Deep Waters: Flooding and the Climate of Suffering in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on the everyday emotions of the populations impacted by the 2022 flood in Nigeria by exploring the affectivities embodied in flooding and the unfurlings of political emotions and agency in these dire circumstances. By foregrounding the everyday emotions of flooding, I address a subject that too often is overlooked in political science, too often shunted to the margins of politics. I advance knowledge of the disparate impacts of flooding on the vulnerable and how these survivors are improvising affective ways of negotiating a complex emergency that spared their lives but left them in a state of injury.

The 2022 flood in Nigeria was unprecedented, surpassing the 2012 flooding that claimed 431 lives and displaced 2 million inhabitants (Earth Observatory 2012). Extreme rainfall between June and November 2022, compounded by the release of excess water from the Lagdo dam in neighboring Cameroon, triggered the flooding that killed more than 600 people; displaced at least 1.4 million people; and put millions of inhabitants at risk for food insecurity, waterborne and diarrheal diseases, and emotional distress (Khalid and Maishman 2022). The flood rendered roads and bridges impassable as streets turned into rivers that swallowed people. The flood dislocated not only the living but also the dead, as newly buried corpses were washed away from cemeteries that were inundated with water. In the aftermath of the flood, millions of Nigerians found themselves stuck in what Berlant (2007, 279) called "survival time," that time of "struggling, drowning, holding on to the ledge, treading water, not-stopping."

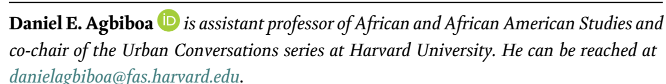
The typical discussion about flooding—and climate change in general—too often is detached from the ways that ordinary people "suffer and smile" (Chabal 2009): more abstract than felt, more scientometric than social, and more matter of fact than matter of concern. Yet, the impacts of climate-induced flooding are anything but abstract. My overarching goals are to foreground the human face of flooding and to relate that face to the logic of disaster as political instrument in Nigeria.

The voices, experiences, and emotional discourses of flood-affected people are mainly distilled from newspaper articles and interviews conducted by (local) reporters, mindful that these do not fully encapsulate people's feelings, emotions, and affect.[1] My aim is to cultivate an "intersubjective awareness"—that is, a way of feeling with and being with flood-affected *others* that reaffirms our shared humanity (Ahmed 2005, 74; Dunlop et al. 2021, 69). Even if we lack an immediate or profound experience of what other people feel or how they affect and are affected by complex emergencies such as flooding, we nevertheless can do the work of putting ourselves in another's shoes, of feeling while sitting down.

FLOOD DISASTERS AND FEELING BETTER

Of all the natural disasters facing Africa—indeed, the world—today, floods have the most devastating effects on lives, livelihoods, and emotional well-being (Doocy et al. 2013; United Nations 2023). An estimated 1.81 billion people, or 23% of the world population, face significant flood risk (World Economic Forum 2022). In coastal West Africa, floods intensify poverty by displacing the disadvantaged, draining their asset holdings, derailing their everyday economic activities, and affecting their mental health. In Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Togo, flooding from overflowing rivers—precipitated by sea-level rise—exerts heavy fiscal burdens (i.e., USD $3.8 billion a year) and the death toll (i.e., 13,000 deaths a year) (Croitoru, Miranda, and Sarraf 2019). The destructive impacts of flooding also are felt in Lagos—Nigeria's commercial capital and Africa's largest city—where 50% to 79% of the inhabitants live within 500 meters of the coastline, often on weakened, sand-filled land (Adelekan 2010, 441). For these communities *in extremis*, flooding has become both a way of life and a way of death. Moreover, across Africa, urban mega-projects, enclaves, and sea defense—animated by elite-driven, modernizing visions of a "world-class city" (see Agbiboa 2018)—negatively affect the ecosystem equilibrium, diverting the flow of water into low-income settlements, leaving them dangerously vulnerable.

The spectacular nature of discussions about floods and their impacts often fails to register their fundamentally spectral dimensions, such as the complex of human affects—stress, anxiety,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despair (loss of hope), and feelings of powerlessness—that are closely tied to flooding. What are the affective attunements of flood disasters? How are emotions tactically deployed by vulnerable communities to survive these dire conditions? What role do affect and emotions play in flood relief and recovery? This article underscores a clear but often overlooked point: that flooding is affectively charged. In times of calamitous floods, emotions become the social infrastructure that people rely on to feel better—that is, to find a different relationship to loss and suffering. In this, I join my voice with other scholars who underscore the dynamic and productive aspects of emotions (Ahmed 2005; Jansen 2014; Katz 2001; Lupton 2013).

