to the employment standards for

academics, including the establishment of an academic staff's pension scheme (NUPEMCO) and the amendment of retirement age; and to academic freedom matters, such as the reinstatement of university councils that were prematurely dissolved, and upholding universities' autonomy among other demands (see Arowosegbe, 2023; ASUU, n.d.; NUC, n.d). Duze (2011) and Eme and Ike (2017) noted that the Nigerian government spends less than 9% of its total annual budget on education, and that allocations to Nigerian universities fall below UNESCO's 26% standard. The average ratio of teaching staff to students is 1:100 in most universities—far higher than the National Universities Commission's (NUC) prescribed 1:30 ratio and woeful when compared to the standard maintained in elite universities in the Global North, such as Harvard University's ratio of 1:4.

Odiagbe (2012, p. 16) has pointed out that 'the dispute between ASUU and the government has thus been one which has shifted from a conventional industrial relations conflict over wages and conditions of service, to one which involves a whole series of wider political questions'. Punitive measures were adopted by the Federal Government in an attempt to suppress ASUU's radical demands for the revitalisation of the Nigerian university system. According to reports by Odiagbe (2012, p. 59), six union members were sacked from the University of Lagos in 1980 at the insistence of President Shehu Shagari following Justice Belonwu's committee's reports. The academics were later reinstated in 1986, following the Supreme Court's ruling in their favour. However, the experiences they recounted indicate that they had suffered serious psychological trauma and hunger-torture due to the withholding of their salaries for six years.

Among other issues fuelling the industrial conflict is the struggle over autonomy and academic freedom (ASUU, n.d). As explained by Bubtana (2006, p. 6), academic freedom entails the 'freedom to undertake teaching and research in a free and unrestricted manner and the ability to publish research findings without fear of political and social consequences'. Academic freedom, which could be considered as a fundamental human right, is highly cherished and held as a virtue worth protecting in advanced democracies. As such, 'academic freedom is usually guaranteed even if the state was totally financing the academic system' (Bubtana, 2006, p. 6). However, the reverse has been the case

where this potent right for national development has consistently been under threat in Nigeria, such that institutions, academic unions, the government, and other social actors have to negotiate its protection, which explains the Federal Government and ASUU impasse. From Odiagbe's (2012) record, the coalescing of hitherto autonomous schools after the civil war in 1970 contributed to centralising school regulation under the Federal Government, and this in part bred the unhealthy disharmony between Federal Government and ASUU over autonomy and control. Universities in particular were no longer at liberty to design curricula and research orientations that best suited their education philosophies. As such, there was a clear case of educational policy mismatch in most instances (Odiagbe, 2012). Salihu (2019) opined that the duplicity in roles and overlapping functions among the administrative and regulatory stakeholders imposed on universities continues to breed conflicts and, by extension, erode institutional autonomy.

Ya'u (2006) noted that while these were the prevalent experiences during the military regimes of 1966 to 1999, the experience of repression was not altogether different with the return of a democratic civilian government to Nigeria in 1999. According to Ya'u (2006, p. 49), 'the expectation of academics that the civil regime could respect academic freedom was shattered. One of the most telling failures of the civilian government to respect academic freedom is the case of 53 academics of the University of Ilorin who were dismissed since 1999'. There is also an instance of the five professors from the Lagos State University who were dismissed at the order of the state governor for questioning the procedure followed in the appointment of a vice chancellor (Salami, 2024).

The effect of such foregoing cases is that Nigerian universities still operate a governing and funding structure that exposes the system to political interference. The total dependence on government funding tends to undermine the efficiency and integrity of the intellectual business conducted by these institutions (Arowosegbe, 2023). Such intellectual independence is indeed fundamental, and has been a concern of academics globally, particularly as neoliberal economic logics proliferate. An example is the United Kingdom, where the intellectual community attempted to strengthen the 'Haldane Principles' which prescribe that decisions regarding the funding of research should be made by researchers and not politicians (Ghosh, 2017).

Bubtana's (2006, p. 6) assertion that academic institutions in most Arab and African countries have been in fierce battle against repressive regimes to safeguard 'academic freedom and institutional autonomy which they consider important not only for playing their role as a watchdog for society but also for nations to construct knowledge societies in which knowledge generation, dissemination, and application are the decisive factors' rightly captures the experience of Nigerian academics. Countries like Nigeria can be categorised as Bubtana's 'consumers of knowledge' (2006, p. 7) rather than knowledge creators, due to the brain drain, poorly funded and established systems of research that, when combined, create the deficit in terms of knowledge contributions to the global community. The Nigerian case is even complex in an environment where religious fundamentalists are opposed to the Western systems of education. This is most visible in the emergence of Boko Haram, an Islamic extremist terrorist group in northern Nigeria that are opposed to Western education (see Afzal, 2020; Atoi, 2022; Iyekekpolo, 2016; Peters, 2014).

