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Infrastructure turned suprastructure: Unpredictable materialities and visions of a Nigerian nation

Ulrika Trovalla and Eric Trovalla
Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden

Abstract
There are signs hidden in the infrastructure. In the Nigerian city of Jos, the unpredictable availability of power, fuel, water, etc. becomes a vehicle of meaning. In many settings across the globe, infrastructure is often made invisible, and the centre stage that it takes in everyday life remains unrecognized. In Jos, however, as in many African cities, the constant need to predict its flows contradicts the prefix *infra* (below); rather than being hidden beneath the realm of experience it is brought to the surface as a puzzle to be figured out. These explorations in turn come to reveal matters beyond the infrastructure itself. Just as diviners infer the state of the world from the stones they have thrown, reading significance out of the seeming randomness of matter, the infrastructure turns intricate questions into tangible clues. It becomes a *suprastructure* – a divination tool giving clues about the past, present and future of the Nigerian nation.

Keywords
African urbanity, anthropology, infrastructure, materiality, Nigeria

There are signs hidden in the infrastructure. When the power goes out in the Nigerian city of Jos, it tells a story. When it comes back, it tells another. Likewise, the unpredictable availability of fuel, the enigmas of intermittent water supply or glitches in the telecommunication networks become vehicles of meaning. Just as diviners infer the state of the world from the stones they have thrown, reading significance out of the seeming randomness of matter, the infrastructure turns intricate questions into tangible clues. Out of its vague rhythms and tenuous patterns, hidden meaning is uncovered. Taking Jos as a

Corresponding author:
Ulrika Trovalla, Nordic Africa Institute, PO Box 1703, SE-751 47 Uppsala, Sweden.
Email: ulrika.trovalla@nai.uu.se

starting point, this article illuminates how its infrastructure is turned into a tool for envisioning the unknown, through which citizens try to grasp the past, present and future of an elusive nation.[1]

The presence, absence, flows and non-flows of infrastructure shape urban becomings to an extent that few other things can match. Often invisible – moved to the background or even underground – the centre stage that infrastructure takes in the everyday lives of people and cities is often left unrecognized. Sometimes withdrawing from awareness while at other times calling attention to itself, infrastructure can assume a wide register of visibility, ranging from hidden to monumental, and for a variety of reasons (see Larkin, 2013: 336). In many contexts, this is a function of how smoothly it performs: 'Good systems disappear almost by definition. The easier they are to use, the harder they are to see' (Bowker and Star, 1999: 33). When, on the other hand, infrastructures develop glitches or break down, what has been hidden is revealed. The 'presence of the vast stretched-out system that usually remains invisible' is underlined (Graham, 2010b: 18). In this moment, the infrastructure comes to demand attention for itself and, by its very deficiency, its context, its relationships and its place in the world become disclosed (see Verbeek, 2005: 78–80).

In Jos, as in many African cities, the need to constantly engage with the unpredictable infrastructure sidelines the prefix *infra* (below); rather than being hidden beneath the realm of experience, the infrastructure is brought to the forefront as a conundrum to be figured out. A plethora of parallel systems and individual solutions – black market petrol, illegal attachments to water conduits and power lines, and private generators – both supplement and compete with the official networks. Like a spider's web, the infrastructure is constantly re-spun over the urban landscape, turning the city into an environment in which the reasons behind flow and hold-ups have to be endlessly re-read (De Boeck, forthcoming).

The uncertain infrastructure not only becomes a highly visible and present part of people's everyday life, but also brings other things into view. As people struggle to figure out the hidden mechanisms that lead water to their taps, electricity to their outlets, or that govern the meandering of fuel queues in the streets, clues to larger questions are uncovered. The connections and disconnections become signs that are read, revealing matters beyond the infrastructure itself. Instead of being hidden underneath, *infrastructure* transcends its own boundaries, opening channels to otherwise hidden truths (Trovalla and Trovalla, forthcoming). It turns into a *suprastructure* – a divination tool that gives clues about the Nigerian nation.

