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‘This Your Strike is Affecting Our Children’: A story of a host community’s intervention on the front line of university–workers disputes in southwest Nigeria.

Abstract

While it is common to regard the traditional actors such as the employers and their representatives, employees and their representatives, and the state as the main actors in industrial relations (IR), this on-the-frontline article shows that host communities (HCs) can be recognised as IR actors in their own right. This article illustrates that the interventions of HCs in IR can be independent – contrary to how HCs are characterised as subordinates to trade unions in community unionism literature. Through Biobaku’s accounts of the interventions of a university’s host community from the Yorùbá society of southwest Nigeria, this article offers empirical contributions to the literature of neo-pluralism and decolonisation of IR in the context of Global South, where formal and indigenous actors co-form the IR systems.

Key words: Employment relations, decolonisation, Global South, host community, industrial relations, neo-pluralism, society, strike, trade unions, Yorùbá.

Introduction

As a former British colony, the formal Industrial Relations (IR) system in Nigeria is western styled, formed of tripartite actors and industrial courts (Onabanjo and Chidi, 2018). Legal provisions such as the Trade Union Act 1973 and The Labour Act 2004 regulate the trade unions and employers as per employee's freedom of association and collective dispute processes. In the Nigerian university sector that forms the context of this article, industrial conflicts and strikes are common, sometimes lasting for months at a time (Wahab, 2018). In 2017 when this story was collected, a series of strike actions had been ongoing for 18 months at the university central to this story (*The University*) owing to unpaid salaries. Talks had broken down between unions and management, with some of the unions at *The University* taking *The University's* Governing Council (statutory employer) to court. While the case was on going, the governments of States A and B which co-owned *The University* dissolved the Governing Council and delayed reconstituting it. At this point in the crisis, the host community (HC) to *The University* decided to intervene.

The involvement of HCs in the affairs of government owned universities is a common phenomenon in Nigeria, this is against the backdrop of complex socio-political relationships between these universities and their HCs. In a multi-ethnic society such as Nigeria, government's decision to site a university within any community is usually influenced by ethnic and township-politics driven lobbying among rival towns and communities (Babarinde, 2022). Biobaku, is the leader of a local community group which champions the interests of the indigenes of the HC to *The University*. The HC is Biobaku's hometown. Through Biobaku's account, this article explores the interests and influence of HCs as actors in the industrial relations of organisations situated in their communities.

According to Bellemare (2000: 388), an IR actor's influence can be assessed along two dimensions: the instrumental dimension, which refers to the means by which an actor exerts a certain degree of influence on the system, and the outcome dimension, characterised by the goals and ends that the actor pursues. Biobaku's story outlines the actions taken by the HC and the outcomes which their interventions were

instrumental in achieving. According to Biobaku's narratives, actors and social institutions of the HC, albeit not recognised within the formal Nigerian labour regulatory environment, were involved in advising *The University's* management on how to solve the budget deficit problems. HC leaders also served as mediators that re-established communications between the unions, *The University's* management and the state governments, after negotiation talks had broken down. Though the role played by the HC in this story might be compared to the functions of bodies like the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Services (ACAS) in the UK, it should be noted that ACAS is state funded and forms part of the formal tripartite structure. However, unlike ACAS, the HC did not act from the position of neutrality, they exerted political pressure and lobbied the owner governments to restructure *The University's* proprietorship. The outcome of the HC's intervention was the unmistakable success of their political campaign to end the problematic co-proprietorship and funding arrangement between the two State governments, which the HC blamed for instigating the strikes. By November 2020, the two co-proprietors had succumbed to the HC's campaign. State A yielded full ownership of *The University* to State B. Although there remains some acrimony over salary arrears for the period before the change in ownership, since the new ownership arrangement, there have been no instances of delayed or unpaid wages at *The University*. The resulting sole-ownership has not only produced better funding for *The University* but has also removed the prospects of long spells of strikes and the adverse consequences of the same on the socio-economic life of the HC.

