# On Mechanics and the Mechanisms of Power

Salawu Olajide
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In Sefi Atta's short story, *Miracle Worker*, a mechanic's wife discovers a vision of the Virgin Mary on the oil-covered windscreen of an abandoned Peugeot 405 on her husband's lot. This spectacle, which she rushes to the nearby bus stop to declare, draws a motley crowd that day, and a feverish throng of miracle-seekers the next. They kneel in the mud of a Lagos street, praying for signs and asking for wonders, an answer from heaven, a flash of light, anything at all. They want wealth, workplace promotion, legs that aid locomotion, sight for eyes filmed over by infirmity, and by the power of a rain-written vision, they invoke fetuses into scorned wombs.

Anyone living in Nigeria knows that a mechanic's lot, generally called a mechanic site, is hardly the place to seek miracles. Oil-ridden and junk-covered, nothing grows there; not grass, not shrubs, and definitely not your riches. The mechanics, garments and hands blackened by grime and oil, are lords of their lot, the only beneficiaries of this urban, scrap-dotted, desert. It blesses them as it scorns others; where it troubles others, it tranquilises them. While the customer appraises her vehicle pensively, awaiting his verdict with bated breath, the mechanic makes raunchy jokes with his colleagues and with the coy women who come around to sell them things—strong drinks, food, or sexual enhancers—and shuffles on his back beneath the bellies of cars. Hardly gracefully, you might say, yet you're the one leaving with a lot less naira, sullenly hunched at the wheel of your newly repaired car, while he makes his way to a seller of assorted goat meat, decked out in dazzling lace and a gold necklace so thin it disappears into the folds of his neck. Displeased and stressed, you are not graceful either.

Nothing grows on a mechanic site—this is largely true but not entirely so. Apart from the mechanics'

pockets, something else grows on a mechanic site. Let's call it The Tree, which is a tree. If a mechanic is having a slow day, or the site is having a slow day—these are two different things—you'd likely find him beneath The Tree, astride a long wooden bench, playing draughts, a bottle of 33 or Heineken sweating by his foot. Life, after all, is for the living. Occasionally, this might be *ayo olopon* or Ludo, but it usually is draught. The Tree, which is usually a dogonyaro tree or an almond tree, and less commonly a cashew tree, also provides shelter from the tropical sun while the mechanic eats his lunch, which may be rice and a lot of meat, or soaked garri with fried fish. The vendors of such victuals are not in short supply around mechanic sites. If you wanted to make a living, you camped your tent with those who knew how to enjoy life.

Perhaps the only working-class group as dexterous as mechanics at enjoying life is the meat sellers, not the ones hawking in bowls, but the cow-killers, the ones who speak rapid Yoruba to the northern cow traders and from whom the bowl-sellers buy. A close second would be commercial drivers, the fire-loined lions of our highways who sow their seeds—veritable testaments of where and whom they have passed through—in small towns and in big cities around the country. Up Road, Up National. This essay, however, in the spirit of keeping fidelity to agenda, will be about mechanics —a class of people embodying a certain deftness of spirit, a specific commutability of aura, glaringly absent in any other group of Nigerians.

Lagos, the country's commercial capital is a place as good as any to start. An overzealous past governor of the state, at the height of his social reforms, had his lawmen clean out the city of 'mad people,' or scavengers of refuse dumps who sometimes set up shop on road dividers, looking confused or napping indifferently as the din of traffic roils above their dreams. I don't recall much being said about the dumps where these people, some of whom were merely homeless and destitute folk, hung around, but the spectacle of their purgation was redolent of those videos one occasionally comes across while endlessly scrolling on the Internet—of young men trying to catch stray dogs with long-handled nets, for the purpose of vaccination or *removal*. It bears mentioning that this erstwhile governor, over the course of his political career, has fed Nigerians with quite some material, not by saying, as most politicians are wont to do, but by being and doing (a few years ago, he was the subject of derisive tweets for picking up a camera from the site of a government-sanctioned massacre with a hankie-wrapped hand. This fine, distinguished gentleman of commendable detective qualities eschews the tampering of evidence).