Unpredictable materialities

Beneath several feet of earth, the water pipes under Jos trace the shifting logics that have been superimposed on top of each other over the city's history. The asbestos pipes of the 1930s outline the template of a British colonial tin-mining town founded in 1915. The galvanized iron pipes of the 1970s tell the story of great infrastructural expansion backed by strong finances. Now, PVC pipes laid by Chinese contractors grapple to encompass patches of land among the sprawling suburbs, while the older layers slowly decompose. Jonathan, an executive at the Ministry of Works, stated in a very heartfelt and gloomy way: 'Jos is a very old city. The infrastructure has failed. The pipes have rusted.'

Like other infrastructural systems, the water pipes struggle to catch up with a city that long ago grew beyond its capacities. Out of the more than one million inhabitants, only a small number live in households that are connected to the city's water supply, and even in the ones that are, the pipes are most likely to be either permanently dry or yield water only irregularly. Tellingly, the word from the Water Board is that if you get water four to five times a month you are expected to pay the full bill. As a result, the land is perforated by private wells and boreholes, and in people's homes you find buckets for drawing water, water pumps, overhead tanks, and barrels and tubs of various sizes which, if the owner is lucky, are filled with stored water. In the streets there are water vendors carting around heavy loads of yellow jerry cans, while hawkers sell water in factory sealed, portion-sized plastic bags, typically called 'pure water', or sometimes, jokingly, 'poor water', since its origin is often dubious.

The comings and goings of electricity are exceedingly uncertain, and part of the unmistakeable ambience in homes in Jos is the silence of electrical appliances, interrupted by sudden thumps from relays when the wires come to life again. Most of the time the wires are inactive and when there is power, the current is often too weak to ignite an incandescent tube or to charge a mobile phone. Other times it is too high, blowing out light bulbs and destroying precious belongings such as fridges, television sets and so on. The intensely material quality of the infrastructure is underscored by the many gadgets that homes and businesses rely on to even out the irregular supply: voltage regulators, surge protectors, rechargeable lamps and torches, solar panels, generators and inverter systems with car batteries in which electricity is stored whenever the grid is active (Trovalla and Trovalla, 2013).

While repairing an inverter system that the customer had short-circuited, Gabriel, an electrician with over four decades of professional experience in Jos, was shocked at all the cables going everywhere. It was not easy to figure out what went where. 'There is really only supposed to be one', he said. He then took his time and carefully started to follow all the cables to their origin, before discovering that they all added up. There were so many things: first the inverter, then a supplementary charger, then a stabilizer that enabled efficient charging even when the voltage was low, and finally the extension block that allowed all of them to be plugged in to a surge protector that went into the wall socket and guarded the whole outfit against the temperamental electricity on the grid. 'This is how you need to do it in Nigeria', he said, 'all of this is necessary.'

As backup systems have become more and more essential to everyday life, new buildings have come to include annexes for generators. In older houses they have taken over garages (Larkin, 2008: 243) and in apartment buildings they occupy balconies. A recent estimate from the Centre for Management Development in Nigeria maintains that there are about 60 million household-size generators in use in the country today. At the ratio of one generator per 2.5 people, Nigeria has the largest number of standby generators per capita in the world. The General Director concluded that generators were now the 'permanent' solution and the common electricity grid was in fact the 'standby' (Esiedesa, 2012; see also Olukoju, 2004).

A typical feature in houses in Jos today is a power switch which on one side says 'Nepa' and on the other 'Gen', the latter being a common term for generator, the former the abbreviation of the National Electric Power Authority, which is now defunct, but

'Nepa' remains a generic nickname for all grid-based electricity. Next to the switch there will be a single socket with a light bulb that lights up when NEPA power arrives, indicating that it is time to kill the gen. 'This is how people want it in their houses now', Gabriel explained. While reflecting on these switches, Sara and John, who had lived in Jos since the 1980s, concluded that previously you had had to connect the gen through a socket, which often broke, and so did the cord. It was dangerous and you could easily hurt yourself. But the switches were also a sign of something else – the generator had become a permanent feature, not just a passing thing. Not knowing when they will be able to iron their shirts, fill their water reservoirs, fuel their cars or charge their phones, for Jos's inhabitants, contingency is the order of the day. The switches underline how the uncertainty of infrastructure has been hardwired into everyday life.

