



PRINT & PIXELS

With All Due Respect

MARTHA BAYLES



A lesson from Nigeria, on balancing the blessings of modernity and the celebration of an ancestral past.

On July 10, 2017, the Ooni of Ife, one of Nigeria’s many ceremonial monarchs, boarded a Delta flight from Lagos to Ontario. Born Adeyeye Enitan Oguwusi, the Ooni (also known as Arole Oduduwa, Ooni Ile Ife, and King Ojaja II) is the cultural and spiritual ruler of the Yoruba people, the second largest ethnic group in Nigeria. For such a person, boarding a commercial flight amounts to making a public appearance, so the Ooni was accompanied by several male attendants, one of whom walked through the aisle dressed in a white robe and leopard skin, rattling a pair of *shekere*, or West African maracas, presumably to mark the king’s approach.

Caught on a passenger’s smartphone, a [video of the *shekere*-bearer](#) went viral on YouTube with 61K views, and was quickly taken up by the writing staff of “The Other News,” a satirical news program produced in Lagos for Channels Television, an English-language news outlet with a sizable national audience. Now poised to begin a second season, “The Other News” was launched with the help of a Brooklyn-based NGO called [Pilot Media Initiatives \(PMI\)](#), which seeks to transplant the format of *The Daily Show* into foreign soil. (Their website boasts of programs in Nigeria, Macedonia, and Kyrgyzstan.)

The *New Yorker* [recently ran an article](#) about “The Other News,” in which the reporter, Adrian Chen, witnesses the show’s mostly youthful writers and producers debating how best to make use of the video. As Chen describes it, they were “trying to figure out how to make fun of a king.” But to judge by some of the comments, they were also trying to figure out how *not* to make fun of a king.

In the make-fun camp was David Hundeyin, a 27-year-old Nigerian who has

studied in the UK and is a self-professed fan of the American TV show *South Park* (best described as *Charlie Hebdo* for libertarian adolescents). For Hundeyin, monarchs like the Ooni of Ife were “literally relics of the dead past in the modern world,” and the article says he urged his colleagues to “take a similarly no-holds-barred approach to Nigerian culture.” In the same camp was Ned Rice, an American and veteran writer for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, who reminded the group, “If you do a comedy show, you’re going to step on toes.”

In the don’t-make-fun camp were the two head writers, who by the *New Yorker’s* account did not really need to be reminded that comedy steps on toes. Looking at it from a Nigerian perspective, their concern was with *whose* toes:

Some of the other writers urged a more cautious approach. The Ooni is seen by some Yoruba as a descendant of Oduduwa, who was sent down by God to found the Yoruba kingdom. “Sometimes we need to go to the other side of the audience or other people’s culture and try to see how it’s going to look to that person,” Sodi Kurubo, one of the two head writers, said. Nkechi Nwabudike, the other head writer, pointed out that the host of “The Other News” was Igbo, another major ethnic group. “We have to be careful, because we have a host from the east, so we can’t really make fun of someone’s traditions,” she said.

Americans have mixed reactions to this cautious approach. On the one hand, our commitment to free expression tells us to throw all such caution to the winds. On the other, our investment in cultural diversity tells us to avoid offending the “Other.” Neither imperative is of much use when confronted with a spectacle as utterly unfamiliar as a dark-skinned African rattling a pair of beaded gourds on a wide-body jet. At this we are likely to laugh or cringe, because whatever the belief system supporting such behavior, some of us will judge it “a relic of the dead past,” while others will reject it as tainted with sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other up-to-date antiquated prejudices. Mostly, Americans will find it hard to imagine that such an atavistic figure could be living in the same “modern world” as we.

As it happens, there’s another way to react. After watching the video that went viral on YouTube with 61K views, take a look at [this other video](#), also on YouTube, that went semi-viral with 36K views. You will see a very different scene, one that would be instantly recognizable to any American. A handsome 42-year-old celebrity and his entourage get on a plane, but instead of sequestering himself in first class, the celebrity walks through the aisle greeting the other passengers, several of whom rise from their seats to see him better. A few passengers summon the courage to ask the celebrity for a selfie, and he complies in a manner both gracious and dignified, at one point agreeing to pose with a baby. As for the *shekere*-bearer, he engages in friendly banter with the Delta flight attendant, one of the few white faces on the aircraft.



What this second video reveals is not some bizarre disconnect between the 21st century and darkest medieval Africa, but a scene that is completely normal in many parts of the world: men and women going about their 21st-century business while also seeking to preserve some favored strands of their ancestral past. In Nigeria, many of those strands are connected to the monarchs. I am not in a position to vouch for the Ooni of Ife, whose marital life seems to make

headlines and whose symbolic authority is wielded in a divided society rife with corruption. But I can report that before being selected from a field of 21 candidates for the throne, the Ooni was a certified accountant and bank director who among other real estate ventures founded a beach resort in Lagos.

