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Transparency and mistrust: Who or what should be made transparent?

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It is increasingly recognized in public administration that the relationship between trust and transparency is not straightforward. Recently, right-wing populists have risen to power, rejecting transparency requirements based on documents while claiming that they "hide nothing." Clearly, existing scholarly conceptualizations are insufficient for understanding how transparency operates as a value in real-world political contestation. An analysis of state- and national-level politics in Nigeria reveals that, while always retaining a core informational component, there are multiple competing conceptions of transparency. Popular demands for transparency express a belief that not only should data be made transparent, but also the social networks in which politicians are embedded. "Transparency in people" can clash with more traditional, technocratic transparency practices centered on data. By rethinking who or what should be made transparent—data, things, or people—this article offers fresh theoretical insights on the complex politics of transparency and trust.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent years the idea of transparency has become increasingly prominent in debates around governance both in developed and developing countries. Transparency is promoted as a route to improving the quality of government, with Transparency International's global ranking of national governments according to their degree of openness. However, multiple studies have noted that empirically the effect of transparency on governance is not straightforward, with greater transparency not always leading to anticipated benefits. As Park and Blenkinsopp (2011, p. 271) note, "transparency might have clear limits to its utility as a method for deterring corruption and improving citizen satisfaction."

Others have raised the possibility that the demands of transparency may impede efficient government and democratic practice (Birkinshaw, 2006). Beyond the pragmatic and logistical trade-offs between transparency and value for money or leaking of sensitive information (Heald, 2006), there remains the unanswered question about whether greater transparency always correlates with or causes greater public trust (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014). In some cases where transparency in data is in abundance, increasing dissemination of documents—financial accounts, international codes and standards, audits—may in fact obfuscate rather than clarify, heighten suspicion rather than soothe it. While transparency as a core concept understood as "the citizenry's right to know" (Kaufmann & Bellver, 2005, p. 1) is salient across diverse political contexts, the dominant interpretation of transparency as "the quantity and coverage of budget information" (Renzio & Masud, 2011, p. 607) is only one conception of this core concept.

Despite the proliferation of data, the rise of conspiracy theories claiming to illuminate the hidden workings of power suggests that people find the activities of those in power less and less transparent (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). This debate has taken on heightened urgency in the context of rising right-wing populism around the world: Despite advances in open government many regard their governments as unknowable and believe their inner workings to be opaque and sinister. Reflecting on Donald Trump's election to the U.S. presidency, Mark Fenster (2017) argues that the success of this discourse derives from its ability to tap into unmet demands for transparency that go beyond traditional bureaucratic transparency. The fact that these antiestablishment figures can simultaneously flout basic benchmarks of government oversight while claiming that they "hide nothing" speaks the salience of two rival meanings of transparency. Technocratic transparency focuses on disclosing government information, whereas populist transparency holds that "the state must refrain from hiding itself and the truth from the public" (Fenster, 2017, p. 173).

This article contributes to debates about the complex relationship between transparency and trust in government. Rather than thinking of transparency as undifferentiated and monolithic, where more is always better, this article draws on an emerging constructivist consensus where both anthropologists of development and scholars of public administrations are increasingly recognizing that transparency and its effects on trust are fluid, constructed, and context specific. Throughout this article, transparency is taken to refer to the core informational concept of providing information about the rulers to the ruled. Starting from a recognition that governments do not always offer the sort of transparency that citizens actually desire (Cucciniello & Nasi, 2014), this article gives an empirically grounded theoretical account of the plural conceptions of the core concept of transparency. Of course, discussions of transparency inevitably stray beyond this core informational concept and implicate broader questions of political legitimacy, the limits of bureaucratic power, and questions of formal and informal access to the state. The nebulous nature of transparency is evident in its propensity to be "offered as a solution to all manner of social, political, environmental and economic problems" (Birchall, 2011, p. 19). Thus, this article uses transparency as the conceptual framework with which to explore the fluid and contested nature of trust and legitimacy. Drawing on interviews and news reports gathered during a total of 6 months of in-depth qualitative fieldwork[1] in Ibadan, Nigeria between 2013 and 2015, it sets out rival conceptions of what aspects of government should be made transparent: data, things, or people.

Transparency in data corresponds to Fenster's category of technocratic transparency. However, it gives a finer grained conceptualization of what he terms populist transparency, in a new but equally globally significant context. Nigeria—Africa's biggest economy and most populous country—serves as a valuable window to the potential and limits of transparency: Donor attention has long been focused on governance reforms and there is a huge public appetite for tackling corruption (Smith, 2010). With the rise of citizen-led online transparency platforms like BudgIT (see http://yourbudgit.com/), it would

seem that any improvements in transparency in data should be welcomed with open arms. Yet in the southwest, celebrated politicians who offer this donor-endorsed brand of good governance have been voted from office or have had to radically change their policies in the face of popular resistance (Roelofs, 2016). Just as in the United States with the rise of Trump, the Nigerian experience raises the possibility that what scholars and donors mean by transparency does not connect with how it is understood by voters.

