Sycophantic Culture and the Sustainability of Democracy in Nigeria

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Abstract

Since the return to democratic or civil rule in Nigeria in 1999, we have had the opportunity to take our cherished democracy through successful successive rebirths. Our democracy has been a major factor for the changes, development and growth which we share today. This democracy has also taught us to checkmate people placed in positions in our bid to fight poverty, ensure social cohesion, facilitate the development of our social services, deepen political participation and awareness, and above all, sustain the peace of one Nigeria. However, it is observed with great concern and urgency that there is this dangerous cancerous enigmatic culture which if not tackled, has the propensity to derail and crumble our gigantic efforts to build a better Nigerian democratic culture. This cancer is what I call "sycophantic culture" which is more dangerous than the coup makers. Hence, this paper argues that this sycophantic culture in our socio-economic and political lives is one of the biggest threats we face even as we shape our democracy. Using analytic, historical and expository stencils, the paper identifies the various shades and forms this culture has hindered the making of our national rebirth where merit strives, mediocrity is shunned, ethnic cleavages are integrated at a higher level and cheap religious sentiments down played. The paper concludes using Tiv system of moral justice which reveres the pride of truth telling as a strong panacea towards building an integrative Nigerian democratic variable culture.

Keywords: sycophantic, culture, sustainability, democracy

1. Introduction

Democracy is the sweet melody the world intends to savour now. Democracy wave has taken its scheme on the world like a contagious malady. This is because as a concept, Democracy is

built on the equality of citizens; the freedom of these citizens to associate with one another for the realisation of their ideals and the defense and promotion of their interest; and the freedom of these citizens to choose between the different political platforms of various political parties and candidates, and see to the actualisation of the platforms they have voted for, if their choices win. Chandran Kukathas puts it: "we live in an age of democracy, fetishism and global political phenomenon of democratisation" (21).

However, in spite of the advantages that democracy purports for any society, it has always had its share of suspicion, because the gains democracy promotes and upholds as a concept are practically difficult to attain and actualise. It means that trying to put on the table democracy on its conception amounts to chasing one's shadow. Given the broad sphere of application of the conception of democracy and the ideal society it seeks to entrench and promote, some writers have conceived democracy to be a relative concept; that is because it no longer means the same thing to all peoples and cultures at all times, the application of its basis evolves through dynamic evolution examples of which abound from Athens, Rome and even Britain. In Rome for instance, democracy has continually shifted producing many variants. The ancient Romans took a practical approach to everything including democracy. They did not concern themselves with the construction of an ideal government, but instead fashioned political institutions in response to problems as they arose. This would have informed Makinda's submission that democracy should be conceived:

> as a way of government firmly rooted in the belief that people in any society should be free to determine their political, economic, social, and cultural systems. But the form it takes can vary according to the particular circumstances of any society (562).

A broader concept of democracy should include what David Maillu refers to as "cultural definition of Democracy" in which African democracy,

> like philosophy, had to be lived, theories left aside. African societies were socially and politically structured so that everybody participated according to his ability, age-status, and wishes …everybody was invited to offer the cooking of his mind. African democracy, therefore, transcended the realm of polities; it constituted an integral part of the people's culture, which allowed everyone a sense of belonging. It was a practical democracy as opposed to theoretical democracy, which required people to be more sensitive and responsible for their neighbor's well-being (255).

This is not to say that there was total absence of social stratification based on wealth and age. Certainly, there were commoners as well and offenders were stigmatised because they violated or trampled on others' right or well-being.

Owing to the diversified but closely knitted conception of democracy, this paper examines democratic practice in Nigeria. Hence, the work firstly is a defensible exposition of the importance of democracy. Secondly, the work brings to fore the minimal form of realism such a view presupposes within the contemporary practice of democracy in Nigeria. Again, the

paper examines the pandemic of sycophancy with the practice of democracy as a clog wheel to the stability and sustainability of democracy. The prayer is that a return to our cultural values on truth with reference to Tiv society is a value tool to enhance democracy, since democracy has always being practiced within the culture and value systems of any given society.

