

THE
EMPOWERMENT
OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY
In a democracy:

NIGERIA
AND THE
UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA

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“Democracy” has been one of the most over defined terms in the second half of the twentieth century. This arises from the terms’ fitting I to the allegorical elephant, which six blind persons touched and each emerged with his/her own understanding of what an elephant was, but based only on the part of the elephant he or she touched. We adopt, therefore, for this paper Hook and Elshain’s definition of the concept as “a form of government in which the major decisions of government – or the direction of policy behind these decisions – rests directly or indirectly on the freely given consent of the majority of the adults governed” (in Bayer, et al, eds. 1997; 684).

Some of the ideals that democratic societies generally strive too uphold are an informed citizenry, and this entails the provision of fruitful education to equip the citizenry with the awareness to interrogate “the issues and problems of the times”. Besides, such a system must encourage the citizens to participate actively in the process of governance since, as John Stuart Mill has observed, “Let a person have nothing to do for his country, and he will not care for it”. Furthermore, any democratic society must provide for inputs into policies and decisions of the state by persons affected by such policies and decisions. And, also individual liberties must be guaranteed in a democracy.

Noble as these principles are, no modern state has yet attained the ideals in full. But the level each society has reached in its progression towards the ideals becomes an index for measuring its position on the cline from the point of autocratic systems to that of ideal democracy. These indexes are what mark today the character and behaviour of advanced societies from those of the relatively underdeveloped ones. But whether the relative distance from the ideals are of Asian or American, European or African societies, the

consequences of deviation from the principles for the citizenry always follow, essentially, the same patterns with only differences in degree. Thus, in a setting where the citizenry elects its own leaders with all the necessary democratic structures such as the executive, legislative, judiciary, a free press, etc, in place and unfettered, deviations from an ideal democratic framework would be lesser than what obtains in a state where the military hold sway without any inputs from those to be affected by government's policies and decisions. How poets as a segment of the intellectual class have continued to sting their societies awake to departures from, and government's responsibilities to, the people's democratic aspirations in the United States of America and the Federal Republic of Nigeria is the focus of this chapter.

Geographically, the U.S. and Nigeria are thousands of kilometers apart. Politically, one is an advanced modern democracy while the other is yet groping for a path. In demographic terms, one is a white-dominated society while the other is dominantly black. But the sensitive poets of these apparently different worlds speak with a common voice and wear a common colour of accountments in their battle for the lot of the silent majority of humankind.

Writers, generally, have been described as "the voice of vision in (their) own time" (Soyinka as cited in Osundare, 1966:60) that, if listened to, can ignite wholesome renewal in a country's social and political situation. This confidence in the role of writers is also portrayed by the American poet, Wilt Whitman, when he insists that writers of a given society would affect their politics "far more than the popular superficial suffrage" (cited in Ellman, 1976:xix). The Chilean displays. Similar confidence is displayed by the Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, when he asserts that History has proven the annihilating power of poetry" (1979: 2). Also in one of his last letters to his friend, William Boyd, the slain Nigerian writer and activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, wrote: "The most important thing for me is that I've used my talents as a writer to enable the Ogoni people to confront their tormentors. I was not able to do it as a politician or a businessman. My witting did it" (Boyd, in Na'Allah, 1998:55). Finally, Olorunoba-Oju observes "The input that brought the (Nigerian) nation to independence was mostly intellectual...." (in Na'Alah, 1998:190) It is against this background that this paper

examines the role of poets in the maintenance of the health of democratic ideals in Nigeria and the United States.

II

Hegel (as quoted in Grey, 1970:38) maintains, "Every work belongs to its age; to its nation and to its environment, and depends upon particular historical and other ideas and aims. For this reason art scholarship further requires a vast wealth of historical information of a very special kind" (See also Ojaide, 1962:2; Osundare, 1996:5f). This historical literary critic, Hippolyte Taine, considers a work of art as the shell of an animal from which observation one could get the details of the animal's features. He, thus, views a literary work as "a transcript of contemporary manners, a type of a certain kind of mind" (in Adams, 1971:601-614).