I can also report that, on a recent visit to Nigeria, I witnessed first-hand a similar process of trying to find the sweet spot, or golden mean, between tradition and modernity. The occasion was a training session for journalists held in Abuja, the capital, by the Hausa-language service of the Voice of America (VOA). The trainer was a stout, jovial fellow from the Igbo ethnic group, who are concentrated in the southeast and have very different traditions, not to mention religious beliefs, from both the Yoruba, who are concentrated in the southwest, and the Hausa-speaking Muslims who live in the north. In 1967 the Igbo tried to secede from Nigeria, resulting in the devastating Biafran civil war that left them defeated and disadvantaged under a national government typically dominated by northerners, who also dominate the military.

The majority of men and women participating in the training session were Muslims from the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups, and with their traditional dress and rather severe manner, they presented a striking contrast to the trainer. For the first hour or so, the trainer tried to draw them out but did not appear to be having much luck. But then he introduced a topic that caused the participants to drop their reserve and engage in a lively, at times passionate debate. The topic was not something that struck me as significant at the time: the use of honorific titles by journalists interviewing important people, including government officials, religious leaders, and monarchs. But in retrospect I can see my mistake.

Like the Ooni of Ife, the monarchs (called emirs) of northern Nigeria have considerable moral, cultural, and spiritual authority over large populations. And some of them are well known outside Nigeria. For example, before donning the ceremonial robes of his present office, the Emir Muhammad Sanusi II of Kano State was a respected economist and head of the Nigerian national bank. (You can see him in his previous, pinstriped incarnation in [this TEDx talk](#) from 2013.) In addition, Emir Sanusi was, and is, a courageous opponent of corruption, and his efforts to bring kleptocrats to justice have earned him wide esteem both inside Nigeria and around the world.

Now, I'd been calling this man "Emir Sanusi," but if I were a Hausa-speaking journalist in northern Nigeria, I might feel compelled to call him something like "Your Highness, Alhaji Muhammad Sanusi II, Emir of Kano." Based on the comments of the participants in the training session, I would probably be expected to use that full title every time I asked him a question. I would also, like the journalists, be loath to show disrespect by unilaterally using what might in that cultural context be a nickname or worse. Hence the spirited debate, in which several participants and the trainer argued against using full honorifics, especially for corrupt politicians whom they did not personally respect. As one put it, "We are journalists, not supplicants. We are not paying tribute to these powerful people but holding them to account in the name of the people they are supposed to be serving."

At the same time, though, there were no *South Park* fans in that training session, urging a no-holds-barred approach that would not stop at dispensing with honorifics but go all the way toward being as outrageous as possible. Nor were there any Jon Stewart fans, urging the VOA Hausa-language service to adopt the *Daily Show* style of satirical and irreverent news reporting. That style is very popular with Western-oriented viewers around the world, which is why PMI, the American NGO, is working with an English-language TV channel in Nigeria. And [according to Dillon Case](#), one of the co-founders of PMI, it is also "a proven tool for democratic engagement."

But is it? Writing about the "Daily Show' alums" who dominate late-night comedy in the Trump era, [Ross Douthat suggests](#) that "to flip from Stephen Colbert's winsome liberalism to Seth Meyers's class-clown liberalism to [Samantha] Bee's bluestocking feminism to John Oliver's and Trevor Noah's

lectures on American benightedness is to enter an echo chamber from which the imagination struggles to escape.” And that was before Trump was elected. In 2018 *The Daily Show* and its fellow late-night rant-fests have abandoned any attempt to elicit laughter in the ranks of their political opponents. This has never been easy, of course, but satire benefits greatly from the attempt, because the funniest comedians are those who can laugh at themselves. In America today, that seems a lost art.

In case you were wondering, the writers for “The Other News” did manage to find the golden mean: Rather than step on the toes of the Ooni of Ife, they decided to use the video of the *shekere*-bearer to poke fun at all those corrupt politicians who think they’re too good to fly in the same commercial plane with ordinary Nigerians, and instead spend their ill-gotten gains on private jets. And in a similar manner, the journalists at the training session in Abuja found their golden mean by agreeing to use the full honorific when first addressing a highly placed interview subject, but thereafter to shorten it in a suitable manner. In other words, they hoped to demonstrate their seriousness as reporters by maintaining an appropriate degree of deference while at the same time asking the hard questions.

In both cases, the individuals involved were able to find the sweet spot between trashing their inherited customs in the name of progress, and ossifying them in the name of ancestral memory. In many such settings, a major obstacle to finding that sweet spot are the attitudes that we Americans bring to the table. Whether those attitudes come from the liberationist Left or the libertarian Right, they too often blind us to the fact that most human beings on the planet want to preserve their religious and cultural traditions while also enjoying the blessings of modernity.

Published on: February 5, 2018

Martha Bayles teaches humanities at Boston College, is author of *Through a Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America's Image Abroad* (Yale 2014), is a visiting fellow at the Hudson Institute, and a regular columnist for TAI.