2. Conceptual Clarity

2.1 The Concept, Democracy

Since the classical times, democracy has been neither a linear nor a monolithic concept. As the meaning of democracy shifted in time and space, so has its actual practice. Again, even the terms that are employed to define the concept are in want of definition. Ancient Greece (Athens in particular) is widely regarded as the birthplace of western democracy and political thought, and the word *democracy* was coined from Greek words *demos,* "the people," and *kratia*, "to rule." In theory, this was rule by the people for the people as opposed to rule by one (autocracy) or a few (oligarchy), a form of direct democracy in which all citizens could speak and vote in assembly. In practice, Athenian democracy did not extend equality and franchise to all persons and therefore allowed direct participation only by male citizens, a small political elite, to the exclusion of the majority of the populace consisting of women, slaves, and foreign residents. Greek democracy did not really encompass most of the key elements of modern democracy-equality of all persons before the Law and franchise for all. Thus, in reality, direct participation in government by the privileged few constituted the thrust of Athenian democracy. Limited as Athenian democracy was, the west still draws inspirations from it.

2.2 The Term, Sycophancy

The term sycophancy connotes a behaviour in which someone praises powerful or rich people in a way that is not sincere, usually in order to get some advantage from them. It could mean to compliment somebody to win favor; often without sincerity; to please somebody by paying him or her particular attention; especially with a request to take some prominent roles; to make somebody or something look good; or to make something or somebody look better looking in reality; to congratulate yourself exclusively; to feel satisfied with some aspect of yourself. It's a way of trying to please someone especially in position of authority in order to get some favour even if the person does not deserve the praise(s). This is mostly done by politicians in order to get political positions, money and other favours.

3. Democracy and Praxis in Nigeria

According to the Chinese, our ideals are like the sun we may never reach them but allow them to illumine us. That is why even though democracy is believed to be the ideal system of government, good number of pundits have underscored the problems and prospects associated with democracy. This is prevalent in both developed and developing countries. Schweller on this count has cautioned that, "democracy is not always or even necessarily a recipe for 'good' societal decisions or the creation of ideal communities. The extension of democracy is not, therefore, an automatic gain for humankind" (49). Not surprisingly, the

most "perfect" popular democracies in the west, including those of the United States and Britain, have some serious flaws. In the same vein, Robert Dahl, asserted that "in practice, democratic systems have always fallen considerably short of the criteria and values that justify democracy" (46); and as Danilo Zolo pointed out, there is no genuine competition between points of view; most political negotiations are done behind the scenes, not visible to the average voters; and the rise of mass media has diminished debate among citizens (203).

Thus, it is no longer in doubt that representative democracy does not work as well as the concept would have one believe. This, according to Kate Nash, is exemplified in the

> declining numbers of voters who participate in national elections in countries where voting is not obligatory, the increase in the volatility of party-political allegiances, and the rapidity with which media-led issues come to prominence and are just as quickly forgotten (17).