An anecdote began to circulate at the height of this man's reforms, of a mechanic going about his business, perhaps on his way to purchase engine oil or replace a faulty spark plug, when he fell into the hands our able governor's lunatic-lassoing squad, who promptly trussed him up and tossed him into a truck. The doctor of automobiles, now designated a common madman, had been marked for removal, indicted by nothing but the garments of his trade. The teachers of our government-owned primary school, passionate about the impartation of knowledge, both moral and scholarly, would relate this story to us to drive home a point: *dress how you want to be addressed*. In other words: dress like a madman, get treated like a madman.

I have always found it odd that this was the sole takeaway from this very likely apocryphal story. In no recorded instance have mechanics been treated like (which many car-owning Nigerians would agree they are) because of how they dress. They segue from their auto parts runs into banks sometimes to fix issues with their account or to deposit cash (they are money men, after all) and no one bats an eyelid. And mechanics, one sees, don't dress like that, they are just *that*, at least at that specific point in time. I suspect that that anecdote more than anything reflects the collective Nigerian disposition to the destitute and mentally unwell—derision. But it further establishes two things.

First, the dishonesty inherent in much of our national discourse, a dishonesty that has only

ballooned to fit the ever-widening avenues of that discourse. Classroom discourse gets classroom-sized dishonesty and Twitter discourse gets Twitter-sized dishonesty; a vice perfectly adapted to its ever-adapting bearers, a foible as malleable as its victims are. Did anyone reckon that a mechanic, momentarily stopped in his work by an unavailable part of machinery, would take off his begrimed work clothes, put on clean replacements on his begrimed body and set off the auto parts market? Or did he need to get into a secluded part of his lot, crouch away from prying eyes, and have a quick scrub-down?

The second is that the mechanic is declared, albeit unintentionally, as a paragon of transformation, or even disguise. So steeped is he in his vocation that he variegates into something radically different from what he actually is; by being himself, he becomes, the very essence of his person transformed by what he does, down to the nailbeds.

The mechanic's ability to be this (blackened fingers and sand-crusted back) while at work and to be that (dazzling lace and razor-thin chain) while going home, establishes him as one embodying that replaceability of aura absent in most other working-class Nigerians. A policeman is a policeman even when off duty, unarmed, and in plain clothes (I said more words than necessary to one once and I was soon saying my sorries and abegs). A judge is always a judge, her aura self-announcing and ever immutable. A soldier, itching to be known, wears a camouflage fatigue beneath his shirt, his evidence as a dealer of death and suffering visible beneath his collar; don't push me to make you suffer, his demeanour announces. The mechanic, that unwitting master of disguise, outshines them all, darkened as he is by the innards of the metallic beasts beneath whom he spends his days.

Before 1999, when soldiers rode this country roughshod, made mourners of many a mother—they still do, but with slightly less institutional gusto—and activism still meant something, the fire of resistance roared in our universities. The current reality might make this hard to believe, and that's completely understandable. Did not the Vice Chancellor of one of the first-generation universities invite our first lady, a woman who on national television exhorted graduates to fry akara for a living, for the conferment of an honorary degree and the commissioning of new gates? Anyway, back when activism still meant something and the fire of resistance roared and our dictator—Abacha? Babangida? Who was it?—was high as hell on being the Big Man at the top of Things, Obafemi Awolowo University (formerly the University of Ife, a nomenclature change I still begrudge) was the place to be. It was an institution rife with crises in those tumultuous years and it threw up characters equal to the chaos of Things, namely student activists who organised rallies and protested both the despotic military government and their own highhanded university of administrators who were, more often than not, in cahoots with the Big Man.

At the peak of one of these crises, the university authorities invited the police and members of the armed forces onto campus to quell an impending protest that had been gathering storm for days and have its principal masterminds arrested on sight. Were it any other university, this power show (to quote Fela Kuti) would have thrown ice water on morale and cowed the student body into docility and forced placidity, but apparently not Great Ife. On the due date, the crowd gathered as planned, but with the leaders of the movement absent, it remained a crowd and not a protest. The members of the security agencies, having been briefed and perhaps provided photographs for easy identification, were on the lookout for the rabble-rousers whose arrival the rabble awaited impatiently. They must have peered menacingly into the faces of passers-by, eager to impress their paymasters by enacting violence against young people whose crime was daring to demand better of a system that had failed them relentlessly since the country's independence. Passionate to do their cruel work, they dismissed across the roadblock anyone who did not look like whom they sought: lecturers, students, hawkers, including tattered, hapless mechanics who said they had been invited to the staff quarters to repair a professor's vehicle.

