

# **Democracy and Human Rights in Nigeria: Proffering a TfD Approach.**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

Democracy popularly regarded as the government of the people, by the people and for the people remains one of the best systems of government owing to the fact that elected representatives are seen to be accountable to the people and can also be removed through periodic elections. The advent of democracy in Nigeria after many years of military rule has opened up a vista for free and fair elections as well as given the opportunity for the majority to be represented and participated in decision making process for the betterment of the society as a whole. The beginning of democratic rule in 1999 has brought a lot of hopes to Nigerians. To many it opened the door of progress, growth and development they have waited for over the years. Despite all these, Nigeria still remains a habitation of the good, the bad and the ugly. This is because, with all the strength and celebration of democracy in the country, the rights of many Nigerians have been relegated to the background thereby neglecting the necessity of their existence as a people. Social maladies such as bad governance, corruption, poverty, lack of inclusion of masses in the decision making processes, economic imbalance, power tussle, control and domination by the super structure and many other leadership problems have become the bane of her development. In this paper, the researchers use Theatre for Development as an approach to conscientise and give voice to community members to stand and speak against any form of injustice or ill-treatment that may be meted to them by those in power. The paper concludes that, as an interventionist, participatory and alternative theatre, TfD can engage and enlighten the people on human rights and democracy as well as encourage them to participate in the protection, progress and development of their communities without waiting for government's intervention.

## **Introduction**

It is no longer news that Nigeria is one of the developing countries the world over owing to her diverse human and material resources. Yet, it is faced with so many social ills due to leadership problems such as: bad governance, lack of inclusion of masses in the decision making processes, economic imbalance, power tussle, control and domination by those in power and their cronies among others which have over the years been the bane of her development. The Nigerian political elites have consistently failed to provide the sort of leadership which is needed to improve the quality of life of the teeming masses of the country thereby affecting the standard of living and the rights of the citizens. Nigeria's political peregrination after gaining independence on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1960 took a major positive dimension on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1999. This marked the end of military regime and ushered in a new dawn of regular elections and return of civil liberties in Nigeria. During this period of exchange of baton, people were filled with happiness and joy. The expectation of people was very high and there was so much confidence in this new system of government to bring about an end to untold hardship of the masses and unprecedented transformation in the lives of the people. Unfortunately, this turned out to be a mirage.

Last year, politicians in their usual and typical elements rolled out drums to celebrate sixteen years of uninterrupted democracy or civil rule in Nigeria. One can imagine; that was typical of our political elites in their usual jamboree where the resources of the country are lavished without recourse and adherence to the rule of law. Today, it is evident that Nigeria and her citizens are passing through hard and difficult times as a consequence of recession that has set in. The economic policy of the present government certainly is not friendly. The change mantra is changing the faces of Nigerians differently from what many expected. Poverty, pain, unemployment, hopelessness and hunger have become the orders of the day. These are the

realities that independence and democracy which the heroes past had fought for brought to us today.

Criss-crossing the length and breadth of Nigeria from the North to the South, East to West socio-political, economic, religious and environmental problems are obvious. For instance, in the Niger Delta region, independence has produced an environment and people paralyzed by the presence of oil companies. This region is seeing underdevelopment and environmental degradation despite billions of dollars in revenue that it produces in oil, a key driver of the Nigerian economy as well as the effort by the government in terms of revenue allocation and derivation accrued to the region. Environmental degradation has crippled traditional livelihood, lack of infrastructure, poor water and sanitation and a lack of educational and health facilities have severely stunted human capital development of many of its inhabitants.

In the Northern region of Nigeria, independence has left people with insurgency and conflicts of different magnitudes which have crippled human and material development and economic growth. This region has witnessed a lot of setbacks in terms of education, good health facilities, restriction of movement, and disruption of peace among others. The West and the East also at one point or the other witnessed their own share of the problems. Unfortunately, most of these problems are leadership related which instead of abating have become recurrent decimals in our polity and democratic space.