According to Ackers (2002), two-way dynamics exist between management of employment and society. The impact of employment management practices such as organisations' decision to downsize or to offshore production have consequences on livelihood in both the losing communities and the gaining communities (Chapain and Murie, 2008; Roemer and Haggerty, 2021; Sandeep and Ravishankar, 2018). While Biobaku's story adds industrial strikes to the list of workplace crises that impact negatively on HCs, this account also addresses the dearth of literature on how HCs address IR issues which affect them. Through the rather narrower lens of classical pluralism, HCs and other external actors have been traditionally excluded from IR conflict analysis. Clegg's (1960, 1975) classical pluralism unwittingly supports the exclusions of non-tripartite actors. In contrast, Biobaku's narrative shines a spotlight on

Ackers' (2002, 2007, 2011) neo-pluralism which constitutes sociological critiques of classical pluralism. This story shows that interest in and participation on the frontline of IR is not exclusive for the tripartite actors and their institutions. Ackers' (2002, 2007, 2011) neo-pluralism as a frame of reference accommodates a diversity of institutions and actors, meaning that it provides a powerful lens through which to analyse existing and emerging actors, particularly in the contexts of former British colonies and other Global South countries, where there is renaissance and involvement of indigenous actors and institutions in IR.

In management studies, independent voice and participation of HCs have been documented on a range of issues including corporate social responsibility, environmental protection, socioeconomic and infrastructural development concerns of the HCs (Mayes et al., 2014; Owen and Kemp, 2013; Wilson, 2022). In IR literature, participation of residential communities around major industries have been recorded on issues where workers' interests and those of the external communities converge (Barron, 2010; Beckwith, 1996; Benya, 2015; Naicker, 2016; Philips, 2017). Most of the existing accounts of HCs' and other external actors' participation in IR activities have been reported within the trade union-led social movement and community unionism literature (Clawson 2023; Holgate, 2015; Holgate and Wills, 2007; Wills, 1996, 2002, 2004; Wright, 2010). The predominant focus of community union literature has been on the nature and extent to which community engagement and interaction can further union interests, and in some cases, about the mutual interests of both the unions and the communities (Chidi and Shadare, 2011; Holgate, 2015; Osterman, 2006). However, accounts of independent IR interventions of HCs with no historic links to trade unions are limited, particularly in non-extractive service industries like the university sector. Biobaku's account contributes to filling this gap in the literature of IR by outlining the independent voices and interests of the local communities in IR matters.

The need to recognise and protect the independent voices and interests of external communities, including HCs within IR is crucial as the networks of social coalition between unions and external communities continue to wane, and the interests of external communities diverge from those of the unions (Chase, 2000; Holgate, 2015; Kelly and Heery, 1994). Although in this account, the HC is not

ideologically opposed to the unions, the divergence of interests and methods between the HC and worker's union in *The University* is evident. For example, the unions used strike action to pursue their interests, while the HC saw the strike as damaging to the socio-economic harmony and so sought to compromise the strike by facilitating the processing of final-year students' grades in private estates away from the campus. This action by the HC effectively undermined the picket lines.

Biobaku's narrative is from the southwest region of Nigeria, an area formerly colonised by the British. One of the long-term socio-political aspirations in the Global South is the decolonisation of institutions (Dados and Connell, 2012). This concern is often expressed in the form of distrust towards national institutions which are delegitimised as relics of colonisation (Amoako and Lyon, 2014). The renaissance and intervention of the indigenous HC represents decolonisation of the IR space in Nigeria and serves as a marker of IR in the Global South. Cultural and normative values such as ethno-social affiliation and communitarianism form the centre grounds of thought systems in Africa and most of the Global South communities (Kamoche and Wood, 2023; Metz, 2013), this affirmation is supported by another case example from The Gambia, a former British colony and a Global South country, where managers abdicated the process of redundancy selection to community leaders during an institutional reform exercise (Khan and Ackers, 2004).

The University's HC is a Yorùbá community. The normative roles of the elders and senior citizens within Yorùbá community charge them to intervene wherever there is conflict (Adeboye, 2007; Bascom, 1942; Fayemi, 2009; Lloyd, 1960). The involvement of the king and elders of the HC on the frontline of IR of *The University* as narrated by Biobaku is explained by the imperatives of Yorùbá kinship and kingship, which regard *The University* as an extension of the remits of the elders and the king of the community (Munoz 1977; Oladumiye and Adiji, 2014). Yorùbá communities demonstrate strong kinship affinity to their hometowns and ancestry (Bascom, 1942). Kinship-inspired activism, which sought to protect hometown's interests against the impacts of the union's strike is evident in Biobaku's account. The legitimacy of the interventions of the HC's actors and their socio-cultural institutions is grounded in the political contexts of Nigerian regional politics. Nigeria is a federation of states, universities owned by state governments operate in more ethno-cultural homogeneous

geopolitical contexts than universities owned by the federal government. *The University* was co-owned by two states from the predominantly ethnic Yorùbá southwest Nigeria. This ownership arrangement provided the structural background against which the HC expressed their agency.