No sooner had the doctors of automobiles been let through that a roar erupted from the crowd. The doctors of automobiles, who were no doctors of automobiles at all but doctors of chaos, were on the dais pumping their fists into the air and invoking the insurmountable spirit of Aluta, while their hunters stood awestruck and helpless, unable to reach their targets now ensconced by a crowd thousands-strong.

The story goes that the student activists had borrowed the apparel of some neighbouring mechanics and made good their disguise. This story, whether completely true or mildly embellished, presents the truth of mechanics as people moving through the world unquestioned not just by reason of apparel or designation, but through collective social decision to simply not engage with them beyond the necessary, soiled as they are by their daily enmeshment with the machineries keeping our world functional. If you  If you didn't invite them and your machine wasn't urgently in need of their expertise, you simply let them pass you by as they hobbled on to the site of their dirty work.

That this sentiment has been ratified into a tacit social contract is not an exclusively Nigerian thing, even though it may be inextricably entangled with ideas of class and social mobility here than elsewhere. It is a fairly common trope in Hollywood action flicks to have characters infiltrate high-security buildings by taking on the disguise and subdued demeanour of maintenance personnel, the fixers of everything who are asked nothing. Why refer to fiction when reality is much closer and stranger? An October 2025 heist at The Louvre had robbers cart away historical jewels costing a paltry 88 million euros. A narrative emerged, slowly but surely, out of the ensuing fracas: the robbers, who slipped into the building as maintenance personnel—helmet, overall, and all—made their way down from the second floor using a truck-mounted furniture lift—and get this, also maintenance—strategically stationed by a window before disappearing into the city of love. It was 9:30 AM. Did this idea come from the movies? Or does the trope have its origins in a long-forgotten noir film inspired by a singular real-life incident now lost to time? Mechanics in Paris, if you will.

The power dynamics with which their world relates with them is one mechanics are well aware of, and one gets the sense that they are seldom bothered. People who do not acknowledge them on the street and in office parking lots come to their domain, cap in hand, bemoaning a troubling noise emerging from within their vehicles. *Oga Qudus, ẹ ba mi wo motor yi* is one I have heard. *Daddy Fatai, ẹ jọ ẹ ma help me* is also another one I have heard. The highhanded policeman is now in a realm where his bravado has been whittled down into entreaties; he now takes orders couched as suggestions. The snooty-nosed magistrate tiptoes around an arena where the only gavel to be heard is the panelbeater's hammer. There is a reversal of hierarchies as the previously unacknowledged is now supplicated.

Reveling in this peripeteia and harnessing the social arrangement for his benefit, the mechanic peppers his speech with 'sir,' 'daddy,' 'mummy.' These people have more education than he does, live on treelined streets—his only tree is The Tree—while he's cooped up with a wife and three children in a room where algae creeps up the outside walls, and he will give them the respect they want to hear, the respect which would facilitate his bread. He tells them what the replacement parts will cost, the price of each bumped up as needed, while his workmanship fee is kept minimal. *Mummy, it's because it's you.* Mummy, secure and made secure in her place on the social ladder, provides the money for repairs of *her* car to a chorus of *thank yous* and *God bless you mas*. She has an inkling that things cost less than she's been told but better that than visiting the market with her untrained eye and buying a substandard gearbox, the repercussions of which will be to the benefit of no one but the mechanic, that tattered angel who has now flown off, every beat of his wings keeping the world moving, one engine at a time.