Democracy means the government of the people by the people and for the people. This means that people should be able to have their say on things that have direct bearing to their lives. Democracy as put by Larry J Diamond "is a system of government in which all the people of a state or polity are involved in making decision about their affairs typically by voting to elect representatives to a parliament or similar assembly" (2). Democracy is a government of the

people, especially rule of the majority, a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually through periodically held free elections. The term is derived from Greek word *demokratia*, which was coined from *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule). In another definition, democracy is a form of government in which the power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system. Nigeria practices a “representative Democracy”. Representative democracy allows for efficient ruling by a sufficiently small number of people on behalf of the larger number. This is a system in which people elect their lawmakers who are then held accountable to them for their activity within government.

In Nigeria, however, democracy is a scenario where leadership is centred on and revolved around the elites. These elites, most often than not always forget that the true essence of leadership is service to the people. No wonder Margaret and Deborah in a book titled *Walk out Walk on* posit that: “A leader is someone willing to help, anyone willing to take those first steps to remedy a situation or create a new possibility” (67). With this characteristic of a leader as described above, we can clearly and confidently say that majority of leaders today in democratic Nigeria are those people who serve themselves and their families. Most of them usually become unwilling to serve when they finally have the mandate of the people who stood under the sun and in the rain to elect them into various positions of responsibilities. In order to satisfy their whims and caprices, they rather hold onto the view that the principles of democracy are not universal, but subjective depending on the environment. Samuel Igomu x-rays a statement made by the Nigerian ex-president Olusegun Obasanjo thus:

Democracy as concurred in the West may suit our peculiar circumstances and needs. As such, our conceptualisation of democracy must take due cognisance of our lived reality and whatever structure

and institutions that would sustain democratic practice must reflect the peculiarities of our (Nigerian) environment (2).

Going by this assertion, democracy thus becomes subjective and the people are liable or subjected to subjugation so as to produce this home-grown democracy. This contrary notion by Obasanjo and other like-minded so-called Nigerian leaders have only given rise to political maladroitness and deception, and proven to be the root cause of our economic and political malaise and quagmire.

In a newspaper article entitled *The Story of Cain, Abel and Nigeria*, Abimbola Adedokun as cited by Igomu captures the practice of Nigerian democracy thus:

Today, Nigeria is literally bleeding. There is too much violence. We have bred enough Frankenstein monsters to haunt us. We feed them red meat each time they cry for blood. Those who are not killed by Boko Haram are killed by the joint Task Force. Those who escape the JTF fall into the hands of mind-bending illiteracy. Those who manage to escape all those are consumed by road accidents. Some die in poorly equipped hospitals. Those lucky to bypass all of the above are either killed with hunger, poverty, or frustration practically turns them a living dead. It is the curse of Cain. The earth antagonises people who needlessly shed blood. Recently, multiple road accidents claimed almost 100 lives. In a country where life counts, that should have led to a major social change. Sadly, not even a paragraph of official response came from the government, not even the local government chairmen of the areas the incidents happened. Unfortunately, the government aides who explain these deaths are the same ones who rush to *twitter* to console President Obama over Boston bombing. They are not their own brother's keepers because their brother's life is worthless (3).

What this means is that, people's lives in Nigeria are of little importance to the people they elect to represent them. Yet, when it is time for election, the political elites still fall back to these voiceless people canvassing for votes. In some other countries, the situation is different. For instance, in South Korea, there was a case of some students who got drowned when a plane crashed into a river because of a mistake on the side of the pilot, immediately the minister in charge of education resigned. In August 2015, China had a chemical explosion in a fertilizer plant,

immediately the government evacuated and relocated the people to another safe haven. In Nigeria, when the Chibok girls were abducted, the minister in-charge of that ministry felt it's one of the happenings in one's life. This among others is one of the situations we are always confronted with in Nigeria today.

### **Conceptualizing and Theorizing Theatre for Development**

The acceptability of Theatre for Development in Nigeria, despite its numerous names and titles, can be attributed to its utilitarian nature. Its emphasis on the people's participation in shaping their reality, and its completeness allows for an ever-deepening participatory analysis and development. Through Theatre for Development, growth has been redefined. This has been made possible by the active participation of the people for whom development is meant. Theatre for Development has been able to democratize development by "tapping and interrogating indigenous but enabling structures into the development process" (Adakole73). Theatre for Development hinges on active approaches to learning of peasants becoming the subjects of their transformation, questioning and challenging the ruling class ideas rather than remaining the subjects of a propaganda exercise. It looks at theatre as a range of participatory methods through which development issues can be communicated. It uses all the denominators of community theatre but is more interested in the process, that is, the lessons and experiences that are learnt by engaging in the process of creating the drama and addressing issues of development.