If the severity and spatio-temporal immediacy of the consequences of truncating the progression towards civilized ideals in Nigeria would make elaborate and laborious reminding unnecessary, the case of the U.S. is different. It is like the reference to Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* that, looking at a kind's mouth; one would never believe he ever sucked at his mother's breast. But the U.S. too has had her woes even if quite different and in milder dimensions. As a post-colonial state with a peculiar plurality of interests, the U.S. was still grappling with the problems of molding a nation when she had to go to war on April 6, 1917 to make the world "safe for democracy" (Roohan, in Bayer, 1997: 745q). Following the war was a period of severe economic depression that had dire consequences for the social strand of the society. Described by Thomas Paine as "times that try men's souls, unemployment in the late 1920s and the 1930s was "dangerously high" and about 70% of the employed population... Was receiving less than \$2,500 a year" (Roohan in Baker, 1997: 746c). Roohan points out that "so high a percentage of the national income went to a relatively few people (and this) meant that a great deal of it accumulated as savings, individual and corporate" (in Bayer, et al, 1997:746c). Two consequences of this for the social life of the society were the reign in the 1920s of a secret society known as Ku-Klux Klan that sought to ensure the supremacy of the whites over other races, and a general decline in polite manners among the youth as well as a noticeable increase in rebelliousness.

The depression resurfaced in the 1980s, and of this period, Woodward (in Bayer, et al, 1997:488) notes that the recession resulted in the "swelling rank of the homeless and jobless and the growing percentage of the population below poverty level – the poor getting poorer, the rich richer". Besides, the education sector "once declared the best in the world... Rapidly reduced to embarrassing performance, low standards, and desperate needs". What the foregoing illustrates is that in spite of her being the most advanced in the upholding of modern democratic principles, the U.S. too has had occasion when she lost her grip on those ideals with unpleasant repercussions for the citizenry.

If the U.S. situation can be described as bad, that of Nigeria, especially the period stretching from about 1988 to 1998, would be considered disastrous. In the Nigerian context, of the thirty-eight years of the country's post-independence days (1960-1998), the military has ruled for twenty-eight while elected politicians have held office for only ten. During the thirty-eight years, the country has experienced a period of oil boom and wealth, which promoted one of the military leaders, General Yakubu Gowon, to boast, "Our problem is not money but how to spend it" (APTER in Na'Allah, 1998:133). But by 1997, Femi Osofisan had this to say of the same country:

.... a huge annual finance budget which produces massive inflation and unemployment: a multiplicity of education at institutions with unpaid teachers and no books and therefore, a wretched and wounded populace, masses of desperate and angry youths, of disillusioned adults. A nation where the streets of town and countryside are ruled by death and anguish, disaster and disease (1997:14f).

Popular opinion seems to be agreed on the regimes of General Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha as being the worst and marking the climax of military rule in Nigeria since independence. This was a period when "rapes, murders, and the burning of villages were being carried out as a deliberate policy of state terrorism" (Boyd in Na'Allah, 1998:53). Indeed, one of the Generals is reported to have given "a blank cheque" to his henchmen "to eliminate any person whose opposition to his dictatorship was considered dangerous" (Tell Dec. 21, 1998:16). In addition to all this, the individual was further

hounded by the spate of armed robbery and the activities of conmen (or "419" in the Nigerian English lingo). Thus, the personal psyche of the individual was perpetually tuned to fear, insecurity and uncertainty, a situation described by Apter as follows:

As those with anything left to steal barricaded themselves into their homes, locking gates and even electrifying doors and window-bars to keep out thieves, entire neighborhoods would close off access by locking gates at dusk so that nobody could pass in or out (in Na'Allah, 1998: 146)