Divining connections and disconnections

Infrastructure is often thought of in physical terms, as networks of railways, roads, wires and pipes. But it is not just something fixed and solid; rather, it comes into being through the changing activities and movements of people, cars, trains, water, petrol and electricity. As such, its essence is the circulation or non-circulation of people, energy and matter (see Graham, 2002; Grieco and Urry, 2011; Simone, 2004). Faced with Jos's highly unreliable infrastructure, its inhabitants put a lot of effort into trying to decipher its inner logic, the how and why of flow and hold-ups, presence and absence. Tirelessly, people search for and interpret clues as to why certain areas and houses receive water and others do not, why water sometimes does and other times does not reach their houses, and when it is likely to disappear just as magically as it appeared. By cultivating divination skills, the randomness of infrastructure, with its shifting and elusive constellations, is probed in search of guidance on how to proceed in the pursuit of everyday necessities. In turn, the obscurity of water distribution, along with speculations about the logic of power shedding, the availability of petrol, etc. become intrinsic to daily conversations in Jos, and elaborate theories are developed, exchanged and scrutinized.

When fuel shortages take hold of Jos, fuel queues are approached like systems of signs giving clues about the best way forward. People cruise around, assessing the queues, trying to figure out what they mean. Long queues may be read as indications of which station is rumoured to receive the next shipment – the longer the queue, the stronger the rumour. They can also be interpreted as reflecting how closely the station is believed to adhere to the government's regulated fuel price of 97 naira per litre as many suppliers deviate from it and the signboards give no clues. In addition, the length of the queues can be construed as indications of trust in how the station is run – if the fuel is thought to be diluted or if the measurements have been tampered with. Umar, a used car dealer in his 40s, explained that this is why filling stations are reluctant to fill fuel in jerry cans because it would expose them. According to him, there are only a few stations that measure correctly. He mentioned one of them that had customers lining up all hours of the day. 'He sells twice of what he would have sold if he had been as dishonest as the others', he said. Still, Umar concluded, 'No matter where you go, you always get cheated on price, quantity and quality. The game is not to get cheated too badly.'

When there is a fuel shortage, the black market thrives and the price quickly adjusts to the changing prognostications of how long the scarcity will last, and the quantities people buy depend on whether they expect the price to go up or down – prognostications which in turn are based on different readings of the reasons behind the shortage. In 2014, Nigeria suffered weeks of severe fuel shortage that resulted in long queues at the filling stations in Jos, and a profusion of theories. Some thought the companies withheld petrol in anticipation of a rumoured hike in the regulated price. Others held that the tanker drivers, who are often Muslim, had parked their trucks in solidarity with the recently dismissed head of the National Bank, who was also Muslim. Still others maintained that the Navy blocked tanker ships from entering the harbours until the petrol companies had paid outstanding import taxes. But they had missed payments before without anyone blocking deliveries, some people remarked, concluding that it must have been an attempt to undermine the ruling political party as it entered the campaign for the 2015 elections. In the end, as so many times before, there was no single answer to the questions posed. But the importance of trying to uncover the governing logics remained, and so people kept trying to reread the landscape of queues and black market petrol, searching for signs of which avenues of action would be most beneficial.

In a similar manner, studying the comings and goings of, and fluctuations in the current, people struggle to find patterns and reasons behind the erratic electricity supply, ultimately trying to figure out if the power will be there when it is needed. Every day requires new attempts at prognostication, based on the experience from the past few days, while keeping in mind the many external factors that might intervene. One rainy July day when we met with Iliya, who worked as a city planner in Jos, he said that the power supply in his area in a southern suburb had been very good the past three weeks, and predictable too. There was usually power during the night until around 8 am. Then it typically came back around 2 pm. But, as Iliya said, 'As soon as you decode a new pattern, it changes', and he expected that soon, when the storm cut the power as it did on a daily basis, it would not come on again – perhaps for many weeks. Always elusive, the patterns constantly mutate, merge, split, appear and disappear. On the one hand, they can easily be assembled in new ways to accommodate changing conditions; but, on the other hand, the suspicion is frequently aired that the patterns people claim to see are just wishful thinking, projections of their desire to find regularities where none exist.