It is usually a platform where people's issues are presented, shared among different community members in order to empower them, and as a way of identifying and proffering solutions to some of their problems. Experiments have been happening since the 1970s creating in practice the ideas of Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire. Invariably, the emergent of Theatre for

Development as a genre of theatre is based on developmental aspirations and has demonstrated its viability as a tool for development over the years. Through its participatory methodology, it has dialogued and participated with communities towards achieving sustainable development, using the same community members to appropriate their own indigenous theatre for their own development. This genre of theatre, makes people look critically at their own existence with a view to transforming it.

Paulo Friere viewed humans in two perspectives: one view conceives humans as 'objects' and 'subjects'. That is as mouldable and adaptable, and able to transcend and recreate the world.

Like Marx, Friere also sees society as divided into two classes, the haves and the have-nots. The rich and the poor, oppressed and the oppressor, the dominant and the dominated. Analysing the structure of education in Brazil, Freire attacked the dehumanizing dogma which sees natives (oppressed) as unintelligent entities that have to be taught everything. He debunked the banking method of education where the teacher gives and the students receive. There are according to Freire, two views on humankind.

In the first conception, humans can be compared with animals. They act and obey without taking time to reflect. An animal cannot see itself as "I" against a "not I", or in other words, it cannot see itself separate from this world. If human beings are seen as objects, they are submerged in the world. They have not been given a chance of self-reflection. In the second view, human beings are seen as subjects. They can think and reflect for themselves and they can dissociate from the world. The essential difference between humans and animals is that humans can operate in the world through action and reflection (2).

This means that humans, if given the chance can think and act positively for their own growth and development. This pedagogy affirms that the oppressed is also intelligible and intelligent; he has the ability of critical thinking and can determine the course of his life if allowed to do so. This is why Theatre for Development practice is a great medium of correction and

transformation, and for the majority of people, there is no better way of reproof than depicting their faults to them through dramatization". (102). It means that, theatre over the years has remained a functional communication tool that enhances development action, community organising, and also promotes good governance, rule of law and human rights.

Theatre for Development is process oriented and is best defined through its functions. It sets out to make people aware of the forces which determine their living conditions and to make active participations in the development process, expanding the expression of their own viewpoints, perceptions and actions to improve their conditions. It is a democratic theatre of the people by the people and for the people, expressing their struggle to transform their social conditions and in the process changing those conditions. The emphasis of Tfd is specifically on developmental goals, and on themes such as adult education, rural community mobilization and mass conscientization. It is a tool deliberately selected by a group of intellectuals and development workers for the meeting of "town and gowns", in order to accelerate modernization process in both rural and peri-urban areas.

What this means is that, Theatre for Development is not a theatre by professionals for entertaining communities. Rather, it is a theatre in which people themselves engage issues about their lives for their own immediate consumption. It stresses participation, critical consciousness, sensitization and social transformation by stimulating dialogue amongst the people using their own familiar artistic expressions to the extent that they take positive action towards the improvement of their lives. This form of theatre enables communities to identify their needs, the types of development they desire, the place of development and the means of attaining such a development. Tor Iorapuu submits that, Theatre for Development is "an educational drama or theatre for social change. It aims to raise awareness by exploring issues in creative and exciting

ways. It is a participatory technique of teaching and learning. It is simply interactive, empowering, creative, active and full of fun and action” (2).

This means that, Theatre for Development is an alternative, interventionist and democratic theatre of the people by the people and for the people. It advocates for social, political, religious, cultural, economic and psychological developments and experiences about human society. It is about people playing people. For example, programmes such as *Communicating Children and Women's Rights in Nigeria: Experiences from the Field* sponsored by UNICEF, *LaedzaBatanani* in Botswana, a non-formal education project which also attempted to follow a Freirian model are good examples of Tfd practices that have encouraged participation, raised community issues to the fore, fostered discussion, and promoted collective actions. This is why this paper employs Theatre for Development as an interventionist approach to conscientise and sensitise the populace on the fundamental principles of good governance and human rights.