Still, it seems the farthest departure from democratic aspirations was in the sphere of human rights violations which climaxed in such murders as those of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni men, the journalist, Dele Giwa, the elder statesman, Alfred Rewane, the imprisonment and subsequent death in prison of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, the assassination of his wife, Kudirat, etc these atrocities qualified Nigeria for the description of the African continent of this era as a "dangerous place to think, a risky place to argue" (Osundare, 1994:1). In sum therefore, both Nigeria and the U.S. have had their democratic aspirations either tainted with occasional shortcomings or brutally truncated, thus warranting reactions from their writers; in the present case, poets. In his submission, Apronti (in Nwoga, 1978:84) believes that "Given the choice of the agent of the oppressor and the person of the oppressed, the vote of the sensitive writer is clearly bound to be on the side of the oppressed". It is with this conviction in mind that we examine some of the works of the following Nigerian and American poets.

III

Perhaps the American poet most committed to the democratic principles of freedom, equality, etc was Walt Whitman (see Brooks, et al, 1974:625). These principles thus constitute the dominant concerns of his poetry. In his "Song of myself", for instance, he declares:

"I speak the password: primeval,
I give the sign of democracy.
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot.
Have their counterpart of on the same term"
(in Murphy, ed., 1975, lines 506-507.

Throughout the long poem, Whitman uses himself, his impressions, wishes and circumstances as well as his love of freedom as representative of what every other person should have or be. The first three lines illustrate this basic philosophy of doing to other as you would other do to you: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, and what I assume you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (p.63).

In the short poem "To the States" (p.44), Whitman's intolerance of oppression as an anti-democratic practice manifests most eloquently when he urges all the States to "Resist much, obey little" so as not to be enslaved since "Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city of this earth, ever afterward resumes its liberties". The emphasis on resistance is consciously graphologically indicated by the appearance in italics of the line, *Resist much, obey little*, thus engaging the reader's eyes possessively. Whitman's rebellious spirit in favour of the governed is continued in "To a certain Cantatrice" (p 45) in which the poet urges the people to rebel. In the poem, Whitman presents an unnamed gift (perhaps the poem itself) to "Some brave confronter of despots, some daring rebel..." This gift, the poet goes on, "... Belongs to you just as much as to any" who rebels against or confronts despots. That Whitman intends this gift for "you" or "any" again exemplifies his commitment to human brotherhood and sisterhood, which constitute the bedrock of democratic ideals.

One of the features of economic depression in both Nigeria and the United States is accumulation of society's resources in a few hands to the detriment of the majority. This was true of the U.S. in the 1920s and 1930s, and true of Nigeria, especially in the days of Generals Babangida and Sani Abacha in the 1980s and 1990s. Whitman certainly lives before both periods, but as a sensitive poet committed to the lot of humanity, he forewarned against such imbalance in the distribution of resources in the following lines in "Song of the Open Road" (p.185);

You shall not heap up what is call'd riches
You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve.
You but arrive at the city to which you were destin'd, you
Hardly settle yourself to satisfaction before you are call'd by an
Irresistible call to depart,

You shall be treated to the ironical smiles and mocking of
those who remain behind you....

Notice in the poem the consistent concatenation of the second person pronoun "You" to the obligatory modal auxiliary "shall" which gives the lines the character of laws that man must follow. There is the deep philosophical statement of the world being just a "city" in which the traveler, humankind, arrives only for a brief sojourn and would soon leave. As such, he concludes in the last quoted line that those who accumulate "shall be treated to the ironical smiles and mockings of/those who remain behind" are usually the poor majority. The attempt has been to show how the American poet, Walt Whitman, stood as spokesman for the downtrodden, as his society's gadfly, using the medium of poetry.