An unexpectedly good supply can fill people with uneasiness, as it may be seen as an omen foreboding a turn for the worse – there is a price to pay for the disrupted balance. It can be a warning of approaching spells of prolonged darkness, or that the power company is getting ready to distribute the bills. 'They mess with your psyche', Jacob, a retired school teacher, said. 'Some days before they come with the bill they bring you good light so you will be motivated to pay.' Similarly, if the hike in electricity supply coincides with important occasions like local elections or sports events, suspicions will arise that there are hidden agendas buried underneath, and that the government is trying to appease disgruntled citizens. Better-than-average electricity can also foreshadow the possibility that the situation might in fact be permanent. Tracing the power lines, trying to figure out where the electricity comes from and where it is going, people try out interpretations. Maybe the power has been rerouted over a better transformer? Maybe the area

now shares lines with a large factory, a government building, or a neighbourhood where rich people with a lot of bribing power live?

Chidi, owner of a small shop in an area on the outskirts of Jos which had been experiencing a sort of one day on, two days off pattern for a while – a pattern that could have been interpreted as a deliberate power shedding schedule – said that it was the wires that kept breaking as the repair crew used inferior materials while pocketing the rest of the money. Steven, who worked as a caretaker at a church, wondered why it took so long to connect the compound to the newly replaced transformer. The long silence, he surmised after a while, meant that somebody was expecting a bribe – but who, and how much? Often, explanations grow thick and layered, as if the small narratives do not suffice. If there is no electricity, it is not only because lightning has struck the transformer, but also because the electricity company staff are too lazy to repair it; and if that were not the case, it would still not be repaired because someone high up in the hierarchy would steal the money; and if he would not, it might still not happen since it would go against the political agenda of someone on an even higher level. Through the many acts of divination, infrastructure becomes imbued with a superabundance of meaning, amounting to a cosmology complete with moral codes and ideas of powerful actors beyond the horizon. Divining infrastructure not only becomes a matter of gaining access to services; it becomes a source of signs and clues to circumstances beyond those immediately at hand.

Signs of interrupted futures

John, like many people, recalled the early days of independence when the future seemed bright. Through his many stories of how the infrastructure used to be and how it now operated, he kept trying to make sense of what had happened to his beloved Nigeria. Living with his family in the area in Jos called Civil Servants' Quarters, he had waterlines connected to the bathrooms and kitchen but no water had run through them for many years. Instead, his children fetched water from the well next to the house. They filled up a plastic barrel located in one of the bathrooms; from there, buckets of water were distributed to the different rooms in the house. The house was connected to the city's electricity grid but on many days there were no more than five minutes of power. John, now in his 60s, kept returning to what Jos had been like in the 1970s – there had been water coming through all the pipes, constant electricity, the roads had not been cratered with potholes, motorcycle drivers had worn helmets and the public transport cars had not looked as if they were falling apart, and had taken four passengers rather than six. He did not like using them anymore. He preferred to use his own car but, unlike in the past, petrol was in constant scarce supply and he wanted to avoid petrol from the black market – it was costly and might be diluted, which would end up destroying his car. In reality, the car more often than not stood still. For John, Nigeria was not what it once had been. Incessantly revisiting the infrastructure of his youth, comparing it with the present, he tried to figure out what had happened. Clearly, the infrastructure of today pointed to a very different future than the infrastructure of the past had done. All his readings indicated that something fundamental had been lost.

During the oil boom of the 1970s, a Nigerian 'petro-naira' was worth US$1.60. Nigeria's consumption power and credibility were at an unprecedented high and everyday

life for many improved. As this world of rapid growth and imported commodities emerged, seeing became believing (Apter, 1999: 268ff). Vast investments were made in the nation's infrastructure. Linking people all over Nigeria, roads were built or overhauled, widened and tarred to meet the increasing congestion resulting from a steadily growing fleet of motorized two-wheeled vehicles and cars (Freund, 1978: 93ff). As the infrastructure expanded, so too did the imagined future of Nigeria:

> Commodified forms of national development were in the last instance backed by petrodollars, represented by letters of credit, contracts, trademarks, bridges, monuments, museums, highways, traffic jams, and a rising nouveau bourgeoisie … All of this created an image of modernity that was backed by hard evidence. Or so it appeared. (Apter, 1999: 269)