Nigeria's democracy is one of the strongest anti-theses to the practice of democracy. It is no news that at least for the first time in the history of our great country, we have had the smooth transition from one democratic government to the other culminating to sixteen almost wasted years. We have been promised dividends of democracy, only to end up witnessing unprecedented looting of nation's treasury. We were promised good roads, healthcare, electricity supply and good governance, but Nigerians are still 'suffering and smiling' as they travel through the most pot-holed roads spread across the country. As for healthcare, the least said about it, the better as people are on daily basis being eliminated by common diseases (such as malaria and diarrhea) which other nations have since forgotten about their existence. Electricity supply is near zero and Nigerians have become depressingly hopeless as to when the problem is going to be addressed. We produce crude oil but we do not have oil.
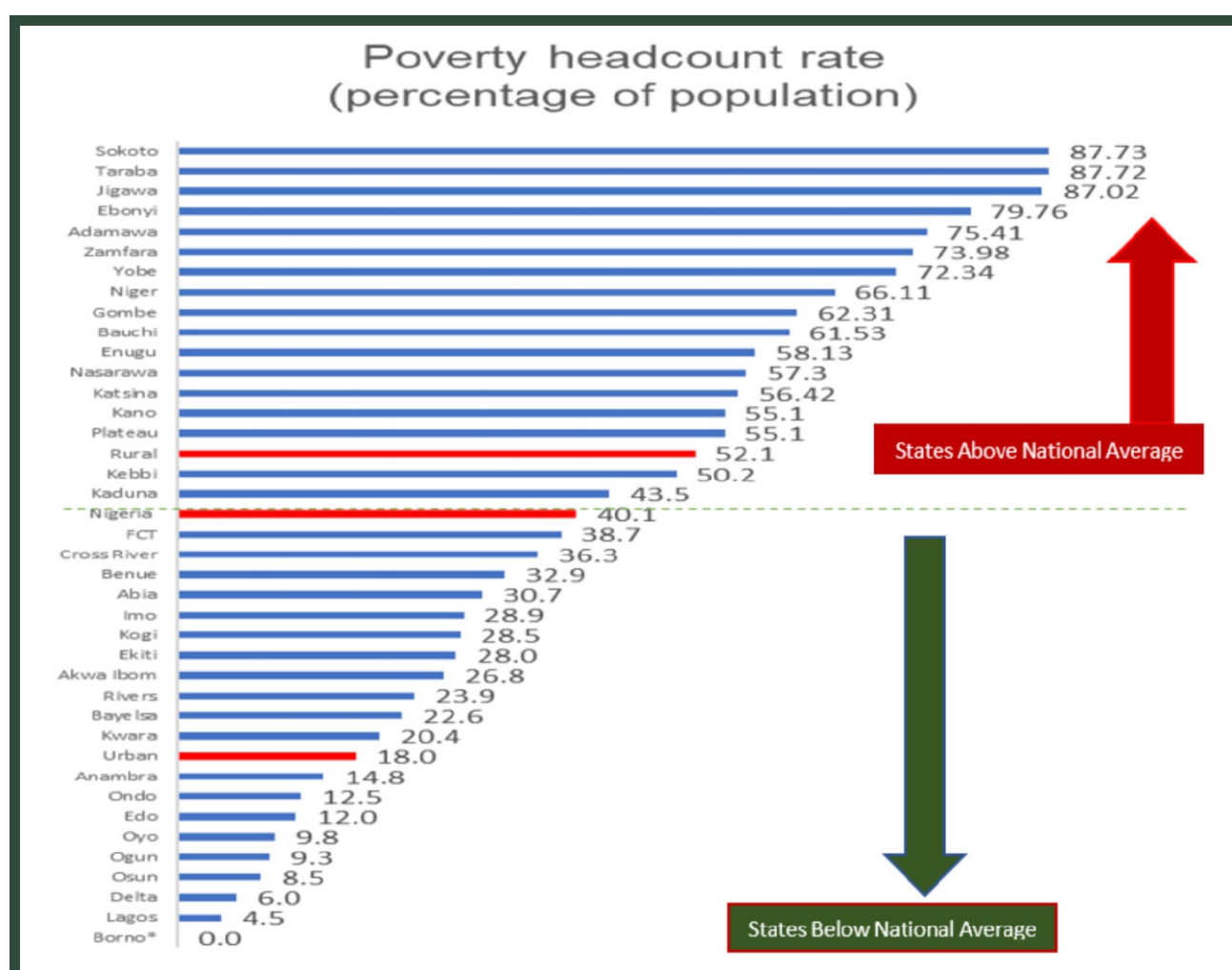
Kwame Gyeke, remarked rightly that, "postcolonial Africa is undeniably among the most vicious of political corruption . . . it probably constitutes the most serious source of financial hemorrhage suffered by the developing nations in Africa, constantly gnawing at their development efforts" (192). This, is just a true reflection of what is happening in the Nigerian political climate where in the midst of plenty, Nigerians, live below normal human conditions. Analysts and friends of Nigeria are appropriately concerned about this disturbing trend, especially at time when other states, for instance, China and South Korea are making frantic efforts to curb and minimize corruption, corruption in Nigeria is asymmetrically tilting at the other end. This, is the biggest blunder of Nigeria's ruling class, owing to its failure to build strong and stable social system to provide the kind of atmosphere that democracy needs to take root and flourish.