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THE POLITICS OF "SUFFERING AND SMILING"

How do people feel better in the wake of a flooding event that has reduced them to bare survival? How do they find a different relationship to suffering, to "losing everything" and having "nowhere to go"? Pain and possibility, I argue, are inextricable from the experience of flooding. In times of disaster, people experience the meaning of suffering, but they also know that "living contains the seeds of open-endedness, possibility, and reversibility" (Di Nunzio 2019, 4).

Since Nigeria gained independence in 1960—and especially in the wake of the botched structural adjustment program of the 1970s—suffering has become synonymous with being Nigerian: in other words, with feelings of citizenship (Kuti 1975). For ordinary Nigerians, things have reached a breaking point (*water don pass garri*, as they say).[2] Nigeria recently overtook India in the extreme-poverty ranking, with an estimated 87 million people—or approximately half of the national population—living on less than USD $1.90 a day (Adebayo 2018). The ubiquitous yet elusive nature of the Nigerian state compels its citizens to improvise their own lives. "If you see Nigeria today, every state is on its own," said the secretary of Niger, one of the states worst affected by the devastating 2022 flood. "You must pursue your agenda to survive. If support comes, fine; if it doesn't, you are on your own" (*New Telegraph* 2021). Nigerians have a saying for this: "Every household is its own local government" (Smith 2022).

At the same time, Nigerians are deeply optimistic people, often ranked among the happiest on earth (Jawad 2023, citing Pew Center Research). Suffering, it would appear, enables poor Nigerians to find a different relationship to crisis—in other words, a positive orientation to the future often rooted in strong religious inclinations (Guyer 2017; Williams 1980). Afrobeat legend Fela Kuti famously described Nigerians as connoisseurs of "suffering and smiling" (for a broader application to Africa, see Chabal 2009).[3] His lyric defines Nigerians as fighters, as "authentically positive people" (Zombobah 2020, 346). To the question, "How are you?," a typical Nigerian will reply: "*I dey manage*" (I am coping) or "*we meuuve*" (life goes on). These statements capture the resolve and agency that underpin the inventive responses of Nigerians to the contingencies and exigencies of everyday life. In the absence of reliable government services, the defiant dream of the Nigerian is "*e go better*," meaning "things will get better"; in the Hausa language, it is "*yi fatan alheri*," meaning "hope for the best." Such a dream pulls the future into sensible reality, giving definity to hope (Burridge 1995, 180). Crucially, for Nigerians, hope endures as both a daily promise and a discipline; in other words, it is determinedly practiced day by day and does not preclude feeling sad, frustrated, or angry (Guyer 2017; Kaba 2020).

A prime illustration of this determined (or cruel?) optimism is the recent #EndSARS protest, which interpolated thousands of youths across Nigeria in protests against police brutality and official dysfunction (Berlant 2011; Obadare 2021). The protesters voiced their dissatisfaction with the Nigeria police—but always with the aim of repairing it, not abolishing it. Yet, a number of protesters were shot dead by state forces under the cover of darkness—this at the time when they were singing, dancing, and waving their national flag (Adichie 2020). Hope for the state, as Jansen (2014) helpfully observed, puts affected communities in intimate dialogues with affective states, underscoring the popular yearnings of vulnerable populations to be incorporated within an effective state grid.

At its most extreme, life depends on affective solidarity and collaborative survival. In the wake of the 2022 flood, survivors made the most of the floodwaters to wash clothes, cook, and bathe (despite the risk of cholera), confirming Kuti's (1975) popular claim that "water no get enemy." There was no shortage of affective surplus. People supported their neighbors in distress by allowing them to crowd into the top floors of their houses, reproducing the African communitarian ethic of *ubuntu*, or life as mutual aid: "I am because you are." As one survivor said, "Not everyone living here right now is my family. I took in some neighbors that had no places to go. I couldn't leave them out there, so I took them in" (Jones 2022). Other inhabitants improvised wooden boats to ferry people and their rescuable belongings across streets turned into lakes, turning situations of crisis into a money-making opportunity. It is from such "floodpreneurs" that the clichéd image of the rugged Nigerian is reinforced in the collective imaginary. As the saying goes, "*Niger no dey carry last*" (Nigerians never come last).