During the 1980s the oil boom was replaced by the oil bust. Nigeria started to fall apart; the country as well as its naira started to lose credibility. The order of the day became broken contracts and dreams, and the imagined futures of the nation that were discerned from the deteriorating infrastructure took on a very different guise. The gradually widening cracks in an infrastructure that had once conveyed promises of a new world instead came to be interpreted as signs of a modernity that no longer carried 'the content that originally went with it' (De Boeck and Plissart, 2004: 228). 'In Nigeria', Larkin (2008: 243) wrote, 'the grand modernist project of infrastructure, manifest in the robust presence of a state whose involvement in everyday life was to be present in the turning of a switch or the flushing of a toilet, has broken down.' The infrastructures had become 'temporary ruins to the dreams of modernity, mobility, and circulation that underpin them' (Graham, 2010a: xi).

Sunday, a senior manager in waste management in Jos with over 30 years of experience, tried to unravel the reasons behind the changes through the organization of garbage collection in Jos. Presently, it was, in his words, 'epileptic' – the very same word that is commonly used to describe the electricity situation in Nigeria, bringing forth images of an infrastructure in suffering. He estimated that they needed at least 1000 large bins to cover Jos but currently had only 60. In 1985 they had over 30 trucks and the city had been much smaller. As the city grew, the political will had disappeared; in his words, the people in power were 'against progress', and the number of trucks had quickly eroded down to only two. In the steep decline he saw signs of a larger issue. 'There is no maintenance culture in Nigeria', he said, using the same turn of phrase as many others to designate a felt lack of care afflicting the entire country – first and foremost for equipment, but also for values and for other people.

Accounts of this nature are so common that they almost turn into a mantra that continuously echoes over the city as well as the nation at large. Newspapers and the internet are full of stories in which people, through the infrastructure, at the same time as they read out the nation's trajectory, struggle to discern the forces behind it all. Opening with the argument that poor electricity was the cause of national 'underdevelopment', an opinion piece in the Nigerian newspaper *Daily Trust* described how the leaders of the past attempted to free the nation 'from the malaise of underdevelopment through generating electricity'. This paradigm had been instituted during the 1950s and continued into the 1970s when NEPA entered the arena with the message of 'improving electricity in

Nigeria'. But then things changed and, since the 1980s, the production of electricity has perpetually been declining (Ibrahim, 2012; see Olukoju, 2004: 52ff, 55). The author of the piece summarized:

> It is generally known that our industries are closed down, teeming youth are becoming unemployed, crime rate is increasing, environment is polluted and contributing to global warming, cost of production is doubling because of epileptic power supply and the consequences are trickling down to the Nigerian masses. (Ibrahim, 2012)

Rereading the glories of democracy

When Olusegun Obasanjo was elected President of Nigeria in 1999, ending 16 years of military rule, it brought hopes that the new century would bring with it the glories of democracy and make real the fantasies about improved futures that it conjured. This period, in much the same way as the 1970s and 1980s, has become known, understood and spoken about through infrastructural signs. In 2007, a crudely made battery-operated lamp consisting of LEDs, with a used CD as a reflector, could all of a sudden be found in street markets all over Jos, just as in Nigeria at large. The lamp was read as a sign indicating the President's shortcomings and was accordingly named 'Obasanjo ya kasa' – 'Obasanjo failed' or 'Obasanjo was not able to', as a young lawyer in Jos translated it, going on to explain: 'I guess since Obasanjo said he would resolve the power problem of the country and he didn't … we had to find an alternative!'

Ending his piece by describing how Nigeria was turning into 'a dangerous gas chamber', with the deadly fumes from the rapid spread of various kinds of generators filling the atmosphere, a columnist on the combined news site and discussion forum Nigeria Village Square wrote: 'It is, no doubt, a prominent evidence of the abysmal failure of the Obasanjo Administration. After nearly eight years of loud promises and dubious claims, I still cannot write this column without fuelling my Chinese toy-generator.' He concluded that as long as this 'reign of darkness persists' he would be inseparable from his 'Chinese toy' (Ejinkeonye, 2007).