The problem of corruption in Nigeria has caused incalculable damage to the entire wellbeing of the country. Poverty has become the way of the Nigerians who essentially are living in a society that provides nothing for them. No better document can confirm the level of poverty in this country than the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics show the following percentages as the level of financial poverty in Nigeria.
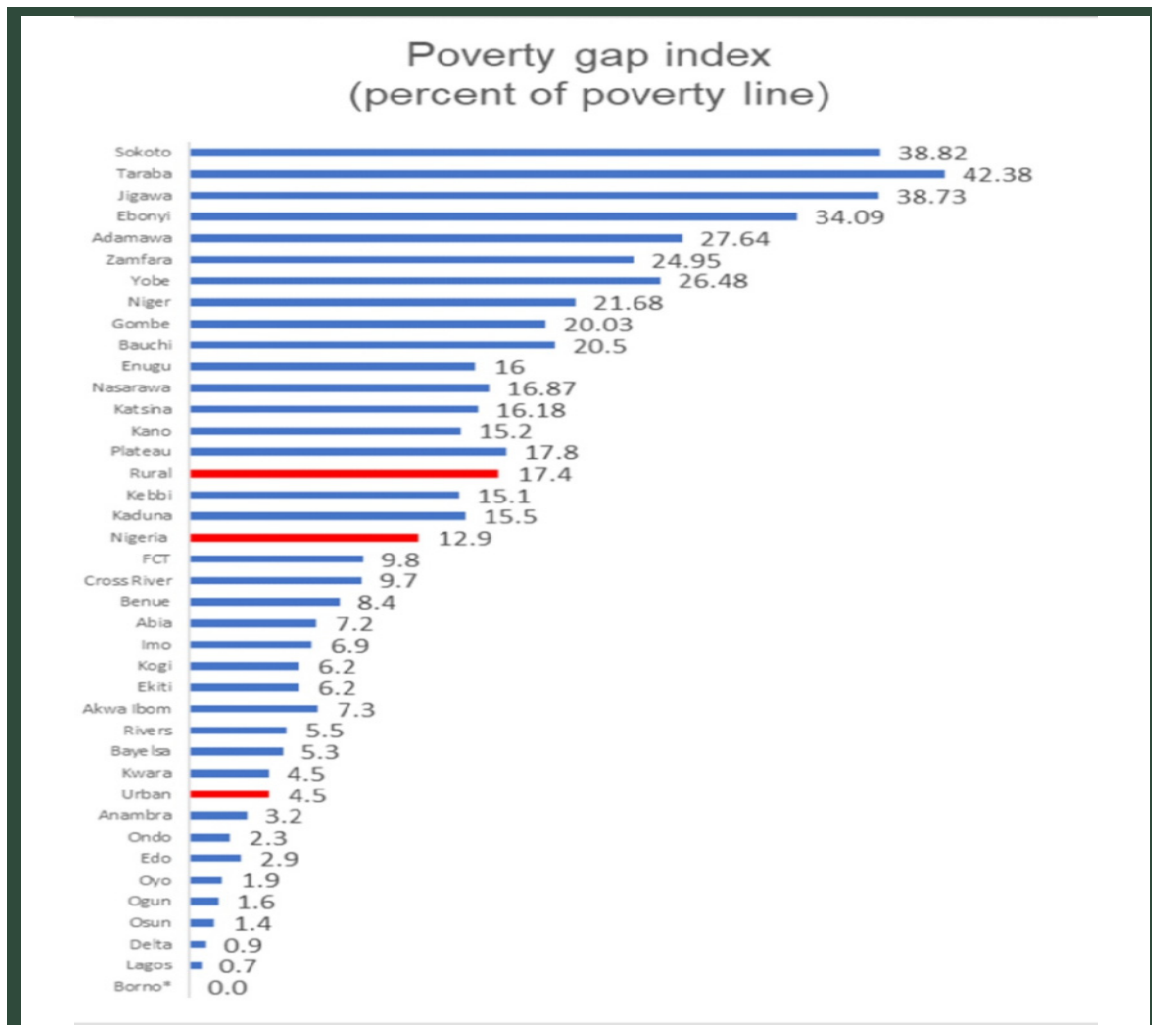
Table 1. Poverty and inequality indicators in Nigeria in 2019

	Poverty headcount rate, in percent of population in strata	Poverty gap index, in percent of poverty line	Gini coefficient
NIGERIA	40.1	12.9	35.1
Urban	18	4.5	31.9
Rural	52.1	17.4	32.8

Source: Nigeria Living Standards Survey, 2018-19. Note: The estimates exclude Borno state.