This article looks at how those in power at the local, state, and national levels make sense of and respond to demands for visibility and legibility, as well as cases where leaders are seen by their constituents as failing to make themselves transparent. What emerges is that transparency is popularly understood as a quality that can apply not only to data and documentary information but to things and people. Of these, transparency in people represents the most significant departure from the good governance agenda and yet motivates high-profile national level disputes that would otherwise remain unintelligible.

The article proceeds by first comparing the development studies literature on transparency with the more nuanced understanding offered by public administration. It sets out the debates over what the goals of transparency should be and whether to think of transparency as revealing a representation of reality, or as a construction in itself. Next, it contextualizes the state of transparency in data in Nigeria and shows that despite the obvious need for improving government accounts, there is nonetheless evidence of a more generalizable ambivalence toward transparency and trust as noted elsewhere. Section 4 presents case studies from national and subnational politics in Nigeria that show how an alternative value of transparency in people shapes contestation. The conceptualization of transparency in data, in things, and in people is presented. By highlighting the conflicting forms of transparency, this conceptual framework helps account for popular suspicion of projects, relationships, and people that, according to dominant approaches in development studies, exemplify good governance. The conclusion unpacks the wider implications of the Nigerian case study for broader theorizations of how transparency intersects with trust and populist politics.

2 | THEORIZING TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST IN DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

This section brings together parallel literatures that typically explore transparency and trust but in separate geographical and disciplinary areas: the literature on transparency in public administration in predominantly developed countries, and the development studies literature on transparency as part of good governance reforms in developing countries.

In developing country contexts, the study of transparency has been driven by the normative policy aims of the good governance agenda (Bank, 1992, p. 3), and its accompanying methods and conceptual assumptions. Within this New Public Management–inspired development studies literature, transparency is primarily seen as an instrument to accountability, amid a concern with corruption and government ineffectiveness. Building on models of developing country governments that saw holders of public office as inherently rent seeking (Krueger, 1974), transparency opens government activities to public scrutiny, resulting in public pressure on governments to perform better and reduce corruption (Rose-Ackerman, 1996; Stiglitz, 1998). Thus, ordinary people need "easy access to information on the workings of public programs intended for their benefit" to empower them to demand better services and monitor officials (Reinikka & Svensson, 2003, p. 2).

Critical development studies has critiqued what the naïve assumptions of representational theories of transparency promoted by the World Bank and others. Using constructivist methodologies,

Hetherington (2011, p. 156) problematizes the representational conceptions of transparency that is promoted by donors and the new wave of technocratic elites in Paraguay, which characterizes transparency as the disclosure of "neutral" information. Through accounts, audits, and reports, citizens gain knowledge of government actions, that is, the reality that is being represented. Indeed, this naïve representational approach can be seen in work that has sought to make transparency applicable to development. An example of this way of thinking is Fox's (2007) distinction between "clear" transparency that "sheds light on institutional behavior" and directly facilitates action to improve governance, and "fuzzy" transparency where information is disseminated but "does not reveal how institutions actually behave in practice" (p. 667). However, rather than clarity or fuzziness being a quality of the information itself, it depends on who is reading it and how (Hull, 2003, pp. 288–289). In trying to expunge information of fuzziness for one audience, transparency practices may create "new opacities" (Christensen & Cheney, 2015, p. 70) for another. This suggests that rather than simply making information available the ultimate aim should be context-specific "legibility" (Fenster, 2006). Legibility is complicated by big data and "e-transparency," with the need for secondary representation of data via visualizations (Galloway, 2011) or its compilation into high-quality "machine-readable" data sets on websites like Data.gov (Birchall, 2015).

Constructivist scholars highlight the unintended and differential effects of transparency practices. How does transparency, with its shifting effects and constructed meanings, shape the relationship between rulers and the ruled? Political anthropologists have explored the microlevel implications of hegemonic transparency practices in an emerging "audit culture" (Shore & Wright, 2015) whereby technologies of power aimed at transparency and accountability remake subjects and social relations in new and constricting ways (Hull, 2012). Ethnographic insights hint at the political consequences of privileging certain forms of transparency. In Paraguay, transparency practices empowered those elites who were able to manipulate abstract documentary forms of information, but were contested and subverted by the *campesinos* who experienced government data as yet another site of power relations (Hetherington, 2011). This literature, which encompasses the growing field of Critical Transparency Studies (Alloa & Thomä, 2018) and work on secrecy from cultural theory (Birchall, 2011), provides vital contributions in deconstructing the idea of pure information and showing the unpredictable, exclusionary consequences of pursuing such an idea. Moreover, it shows how transparency practices have political consequences beyond the direct effects of the information released. By *doing* transparency, organizations and individuals can accumulate "transparency capital" that can confer both cultural and moral authority (Birchall, 2011, pp. 8–9). However, this literature has for the most part existed in parallel to more practical discussions of how to best manage the dissemination of information to meet citizens' demands for transparency. The literature on public administration, with its primary focus on Western and developed nations, has long explored how the dissemination of information about the workings of state power shapes the relationship between citizens and government. Unlike the good governance literature that focuses on transparency as a means to accountability and government effectiveness, scholars within public administration tend to regard legitimacy or trust as the "main rationale" for transparency (Licht, Naurin, Esaiasson, & Gilljam, 2012, p. 111). Changing public attitudes to public works in a subdistrict of Seoul, for example, show that while more transparency does not always reduce corruption, it still has benefits in terms of public trust (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2011, pp. 271–272). Whether for citizens and government, or for employees of large corporations, this literature builds on the intuition, often born out in reality, that "as organizations become more transparent they will also become more trusted" (Rawlins, 2008, p. 16).