Notes on methods

The protagonist, pseudonymised as Biobaku, is the leader of the local body which represents indigenes of *The University's* HC. A and B are pseudonyms for the two state governments that co-owned *The University* in 2017. The discovery of this story was facilitated by a contact within the Student Union of *The University*. Biobaku's interview was conducted partly in English and Yorùbá, one of the authors who lived and worked in the region for 30 years translated the transcript from Yorùbá into English. The interpretation and application of Yorùbá culture in our introduction to Biobaku's story is corroborated by accounts of anthropologists like Bascom (1942) and Adeoye (2007). Between December 2022 and June 2024, six union representatives were contacted, they validated our findings that since the restructuring, which was instigated by the HC's campaign, there had been no unpaid-salary related strike actions at *The University*.

Implications of the article for future research

Biobaku's account signals two key directions for future research. First, this article reveals the intervention of HCs as examples of indigenous actors' involvement on the frontline of an industrial dispute. Variations in sociocultural institutions across the world present opportunities for interrogating leading IR theoretical concepts within various local sociocultural contexts, particularly as most of the existing theories have been developed against the backdrops of the industrial ecosystems of the Global North. Second, the empirical evidence for this article was collected from a public sector institution, in which intervention from societal actors due to their sensitive and political nature may be expected to carry a good deal of weight. Inquiry into trends and outcomes of HCs' involvement across private sector

industries of the Global South is recommended, with the view to ascertaining the nature and extent of HCs' influence in the latter.

Biobaku's story

I am the chair for the national association of indigenes from the five council areas under the municipality of the [host] community.

The compelling case for intervention

The community I lead decided to intervene in the industrial relations disputes that have engulfed the city's university. A Yorùbá adage says '*agba kiii wa loja ki ori omo titun wo/ an elder cannot be present in the market and watch the head of a child uncomfortably placed while the child is asleep on the mother's back*'. We would not be good elders if we watch the head of *The University* come to harms. Another Yorùbá adage says that, even when our eyes are full of sleep, we must keep them watchful. We must not just look on and watch any harm come to the community.

The first of the harms that we worry would come to our society is the current plight of our children who are studying at *The University*. Second, the economy of our town has been growing since *The University* was sited in our community. However, whenever *The University* is on holiday or on strike, this brings setbacks to the local economy, which thrives on the activities of *The University*. This strike does not only bring setbacks to our local economy; the education of our children who study at *The University* also stalls. Some of them should have completed their studies two years ago. The conflicts between *The University* and the workers have added two years to their study period – we do not even know when they will complete their studies. Many of the students came to us when the conflicts became complicated because the last two sets that graduated and got called up for the mandatory national service were only able to graduate as a result of our intervention.

The host community's analysis of the problem

The current strike problem began with workers who want to collect their rights from their employer, as *The University* is owing them salaries. Though we do not have the financial power to pay the salaries, we can help in other ways. We can advise them. The matter of *The University* is like a goat that has two owners: If the first owner has money, the goat will be fed. If the second owner does not have money, the second owner would not feed the goat. What would happen to the goat? The goat will starve to death. *The University* has two fathers: The first father says he does not have money; the second father, too, insists that he does not have money. We demanded that one of the fathers (proprietors) hand over *The University* to the other. They should not let *The University* become a fatherless child (i.e. *they should* let one proprietor government stand down). State A's government refused to hand over *The University*, and State B's government also refused to hand it over. Both of them are not fully responsible in terms of their financial commitments. When we last spoke to the two governments about *The University*, State A was owing 5.6 billion naira, while State B was owing less than 2 billion naira in subvention funds to *The University*.

Indigenes from both states study at *The University*. The two governments should consider this and find a solution to the financial problems. The town seeks a solution to this by appealing to the two governments to also consider full autonomy for *The University* if one government does not want the other to take full ownership. *The University* is more than capable of doing this. It is currently ranked high amongst state-owned universities in Africa.

In our assessment of the situation, management is responsible for this problem. Since 2013, State A's government has not paid any subvention grant to *The University*, but the management was secretive about this and shielding the government of State A. We believed that if they were open about this, the public and State B's government would have questioned them, and maybe the outcry would have made them pay up and prevent *The University* from being broke. The management has been using the internally generated revenue (IGR) to plug the gap for four years. State A does [sic]not budget for *The University*. The year 2012 was the last [time] State A released any subvention to *The University*. We

told the management, “You do not run an institution like this; eventually, it will affect the system and the life of the students that are there”.

The vice chancellor assured us that there will be amendments, but how were they going to rectify the damage that has been done? They reassured us that there would be no problems and that they will depend more on the IGR. For how long? What if there is a drop in the IGR, or what if State B also begins to withhold the subvention fund? They could not answer us.