While the generators have become multi-sensory cues to the shattering dreams of democracy, they have also become signs of new, powerful actors with hidden agendas working behind the scenes. Joseph, a polytechnic student in Jos, having watched the number of generators of all sizes gradually increase since the turn to democracy until they had virtually taken over the city's streets and compounds, considered that the change was too comprehensive to have happened by itself. The big men all had their high-capacity generators and had no real interest in improving the situation. Many of them, he suspected, were even involved in the importation of generators and thus deeply invested in seeing that NEPA did not work as intended. Indicating the existence of a 'generator mafia', sucking the Nigerian nation dry, the generators have for many people become signs of the greed of the people in power. As Joseph concluded, every year new promises are made and more money spent – 'but we never see neither the light nor the money. With all the money spent we should have constant light, but as soon as some money is given, somebody eats it.'

In 2001, when the Global System of Mobile (GSM) Communication was introduced in Nigeria, the telephone industry was extremely stagnant. With a population of over 100

million there were around 500,000 landlines in use and over 10 million Nigerians queuing for an installation – with an average queue time ranging from 8 to 10 years (Obadare, 2004: 10; Onwumechili, 2001: 223ff, 2005: 24ff). The introduction of GSM was an enormous leap, and in 2012, there were around 100 million active lines in use (Nigerian Communications Commission, 2012). 'Obasanjo was the one that brought GSM to Nigeria', Joseph said, in a statement that mirrored a common reading of GSM as one of the fruits of democracy. 'At the very least, mobile telecommunication was expected to accomplish some of the "miracles" associated with its introduction in other parts of the world, for instance, "abolishing" distance by facilitating the conduct of business and interpersonal relations' (Obadare, 2006: 101). But as the communication speed increased, Nigeria's infrastructure also revealed 'the gap between *actual* and *potential* acceleration' (Larkin, 2004: 305). The initial euphoria connected to the introduction of the GSM system, just like the electricity situation, was soon replaced by disenchantment with the poor reception and general inadequacy of the services.There was a general suspicion that the omnipresent 'Nigerian factor' (Obadare, 2006: 101) – an elusive negative force, often connected to notions of corruption, fraudulent behaviour and a general lack of interest in the well-being of the nation and its inhabitants – was making itself known; the very force that, as an actor in its own right, has for several decades been felt to be shaping the destiny of the nation.

Re-wiring a nation

Novelist Achebe once concluded,'*The trouble with Nigeria* has become the subject of our small talk in much the same way as the weather is for the English …Whenever two Nigerians meet, their conversation will sooner or later slide into a litany of our national deficiencies' (Achebe, 1984: 2, original emphasis). Since the 1980s, people's confidence in the institutions of modernity has declined rapidly and a 'national pessimism', fuelled by notions of 'an infrastructural collapse of Nigeria', has begun to flourish in the country. The collapse has been seen as symptomatic of a 'national dis-ease', as symptoms of 'this Nigeria' – a phrase heavy with disappointment and resignation (Bastian, 1998: 114, 118; see Diamond, 2001: xiii). Also referred to as the 'Nigerian character', or, as above, the 'Nigerian factor', this deep-seated frustration with and distrust of the Nigerian nation is highlighted by the plethora of attempts to capture it, all expressing the notion that, whatever effort is invested, in Nigeria nothing works (Obadare, 2009: 255). This perception has become so endemic that it has come in many ways to define the nation (Smith, 2008: 8).

Reacting against the steadily deteriorating image of Nigeria and wishing to bring forth what was felt to be absent, Dora Akunyili, the former director of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), in 2008 stepped into her new position as the Minister of Information and Communications in the Nigerian government. After becoming both nationally and internationally renowned for her battle against counterfeit pharmaceuticals and contaminated food products, the new project she embarked on was one of re-branding Nigeria. After officially assuming her office she announced:

> I have enjoyed serving Nigerians through the Nafdac where I worked with my wonderful and indefatigable team to safeguard the health of the ordinary Nigerian. …Today, I find myself steering the ship of this very important ministry as the chief image maker of Nigeria … This ministry represents the image and the soul of the nation. (Amaefule et al., 2008)

In the face of economic decline and feelings of a nation falling apart, different governments since the mid-1970s have launched various mass mobilization campaigns in attempts to deal with Nigeria's steadily evolving economic and political legitimacy crisis (Alubo, 1991: 58). These campaigns of persuasion, in the words of the Nigerian sociologist Alubo, were purely and simply a matter of 'cosmetic dressing' (p. 46) – 'mass mobilization' was 'synonymous with mass deception' (p. 43).