Poverty headcount rate (percentage of population)

Source: Nigeria Living Standards Survey, 2018-19. Note: The estimates exclude Borno state

Poverty gap index (percent of poverty line)

State	Value
Sokoto	38.82
Taraba	42.38
Jigawa	38.73
Ebonyi	34.09
Adamawa	27.64
Zamfara	24.95
Yobe	26.48
Niger	21.68
Gombe	20.03
Bauchi	20.5
Enugu	16
Nasarawa	16.87
Katsina	16.18
Kano	15.2
Plateau	17.8
Rural	17.4
Kebbi	15.1
Kaduna	15.5
Nigeria	12.9
FCT	9.8
Cross River	9.7
Benue	8.4
Abia	7.2
Imo	6.9
Kogi	6.2
Ekiti	6.2
Akwa Ibom	7.3
Rivers	5.5
Bayelsa	5.3
Kwara	4.5
Urban	4.5
Anambra	3.2
Ondo	2.3
Edo	2.9
Oyo	1.9
Ogun	1.6
Osun	1.4
Delta	0.9
Lagos	0.7
Borno*	0.0

Source: Nigeria Living Standards Survey, 2018-19. Note: The estimates exclude Borno state.

The prevalence of poverty and misery in Nigeria is however, a paradox. Nigeria should, by no means be a poor nation. Apart from being an oil-producing nation, Nigeria is endowed with other natural human resources which are enough to put her on a solid path to economic development and greatness. But Nigeria still wallows in abject poverty despite her stupendous wealth. Deep concerns have been expressed about the sustainability of the democratic process in Nigeria, as poverty-induced agitation and violent conflicts spread across the country. Stakeholders in the Nigerian democratic enterprise appear to be at crossroads on what to do to alleviate poverty, which is generally regarded as the greatest threat to the nascent democratic process in the country. Large segments of the population are demanding the dividends of democracy as the incidence of poverty continually grows throughout the nation. Geo-political zones are crying out against impoverishment, deprivation and marginalisation. Countless ethno-cultural associations and pressure groups are being formed to articulate interests for a better share of the national cake, even when such interests threaten the very basis of democracy in the country. Apart from financial poverty, the country

is suffering from intellectual poverty and moral poverty. All these have crippled the Nigerian nation economically and health wise.

Few Nigerians would deny the fact that there is lack of basic human values in the society today. Some fundamental questions are appropriate: What happens to respect for human life and basic social values on Nigeria? What criteria should guide the activities of politicians? Are they basing their action on common human feelings and social welfare of their personal utility? Are the politicians not corrupting the youth financially and morally? Are they creating a democratic civil Nigeria or an autocratic state? Is having courage dangerous in Nigerian politics? Is there any place for values and ethics in Nigerian politics? This writer is aware that the sycophants and political jobbers would dance around these questions even as they know that their master's actions are creating economic disaster and political havoc.

4. The Pandemic of Sycophancy in Nigerian Democracy

Sycophancy towards those who hold powers is a fact in every regime, and especially in democracy, where unlike tyranny, there is an accepted principle of legitimacy that breaks the inner will to resist. Sycophancy, praise-singing and hagiography seem to be taking an institutional presence in Nigeria. Under the guise of loyalty people do all sorts of dehumanising activities to service the throne. Is it not preposterous to see able-bodied people, including the old, singing and dancing in praise of somebody who has only succeeded in impoverishing his people in the name of leadership or better contorting people's aspirations to chisel his self-seeking?

In Nigeria this happens with an embarrassing frequency yet nobody cares to even note let alone talking about it. For instance, during the last presidential elections, Jonathan was called many names by his many admirers. They called him the "best president ever" in the history of Nigeria; others called him Mandela, Obama, and Marthin Luther King. To some, he was a combination of Awolowo, Sardauna and Azikiwe. Others called him Ojukwu and Mbakwe put together in one Ebele. One presidential spokesman, likened him to Jesus Christ, the son of the living God who came to bear our burdens. The president as things seem to unfold today May not have known those around his throne are many liars and deceivers lying in wait daily at the gate. Around him were those chanting only songs that were pleasant and sweet in his ears. Gluttons became in charge of the treasury and gerrymandering geeks became the trusted confidant of this commander. At present, the Buhari regime is witnessing the same thing. Despite the insecurity and bad governance, the presidential aides of President Buhari keep praising him and comparing his regime with the past regimes in Nigeria.

