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# THE VICISSITUDES OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: ROLES OF THE POET

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&

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## Abstract

Overtime, juxtaposing poetry and democracy has come to feel more like an oxymoron. Yet the twosome is interconnected, with each having a profound influence on the other. In Nigeria, democracy has been a bumpy ride from its nascent stages to the present day. The vicissitudes that underlie the Nigerian political arena are observed and commented on by critics from different occupations. This paper explores some roles of poets in helping to shape Nigeria's democracy by articulating the voice of the people, nurturing civic values, bridging divides and fostering unity, and challenging authority and holding power accountable. This was achieved by highlighting relevant works of historical and contemporary poets such as Douglas Malloch, Gabriel Okara, Rome Aboh, Peace Longdet and Nathanael Noah. In the quest for true democracy, the voice of the poet in Nigeria is a force to reckon with. A new generation of Nigerian poets are rising to speak boldly or true democracy even as the older generation of poets relinquishes the reigns.

**Keywords:** Democracy, vicissitudes, roles of the poet

## Introduction

The vicissitudes of democracy refer to the difficulties, fluctuations, and changing fortunes of democratic systems of governance. Democracy, as a political system, is characterised by the participation of citizens in decision-making processes, protection of

individual rights and freedoms, and the rule of law. However, across countries, democracies have faced various challenges and experienced both progress and setback. Viewed from the dispiriting perspective, it may simply be the case that from ancient Athens in Greece, to Abuja in Nigeria, democracy remains an ideal that has never been achieved.

The challenges of democratic governance in Nigeria are reflected in the following questions: Why is Nigeria so poor despite its enormous human and natural resources? What are the constraints that keep Nigerians from becoming as prosperous, if not more, than those in the developed world? Are the problems of Nigeria unassailable? If Nigeria were a human being, he/she would be sixty-three years old as of the time of this writing. A 63-year old, given the right circumstances, would have accomplished a lot, and been well off in life. In fact, they should be retired from “active” service. Their children should be running the business they relinquished, or doing well in their own careers. Unfortunately, at 63 Nigeria’s democracy leaves so much to be desired. Coming to terms with the beauty of a democratic system of government in Nigeria is almost impossible.

If democracy is as in the cliché, “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” it suggests that the masses are the centre around which every element of governance revolves. The people reserve the power to elect those they want to lead them, and those elected bear the mandate to furnish, at least, the basic daily health, educational, economic, and safety needs of the people who elected them into office. Tactlessly however, the Nigerian democratic terrain is replete with corruption, electoral irregularities, weak institutions, ethnic and religious divisions, insecurity, and violence. For many years, the masses have groaned under the pathetic socio-economic woes that have bedevilled the country. People and groups of people of various occupations have spoken up against the menace – among them are poets. The relationship between poets and democracy is an intriguing

and a multifaceted one. Poets, with their profound ability to harness the power of words and evoke emotions, depict the essence of democracy at its core.

It is against this background that this article explores the vital roles that poets play in nourishing democratic values, promoting social change, and encapsulating the aspirations and struggles of an egalitarian society. By examining some historical and contemporary examples, we could appreciate the transformative impact of Nigerian poets in fostering the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice.

### Review of Related Literature

As democracy permeates the nations of the world, so have poets spoken for its benefits, and against its saboteurs in diverse places. Indeed, in most African nations, the dividend of democracy reflected by freedom, civil rights and good governance is less than adequate. Some western nations think their democracy to be superior to other nations due to perceived inadequacies in the “people’s participation in public management of the state” (Kramoko, 2013:106). Hence, Walt Whitman in the first preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855) asserted that “the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatives, nor in its ambassadors or authors... but always most in the common people” (Mark, 1973 in Kramoko, 2013: 110).

Wole Soyinka as a poet, playwright, and novelist is known for his “efforts to redress electoral fraud ...police and military abuse of civilians, and various forms of human rights abuses” (Okey, 2019:5). He, as if in tandem with Whitman, points to the place of the Nigerian masses as the galvanizers of democracy. According to Osundare (1994), as Soyinka witnessed “the hopes and promises of independence flagrantly squandered by a treacherous African power elite, the more vocal, more articulate his voice of courageous dissent.” He noised his discontent for both at home and abroad.

Tom (2020:145) reviewing Angifi Dladla's poems, refers to his works that speak for "the marginalized and explores the otherwise unmentioned dynamics of South Africa's political and social landscape." The two collections of poetry reviewed are, *The Girl Who Then Feared to Sleep* and *Lament for Kofifi Machu*. Angifi wrote during and post the South African apartheid regime when he spoke against oppression and espoused freedom within the official political environment of the day.

Mandela was not exactly a poet, yet many poets wrote about him. On his day of inauguration, Mandela read a poem by Ingrid Jonker titled, "The child who was shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga." Guarducci (2014:60) stated that, "In opting for this specific poet/poem, Mandela was celebrating both the end of past atrocities and the present democracy." In the poem, Ingrid decried a system of government, a kind of democracy that thrived on segregation (apartheid), and Mandela quoted from it to indicate a new form of democracy that was inclusive of all without prejudice to race, culture, and gender.