Whereas the good governance literature assumes that more transparency is always better, studies within public administration have raised the possibility that transparency practices can have ambivalent impacts on levels of trust (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014). Worthy (2010) notes that in the United Kingdom,

ever more stringent transparency requirements have been accompanied by falling trust in institutions. Fenster (2015, p. 150) has pointed to the way that increasingly onerous transparency requirements breed a sense not of greater certainty but growing anxiety about whether data can be trusted. With ever escalating auditing demands, more data are needed to verify existing data, and auditors themselves must be audited: "The disclosure of state information consistently disappoints, however: there is never enough of it." Depending on cultural context and expectations of government capacity, greater transparency may erode trust (Grimmelikhuijsen, Porumbescu, Hong, & Im, 2013). Scholars have speculated as to the reasons for these counterintuitive cases of "more open but not more trusted" government (Worthy, 2010, p. 561): Simply releasing information may spread confusion or alternatively beliefs about government trustworthiness may be so deeply ingrained that they are only marginally influenced by increased transparency (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014).

There is a growing recognition of the nature of transparency as constructed and shifting. Reviewing scholarly work on transparency within public administration over the last 25 years Cucciniello, Porumbescu, and Grimmelikhuijsen (2017) point to a growing recognition that different forms of transparency affect trust in different ways, but what those actual relationships are is less clear. Work on transparency and trust should start from the "premise that the effects of transparency are very much a product of the environment in which they are implemented" (Cucciniello et al., 2017, p. 41). Accompanying this shift toward seeing transparency as plural and unpredictable, constructivist thought has gained prominence in debates about transparency and trust in traditionally positivist fields. Drawing on Foucault and Baudrillard, Meijer has assimilated similar theoretically informed insights into public administration. In his work on transparency in European public policy settings, Meijer (2013) shows how the meaning given to transparency practices, and thus their effect on the relationship between government and citizens, is constructed. What engenders trust in one administrative setting or one policy area may raise suspicion in another, depending on whether it is framed as a naming and shaming exercise or an invitation to public participation and collaboration.

Thus, the representational value of transparency must be distinguished from its symbolic power. At times, as in the case of school rankings in the Netherlands (Meijer, 2009), the symbolic value of the representation became more important than the thing being represented. The differential effects of transparency may reflect the way its symbolic power can variously "reduce uncertainty" or "enhance ambiguity" (Meijer, 2009, p. 262). In fact, similar insights have been arrived at by scholars working within radically different methodological frames. More quantitative work has highlighted that politicians engage in transparency practices for the purposes of signaling their integrity. Just as constructivists emphasize the slipperiness of transparency's symbolic value, in the language of rational actor models Schnell (2017) shows how in Romania politicians may "miscalculate" the signaling effects of engaging in transparency practices.

Inspired by the emerging consensus that "the effects of transparency are very much a product of the environment in which they are implemented," scholars from within the Western-focused public administration literature called for research into the experiences of transparency in Africa and Latin America (Schnell, 2017, pp. 41–42). Conversely, the debates over the ambivalence of transparency in Europe have much to offer development studies. While scholars have asked questions like "Does enhanced transparency, through the Internet, boost the legitimacy of the EU?" (Curtin & Meijer, 2006), such skepticism has rarely been asked with regard to good governance transparency reforms in Africa. This is in spite of recent findings that transparency may impact trust in equally nonlinear ways in African countries (Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, & Wibbels, 2018). This cross-fertilization is just as important for development studies, which has remained largely untouched by conceptual debates over transparency. If we accept that transparency can affect trust both positively and negatively, what implications does this have to the goal of good governance? This article seeks to fill that gap. As

shown in the empirical discussion later, the question of whether transparency inspires public trust is not just *how* but *what* must be made transparent: data, yes, but also things and people.

3 | TRANSPARENCY IN DATA IN NIGERIA

Discussions of transparency in Nigeria, both within and without, tend to focus on the country's poor record of corruption in government. Since the return to democracy in 1999, activists and scholars have fought to strengthen mechanisms for tracking and publicizing government accounts. Governance reforms have been vital for recovering funds stolen by the previous military regime (Enweremadu, 2013) as well as bringing the country into line with global standards of transparency and accountability in order to receive debt relief and access to international finance (Thurston, 2018). The well-publicized struggles of those seeking to improve transparency practices (Adebanwi, 2010) and the widespread frustration at their failure (Smith, 2010) show that a lack of transparency has harmed public trust in institutions. Indeed, in 2016 Nigeria ranked lowest in Africa for public trust in the executive institutions of the state, with only 31% of Afrobarometer respondents saying they trusted their government "somewhat" or "a lot." Clearly, the need to improve the availability, accuracy, and legibility of government accounts is an imperative, and it is on this area that donor-led governance reforms have focused (see, e.g., the U.K. Department for International Development funded State Accountability and Voice Initiative).