The series of industrial actions that have occurred in Nigeria leave a rather sour taste in the mouths of students and parents. Scholars (see Eneji et al., 2019; Odey et al., 2020; Wojuade, 2019) have consistently observed a positive correlation between the disruption of the academic calendar and students' poor performance and, in turn, insufficient skills to cope with the demands of the labour market.

The Nigerian University System: The Ideal and the Reality

Western education in Nigeria has a colonial history. Nigeria adopted the British colonial Master's system of formal education. The country's first university was the University College, Ibadan, which predated Nigeria's independence. It was established in 1948 as an affiliate of University of London with the name changed to University of Ibadan after it severed ties with the British university. Indicating the existential significance of academia, the first indigenous university, the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, was formally opened on October 7, 1960, just seven days after Nigeria's independence. It was founded by the government of the Eastern Region of the country.

Interestingly, the original ideology that guided the premier universities in Nigeria informed their formulation in the ideal of 'the

ivory tower', and as destination institutions for both Nigerian and foreign students. In other words, high standards were maintained in line with the stratified vision of the colonial regime. To put this into perspective, the best academic buildings in the first-generation universities were those erected at the inception of the universities over sixty years ago (Bello and Isah, 2016). The current downturn is within the post-colonial period, rooted in the interruption of the nation's democracy by the military in 1966 (ASUU, n.d). Ever since then, Nigerian universities have contended with the continual 'teething problems' of poor funding, brain drain/staff attrition due to some structural problems such as infrastructural decay and hostile work environments (Salau, Worlu and Osibanjo et al., 2020), poor remuneration and unhealthy disparities in comparison to other civil servants (Waswa and Katana, 2008). The average Nigerian academic practices within pitiable conditions, especially in the face of incessant hyper-inflation in the Nigerian economy. It has become a common refrain to hear from among the academic staff that the take-home salaries can hardly take one to the university's gate, indicating how paltry the average academic's salary is. A tenured professor who progressed to their career peak, as of January 2022, would receive a salary of less than $1,500 per month.

As glaring as these asphyxiating problems of higher education were, the Federal Government has continued to play the ostrich and rather heap blame on the academics that have advocated for reforms in the higher education sector. There is abounding evidence that the historisation of the struggles for the restoration of quality of higher education in Nigeria has watered down the relevance of the demands in the judgement of most Nigerian politicians. It has become a case of 'business as usual'. In other words, there is a seeming reluctance on the part of the critical stakeholders to respond to the demands which challenge their collective priorities which are mostly incongruous with the funding of public education. These are indications of the disjunct between the ideal and reality, providing insights into the discourses of such tensions and their targets, which the next section will turn to.

Conflicts in Nigerian Universities: Deconstructing the Narratives that Explain Nigerian Academics' Experiences

Conflicts are inevitable and an intrinsic part of human interaction (Ugbo, 2020). However, forestalling conflicts requires the clear strategy of cooperative relationships and integrative solutions (Valente, Lourenço and Németh, 2020). Conflicts naturally arise over incompatible needs within the frame of human interactions. How these needs are communicated and addressed is at the centre of every conflict. The education sector is not immune to this inevitability; as a social institution, it is a hub of human convergence and interaction. Hence, one would assume that effective communication would remain an essential component of conflict resolution in educational systems. Scholars have contributed by articulating conflict resolution strategies that might be deployed productively to address conflicts in higher education systems. These include arbitration, conciliation, dialogue and mediation (Mojalefa, 2021; Valente, Lourenço and Németh, 2020). As effective as these strategies have been as alternative dispute resolution strategies, the sincerity of stakeholders saddled with the responsibility of deploying this mechanism to resolve conflicts within the Nigerian context remains in question.

Importantly, theorising the typologies of conflicts is essential to our understanding of the dynamics of the ASUU and Federal Government's conflicts in Nigeria. These typologies include the structural, value, relationship, interest and data (Valente, Lourenço and Németh, 2020). In this sense, the structure of the Nigerian educational policies emphasises dichotomies between public and private interests and goods, and politics. The de-prioritisation of educational rights and needs, in terms of budgeting and funding, has continued to widen the gap in access between the haves and the have nots, and by extension, social inequality. These are at the same time embedded in the lack of values attached to education and the clash of interests between the key actors—Nigerian academics, the government, students and parents. An unhealthy relationship exists where stakeholders are at loggerheads. When academics resort to down tools as a way of collectively expressing

their displeasure, propaganda is then deployed as a lethal weapon of victimisation, scapegoating and suppression.