The artistic practice of focusing on the people as seen in Whitman, also finds expression in Carl Sandburg's poetry. In two of his poems, "Grass" and "The People, Yes" (in Ellman, ed., 1976:423f. 427f), the poet shows the constancy and continued survival of the human race even as some of the great people of the day are buried. In the opening line of "The People, Yes," we have the assurance that "The people will live on" no matter how many times "they will be tricked and sold and again sold". The people's invincibility and immortality in spite of the pounding by oppressors is most effectively portrayed in the metaphor of the hammer and the anvil: "This old anvil laughs at many broken hammers". Then he again re-affirms in the last stanza of the poem:

In the darkness with a great bundle of grief
The people march.
In the night, and overhead a shovel of stars for keeps,
The people march.

The same idea of the ordinary people as the final winners in any society reincarnates through the metaphor of grass in Sandburg's poem by the title (p.423). In it, "grass" is the vehicle representing the downtrodden but who, in time, would emerge to stand above and cover all "the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo", being the graves of those who were once brave enough to face war. Although Sandburg does not directly clamour for rebellion and resistance as Whitman does in some of his poems, he shares Whitman's

unflinching focus on the powerless majority who are predictably the victims in any disequilibrium in the scales of democratic canons.

As we saw earlier, it is a part of government's responsibilities to ensure the citizenry's liberties, including the right to rewarding employment. But as observed earlier, even the U.S. has had moments when she could not meet this obligation to her citizenry. Born in 1926 and hence maturing during these years of unemployment and underpayment of the thirties, Allen Ginsberg responds poetically to this state of affairs in his "My Alba" (p.928). Using himself as representative of this class of the oppressed, Ginsberg gives a clear picture of his situation as a worker in Manhattan in these two stanzas:

Stayed on the market
youth of my twenties
fainted in offices
wept on typewriters

five years unhappy labor
22 to 27 working
not a dime in the bank
to show for it anyway.

Whether based on Ginsberg's personal experience or not, this poem seems to be speaking for most low income earners in most parts of the world, especially those societies that derailed from civilized democratic precepts.

Yet, the condition of the rich in the same society contrasts with that of the poor. This seems to explain why Allen Ginsberg's contemporary, Robert Bly, turns his tercets into an arsenal directed at the rich in his "Poem Against the Rich" (p.94) in which he maintains that

The rich man in his hat
cannot hear
The weeping in the pueblos of the lily.
Or the dark tears in the shacks of corn.
Each day the sea of light rises
I hear the sad rustle of the darkened armies.
Where each man weeps, and the plaintive
Orisons of the stones.

The emphasis on the gulf between the rich and the poor in the poem above comes in both linguistic and graphological representations. Thus, the one line standing for the rich is just **one** while the weeping things are a mass divided from the rich by the short boundary: "cannot hear"; thus this line becomes the physical equivalent of a wall separating the oppressor (above) from the oppressed (massed below).

If we were to return to Apronti's position (cited earlier) that "the vote of the sensitive writer is clearly bound to be on the side of the oppressed", we would be inclined to agree that the American poets examined here have voted body and soul on the side of the downtrodden. Thus, Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Bly have all, in their various ways, ranged their poetic arsenal on the side of the marginalized majority in their role as gadflies of their democracy.

IV

The emerging voices on the Nigerian poetry scene who began to flourish in the country's days of pain under Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha appear to be conforming to James Thurber's words that "A species living under the threat of obliteration is bound to produce obliteration" (cited in Ushie, 1995:8). This is because of how far the military "moved (us away) from our Federal aspirations" (Ayoade, 1997:1). Our first example of poetic reactions to the undemocratic governance of the military rule will be Kabura Garvwa's "We shall 'Rise with the Sun'" whose first stanza reads:

"WE SHALL RISE WITH THE SUN"

Over-cooked unyielding promises have SAPPED their	1
Stomachs	2
Pot-bellied tycoons have clothed them in TOKUNBOS	3
Unlettered men of ACTION have MAROKOED their	4
Dwelling places	5
Their NEWBREED patriots are hindered	6
By clumsy turnings of a headless NECK	7
They seek to return to their GRASSROOTS	8
and Operate to "Feed the Nation,	9
But their GREEN REVOLUTION turns to brown dreams	10