Gray (2021) examined Ben Okri's "The Incandescence of the Wind" first published in *An African Elegy* (1992) and republished in *Rise Like Lions* (2018). The poet wrote "against the tyranny of the national power impulse" (p.3). As Soyinka sheds more light to the background of the poem, he states that Ben Okri wrote during the "patently rigged elections" (p.7) of 1979 and 1983. Gray posits that the protest poem is not innocent but political, because it theorizes an alternative reality. It is transformative in the sense that puts the reality we know into doubt, envisioning a new nation. The ultimate purpose of protest is change.

### **Roles of the Poet: Articulating the voice of the people**

Poetry, as an art form, possesses a remarkable talent for elevating the voice of the people. Poets have long been recognised as proponents of democracy, using their craft to express the thoughts,

sentiments, and collective experiences of the masses (Timehin, 2021). From the political verses of Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka during the Civil War, to Nathanael Tanko Noah, and Peace Longdet's poignant verses in the present day Nigeria, poets have consistently championed marginalised voices, shedding light on societal injustices and inspiring a quest for democratic change. Longdet (2022, p.16) in "Hallowed gong," for instance, wrote

Hallowed gong makes a turbulent journey  
 Through the path of heterogeneous landscapes.  
 Lofty promises offered at the altar of power quest.  
 Isn't the dollar a naira and the black liquid far less then?

Isn't the change meeting our lofty dreams  
 of a republic where all lives matter?  
 Aren't we walking the landscapes  
 with our dreams of secured lives fulfilled?

The verses above sum up the sentiments of the average Nigerian rooted in their disappointment in the politicians who made flagrant promises before they were voted into power (say, in 2015). It is common knowledge that politicians would comb the nooks and crannies of the country to solicit support from the masses. During such campaigns, they promise the people sudden change from conditions of hardship to surreal bliss and security immediately after elections. And they often fail to deliver on their promises.

The poet used rhetorical questions in the stanzas above to point out the obvious failure of the politicians to fulfil their pre-election promises after 8 years in governance. Most Nigerians believe that the prior government could not deliver the dividends of democracy. The people seeking election assure the masses that if they are elected, they will, for instance, reduce the pump price of premium motor spirit (PMS - petrol) from an average of ₦92 (at the time) to ₦65 per litre. Alas! At

the time of this writing, the price of PMS keeps climbing up and currently sells at ₦626.70 per litre (NBS, 2023). The exchange rate that was ₦232.40 to a dollar in 2015, now trends at ₦824.494 to a dollar (CBN, 2023).

Indeed, it is as Noah (2023) in “A hope dashed,” laments in the following stanzas

Years have gone by,  
many days have flown past  
with their lavish promises  
of milk and honey,  
and nothing.

The religious bask in deceptions,  
no different from they which do not know better.  
So were the led made to lose the only heart left  
from many years of ghostly hopes.

Election years come and go as they up-end the hopes of the masses only to characteristically dash them later. Even the institutions of religion that should preach and sustain vibrant and pro-masses democratic tenets, have been inundated by clerics who perpetrate and perpetuate anti-masses political agenda. At first glance, the stanzas above may seem to be a vivid picture of the despicable condition of the Nigerian masses, it, however, echoes the concerns of Richard Nturu’s “Pauper” (Wajibu, 1998) who cranes their eyes “In all directions, in no direction!” wondering if it was worth the effort and time to grace the contemptible polling units.

### **Nurturing Civic Values**

Civic values are the principles and ideals that underpin a functioning and thriving society. They serve as moral compass for individuals, communities, and governments, shaping how people



engage with one another and contribute to the common good. Civic values are the foundation of a democratic society and promote harmony, cooperation, and social progress. Some of the key civic values include respect for diversity, active citizenship, integrity and ethics, and taking responsibility. These civic values collectively contribute to a resilient and inclusive social order where citizens work together to promote the betterment of their communities.

Democracy thrives on civic engagement and the cultivation of informed citizens – it is a system of values that serves the masses. Here also, the poet finds reason to call everyone to civility. Douglas Malloch (1877-1938), in his poem, “Be the best of whatever you are,” admonishes,

If you can't be a pine on the top of the hill,  
be a scrub in the valley – but be  
the best little scrub by the side of the rill;  
be a bush if you can't be a tree.

If you can't be a bush be a bit of the grass,  
and some highway happier make;  
if you can't be a muskie then just be a bass –  
but the liveliest bass in the lake!

Malloch continuously tells his reader to be the best in whatever they could be. People must never be ashamed to practice the values that they hold dear which ensure the smooth running of society. Poets, with the power of their words, serves as a beacon of enlightenment, challenging conventional narratives and promoting critical thinking. Through their lyrical creations, poets spark reflection and dialogue, nurturing essential civic values such as empathy, tolerance, and respect. By urging individuals to question authority, re-evaluate societal norms, and imagine alternative possibilities, poets invigorate the democratic spirit and simulate the collective conscience of a nation.