### **Chlorine and its Effect on Humans**

Chlorine is a chemical used in industry and in household cleaning products. It is among the ten highest volume chemicals made in the United States. It is a gas that has a yellow-green colour, and a pungent, irritating odour similar to bleach. Usually, it is pressurized and cooled for storage and shipment as an amber-coloured liquid. It does not catch fire easily, but may combine with other common substance to form explosive compounds. It has a variety of uses; it is used to disinfect water and is also part of the sanitation process of sewage and industrial waste. It is used in the preparation of chlorides, chlorinated solvents, pesticides, polymers, synthetic rubbers, and refrigerants. However, owing to its widespread use in industrial and commercial locations,

exposure to chlorine could occur from an accidental spill or release, or from a deliberate terrorist attack. The most harmful route of exposure is from breathing chlorine gas. Exposure may also result from skin contact with chlorine gas or by swallowing chlorine in contaminated food or water. Chlorine gas is heavier than air and will initially remain in low-lying areas unless wind or other conditions provide air movement. When chlorine gas enters the body as a result of breathing, swallowing, or skin contact, it reacts with water to produce acids. These acids are corrosive and can easily damage cells in the body on contact. ([https://www.health.ny.gov/environmental/emergency/chemical\\_terrorism/chlorine\\_tech.htm](https://www.health.ny.gov/environmental/emergency/chemical_terrorism/chlorine_tech.htm))

### **Preliminary Reports**

The people situated close to Laminga water treatment plant became victims and casualties in the month of July 2015 when chlorine gas usually used for water treatment leaked from the water treatment plant situated around the area. They were caught up with this situation at about 12 midnight on that fateful day. The inhabitants could not salvage the situation as the chlorine had already spread and contaminated the air before they realized. Report has it that almost eight persons lost their lives and more than hundred hospitalized. An interview with some members of the community indicated that it took the government longer than necessary to come to the area and sympathise with the effected. As a result, they felt neglected and abandoned by the government they voted into power that is supposed to show concern and support in the wellbeing of her citizenry.

According to Mr Sunday, one of the residents of the area, the unfortunate incident happened on Sunday 12 July, 2015 midnight when people were sleeping. He said when the leakage occurred, it filled the air like a dew. Those who woke up on time quickly switched on their fans and

windows to allow the fan blow out the substance. Those who woke up from sleep as a result of inhaling the chlorine did not know where it was coming from, in trying to escape, they made their dead because they ran towards the water plant. In furtherance to this, Mr Sunday said that it was shocking to them to hear the government announcing on radio that it has taken charge of the hospital bills of the affected. He further revealed that, the leakage or spill of the chlorine was not the first time, rather it was the third time in which he personally wrote to the government when it first happened but nothing was done to avert future occurrence. Mr Sunday happened to be the landlord of a PhD student in physics department of the University of Jos that was killed by the chlorine gas that fateful night.

Again, when the guard manning the gate of the treatment plant was interviewed, he disclosed that the cylinders containing the chlorine products have been laying hopelessly on the ground outside the building for sometime even before the incident happened. Several attempts to relocate them to a safer place proved abortive. Mr. John a member of the community revealed that the people who were affected have not been given anything to support themselves after the incident rather the government is still claiming to have given them some money to assist in the treatment of those affected. In the course of the research, we gathered that the community was organizing to take some certain measures in tackling the issue. One issue the community was so concerned about was the fact that they were asked to relocate from the area, which means leaving the houses they have built for years to wherever place they can find shelter because the government said the land belongs to them. They also lamented that, they have spent a lot of money acquiring the lands and erecting their buildings. The questions we could not find answers to were, where will these people go to and how will they be relocated? Is the government providing any alternative for them? How will they get the resources to start up life afresh?

When we interviewed a journalist, Mr Frankly, he posited that, the problem with the Nigerian government is that, once they want to put an issue under the carpet, is to begin to set up committees. According to him, the federal, state and the house of assembly have set up committees to look into the matter. He asked, when will these committees submit their reports and what will be the outcome of that investigation? These were the questions we could not answer.