Their villages are not DIFFRIED	11
Their rural women are promised BITTER LIFE	12
As lazy LADIES, FIRST PERSONS to sit in CHAIRS	13
swell their wardROBes	14
Their NATIONAL CAKE IS secretly COMMERCIALISED	15
Into the waiting arms of PRIVATE practitioners of	16
lobbying...	17

The poet's dominant device in communicating his concern for the society seems to be manipulation of lexis. In all about 33 of the content words are either written whole in upper case letters or have their initial letters capitalised, for example, "Nationally Orientate and Agitate" (line 29). Of the total number of words in this form, over 25 are either acronyms drawn from the several ad hoc agencies and statutory bodies established by Nigeria's dictatorial regimes (including that of General Obasanjo, to a lesser degree), or are words coined, created or functionally converted through morphological juggling to capture, ridicule or satirize the bankrupt military era in Nigeria's leadership. Some examples of these "nonce" forms are "SAPPED", coined from Babangida's Structural Adjustment Programme, SAP; MAROKOED", a conversion into verb of the noun "Maroko", a former Lagos slum settlement for low income earners whose residents were forced out by a one-time Military Governor of the State, Col. Raji Rasaki, and the land shared among the rich and highly placed by the same administration. Another term, "NEW BREED", refers to General Babangida's cavalier banning of older politicians to pave the way for the younger, easier-to-manipulate ones as a strategy for continuing in office. Further to this, he established the National Electoral Commission, NEC, referred to as "headless NECK" in the poem, whose headship was not really the man the General appointed but the General himself.

Other structures set up by the regime which are satirized in the poem are the Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Reconstruction, MAMSER, converted into a verb in the poem "MAMSERed", the "Better Life for Rural Woman" programme of Mrs. Miriam Babangida which the poet has presented as "Bitter LIFE (line 12), and the various cosmetic attempts at democratizing the polity, satirically referred to as "deMOCKERIZATION" (line 36). Thus, throughout the poem, there is a continual subversion of, and satirical

play on, the military men's own language to front fresh meanings that ridicule the dishonest intentions and originators of the terms and acronyms. For instance, while the government talks of health for all by the year 2000, what the poet makes of the same statement is that in view of the "kwashiorkored children" (line 22), what government is actually promising is "DEATH FOR ALL/by 2000" (lines 23/24). On this type of subversion of dictator's own language, Soyinka notes, "When power is placed in the service of vicious reaction, a language must be called into being which does its best to appropriate such obscenity of power and fling its excesses back in its face" (1985:xiii).

Throughout the poem, an us-versus-they divide is maintained through the pronouns such as "we", "us", and the deictic "our", "their", "your" and "my". The poem ends on a positive note of hope for the people, "but the sun shall rise/upon us to celebrate" (lines 49/50). Thus, like Whitman, Carl Sandburg, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Bly of the American terrain, Kabura Garvwa has pitched his tent with the people in their quest for democracy through artistic confrontation of the unfashionable phenomenon of military rule.

The same spirit of quest for democracy is the concern of Martin Akpan in his poem, "Annulled Hope" (1998:32). Akpan uses the rainbow, with all its "seductive colours" to symbolize democracy dangling above a yearning earth, "salivating greedily/to the sensual overtures". Further, the earth "stretches her hands of gravity/to pull the rainbow" but, unfortunately, the hope crashes since the "envious sun/withholds his rayful support/to discolour the rainbow". Thus, in the rainbow we find the glowing beauty of democracy symbolized and in a sense, drawing from extra-textual experience, the late winner of Nigeria's June 12, 1993 presidential elections, Chief M.K.O. Abiola, shares in this symbolism. The "envious sun" then, stands for both the junta that denied Nigeria access to the rainbow and, perhaps too, for what some people may regard as fate since if it were only man's intentions, earth's "hands of gravity" would have brought the people the rainbow.