The affective capacity to both suffer and smile simultaneously is not *sui generis* to flood-prone communities but rather constitutes a permanent fixture of the workaday world in Nigeria. Annual flooding amid infrastructural voids keeps residents incessantly prepared to change gears, focus, and location (Simone 2001, 18). Yet, such suspension is not passive. Far from a "*siddon look*" (idling) population, survivors are always seeking to find ways to repair their lives. They know better than to wait for a too-often fraudulent and absent government. For instance, government authorities have yet to complete the 400 resettlement houses promised to victims of the 2010 flood disaster in parts of northern Nigeria, sparking popular protests (Jaafar 2018). Flood survivors in Nigeria are hardly "patients of the state" (Auyero 2012): they do not "wait out the crisis" in hope of experiencing the "heroism of the stuck" (Hage 2009). For flood-affected Nigerians, there is no heroism in waithood, only shame.

Figure 1

A Woman Cries as She Stands on a Flooded Street After a Boat Accident in Anambra State on October 7, 2022 ***(National Emergency Management Agency via AP)***

Yet, the positive orientation of flood survivors in Nigeria should not be romanticized. Flood victims themselves are unequivocal about their suffering, excruciating pain, and liminal dwelling (figure 1). As one flood survivor made clear, "We are suffering but suffering is better than stealing. That's why we are here in this condition. The clothes that I am wearing are the only ones that I have left. The flood carried away all our belongings" (*DW* 2022). One mother was worried that her children would fall sick and die from waterborne diseases. Her fears are real, considering that no fewer than 320 deaths were reported from the outbreak of cholera in communities in Yobe, Borno, and Adamawa—three states where violent extremism already has internally displaced millions (Amnesty International 2023, 278).

Some flood survivors have had their farmlands—their main source of livelihood and dignity—washed away. As one man said, "I have an acre of farmland. And I bought a bag of manure for forty dollars. I planted rice. Two days later, the floods washed everything away." "It's so painful," another man lamented. "Everything I lost in total would be about N400,000 [i.e., USD $490]. How much do I earn?" (*The Cable* 2023). Many survivors had borrowed money to cultivate their farmlands. With the money now gone, they find themselves in the deep waters of debt. "My concern is how to repay the loan I took. I hope those who gave me the loan would give me a grace of one year and also not charge me interest," said one flood survivor (*Daily Trust* 2022). For these indebted survivors—ordinary Nigerians—God, fate, and luck have become common categories for explaining the ruins of the present and the uncertainties of the future (Peace 1979, 32; Williams 1980, 114).

By calling out the government—rather than the water—as the real enemy, flood survivors have found a way to absolve themselves of self-blame and guilt, to recalibrate their climate of suffering as an outcome of poor governance, lack of political will, injustice, and apathy.

Flood survivors face acute food shortages long after the floodwaters have receded. Consider the story of Halima, a mother of eight children living in one of the makeshift shelters set up by the state. "Before the flood came, me and my husband were farmers. We used to feed on our farm produce. We were about to harvest when the floods came and destroyed everything. We were not able to harvest a single crop. And our house is under water" (Voice of America 2022). Another survivor noted, "I cultivated over five hectares of different crops, but I don't know where to get one sack of food now" (*Daily Trust* 2022).

What survivors are questioning here is the dominant ideology that blames the vulnerable for their misfortune, that emphasizes personal responsibility over state responsibility. In this manner, these survivors show that climate change is not simply abstract but rather politically and affectively charged.

For most flood survivors, trauma flows not so much from the flood as from what comes after, from feeling stranded and confused. For these people, the real disaster is "the disaster of stalled and prolonged recovery" (Adams 2013, 1; see also Kopnina and Shoreman-Ouimet 2017). As one survivor stated, "Even when the flood subsides, we don't have anywhere to go. No food, no money to buy cement, zinc, no money to rent a new house" (Jones 2022). Another man noted, "As we speak, I, my wife, and our four children are stranded. Although I was aware of the warning issued by the state, I was, however, waiting for my salary at month end to enable me to move. I didn't know the water would rise to this level; and I really don't have anywhere to go" (*Daily Trust* 2022). This waiting suggests that people in vulnerable communities do not always have the wherewithal to leave, despite early warnings related to extreme weather.