In the section to follow, we thematise the narratives of different stakeholders as projected in the mass media in relation to the ASUU/FG industrial conflicts.

Narratives around ASUU-Federal Government Conflicts: The Media Example

As earlier stated, in the course of its struggles as a stakeholder in the Nigerian university system, ASUU is often vilified by members of the public and even its employer, the government. Relying on media contents (in this instance, the online version of Nigerian national daily newspapers' news stories and editorials between January 2022 and October 2022), we examine the common patterns of general narratives concerning conflicts with regards to ASUU strikes, shedding light on how ASUU and its struggles tend to be projected in a negative light. The period in focus marks the peak of the protracted eight-months-long ASUU strike which generated heavy media coverage and public discourses. As such, it yielded interesting materials to distil themes upon which we anchor our discourses as presented below.

The Reductionist Narrative

The narrative pattern, in the public discourse of ASUU industrial actions, tends to reduce whole issues to the singular act of the declaration of a strike. Strikes are discussed outside the circumstances that led to them and within the context of the Nigerian labour laws. In other words, a strike action is not discussed as an eventual outcome of a failed dispute management process as prescribed by the extant Nigerian labour laws (Giame, Awhefeada and Edu, 2020), but rather it is framed as an isolated arbitrary action on the part of ASUU, thereby diverting attention from the longer process of engagement that failed to resolve disputes which paved the way for strike action. For instance, in discussing the most recent strike which started in February 2022, many commentators failed to recognise that ASUU had, since the middle of 2021, started engaging with the government on the need to sign the renegotiated 2009 agreement

that was concluded in May 2021. They equally discountenanced the fact that when appeals failed, ASUU had issued an ultimatum to the Federal Government to sign this document before the end of July 2021 (Lawal, Olayinka and Umeh, 2021). In addition, seemingly overlooked by many public commentators was the fact that the FG had reneged on its commitments made at a reconciliation meeting with ASUU, which included the promise that work would be concluded on the draft renegotiated agreement by a committee set up for that purpose and would be submitted to the government by the end of August 2021, but that nothing was done to this effect weeks after that deadline (Olaitan, 2021). Again, many media contributors to the discourse on the strike failed to consider the three weeks ultimatum issued to the FG by the union in November 2021 to sign this same agreement or risk a strike action (Ezeigbo, 2021). Similarly, many appear to have ignored the fact that the strike would have commenced in December 2021 but was shelved following interventions by some stakeholders including the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) (*Blue Print*, 2022). In summary, the media, in their reporting, failed to represent the strike as a seemingly inevitable outcome of the government's apparent reluctance to follow up on the agreement that had ended the prior strikes.

Instances of this sort of narrative in the discourse of ASUU strike abound. One of them is seen in a comment made to the press by the Minister of Labour and Employment, Dr Chris Ngige, in April 2022. He said: 'there is nothing new about the ASUU strike. It has been a recurrent decimal. In the last 20 years, ASUU has gone on strike 16 times. So, there is nothing new as such' (Olayinka, 2022). While the Minister's observation about the quantity of strikes may have been accurate, the account misled the public. He failed to inform his listeners that these repeated strikes came against the backdrop of perennial failure to permanently resolve disputes by honouring agreements, on the part of the government that he represented. In addition, the Minister was definitely not telling the whole story when, on another occasion, he said of ASUU, 'every time there is a disagreement, it is strike' (*Premium Times*, 2022). In other words, he has failed to acknowledge that ASUU strikes, rather than being abrupt responses to dispute, are usually the last resort following failed attempts at resolution.

Former Minister of State for Education, Hon. Emeka Nwajiuba, was also counted among those pushing this unbalanced discourse. Speaking on a TV programme monitored by *Vanguard* newspaper in May 2022, he said, 'My position has not been that ASUU is talking rubbish. ASUU has a case, they are not making a case for themselves alone. ASUU is making a case for the entire university system. The only point of departure is that we have asked ASUU that strikes can't cure the problem' (*Vanguard*, 2022). Here the Minister appeared to have conveniently overlooked these strikes happening because firstly, the less disruptive means of curing the problem had failed to work, and secondly, the government appears willing to listen only when strikes are activated.