In the context of such low transparency and trust, it might seem that the debates in more developed countries about technocratic or populist transparency are irrelevant. Yet the idea that developing countries, by virtue of their poverty or poor governance, sit outside the complex and messy world of politics is to reproduce the depoliticizing, "antipolitics" effect of development interventions more generally (Ferguson, 1990). In Nigeria, as in Europe and the United States, the relationship between transparency and trust is ambivalent. Alongside campaigns for greater budgetary transparency and vocal demands for stricter anticorruption laws, there is also a suspicion that official documents may be hiding as much as they reveal. Of course, this is in part a consequence of low levels of trust in those who draft them, but it goes beyond this to a skepticism of data as a form of communication in itself. Beyond the straightforward barriers of illiteracy, idioms such as "talking grammar"—meaning pompous but nonsensical talk—attest to the slipperiness of elevated forms of speech, and the ease with which words can occlude and confuse rather than illuminate meaning.[2] The idea of talking or speaking "grammar" conveys the way in which jargon-laden forms of communication function to exclude people who do not enjoy the level of participation required to decode it. Moreover, in the accusation that "your grammar [is] too much" there is the suggestion that those with access to education and elite milieus might use their way with words and apparent sophistication to mislead those who are excluded by it (Demola, 2018).

In a preelection radio debate in Oyo state in the southwest, there was the same ambivalence toward data as the sole source of transparency, this time in the form of skepticism toward a politician who was seen to place too much emphasis on figures. A leading opposition candidate queried the transparency of the governor's flagship flyover in Ibadan. "My brother" he said, referring to the governor, "is very good at giving statistics." His critique compared the statistical data about the flyover, the N2.9bn cost, as well as its clearly discernible physical characteristics with those of a cheaper flyover in Ogun state. He pointed out that the one in Ogun was also double lane, but longer and permitted large trailers which were too heavy to use the one in Ibadan ("Governorship Debate," 2015).

Many politicians rely instead on cultivating transparency and trust by pointing to visible tangible outputs. As one state governor announced in 2016, the "State government is now in a better position to

convince people to pay taxes because of its involvement in the execution of developmental projects, especially physical ones which the tax payers can see" (Olaniyi, 2016). Whereas transparency in data seeks to describe government action, and produce a representation of reality, transparency in things is a direct apprehension of that action. Rather than information standing apart from reality as a representation (Hetherington, 2011), the reality is the information. It relies primarily on a visual logic, whereby citizens can see what their government is doing directly. Seen through this lens, an itemization of government outputs in data acts merely as a signpost to the things that can be viewed directly. It empowers the curious citizen to seek out the things on which government hangs its claim to transparency.

Overall, the status of technocratic transparency, where the focus is on data as a representation, is mixed in Nigeria as it is elsewhere. The dire state of government accounts over history and ongoing struggles with financial accountability motivate recurrent popular campaigns for more documents. In the context of intermittent electricity supply and pay-per-byte mobile data plans, data come at a cost and the imagined role of the citizen-auditor (Birchall, 2015) in scrutinizing data is especially burdensome. At the same time, there are popular suspicions with whether representations and the language used to communicate them can be trusted, leading to alternative but recognizable demands for transparency made tangible. However, there have been high-profile political disputes centered on claims about transparency that deviate significantly from either technocratic transparency or its more tangible variants.

4 | TRANSPARENCY IN PEOPLE IN NIGERIA

A focus on data would lead us to treat Birchall's concept of "transparency capital" as a close relation of what scholars of Nigerian politics have called "technocratic capital" (Thurston, 2018, p. 217); in fact, as this section will elaborate, discourses and practices of transparency have been utilized in service of very different political projects and as a critique of technocratic politics.

4.1 | Untransparent relationships: The first lady's criticism

In October 2016 Aisha Buhari, the first lady of Nigeria, famously went against expectations of spousal loyalty when she publicly denounced her husband, President Buhari, saying she would not vote for him in the next election. In particular, she condemned his handling of official appointments ("Nigeria's President Warned by First Lady Aisha Buhari," 2016). She explained, "The president does not know 45 out of 50 of the people he appointed and I don't know them either, despite being his wife of 27 years." In the context of complaints about nepotism, where appointments based on personal relationships are feared as a source of corruption, the accusation that the president and his wife do not know the successful candidates is puzzling. Yet Mrs. Buhari's comments were seen as reasonable and astute by my informants.[3]

In this case, rather than transparency requiring that data or documents or accounts should be visible, transparency is focused on the social information concerning leaders and their qualities. To be seen as trustworthy and reliable, leaders should not hide: Their actions and connections should be visible. The following examples demonstrate the salience of this conception of transparency in Nigerian political contestation. The fear of unseen social networks controlling the state is observable in ongoing political debates in Nigeria. The idea that "cabals," small groups of unknown and unknowable individuals, are controlling Nigerian politics from "behind the scenes," is frequently alluded to. Commentators decry what they see as the continued influence of a cabal of Northern "aristocrats" or military elites under democratization (Uweru, 2010, p. 169).