There also are many for whom the 2022 flood reopened wounds still not healed after the devastating 2012 floods. This was true for this mother of five: "My mum was ill when the floods came in 2012. The water level was high, and my sister and I couldn't carry her. All we could do was cry as she drowned in her room" (Princewill and Madowo 2022). For many flood survivors, forgetting (or trying to forget) was a strategy for moving on from past lived traumas. (For similarly situated strategies, see Bradford et al. 2012; Mbukusa 2015; McEwen et al. 2016.)

FLOOD AS POLITICAL INSTRUMENT

The call to avoid romanticizing a climate of suffering—of vulnerability and resilience—compels us to relate our focus on the affectual to the political. The question of political instrumentality too often is glossed over—if not altogether elided—in discussions about the emotions and affect of flood disasters. Yet, engaging the affective dimensions of flooding allows us to "think about the conditions of structural oppression in its emotional registers" (Adams 2013, 123).

Despite their improvised lives and optimistic outlook, most flood survivors do not stupidly or simply "jump on the bandwagon" of global climate change as the cause of the flood. For the most part, they blame their government, reclaiming Hoffman and Oliver-Smith's (2002) point that "disasters do not just happen." Survivors criticize their political leaders for using climate change as a cover for systemic issues of corruption, negligence, poor infrastructural preparedness, and "too little, too late" recovery and relief efforts. "We have only seen relief materials from the government just once," said one flood survivor in a crowded refugee camp in Bayelsa state (Adetayo 2022). This begs the question: Where did all the millions (if not billions?) of dollars donated in humanitarian support for flood survivors go? Is this yet another instance of disorder as political instrument (Chabal and Daloz 1999); of patterns of predicament being turned into profit-making, into "markets of sorrows" (Adams 2013)?

It is not so much climate change that flood-affected populations in Nigeria are angry about as the political instrumentality of disaster. They accuse politicians of not learning from the past and of relying on the adaptive capacity of survivors rather than implementing the essential infrastructure for reducing flood risk and building flood resilience. By calling out the government—rather than the water—as the real enemy, flood survivors have found a way to absolve themselves of self-blame and guilt, to recalibrate their climate of suffering as an outcome of poor governance, lack of political will, injustice, and apathy.

CONCLUSION

This article explores the neglected linkages between affect and flood. I argue for an understanding of flood-affected individuals as both victims and survivors. They are indeed victims because the Nigerian government has failed woefully to ensure proper flood-resilient infrastructure, favoring instead a reliance on the resilience and improvised agency of vulnerable populations. However, they also are survivors because vulnerable populations have developed a positive orientation to the future that allows them to find humor in the horrible. "I have been through hell and back," one flood survivor told me, "and I have receipts to show." This affective capacity to suffer and smile should not be mistaken for a resignation to fate; on the contrary, it bespeaks an affective intelligence and activism rooted in political critique.

Flood survivors often fire back—and are fired up by their emotions—against an apathetic and reactive system. These communities blame their predicament on local authorities who often embezzle funds earmarked for flood infrastructure and maintenance. They are suspicious of "good-enoughery" flood policies that charge the vulnerable to become the infrastructure that stitches communities back together. Nigeria's annual floods, survivors argue, are as much a political phenomenon as a product of climate change. "The flood is not even really the problem; the problem is with the leaders," said one survivor. "It was not like they were unaware the flood was coming, but they did not do anything" (Adetayo 2022). What survivors are questioning here is the dominant ideology that blames the vulnerable for their misfortune, that emphasizes personal responsibility over state responsibility. In this manner, these survivors show that climate change is not simply abstract but rather politically and affectively charged.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. The interview data presented in this article are not based on interviews conducted by the author but instead on an analysis of interview data presented in newspaper articles and other sources.
2. This popular Nigerian pidgin is used to describe an extremely difficult, even hopeless, situation. As Faraclas (2021, 37) explained, "Garri is a popular food in

Nigeria known as 'cassava flour' which requires a moderate portion of water to be edible. However, if too much water is carelessly poured on the flour, it becomes a bad situation and consequently inedible."

3. "Suffering and Smiling" is the title of Fela Kuti's famous 1978 song.

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