This endemic wave of sycophancy sweeping across our political space with rage of wild fire, prosecuting democracy and flailing political creativity is the danger we must all watch. Interestingly, only a few have openly condemned this canker worm gradually, but steadily, getting engraved in the psyche of some people – consciously or otherwise – whilst trading their sense of honor, candor and integrity on the alters of achieving egotist gains. In the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the unscrupulous nationalists and obscurantists were out beating their loyalty drums, so palpable were the loyalty narrative, the party was the biggest and could never fall like the Ancient Roman was thought of. They confused sycophancy with

loyalty to the party and leadership and were all out dancing in the theatre of falsehood, when Nigerians were waiting for the judgement day to pass their verdict. It was like hurricane or better still tsunami that PDP was voted out in the 2015 general elections. The lessons are here with us to learn from and hurriedly make amends where it is needed.

We have read how so many people tend to claim that, President Jonathan was not a bad man, but those around him ruined and frustrated his goodwill for Nigerian people. This is medicine after death, a friend it is said is one who says I told you, but not the one who says I would have told you. It is no doubt that sycophancy among our present crop of politicians is mind numbing. Nearly every Nigerian is involved in one form of sycophancy or another to the detriment of our democracy and national development. The non-performance by our leaders is a product of sycophancy. So, leaders pay to be told what they want to hear. They loathe the truth and see anybody who tells them the truth as an enemy. The real enemies it must be told, are the sycophants who are found in all the political parties in Nigeria and even with the current Buhari led administration. That is why Nigerians are concerned about the kind of persons that surround him, whose antecedence leaves nothing to desire. So even if the president is seen as an incorrupt individual, he seems to be a tree in a big forest and since a tree cannot make a forest, Nigerians are skeptical that these so-called change soldiers, might scuttle the process of making Nigeria the country of our dreams.

There are many of us who have a clear understanding of the enormity of the burden of leadership. Leading a family, church, business or a community has its biting effect on whoever has been chosen to lead. In a convolution like Nigeria, leadership is more challenging because there are too many holes and vacuums to fill, and too many complex problems to solve. Aeschylus was the ancient Greek playwright who made this statement: "it is an easy thing for one whose foot is on the outside of calamity to give advice and to rebuke the sufferer" (qtd in Adegbite 30).

Recently, we have read disturbing and worrisome though interesting events in Nigeria's policy, those who claim to love Nigeria more than any other person, are on the vanguard about appointments in Nigeria. For them, this is the right time to speak because appointments are sectional. They are more interested in what divides us than what unites us. The shared suffering, insecurity, misery, want, hunger, and poverty, etc are not attacked with the vigor, they are so concerned about balancing appointments in Nigeria in the name of federal character. It is getting even more interesting because the attacks are coming from within and outside the ruling party. The president must note that sycophantic behavior begins early in each administration and gradually captures the system. History will remember him only on a few counts that Nigeria worked under his administration when security of citizenry is guaranteed, Nigerian educational sector is revamped, our health care system works, poverty is minimised, jobs created and corruption the greatest bane to the counties development is minimised. These and many more are the shared expectations of the Nigerian in the 21st century. Those who seem to discuss Nigeria, as if it is their piece of land are playing to the gallery, and this he must watch, since the owners of the land have won the sceptic cap given the kind of experience Nigerians have had in recent times with the return to democracy. Nigerians are no longer and do not have the patience for histrionics and theatre any more,

they want to see every facet of the Nigerian life to start working.

The question is: can Nigeria overcome sycophancy in her political and developmental challenges? Yes, it can be overcomed only when we stand firmly against the causes, perpetrators, effects or dangers of it, and be ready to acknowledge it as a social canker that needs to be eradicated objectively and with a common purpose by all.

5. Tiv Social Justice on the Pristine of Truth and Its Relevance to Nigerian Democracy

All human societies or cultures have an ingrained model value philosophy and social genre of viewing, interpreting and understanding nature. Such extant mechanism constitutes the fabric of man's social existence, often encapsulated in his logic, custom, belief, expression, thought, and practices. A thorough, profound and first-hand experience and knowledge of the Tiv society is what would qualify us to make categorical conclusion about any one aspect of their physical, cognitive, social and cultural value systems. The Tiv society is a closely knitted one like other African societies. There is massive interconnectivity between the physical and the spiritual or the material and immaterial world. Commenting on the egalitarian holistic nature of the Tiv society Moti and Wegh aver that:

> In Tiv worldview, it is the sacral character that unifies human experience and homogenises Tiv cultural institutions. Economic life cannot be separated from religion, neither can legal injunctions be divorced from morality…the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the supernatural and the natural which is so characteristic of western worldview is strikingly absent in Tiv worldview (101).