### **Bridging divides and fostering unity**

In a diverse and complex democratic society, division and polarisation could hinder progress. Poetry, however, possesses the power to bridge these divides by forging emotional connections and fostering empathy. Poets act as cultural intermediaries, using vivid metaphors, rhythmic language, and powerful imagery to transcend divisive barriers and evoke shared humanity. For the poet of the modern, democracy exists not with elections, parties and politics, but in the highest forms of interaction among people, and their beliefs (Geertjan, 2010). By creating verses that resonate across different backgrounds, poets encourage dialogue, understanding, and solidarity, nurturing a robust democratic framework that embraces diversity and inclusivity.

People have learned the art of distancing from one another. The camaraderie that once existed among men, women, and children of different tribes and religion within and across societies in Nigeria has long been consigned. One could only feel sadness and be disillusioned with the way people behave towards each other these days. Instead of behaving openly and sincerely, they are hypocritical. Gabriel Okara addresses this issue in his poem, "Once upon a time" (Dubey, 2022) He laments that people pretend to have feelings that they do not have; they say things they do not mean. People disguise their basic selfishness to the detriment of communal unity. While this is the present reality, the voice in Okara's "Once upon a time" longs for a return to those times when there was no divide among Nigerians anywhere in Nigeria. The last two stanzas of the poem emphasise the poet's wish thus,

But believe me, son,  
I want to be what I used to be  
when I was like you. I want  
to unlearn all these muting things.

Most of all, I want to re-learn  
 how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror  
 shows only my teeth like a snake's bare fangs!

So show me, son,  
 How to laugh; show me how  
 I used to laugh and smile  
 Once upon a time when I was like you.

The manner in which people behave toward one another could build walls to divide them, or build bridges to connect them. Either ways, human relationships are affected. A father, who had also lost the ability to behave honestly towards others, now wishes to relearn the kind of sincerity that closes the gap between people and promotes unity in the society.

### **Challenging authority and holding power accountable**

At its core, democracy thrives when those in power are held accountable, and the mechanisms of justice are robustly safeguarded. Poets, often acting as fierce critics of authority, assume the role of truth-tellers within democratic societies. From the striking lines of David Diop's "Africa" to the unwavering commitment to national cause in John Pepper Clark's "The Lagos-Ibadan Road before Shagamu," poets have acted as guardians of democratic values, calling for transparency, accountability, and the protection of fundamental rights. In Rome Aboh's "A letter to the MP" (Orhero, 2017), the political class is particularly taken to task for their chicaneries and betrayal of the people's trust. He writes,

Dear MP,  
 When you cajoled us to vote for you,  
 was the last time we saw you.  
 Abandon the impotent words-acrobatic

in NASS [National Assembly].

Come and see our matchbox houses  
cramming us in on bedbug-infested mats.

Come and see our eczema-coated skin, our only linen.

Come and see our children's kwashiorkored bellies  
and mumps-fattened jaws.

Come and see rodents and reptiles besieging our hospitals,  
and bats ambushing our dilapidated classrooms.

To you we cast our votes,  
to you have we turned.

The dog does not eat its own kind.

The Nigerian masses are no longer strangers to the routine of politicians coming to them in the slums and ghettos to campaign for various offices, only to be neglected when the campaigners become "Honorable." It is against this backdrop that Aboh presents a picture of the living conditions of the electorate, which is of abject poverty, squalor, pestilence, and disease. The poet beseeches the MP (Member of Parliament) to come away from the luxuries he/she enjoys in Abuja, to "come and see" for themselves the suffering of their people.

Poetry gives voice to dissent and challenges the status quo, exposing systemic problems, corruption, and abuse of power. It speaks aloud as in the voice of Funso Aiyejina in "And so it came to pass," that,

...many seasons after the death of one Saviour  
... a new crop of saviours, armed with party programmes  
came cascading down our rivers of hope...

men we had taken as ... protectors of our secret recipes  
suddenly turned to crabs, carapace and all  
shedding shame like water from duck-backs  
...destroying hope...

Alluding to the concept of salvation in the Christian religion, Funso sees politicians as saviours of sorts; the masses often presuppose that political leaders wield the capabilities of relieving them of the debilitating effects of poverty. Unfortunately, political leaders become unabashedly brazen upon assumption to office. They, instead of protecting the interests of the people, destroy the hopes people had in them.

### Conclusion

The poet and democracy share an inseparable bond, as poets capture the spirit, ideals, and complexities of democratic societies. Armed with a lyrical arsenal, they articulate the voice of the people, nurture civic values; bridge divides, and challenge authority. The power of poetry to shape public discourse, inspire change, and hold power accountable underscores the indispensable contribution of poets to the vitality of the political system in which the supreme power lies in a body of citizens who can elect people to represent them. By acknowledging the profound impact of poets and their enduring commitment to democratic values, we can appreciate their role as visionary custodians of societal progress and transformation. The colonial generation of Nigerian poets is relinquishing the reigns of speaking against bad democratic nuance to post-colonial poets.

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