TABLE 1 Three conceptions of transparency

Conception of transparency	Substantive requirements
Transparency in data	Availability of documentary information that is an accurate representation of government activities
Transparency in things	Visibility of tangible developmental outputs
Transparency in people	Legibility of social networks, connections, and obligations in which power holders are enmeshed

Albert (2012) provides the clearest theoretical exposition of the role of cabals in Nigerian politics. He identifies them as a specific form of elite grouping where informal networks control formal political processes. What is especially interesting about cabals is their unknowable character. Cabals "operate in the dark and hardly make any statements that could betray their identity." This lack of visibility makes them pernicious as they are "more difficult to manage than godfathers." Albert distinguishes cabals from other shady groupings like "mafias" and "godfathers" on the basis that whereas cabals are unnameable and unidentified. Cabals, Albert argues, "consist of a shadowy group of people bound together by some sinister political interests," those who work with them are "unable to say who they are" and those who expose their workings are still "careful enough not to name them." Knowability is linked to whether those in power can be "managed" or are beyond the reach of popular accountability. He quotes the Vice National Chairman of the Arewa Consultative Forum, a group of Northern Governors, alleging in 2012 that "the leadership [of the nation] knows them and shields them from being prosecuted" (Albert, 2012, pp. 2–4). The accusation of the existence of a cabal represents both the idea that there are unknown people behind the scenes, but that known individuals, office holders, have connections to these unknown people that are being obscured.

Where transparency is understood as making known a politician's social affiliations, personal connections, and political loyalties, then the appointment of candidates who by their anonymity are "unknowable" in this way is in itself untransparent. Considering the salience of conspiratorial fears about cabals, Aisha Buhari's concern makes sense: If the president himself does not know those in his government, then by implication other, as yet hidden, forces are responsible for their appointment. This means that those in office are imbricated in networks that are not transparent to voters. Mrs. Buhari made this point when she claimed that those in top posts were there due to the influence of "few people," which echoes Albert's (2012) account of shady "cabals" dominating politics from behind the scenes. In this way, theorizing transparency in people contributes to existing scholarly concerns with unknowable and conspiratorial politics. It helps us make sense of otherwise counterintuitive popular responses to government efforts at "good governance." If these alternative forms of transparency are not recognized, then even where transparency as data exists, citizens may still feel that their leaders are untransparent and therefore fail to meet their conceptions of good governance.

The three conceptions of transparency are summarized in Table 1. The way that the same actions and practices can meet one conception of transparency, while potentially eroding another, is the subject of the next section.

5 | WHEN THE WRONG KIND OF TRANSPARENCY UNDERMINES TRUST

5.1 | Tinubu and conspiracy theories

What follows are two examples of transparency in data conflicting with transparency in people and thus inspiring popular mistrust in recent subnational politics in Nigeria's southwest. From the mid-2000s Lagos state government, led by Governor Bola Tinubu, was celebrated in the international press for moving from the murky godfather politics seen to characterize Nigeria to embracing "good governance." Behind this

praise is the assumption that godfathers are untransparent, whereas transparency improves as developing country governments integrate themselves into international, donor-led best practice.

Whereas much scholarly and NGO commentary sees the power of godfathers as an obstacle to transparent and accountable government (Human Rights Watch, 2007), this clashes with local evaluations of Tinubu's role. After leaving office, Tinubu played the role of political "godfather" to aspiring governors in other southwestern states. Abiola Ajimobi, in Oyo State, was one of his protégés. Tinubu played a key role in Ajimobi's first campaign for the governorship in 2007, and his successful bid in 2011 (Adebanwi, 2014, p. 223). Albert (2012, p. 2) defines godfathers as individuals who promote and control protégées through manipulation of a mass followership, but distinguishes them from cabals because, crucially, they are publicly known. Indeed, my respondents on the street of Ibadan were satisfied that they understood how Ajimobi and Tinubu were connected to each other through ties of obligation and social networks. Many judged it uncontroversial, though not necessarily ideal, that Tinubu's financial and political backing for Ajimobi's career came with strings attached. As one journalist explained, "[h]e's not Santa Claus, he has to recoup his money."[4] In a context where showing "appreciation" to one's patrons is a well-policed social norm,[5] the relationship between Ajimobi and Tinubu met the requirements of transparency in people.