At the beginning of 2009, the Federal Ministry of Information and Communications unveiled the new slogan and logo for its re-branding project: 'Nigeria: Good People, Great Nation'. Akunyili explained that what they wanted was to 'repackage Nigeria and present her to the world in a more acceptable manner' (Ogbuenyi, 2009).

In an opinion piece headed 'Re-branding a fake product?', the author questioned what Akunyili wanted to re-brand. 'Is it the potholes on our highways, the 25-year lack of stable electric power or the corruption that holds sway in our offices, airports and seaports? Is the re-branding intended to hypnotize Nigerians into believing all is well?' (Adamu, 2009). 'No amount of mobile phone propaganda, TV jingles and CNN adverts', in his words, would convince the world that Nigeria was an improved place. He concluded that all attempts to re-brand Nigeria without the content being purified would fail miserably.

'Nigeria: Good People, Great Nation' was implemented 'to re-shape the destiny of Nigeria and Nigerians' (Kudaisi, 2009), but no matter how hard the snow globe was shaken, when the snow fell to the ground, the image remained the same. The signs read from the infrastructure, pointing out the future of the nation, were still just as ominous as they were palpable. A news article in the Nigerian newspaper *Vanguard* ended with a voice echoing desolation:

> … if the people see their taps without water and their roads riddled with death traps, if the people continue to power their subsistence existence on fuel powered generators, if the people cannot have the basic necessities of a life that is expected of such an endowed nation in the 21st century, then ten thousand branding or rebranding attempts would continue to meet with the failures earlier experienced by prior half hearted attempts at cosmetic surgery on the nation's image. (Emmanuel, 2009)

In a world of mass mobilization campaigns, rebranding projects and promises conjured in the spirit of the coming of democracy, infrastructural connections and disconnections circulate truths about the nation. Through the everyday struggles of the citizens, infrastructure has turned into a divination tool capable of piercing through a politics of mirages.

Dire readings

Imbued with hopes and concerns, images of what the future will bring are read out of the infrastructural signs. In 2005, when NEPA was renamed PHCN (the Power Holding Company of Nigeria), most Nigerians interpreted it as a matter of putting old wine in a

new bottle. While NEPA has mockingly been spelled out as 'Never Expect Power Always', PHCN was now named 'Problem Has Come to Nigeria' or 'Problem Has Changed Name' (see Ibrahim, 2012; Obadare, 2009: 249; Olukoju, 2004). On the streets of Jos, it was commonly referred to as 'Please Hold Candle Now'. In the words of Obadare (2009: 245): 'Ridicule has emerged as a means through which people attempt to deconstruct and construct meaning out of a reality that is decidedly surreal.' The jokes take the shape of collective readings of what to expect from the future but, as much as humour has become intrinsic in the way people speak through and with infrastructure, prognostications often strike much darker notes.

Before ending with 'The future is bleak for over 150 million people', an opinion piece in the Nigerian newspaper *Economic Confidential* headed 'Nigeria: A Road to Anarchy?' interpreted the message conveyed by the infrastructural signs:

> In the cities, those who can afford buy generators, dig bore-holes, send their children to private schools or overseas, fly to Egypt or Saudi Arabia for medical help, they also hire vigilante groups to patrol their streets … in the city everyone is to himself. Dirty streets, congestion everywhere, poor town planning, loss of societal values etc. … What future do we see for our dear country Nigeria? (Lawanti, 2010)