Media houses themselves are not beyond contributing to this discourse. *The Guardian* newspaper—in a feature titled 'ASUU, FG bicker over unfulfilled agreement', published in its August 1, 2021 edition—after giving a statistical breakdown of ASUU strikes which showed that an average of 19.5% of days of every academic year were spent on strike, argued that 'This, perhaps, explains why some stakeholders perceive the activities of ASUU, especially with respect to the industrial actions, as an attempt to frustrate academic pursuits of Nigerian undergraduates' (Lawal et al., 2021, para. 32). There, strikes are presented as 'activities of ASUU', in effect framing strike actions as arbitrary decisions of a single insensitive party, thus diverting attention from the contributory role of the other party (the government). Similarly, in an editorial titled 'ASUU and the Endless Strikes' published in the February 16, 2022 edition of *ThisDay,* the paper noted that 'public disenchantment with ASUU is understandably high because of its bullheaded approach'. The word 'bullheaded' portrays ASUU as being stubborn and uncooperative, a quality the paper sees as justifying the negative public perception suffered by ASUU. No mention was made of the obvious failures of the other party, the government, as seen in its repeated failure to honour agreements—an attitude that equally merits the compliment 'bullheadedness'.

Such portrayals represent a well-known tool employed by the media to demonise a cause and its promoters, especially when they take actions to protest what they want corrected. By employing uncomplimentary words, phrases and negative naming, the media succeed in framing the ASUU promoters in a way that demonises them and the cause of

their members. Brown and Harlow's (2019) study reveals this pattern in the US media, where protests related to racial issues were reported as adopting more negative frames, even though an opposite pattern was found in the coverage of protests related to migrants' rights, health and the environment. Through this selective framing, the media promotes a discourse of 'hierarchy of social struggle' (Brown and Harlow, 2019, p. 523) where certain social struggles are glorified while others are demonised.

In all, the reductionist narrative highlighted above—which constructs strikes outside of the circumstances that seemingly made them inevitable—has the effect of portraying the ASUU as an insensitive body that irrationally and recklessly shuts down the nation's universities at will. Such narratives achieve this by failing to engage with those developments that are antecedent to the actual declaration of a strike and which, if critically viewed, may have positioned ASUU more as victims than as troublemakers. Stated differently, there is a clear failure among public commentators to balance the discourse around ASUU's industrial actions by engaging with the history of the strikes which would have brought under equal scrutiny the government and its agencies, who have often created the conditions for strikes by failing to honour agreements.

The Isolation of Strike Episodes

This was another way in which public discourse on ASUU strikes tended to portray ASUU as the problem. In this narrative pattern, each instance of striking was viewed in isolation; in other words, it was seen as an isolated episode rather a phase in a continuing chain of strikes arising from problems that have remained unsolved. Thus, each strike was discussed outside its historical connectedness with previous strikes.

Hence, the following picture is created: an issue arises, ASUU goes on strike, the government attends to the issue, ASUU calls it off, then another issue arises, ASUU goes on strike, the government solves the problem, ASUU calls it off only to return to strike once the next issue arises. This pattern of narrative has the effect of portraying ASUU as instantly invoking strikes once a dispute arises without first giving the government a chance to resolve the issue. However, in reality, each

strike—at least in recent years—has practically been a continuation of the previous one. Hence, what is seen as recurring strikes by ASUU within a succession of unconnected industrial actions, are ultimately part of a continuum of struggles over largely the same set of issues. This is evident in ASUU's use of the word 'suspend' whenever it was ending any particular strike action. The import of this choice of word came to the fore when ASUU declared a strike in October 2018 and its leaders were called for a meeting by the Minister of Labour and Employment. The Minister, Dr Ngige, started by blaming the union for not giving him as the conciliator notice, before embarking on the strike as required by law. To this, the union leadership replied that its last strike was never called off but was merely suspended.