However, Tinubu's influence represented for many a failure of transparency in people due to his connections to the realms of international business and networks of prestige. For internationally educated elites in the upper echelons of the party and state government, Ajimobi's cooperation with Tinubu was evidence of an enlightened orientation to development, where decisions were to be made at the regional level and connections to international resources, knowledge, and people were to be maximized. Tinubu embodied a 21st-century conception of the Yoruba notion of *olaju* or enlightened development (Peel, 1978) through his engagement with modern private sector principles. In July 2013, Ajimobi and the ACN governor of Osun state appointed Tinubu to the position of chancellor at LAUTECH, a university jointly controlled by both states. Ajimobi noted that Tinubu had "an international network" that would help the school and he wanted LAUTECH to become a world-class institution (*The Nation*, 2013). Seen through the perspective of ordinary voters, Tinubu's outward-facing connections take on a very different meaning. Tinubu maintained a presence in Ajimobi's policies in various ways that raised suspicions about what the relationship to unknown third parties was, and what obligations it placed Ajimobi under. Moreover, Tinubu himself represented connections to a wider world of remote "international" connections that were unfathomable and beyond the horizons of Oyo state. Knowledge of international professional norms and practices was seen as a source of untransparency because through international exposure Tinubu knew how to be corrupt while looking clean. People explained that what differentiated Tinubu from the likes of other famously patrimonial godfathers was, as a journalist put it, "He's not to walk into the treasury and cart away funds." Tinubu's perceived adeptness at utilizing knowledge of international standards and systems—his success in cultivating the new international capitalist form of *olaju*—enabled him to engage in one sort of behavior while projecting an illusion of another.

As ubiquitous as the belief that Tinubu has merged state and personal interests, is the belief that no one would ever be able to prove it. One source pointed to a lapsed investigation into a tax-collection company in Lagos, "but there was no trail."[6] A senior journalist, working in the southwest for a major national newspaper said that their investigations had shown that Tinubu had a hand in government contracts but "on paper you will not find any trace … rather than employing impunities like the People's Democratic Party (PDP) would do, they must design a clever way of approaching some of these things."[7] According to this interpretation, a familiarity with international norms of good governance, indeed the knowledge of how to conform to international standards of transparency, enabled Tinubu and others southwestern governors to engage in untransparent behavior.

Commentators, political opponents, and gossip websites promote conspiracy theories that link Tinubu's political domination of the southwest to his business "empire" (Okpi, 2014). Society-NowNG.com (2011) claimed that any governor under his patronage must enter a "legal but intricate business arrangement with the party leader's vehicle of commerce—directly or indirectly—to help recoup expended resources and make gains." Another article posted on Pointblank News and widely reposted, specifically links those companies involved in Lagos public–private partnerships, such as Alpha Beta Consulting and Lekki Concession Company, to Tinubu's status as "the emerging dictator and emperor of the south west" (Nkordeh, 2012).

As discussed above in relation to cabals, the concept of transparency in people is often expressed in idioms of a superficial surface impression obscuring a malevolent reality of unseen actors, connections, and loyalties. This same metaphorical structure can be seen in conspiracy theories about Bola Tinubu. One article on Point Blank News contrasts "the rise of another seemingly righteous leader, General Buhari"—that is, the benevolent surface image—with what it claims is the hidden real reason for Buhari's rise, "criminal activity engaged in by one Mr. Bola Ahmed Tinubu" (Kayode, 2015). While his connections to international networks are celebrated by his allies (as in the LAUTECH example above), a common trope in conspiracy theories about him is that Tinubu's origins and identity are not transparent. Articles accuse him of using fake names (*News of the People*, 2012). This implies that he engages in fraudulent behavior, but more importantly in the context of legitimate leadership in Yorubaland, places him outside of a traceable ancestral lineage. Similarly, the accusation that Tinubu oversees a conspiracy to use superficially legal companies to construct shady networks replicates this structure of misleading and untransparent connections.

Some feared that Ajimobi's major infrastructure projects were being undertaken as a way of building up the economic base of his party, the All Progressive's Congress, with only secondary consideration given to their actual benefits for development. A journalist articulated a sentiment that I had heard alluded to numerous times in my research: "He [Tinubu] makes some contractors front for him in state projects ... and that's why they [the APC governors] embarked on many of these projects."[8] The suggestion was that governors in the southwest undertook big infrastructure projects because they created business opportunities for Tinubu's companies. A lawyer who worked with local business elites complained that "APC central working committee is saying to all the southwestern governors, you need to have contracts and give them to us, or give these companies contracts, so they can build up some money."[9] The selection of contractors for state government projects in Oyo contravened the value of transparency in people.

5.2 | Public–private partnerships, foreign contractors, and mistrust

The accusation that Ajimobi's government was hiring Lagos-based and foreign companies over Oyo-based ones was a hot political topic throughout the governor's first term and into the election. Ajimobi was keen to publicize his success at initiating investment deals with foreign countries, such as the prospect of agriculture, trade, and investment with South Africa ("Oyo to Partner South Africa—Ajimobi," 2015). Indeed, to overcome the problems of uncompleted projects, Ajimobi gave contracts to firms that both had a good track record of performance elsewhere and substantial financial resources of their own, so that they were not liable to delay the project should government funding be interrupted.