Given the point above it is worthy to note that in Tiv society, it is in the social organisation not in the political structure that the unity and cohesion of the group lies and the soul which sustains, keeps and promotes this unity is "TRUTH", from the *Tor* Tiv (Tiv Traditional Head) to the *Tor Kpande* (tax collector) to the *Orya* (Compound Head). This structure implies that kings and chiefs rule by "consent" and that "ruler's subjects are as fully aware of the duties they owe to them, as they are of the duties they owe to him, and are able to exert pressure to make him discharge these duties. Similarly, that in traditional Tiv political arrangement, "No one was locked out of the decision-making process. Thus, in Tiv society, "three heads are better than one" that is why the Tiv socio-political systems in terms of governance were open and inclusive.

All these social stratums were governed by the dictates of the truth. Even at the level of Orya who was usually the male eldest in the family was expected to be a man of discipline and courage as such he was to live an exemplary life so that he could access the powers and become strong in *Tsav* (the supernatural psycho-physical potency) and high in Akombo (magico-spiritual-powers). His appearance and personality must be such that can inspire awe, fear, obedience, and compliance from younger members of the *ya* (house unit). This is what Chinua Achebe advised Nigerian leaders to rise to the hall mark of personal example when he declared that the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a problem of leadership (i). Examples of great leaders abound in history whom even at death, the world trembles at the mention of their names, more than the so-called leaders at the helm of affairs in Nigeria.

For the Tiv society, truth is what repairs and restores sanity to society. That is why the *Swem* is used to entrench and promote this Tiv cultural value. *Swem* is a sacred emblem of Tiv conception of "Truth". *Swem* also has the power of retributive justice and the power of enforcing communal decisions and ensuring compliance. Leaders or elders who are accused of lust and greed and pursuing of personal vendettas or using their accumulated *tsav* potency in manner that is harmful to the well-being of the community were punished by *Swem*. If the situation deteriorates, then the whole community turned to the *Swem* for liberation. *Swem* in this regard, became the panacea for all grades of social maladies including the fight against bad government that breeds tyranny, poverty, suffering and death. Hence, mischievous deeds were curtailed for communal plenitude. At present, the situation has changed due to education, civilisation and modernisation.

Sycophancy breeds deception and destroys the entire system because it thrives on falsehood. It is quite clear, from the lesson drawn above from the Tiv society that leaders who tend to sycophancy lose touch with reality and subsequently bear the wrath of people and end up very badly. Any form of government or any political ideology that is built on deception has no pride of place in history. However, many Nigerian politicians are faced with ethical dilemma as many of them do not seem to care about doing things that are beneficial to the society at large. The politicians, because they want to win elections by all means do terrible things. These include, forging their credentials and assassinating their opponents, without minding the impact of their actions on the polity. Nigerians need ethical politics and a peaceful path to true democracy!

6. Conclusion

Given the mantra of change in Nigeria politics, a lot of expectations have greeted the Nigerian democratic world especially with the 2015 elections in Nigeria. The elections indeed produced no real surprises given the fact that there was a consensus by Nigerians from all classes of life and status that all was not well with this country. The tattered and torn umbrella was swept massively by the broom that anchored its campaign promise on the platform and ideology of change for Nigeria. The elections having come and gone six years ago, Nigerians are seriously in wait of this revolutionary agents to build a better democratic culture, ethos and praxis. To see better days ahead, these expectations are not misplaced given the fact that with the return to democracy in 1999 and its smooth run for 22 uninterrupted years, Nigerians had hoped for better lease of life. But the tale has been different. Like cancer, sycophancy is eating up the soul and conscience of the nation. It is also turning some people into despots and tin-gods. These over-bloated leaders now see themselves as above the law and above man. This is what the new administration must watch. The praise singers are seriously at work. If the soil is provided, it will grow very fast. Now more than ever, what Nigerians need are true loyal citizens in this country and no doubt patriotic ones. In every country where the majority of citizens exhibit a high sense of patriotism or loyalty, it would mean that they would be faithful, law-abiding, disciplined, and committed to every national cause. Once the citizens apply these qualities in their daily national lives, there would be accountability, hard work, increased productivity, less bribery and corruption, as a result, the development of the country politically, economically, and socially would be enhanced. The choice is for the Nigerian

political leaders to stir this ship along honorable paths! Democracy cannot be anchored on any other better humanistic principle than truth.

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