Angel though he is, some people would allege that he and his ilk sometimes contract the services of un-angelic forces, if they do not outrightly condemn him as a demon himself. A neighbourhood I

lived in years ago had a mechanic whose business tanked because it was rumoured that if he put hands on your vehicle once, it became his to fix forever. No other mechanic would be able to *get* your car, no matter how knowledgeable that mechanic was. This was, as the commentary proffered, a supernatural business strategy to retain customers and keep himself perpetually fed. The sentiment that mechanics are predisposed to malevolent magic is quite a mainstream one. Ours is a superstitious society, after all. It is not uncommon to find out that one's mechanic or one's plumber has fortified himself against workplace competition and evil machinations through the use of medicine. The Pew Research Center puts the population of Nigerian Muslims at 56.1%, Christians at 43.4%, and adherents of traditional faith practices at 0.5%. These figures are congruent with the obtainable reality, but I am yet to find any credible data on the number of people who practise either of the imported religions and yet recourse to indigenous spiritual practices to ease the daily challenges of Nigerian life—a demographic that is not negligible by any means.

Most Nigerians believe in Jesus Christ and Allah, but will without much ado 'go home' upon encountering problems which defy their pastor or imam. By 'go home,' we mean seeking solutions outside of our professed faith, a quest which usually begins by returning to one's origin, the hometown. A family friend whose vehicle kept breaking down and needing unexplainable repairs every two weeks got fed up and went home, exhausted by how much the unending misfortune ate into his finances. This could not be ordinary, he concluded. He came back armed with a revelation (given to him by a babalawo) that his mechanic had bound his car in the spirit realm, and thus, the car was a source of worry to him so it could be a source of wealth to the mechanic. He changed mechanics after that, having been told that the mechanic was 'powerful' and could take his life if care was not taken. Of course, he is powerful; he is a mechanic.

Those who refuse to acknowledge the power of mechanics and foray into their domain are fated to suffer the consequences of indiscretion. Nigeria is the world's third-largest importer of used vehicles and the largest in Africa. Most cars plying our roads are on their second leg of life, their more efficient days having been spent on American and European highways. To get a Tokunbo—so called because they arrive from across the ocean—you go to a dealership with cash in hand, ready to drive your ride homeafter payment (mortgages are American nonsense, thank you very much). What I just described is what the uninitiated would do. The mark of initiation, however, would be going along with *your* mechanic, an expert who will, for a fee, ensure you do not drive home a rust-eaten vehicle, or one whose chassis will fall apart at a busy intersection. A car is a tool of power, and purchasing one is power play. This might explain why the whole arrangement is not unlike an ancient king and his wizard who casts a circle of protection around the throne, and whose counsel the king relies on lest the realm be thrown into chaos. A faulty gearbox acquired undetected is an ingredient for chaos, and marching to the point of sale without your wizard in tow lets the enemy know you are fruit ripe for the picking, one for whom a faulty gearbox will be fitting.

Once, shortly before our last general elections, I saw a procession of mechanics carrying campaign placards and pledging their collective support for one of the presidential candidates. This was in Ikeja, one of Lagos' most concentrated commercial hubs (everywhere in Lagos is a concentrated commercial hub, to be fair, but Ikeja is the seat of government and the state capital). Though these mechanics wore the begrimed, familiar raiment of their trade, I identified them as such because they wore knee-length coats with yellow highlights. The man from whose office window I saw the spectacle, said, "they have paid these people again," to which I said nothing.

I could not help but think that the mechanic, who generally went through the world unacknowledged, had now been recruited into an army hundreds strong, his humble garments of vocation discarded. A powerful man in the service of power, marching with his tribesmen under the full glare of a public who would not have spared him a glance were he alone. The sun is blazing and their faces are sweaty, but down the road they go, their sky-coloured robes flowing behind them.

Maybe tomorrow, they will be something else. Maybe tomorrow, this candidate for whom they've been paid to march would be president and his administration will receive nothing but the best of their ill-wishes. Maybe tomorrow, their work clothes would help militant students escape the clutches of the murderously powerful. But today, they are a host of angels singing, miracle workers with clouds beneath their every step.

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**Onyekachi Iloh** is a writer, poet, and visual artist whose work explores photography as documentation and the re-examination of sight. His honours include the *Quarterly West Prize* and the *Oxford Brookes Prize for Poetry*. He has also been an Oxbelly Fellow and a winner of the Sony World Photgraphy Awards. He has been published in *Wasafiri, Ake Review*, and elsewhere.

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