However, these criteria of having a track record and independent financial resources de facto ruled out many local contracting firms that had less capital than competitors from Lagos or abroad and had no claim to a world class track record. An example is the contracts given out for infrastructure and urban renewal. The state government strategically favored companies with better access to finance, which in turn could have disadvantaged firms that did not have a national or regional reach.

The case of Apete Bridge is an example of how the instability of government income with falling oil revenues favored larger contractors with access to their own finance. In 2012, floods destroyed Apete Bridge in Ibadan and the state government awarded the contract for the rebuilding to an "indigenous company." However, the original contractor lacked capacity for the complex engineering project, and the project was passed on to another contractor. In press reports, the attorney general explained what happened next. When revenue fell suddenly in the second half of 2014, the government "told the contractor to seek fund for the project while we provide the collateral" (Atoyebi, 2014). By January 2015, the choice to partner only with companies who could afford to be paid 30% up front and the rest on completion had effectively become state policy. Ajimobi referred to it as "financial engineering" and notes the "the local contractors cannot finance road projects" (Oderemi & Alao, 2015).[10]

The case study of the Oyo state government's announcement that they would build a light rail line in Ibadan in 2015 reflects the hegemonic role of Chinese companies in infrastructure investment in Nigeria (Lawal, 2015).[11] Industry commentators note that there is a lack of capacity among Nigerian firms to take on similar projects, not in terms of the actual construction and engineering but in terms of the legal expertise needed to navigate the complex legal structures associated with PPPs (Dowden, 2013, p. 25). Therefore, transport and infrastructure PPPs represent a major area of state government economic policy where forms of abstract knowledge serve as a barrier to the participation of local firms in government contracts but also obscure the scrutiny of such, as they are beyond the comprehension of most local businesses. There was a belief that local companies keep the money in local circulation, whereas foreign investors would take government money back home with them, something some respondents termed "capital flight." This frustration was tempered by an acceptance that the benefits of a higher quality project could in theory outweigh the benefits of local contracting.[12] Nonetheless, local businesses felt that they were being locked out of government contracts, in favor of companies who were beyond the horizon of Oyo state transparency or accountability.

Someone who had worked for a high-profile Ibadan political family, including on business deals, explained his suspicion of Ajimobi's motives for partnering with Chinese companies:

> If a local company is seen as corrupt, the EFCC might go after them. But, if Ajimobi has done a corrupt dealing with a Chinese company, what are the EFCC going to do? They're not going to understand it; they're not going to be able to go after them. It's going to be difficult to discover what's going on, not to mention then trying to prosecute it.[13]

This section has explained the ways in which policies that embody transparency in data, and appropriate auditing, come into conflict with popular conceptions of transparency in people. The governor's relationship with his godfather Bola Tinubu in Lagos is shown to arouse suspicions by virtue to its implication of unknowable global networks. Therefore, as the governor oriented himself toward meeting internationally defined standards and working with foreign partners on key economic projects, he is seen as less transparent. Furthermore, there is a sense that Ajimobi and Tinubu have access to unfamiliar international forms of knowledge, which they manipulate to achieve the documentary requirements of transparency in data. This leads to concerns that such abstract knowledge can be used to obscure their social connections.

The popular suspicion of good governance reforms in Oyo state has wider implications for the study of transparency, governance, and public trust more generally. Practices that aimed at transparency in data via improved government effectiveness and financial sustainability, in fact undermined transparency in people. Together, these examples reveal that reforms aimed at mainstream conceptions of transparency may in fact lessen leaders' claims to transparency in the eyes of their constituents.

6 | CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF TRANSPARENCY IN PEOPLE IN NIGERIA AND BEYOND

In conclusion, politics in Nigeria provides a window on the puzzle of why greater transparency does not always lead to greater trust in government. Transparency is conceived of in multiple ways that at times come into conflict, thus helping to explain why practices apparently improving transparency as adherence to international best practice in certain political contexts lead instead to heightened suspicion. Most of the literature of transparency and trust, whether in public administration or development studies, focuses on different mechanisms and procedures to achieve transparency in data: putting documents online, expanded budgetary openness, and escalating auditing requirements. However, political contestation in Nigeria shows that these measures are insufficient to meet popular demands for a government that is knowable and visible. The social networks, relations, and obligations in which their leaders are embedded are vital components of what it means to bring the business of power into the open. Where data are provided in the absence of transparency in people, the existence of documents and data may be perceived as an intentionally misleading surface image obscuring the public's access to the real workings of power. The resulting levels of trust in government reflect the complex and contradictory interplay of these different conceptions of transparency. Practices that strengthen the state's grip on transparency in data may loosen its grips on other, equally important forms of transparency. Thus we can see that transparency and trust should not be expected to relate to each other in a linear way, because transparency itself is not linear but can be contradictory.