In July 2004, sitting on a bench in the university grounds in Jos, a woman working at the university started to talk about the existence of a phone number that you could die from: if you answered when the number called, you would die immediately. The rumour, transmitted through text messages over the newly introduced lines, spread across Jos, like the rest of Nigeria, like wildfire (Andersson Trovalla, 2011: 99ff). It was later reported how people had become ill, fainted and even died from receiving calls on their mobile phones. Some Nigerians stopped answering calls from numbers they did not recognize, and a steadily increasing list of 'killer numbers' was shown on television (Adam, 2004); many went to hospitals for check-ups after receiving calls (Agbu, 2004: 16). These phone calls came to be known as 'satanic calls', 'killer calls' and 'doomsday calls' and in many people's minds came to support the increasingly common perception that the 'end times' were approaching (Agbu, 2004: 18ff; see Hackett, 1998: 260; Last, 2008: 58). As GSM airwaves wrote invisible signs in the sky, eschatology was added to the communicational repertoire of infrastructure.

Infrastructure turned suprastructure

Central to the works of the pragmatist philosopher Dewey (1930) is the idea that as outcomes are held in suspense, life is always fundamentally uncertain. As people try to discover the logics behind the uneven and seemingly random supply of such amenities as electricity, water or petrol, the highly unreliable infrastructure makes this fact of life extremely distinctive. The unpredictable systems have spawned a widespread disbelief in the likelihood that one's actions will produce foreseeable results (Simone, 2006: 364). Yet the very lack of consistency seems to open up a space of heightened sensitivity to the signs that are embedded in the elusive infrastructure. The grey areas, the blank spaces, the ambiguities, allow the projection of desires, hopes and fears. When mastered in

actual experience, writes Dewey (1929), the unstable and precarious factors that intervene while we attempt to attain goals and ends become tools, techniques, mechanisms, etc. 'Instead of being foes of purposes, they are means of execution' (p. v).

In a city and a nation that often seem to be beyond any prognostications, the likewise uncertain infrastructure paradoxically comes forward as a valuable divination tool. It reveals not only the cracks but also the joints – the points at which different parts of society intersect, and where past and present meet the future. The wires, pipes, roads and signals, the water, electricity, transportation and phone networks that connect people to and disconnect people from society make up powerful instruments for analysing the nation. Instead of being *infra* – underneath and hidden, they become *supra* – above and visible; transcending the realm of mere utility, signifying the unpredictable and elusive essence of Nigeria. They are not only symptoms of 'this Nigeria', the 'Nigerian factor', or the 'Nigerian character'. Imbedded in them are the indexes, the omens, of what has been, what is and what will be.

Ferguson (1999: 236ff) writes about being 'abjected' from trajectories of technological advancements that one was once part of. In contrast to never having been connected at all, this is not simply a lack, it is a loss. But despite many narratives of a modernity lost, Nigerian infrastructure is not simply an experience of being disconnected, as the many parallel networks, official and unofficial, teach us. Essentially, it is an experience of existing near one extreme of a continuum in which, at one end of the scale, systems operate without calling attention to themselves, in line with the prefix *infra*, while the *supra* end is a state of hyper-visibility, where systems are highly present in people's minds, speaking of contexts beyond themselves. Materializing relationships between now and then, here and there, neighbourhoods as well as nations, infrastructure conveys messages of what it means to be linked to, or cut off from, images of modernity. Globally, moving back and forth along a continuum of awareness – between modes of *supra* and *infra* – infrastructure charges people to interpret what it says about the world and their place in it.

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1. This article builds on fieldwork conducted in the Nigerian city of Jos between 2000 and 2014.

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Author biographies

Ulrika Trovalla is a senior researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute. She holds a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Uppsala University. Working on issues of landscape, materiality and existential navigation in a city in the wake of devastating ethnical and religious conflicts, she has been

doing fieldwork in Jos, Nigeria, since 2000. She is currently engaged in the research project 'Infrastructure as Divination: Urban Life in the Postcolony', which studies infrastructure and everyday life in Nigeria.

Eric Trovalla is a senior researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute. He holds a PhD in Ethnology from Uppsala University. His research has mainly considered the psychological and emotive aspects of relationships between people, objects and places. He has been doing fieldwork in Nigeria since 2007, and is currently engaged in the research project 'Infrastructure as Divination: Urban Life in the Postcolony', which studies infrastructure and everyday life in Nigeria.