### **Human Rights and Democratic Nigeria**

The need to address the issue of human rights in Nigeria is both an urgent and a compelling one. According to BBC dictionary, human rights are the basic needs which all people should have (300). Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, irrespective of their nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. The basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are considered to be entitled, often held to include the rights to life, liberty, equality, fair trial, freedom from slavery and torture, as well as freedom of thoughts and expression. From the spring of legal rights come a number of documents aimed at protecting man and his environment. These documents have been drafted to take care of particular and peculiar challenges that man has been faced with in the cause of his sojourn on earth and his interaction with his fellow man and his environment generally.

The Nigerian constitution Section 33 subsection (1) says that:

Every person has a right to life, and no one shall be deprived intentionally of his life, save in execution of the sentence of a court in respect of a criminal offence of which he has been found guilty in Nigeria (11)

Again, in section 44 subsection 1a, b and 2f, it is evident that:

(1) No moveable property or any interest in an immovable property shall be taken possession of compulsorily and no right over or interest in any such

property shall be acquired compulsorily in any part of Nigeria except in the manner and for the purposes prescribed by a law that, among other things -

- (a) Requires the prompt payment of compensation therefore and
- (b) gives to any person claiming such compensation a right of access for the determination of his interest in the property and the amount of compensation to a court of law or tribunal or body having jurisdiction in that part of Nigeria.
- (f) Providing for the taking of possession of property that is in a dangerous state or is injurious to the health of human beings, plants or animals (14 and 15).

In a democratic Nigeria, all these rights are being violated directly or indirectly. The Nigerian government and the so-called leaders elected by the poor masses for proper representation are seen doing nothing for the betterment of the masses, rather, they are seen lavishing and enriching themselves and their children's children yet unborn. Taylor and Williams as cited by Sagaris submit that:

We should not regard ordinary people as being helpless victims of conniving, unscrupulous oppressors. Power is not evenly distributed and oppressive hierarchies prevail, yet even ordinary people are capable of exercising their intelligence and agency. This might not be citizenship in a strict or theoretical sense, neither is it subjugation nor helpless victimization. The actions involved in the negotiation of power identify people as protagonists in their community and society (208).

Taylor's thought about citizen participation, underlines the dual nature of citizenship, as both "a condition of belonging to a specific place and the possibility of action for the common good".

## **Conclusion**

Throughout human history, people have organised to change social conditions. Some collective efforts have had dramatic success, while others have failed miserably. Nonetheless, the advancement of human society has largely been achieved through citizen-based actions. The

coming together of unrelated people to achieve common goals has long fascinated historians, theorists, and ordinary citizens. Theatre for Development has always been in the practice of organizing the people to achieve goals and development of their own community and achievement that will affect their lives positively. Government and Non-Governmental Organizations can effectively use Theatre for Development as a parameter for conscientization and value reorientation, because its gamut can bring about positive change in the lives of the people. This can be done through performances on the issues that affect the people directly. Through dramatization, the people are engaged, encouraged and sensitized to stand for their rights at every point of challenge in the community.

In the past, governments found this theatrical approach so effective that they used it for national mobilization and reorientation. One of such instances in Nigeria was the unprecedented collaboration, during the Ibrahim Babangida's regime, between the Directorate of Social Mobilization for Economic and Social Recovery (MAMSER) and the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance, to achieve basic social development and economic objectives. This collaboration built confidence on the people on the need towards economic and social recovery via the consciousness created through the indices of Theatre for Development practice.

The need for Theatre for Development to move forward to form Theatre for Social Movements (TSM) for better participation and imputing their own quarter in democratic Nigeria is imperative because social movements are needed now more than ever based on the kind of "governance" and "democracy" the citizens of Nigeria are faced with. The inspiration for this concept was conceived after reading Bill Moyer's "Social Movement" which is a formally organized group that acts consciously and with some continuity to promote change through collective action. While the modern era has brought unprecedented production, wealth, and

consumption, it has also created social ills at crisis level, poverty, hunger, war, oppression, and devastation of our environment. In most places these problems are bad and getting worse. Moreover the existing power holders and the established institutions and social systems are incapable of alleviating these planetary problems because the pursuit of their goals, policies, and programmes create and exacerbate them. When Theatre for Development practitioners begin to set up social movements in communities, the community members will not only be the custodians of cultures but they will be community members who will always rise to challenge the political structures and change the status quo. When people are equipped with such strength and dogma, political positions will not only be for the elites rather it will be for those who are willing and ready to serve the people.

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