The conceptual distinction between transparency in data and in people makes a number of contributions to debates about the relationship between transparency and trust. First, the empirical material from Oyo state confirms the constructed and contextual nature of transparency, in line with insights from critical anthropologists that are increasingly gaining traction in public administration. This highlights the importance of assimilating these insights into the development studies good governance agenda. This points to the insufficiency of representational understandings of transparency that simply demand that "fuzzy" information to be made "clear" (Fox, 2007). Rather, it attests to the pitfalls of seeking to make government power transparent: There can be no communication that is "devoid of mystery inaccuracy and (mis)representation" (Christensen & Cheney, 2015, p. 70). Moreover, the insight that transparencies will always create "new opacities" (Christensen & Cheney, 2015, p. 70) is borne out in the disquiet around the role of Bola Tinubu and foreign contractors in Oyo state. By distinguishing between the value of transparency in data and transparency in people, it is possible to detail why certain forms of transparency create these "new opacities."

The leveraging of alternative conceptions of transparency by antiestablishment figures across the world demonstrates not only the conceptual but the political urgency of making sense of these new and hitherto unrecognized opacities. This article builds on Fenster's distinction between technocratic and populist transparency but differs from it in significant ways. Technocratic transparency largely overlaps with what I term transparency in data. While transparency in people shares similarities with populist transparency, it differs both conceptually and politically. Conceptually, populist transparency, in Fenster's usage, refers to a whole package of moral and affective claims that emerge specifically from the contemporary U.S. context. Transparency in people is defined more minimally as the value of making social network, relationships, and obligations legible. It is simply the core imperative that the government should be visible and knowable, but applied to the social relations of those in power. The value of transparency in people is generalized through the political culture of Nigeria. Rather than being wrapped up with an all-encompassing ideology as in the case of Trump's populist transparency, it is better thought of as an accepted norm of political culture in Nigeria. It is not uniquely channeled by populists: It is thus not a populist conception of transparency as much as a popular one.

Fenster's category of populist transparency can be understood as both a rejection of transparency in data and a desire for transparency in people. First, in its reliance on elevated forms of abstract communication, transparency in data is elitist insofar as these forms are seen as the reserved of the educated elite. Whether in the fear that Tinubu will use Chinese business records to outsmart anticorruption authorities, or that foreign companies are dominating business opportunities through mastery of legal jargon, the failure of transparency in data to inspire trust results from the sense that the associated practices are slick but not honest. Those who are excluded from these cosmopolitan networks see elites who appear to use their exposure to rig the game in their favor via "unethical if not technically illegal means" (Fenster, 2017, p. 174). Moreover, the ability to work the gap between unethical but not illegal was cast as resulting from their privileged access and exclusive control over to elite forms of transparency. In its extreme interpretations where transparency in data is seen as "talking grammar" writ large, it might appear that the occluding power of these transparency practices is not an unintended consequence, but their primary purpose.

Second, populist transparency relies on "notions of authenticity and honesty" (Fenster, 2017, p. 173). Where Fenster identifies Trump's seemingly unmediated direct forms of speech and willingness to be politically incorrect as signifiers of authenticity, transparency in people is the substantive basis of these claims to authenticity and honesty. Voters, whether in Nigeria or elsewhere, want to know who their leaders are, where they come from, and who they are connected to in order to trust them. In its extreme incarnation, conspiracy theories reflect popular attempts to make social networks legible in the absence of transparency in people. While this article has drawn from Nigerian case studies, the core concepts have global resonance. The conceptual framework set out above helps identify the failures of transparency that lead to the mistrust expressed in conspiracy theories and to explain the success of politicians who promise an alternative vision of transparency.

ENDNOTES

[1] For a description of methods, see the online Supporting Information.

[2] For an example, in his inaugural lecture at the University of Port Harcourt, Professor E. J. Alagoa described the risk of self-important lecturers "talking 'grammar' and making little sense." Such nonsense invites students to "return my 'grammar' in the end-of-semester answer scripts" (Alagoa, 1979, p. 1).

[3] Focus group with academics and political activists, Lagos, June 22, 2018.

[4] Political journalist at a major national newspaper, Ibadan, July 25, 2015.

[5] For instance, much of the debate around the impeachment of a preceding Oyo State Governor, Rashidi Ladoja, in 2006 was about the sins of "ingratitude" and how to negotiate political debts.

[6] Junior academic and political activist, Ibadan, January 5, 2015.

[7] Political journalist at a major national newspaper, Ibadan, July 25, 2015.

[8]Political journalist at a major national newspaper, Ibadan, July 25, 2015.

[9]Director of Ibadan-based legal practice, Ibadan, May 21, 2015.

[10]This was confirmed through interviews. Local investors who pitched projects to the governor were unable to fund the project themselves and faced interest rates of over 25% when they approached banks for funding.

[11]The biggest single investor is the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), which has been announced as the partner for Ibadan's forthcoming light rail system. CCECC is building a similar light rail line in Lagos. By 2015, CCECC, or its parent company the Chinese Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC), had been awarded contracts for a further seven major railway lines across Nigeria.

[12]Director of Ibadan-based legal practice, Ibadan, May 21, 2015.

[13]Former aide to major Ibadan political family, Ibadan, May 15, 2015.

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