However, narratives in the public domain in many instances tend to ignore the connectedness between strikes, treating each strike as an isolated episode. For instance, in an editorial published by *Vanguard* newspaper on April 8, 2020, the newspaper blamed ASUU for being insensitive and always choosing the strike action once any dispute arises. According to the editorial report, 'The Academic Staff Union of Universities, ASUU, returned to its old "hobby" of indefinite strikes on Monday, March 23, 2020 [...] We see the main reason for this indefinite strike [the IPPIS issue] as unnecessary and undue muscle-flexing by ASUU' ('ASUU's insensitive strike', 2020, paras 1 and 9). The use of the language 'hobby' here is telling. *The Punch*, in an editorial titled 'ASUU Can't Be Exempted from the IPPIS' published on November 3, 2019, adopted a similar narrative: 'it is curious', the paper wrote, 'that academics who should know better are opposing innovation and cutting-edge technology to fight corruption at its roots' (*The Punch*, 2019). The phrase 'opposing innovation and cutting-edge technology' conveys the picture of unconnected instances of dispute rather than a protracted dispute over largely the same issues and which resolution thereof has been repeatedly frustrated. Also to be placed in the same league of disjointed narratives is the earlier quoted media statement of the Minister of Labour that 'every time there is a disagreement, it is strike' (*Premium Times*, 2022).

The Narrowed Narrative on the Impact of Strikes

In this instance, narratives around ASUU industrial actions tend to emphasise the immediate disruptive impact of strikes on the university system rather than taking a holistic view of the role of such industrial actions over time. Thus, public commentators tend to dwell on issues such as the delays suffered by students as a result of interruptions of academic activities, and their potential exposure to vices due to idleness. These issues are raised without any care to reflect on the huge impact of the series of concessions which ASUU has, through these strikes, successfully extracted from the government. These concessions include the establishment of the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) and National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) Assessment, which have seen massive infrastructure development not only in universities but also in Polytechnics and Colleges of Education across the nation—both federal and state-owned—as well as extensive human resources development in these institutions. ASUU's industrial actions have also led to a legislative action to grant autonomy to universities in line with global standards, and have contributed to the quest for accountability in the system by forcing the government to constitute Visitation Panels for universities (Ero, 2022; Ibrahim, 2021).

A typical example of such faulty narratives is found in a feature on the ASUU-Federal Government disputes published in *The Guardian* of August 1, 2021 where the newspaper quoted a news source, one Duro Adebisi, as saying that 'the only thing achieved by these incessant strikes is to keep the system shut down, keep students at home, expose them to social ills, and progressively degrade the quality of learning in our universities' (Lawal et al., 2021). Another source, Priscila Etukudo, who was introduced as a parent, was quoted as saying: 'these strikes only succeed in disrupting the education of these children. Instead of being at school they are at home and may learn bad things in the process. Also, they [the students] risk spending more time than necessary pursuing a degree'. A similar sentiment was expressed just as emphatically in an online opinion piece titled 'Incessant ASUU strike—The devastating effects on Nigeria', by one Emmanuel Ojukwu whose main argument was that ASUU's 'incessant strike action

continues to take a huge toll on the academic performance of students' (Ojukwu, 2022, para. 4). The writer went on to list the various ways the system suffers as a result of the strikes, without bothering to reflect on the other side of the story as told by ASUU, regarding the lasting positive impact of the strikes.

Narratives like these are not scarce in newspapers, on radio, television and social media, particularly during times when a strike has been declared. While they dwell on the immediate disruptive impact of strikes, ASUU is usually found to be toiling in isolation in trying to direct attention to the long-term positive impact of such industrial actions—both as already realised and as hoped to be realised in future. The result of this disjunct is that the public space is dominated by a narrative that tends to demonise ASUU by dwelling almost entirely on perceptions of the negative impact of strikes. Scholars of language analysis contend that such an unbalanced approach to discourse has proved to be a strong means of privileging a particular viewpoint over a competing viewpoint (Fairclough, 1989; Hall, 1997; Machin and Mayr, 2012).

The Distorted Narrative about the Beneficiaries of Strikes

This is an emerging pattern in the discourse around ASUU's industrial actions, with potentially serious consequences on the public perception of the union. In this instance, narratives about ASUU strikes tend to revolve around a false premise that the union's industrial actions are self-centred; that the objectives of the strikes are meant to benefit only the members of the union. Thus, in constructing the impetus of the union as about self-interest for the private gains of members, attention is deflected from the broader benefits, including the public good, which ASUU intends for the system in most of its industrial actions.

This sort of narrative has been dominant in the discourse around financial concessions made by the government in response to ASUU strikes. For example, *The Guardian* of March 1, 2022 has a story with the headline 'ASUU Strike: Ngige Updates Buhari, Says FG Paid N92bn to ASUU'. This headline is seriously misleading, if one goes down to read the body of the report. Therein it is reported that only N40bn out of this N92bn went to the university staff, including non-academic staff, as earned allowance (*The Guardian*, 2022). The rest was part of the

revitalisation funds that went into the coffers of respective university management. It is interesting to see in this report what has become a regular pattern, where money meant for multiple purposes is framed as going entirely to ASUU, thereby portraying ASUU's demands for better funding of the universities as demands for personal monetary benefit. Similarly, a report in *Business Day* from May 8, 2022 reported that 'President Buhari has approved the sum of 456 Billion for ASUU to end the strike' (Ogwo, 2022, para. 8). The report did not bother to break down this sum to show who would actually benefit from this money and how.