The host community’s intervention

After about three months, the university could no longer pay its bills, including the salaries of the staff, and the workers kicked off (*their strike*). We cannot expect staff to work without being paid. From the first month till the fifth month, *The University* could not come to us to pacify the workers. That was when we wrote to the governors of the two governments. As the main campus is located in State B, we implored them to look for a way to rescue *The University* from the abyss and to think about the future of the students in the school. We begged them to save the reputation of the school.

After writing to State B, we made a face-to-face visit to the office of the state governor. State B’s governor told us he would talk to the governor of State A, but we should go to talk to the workers as well. We requested a meeting with the main unions on the campus, including the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). We asked them what they wanted and what compromise they were prepared to offer. The workers said that the 11 months’ salary being owed must be paid up, and there will be stability in the institution. The ASUU, on their part, alleged that there was no pension scheme for *The University* staff. So, we decided we would take their stories to the newly convened university council. Along the line, we heard that both governments were planning to privatise *The University* to be sold for 90 billion naira. The law that set up *The University* was not like this; the university should have been retained by State B when both A and B were created from an existing state. We, as the people of the town where the university is headquartered, belong to State B. We can take on State B in terms of our activism in support of *The University*.

We went yesterday; we left there [meeting with the newly convened university council] around 4.30 pm. We were the ones who called for the meeting; we wanted to know what their plan was for *The University*. We met the chairman. They told us that as soon as an audit is done, after the report, the two governments will then know where they will be spending their money, but the auditor says the full report will take up to six months. Six months plus three years already spent by the students at home? An academic year is different from a calendar year, meaning the problem has been for over two years, so we told the council not to wait for the full audit report: “It is better you adopt the short-term solution; this is what we want you to recommend to the two governments so that the students could come back to continue their studies here”.

We advised the governing council not to meet the two states separately and asked them [the states] the direction that they want the council to go. We also implored the new appointees to *The University* council not to damage their individual names because they are writing history. If they are the governing council, and *The University* becomes more damaged under their watch, they will not only damage the reputation of *The University* but also their individual names.

We practically went to beg the employees who work at *The University* pleading with them to end the strike. We told them, “This your strike is affecting our children who are due to be called up for the national service”. We went to plead with the registrar of *The University*. The registrar said he is not from the community. We pleaded with him in the name of God. “Please do not let this situation disintegrate further.” We pointed out that not all students who are being delayed from going on national service are the HC’s indigenes. We insisted that all the students who study in our city’ university are all our children, irrespective of the towns where they may have come from.

Eventually, the last time around, the registrar yielded to our plea. He allowed one of his aides to process the names of students who were being delayed from being called up for the national service by the strikes. The registrar permitted the aide to do the work at his house to circumvent the picket lines of the

striking workers. He did it for us. That was how some of the students could graduate and go for the national service in Batch 1 and Batch 2.

So, these are some of the roles that we play as a community. When things are spiralling out of control, we as elders must intervene. Our adage says, 'If a child stumbles, the child would look forward to the elders; if an adult stumbles, the adult must look back to the young', meaning we must take stock of what is going on in our society. The quality of education in this country is falling, and we must make sure we do something about the damage that strikes do to the education of our children.

Barriers to the community's intervention

None of the people we have met on *The University*'s crisis voiced any opposition to our involvement. We sensed that the two governments were irritated that we did. We have held a solidarity march for *The University*. Our 80-year-old king was part of the walk. Parents who have children in *The University* joined the march. We marched from the town to *The University* campus; there was good press coverage. Our involvement in *The University* dates back to the period it was conceived. If you go to *The University* campus today, most of the infrastructure was donated by the community people. We, as the indigenous people, acquired the land and built *The University*. We continue to lobby for funds for *The University* through many offices held by indigenes of the town across the nation.

We know that by law, the government should not be involved. We, too, should not be involved, but, by culture, we are obliged to intervene. We know that parties should approach the court when there are issues on the campus. Some unions took the governing council to court. The government that appointed the council pressured them to withdraw the case, saying it is insubordination for them to sue the government. However, our culture expects that we the elders should be involved when something is going wrong in the society. And if they think they can get away with disregarding the involvement of elders like the king of this city, they will be destroyed. A child who disobeys his parent will perish. It is not the consequence according to the law; it is a natural consequence. '*Omo ti obi ba nbawi ti o ba nwarun ki, yio parun ni*/A child that refuses the chastisement of the parent will be destroyed by his own disobedience'.

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