The American poet, Allen Ginsberg's portrayal of the condition of the salariat seems to find its equivalent in the Nigerian Joe Ushie's "Month-end blues" (1995:17). Ushie describes the salary earner, especially in the civil service, as one "Trapped in [a

room/that's filled to the brim/with visible emptiness" thus suggesting both the boredom and the bemoaning of "each month-end's calculation that narrows to zero". As a consequence, the worker drifts into filling the emptiness with gossips while his/her mind

hovers, a plane in reconnaissance flight,
around the empty pots criss-crossed by cobwebs,
around the waist belt shifted to the lat hole,
around the retiring shoes torn by tar's teeth,
and around the landlord's tithes or quit notice.

One of the ideas of democracy is the guarantee and protection of minority interests. Such interests could be those of ethnic minorities gender-based ones, religious minorities, gays, etc. In a traditionally male-dominated society as Nigeria, it is only natural that its female writers, if not other, should interrogate society over its protection, or non-protection, of the interests of females. This is the opening poem of Titilola Shoneyin's volume (1998:13). Entitled "She Tired", the poem is reproduced in full for obvious reasons:

She tried to be a doctor
But they said
The enamel paint on her talons
Stained the scalped

She tried to be a lawyer
But they said
Her skirts, way too high,
Distracted the judge.

She tried to be a teacher
But they said
Her voice was too weak,
Not quite loud enough to control the children.

She tried to be a writer
But they said
She needed guts
And of course, that phallic mind.

So, she tried to be a woman.
They pat her on the back
And showed her the kitchen, the garden
... and the bed.

In the poem, we notice, first, the division between "she" and "they" in which a singular being, "she", is pitted against the majority with all their bias. Notice also the reflection of male prejudice (and female, too, sometimes) against the cosmetics, the impingement on the freedom even to choose a wear, the fallacy that a female's voice is not loud enough to be audible in a classroom, and her lack of "guts" to be a writer as well as her lack of "that phallic mind". In the five-stanza poem, the verb of the second lines of the first four stanzas as in the past form suggesting the completeness of the action of cordoning off the female from the male-dominated professions. But in the last stanza, the verb form is changed to the habitual present, "pat" which suggests the currency of the vice of sex-based discrimination. And the compromise only comes when the woman accepts to identify with the roles assigned her by a male-dominated society, which are in the garden and on the bed.

In sum, therefore, one seems to find the Nigerian poets also united in their confrontation of the harsh realities of their times and becoming the voice for the voiceless the same way as we saw of the American poets. Of Nigerian writers in general, Osundare (1966:6), tends to support this observation when he states that "unlike the country Nigeria, Nigerian literature possesses – has developed – a binding, overwhelming sense of mission and a humanist vision..." And this humanist vision is, of course, a synonym for democratic ideals.

V

Thus far we have examined the meaning and basic principles of democracy in its modern sense. We noticed that no society has yet attained in full the ideals of democracy and, rather, that all societies are only at certain distances away from the principles. The material environments of both U.S. and Nigeria were highlighted. Among the similarities that emerged were that both countries are post-colonial societies, both have experienced wars and periods of severe economic depressions with dire consequences for the poor majority. Both are also either multi-ethnic or multi-racial. And, then, in spite of their spatial distances, differences in colour of their peoples, level of development, etc. their poets speak a common tongue. As such, what Osundare observes of the Nigerian situation can be recast to encapsulate the Nigerian-U.S. situation: Unlike the world's

In the light of this, it is suggested that such studies and conferences as these be encouraged as a way of thawing the fiction of unbridgeable differences among the peoples and nations of the world so that the ugly incidence of ethnic cleansing which crept into the evening of the twentieth century will not emerge at the dawn of the twenty-first. It is also urgent that writers, especially those of Nigeria, be supported. For instance, most of the new poets cannot publish their works because of the country's economic woes and the effect on the publishing industry.

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