This sort of narrative tends to mix up issues by presenting ASUU strikes as a mission in self-aggrandisement, thereby diluting the altruistic dimension of its struggles over the years. This has been the case even in the face of verifiable evidence of the many gains achieved for the system through these struggles (Ero, 2022; Ibrahim, 2021). ASUU members are, in effect, portrayed as selfish trade unionists who do not mind destroying the system for private gains. Such portrayals are inconsistent with the notion of academics as acting in service of education for the common good, as trustees of knowledge.

Parting Shots: The Way Forward

This chapter has exposed the dominant prevailing perspectives on the incessant ASUU-Federal Government conflicts. From the foregoing expositions, it becomes clear that public discourse on ASUU strikes in Nigeria still falls short of being anchored on balanced and holistic narratives. This, perhaps, explains why the recurrent impasse has defiled all known solutions—at least, at the moment—largely due to the politicisation of the genuine demands to improve the quality of Nigerian higher education in particular. This chapter has focused on the way these narratives are tilted towards diluting the persuasiveness of ASUU's case and in effect projecting them as the villains of the whole situation. Thus, it is common to see from the ontology of the Nigerian industrial conflicts that academics have consistently been doubly oppressed and maligned by the government as the enemy of the university education system in the eyes of the students, parents and other concerned social actors, despite their pitiable realities. While

ASUU remains in the eye of the storm, the principle of the idiom 'when two elephants fight, the grasses suffer' comes into focus. The conditions for the education of students in particular, and national development in general, have been adversely impacted, while public opinion of the professoriate has been tainted.

It is our conclusion that such lopsided narratives have the effect of distorting public understanding of the significant issues involved in these unending industrial disputes. This, in turn, miseducates the public about the institution of the university, and perpetuates the lack of accountability and often unhelpful responses from state stakeholders. The Nigerian Federal Government, therefore, needs to set its priorities right and begin to deliberately implement policies that recognise the voice of academic staff as central to their mutual mandate to promote quality education and knowledge creation for the global common good. As a developing country, the university system plays a significant role as the knowledge base of any progressive nation and must be empowered to function optimally. Although ASUU is not exonerated in the entire decay in the university system, the onus lies on the government to recognise, protect and inspire high standards in line with global best practices.

The above position is reinforced by the issues around which ASUU's struggle revolve, which are largely the same issues that university teachers around the globe have been struggling with, far from being a product of mere self-interest nor the utopian imaginations of a trade union (as some have charged) (see *The Punch*, 2019; Ojukwu, 2022). For example, the challenge of funding of public universities has been an issue of spirited public engagement in Europe and the USA (European University Association, 2022; Lung, Moldovanb and Alexandrac, 2012), and like in Nigeria, universities in these climates have had to contend with reduced government funding in recent years. The same applies to the increased constraints on academic freedom which intellectuals globally have had to engage with for decades (Allen, 2019; Palfreyman, 2007). Similarly, the problem of unbefitting wages for academics has been highlighted in several other countries including China (He et al., 2020), the UK from 2018 to 2023 (as discussed by Hudson-Miles in Chapter 10 in this book; Staton, 2022) and Nigeria's neighbouring country of Ghana (BBC News Pidgin, 2022). All this would tend to

vindicate ASUU's position by showing that its demands are in line with the global sentiments as to how universities and their teachers should be treated, and global resistance to neoliberal erosion of the universities.

Against this backdrop, it becomes imperative on the part of ASUU to do more to influence the public opinion around its industrial engagement with the government. Public engagement generally, and with the national press in particular, has not been a central consideration of the union's strategy. A way out of the impasse may be to be more proactive and decisive in public communications, as well as to show more robust recognition of the critical role played by the perceptions of stakeholders such as students, parents and the media. This is indispensable if its voice is to be heard loud and clear, and if its activism is to yield more positive results. There is no more room to be complacent and presume that the public will be sympathetic to the cause simply because ASUU believes it to be a just cause, particularly as both the reputation of academics as trustees of education and the credibility of the union have been put to the test.

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