Existentialist Notion of Authentic Existence as a Catalyst to Nigeria's Democratization Process

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Abstract
The political history of Nigeria can be characterized as the history of the country's tortuous attempts at democratic governance since her independence in 1960. It is against this backdrop that the country has often been described as a fledgling democracy. To graduate from a fledgling democracy to a stable democracy, Nigeria needs to democratize all her institutional processes and practices. Existentialist notion of authentic existence is recommended as a catalyst to Nigeria's democratization process because its constitutive elements viz, freedom, choice, commitment, responsibility, critical individualism and a focus on man's work - a day-life as against pure thought or idealism are powerful germs of cultivating enlightened citizenry or as Kierkegaard himself would put it 'make the citizens aware'. Freedom, choice and responsibility constitute a trilogy in existentialist thought and the existentialist's formulation of the trilogy provides a formidable bastion of democracy with the latter properly understood as ultimately mediated by, and anchored on, the individual both through knowledge of oneself and the other. To be a truly existing individual within the context of existentialism, every Nigerian must be an actor and not a spectator of the political process. He must choose to belong to either the ranks of faithful political leadership or vigilant political followership. In the nature of things, there is organic and dialectical relationship between the ranks of faithful political leadership and the ranks of vigilant political followership because both are products of social action and such relationship can operate as a strong catalyst to the democratization of Nigerian polity when properly nurtured and harnessed. In this essay, exposition and hermeneutic methods of research are employed.

Keywords: Nigeria, Democracy, Philosophy, Polity, Criticism.

1. Introduction
1.1 Democracy
Social concepts such as “democracy” are characteristically fluid. Thus, there is constant need to preface any discourse involving these concepts by a definition keyed in a chosen context. The concept “democracy” has become notorious for such fluidity not in the least.
because of its acquired charm. Writers and speakers alike employ it as if it were a magical theory and practice that could fit into any context. The feuding ideologues of capitalism and socialism describe their governments as democratic — thus giving rise to the terms, 'bourgeois democracy' and 'socialist democracy', ascribed respectively to them. And in Africa, there are emergent rebels who are insistent on what they call 'African democracy' moored, according to them, upon traditional consensual decision-making process. To these rebels, 'African democracy' is 'consensus democracy' and therefore logically and materially different from the so-called 'bourgeois democracy' and 'socialist democracy' which the rebels pejoratively term 'majoritarian democracies'.

The concept of 'democracy' which prima facie seemed simple has, against the foregoing analysis, become a controversial question. This is why in this discourse recourse will be had to the puritanical use and sense of the concept as the Athenians originated it in 450 B.C. In this original Athenian sense, 'democracy' literally means demos (people) and kratos (government or power). Pericles, the great Athenian statesman, defined democracy in its original sense thus:

“Our constitution is named a democracy because it is in the hands not of the few but of the many. But our laws secure equal justice for all in their private disputes and our public opinion welcomes and honours talent in every branch of achievement... on grounds of excellence alone... our citizens attend both to public and private duties and do not allow absorption in their various affairs to interfere with their knowledge of the city's.... We decide or debate, carefully and in person all matters of policy, holding... that acts are foredoomed to failure when undertaken undisgressed”. (quoted in Macridis 1982,16)

The following points crystallize from the above enunciation of democracy by Pericles, viz:

a. Government by the people with the full and direct participation of the people.
b. Equality before the law.
c. Pluralism — that is, respect for all talents, pursuits and viewpoints.
d. Respect for a separate and private (as opposed to public) domain for fulfillment and expression of an individual's personality.

These principles have for over two millennia remained the defining characteristics of democracy despite whatever cultural or ideological tinge that may be imposed on it by the various adaptations described above. Hence, whether one is talking about western or bourgeois democracy, social democracy, or African consensus democracy, these four cannons of democracy remain the universal index of democracy. The various adaptations rise or fall in their claim to democracy according to the degree they exemplify these cannons of democracy.
(ii) Understanding Existentialist Notion of Authentic Existence
To understand the existentialist notion of 'authenticity', it is necessary to grasp existentialism as a philosophical current of which 'authenticity' is but one of the leitmotifs. In the beginning, it should be noted that existentialism is more of a movement than a close—knit or homogeneous school of thought members of which hold basically the same doctrine as is the case, for example, with Aristotelianism.

Existentialism had its first formal expression in the philosophy of the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) with variations found in diverse philosophers as Schelling, Marx, William James, Bergson, Nietzsche, Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. What all these philosophers had in common was a concern about existence. But here again it is necessary to emphasize that existentialists use the word 'existence' in a peculiar sense. In such peculiar sense, only human beings exist while all other kinds of beings are, but do not exist. Existentialism is, therefore, the philosophy of human existence, a philosophy preoccupied with what it means for human being to exist. The existentialist philosophers analyze and describe what they see as peculiar characteristics of human existence, namely, irrationalism, facticity, commitment, anguish, freedom, choice and responsibility.

For the existentialists, human existence does not simply mean 'being there'; human existence is a drama in which every individual is an actor. To exist is to be personally involved in the drama of life as an actor rather than as a passive spectator. To exist means to be personally committed to a freely chosen life; it means being conscious of the problem of human life with all the choices open to man and freely opting for a certain way of life while assuming full personal responsibility for it. It means really living one's own life the way one has freely chosen and assuming responsibility for it. We can see that in this sense of existence only human beings can exist. Heidegger expressed this by saying: “The being that exists is man. Man alone exists. Trees are, but they do not exist. Angels are, but do not exist. God is, but he does not exist” (W. Kaufmaun, 1956:215)

For Kierkegaard, the first formal exponent of existentialism, the facts of the individual man wading through the vicissitudes of daily life are given primacy. Thus, for him, the putative truths of reason quarried from logic, metaphysics or theology or any claims to collectivity are dubious and beside the question. The urgent question is: “What is the truth for me?” In raising and answering this question, Kierkegaard opposed all idealisms particularly the Hegelian idealism and his native Danish Church which he excoriated for its hypocrisy. He saw all forms of idealisms as illusory and delusory systems of thought far removed and irrelevant to the individual's peculiar life situations. The following quote from his Concluding Unscientific Postscript bares his essential thought on this:

“It is a misunderstanding to be concerned about any reality other than one’s own ethical reality: each individual is isolated and compelled to exist for himself. The individual cannot be defined; he can be known only by himself
from within. His own being is the first and proper object of his thinking, by
which he is to judge everything else.... The goal of movement for an
existing individual is to arrive at a decision, and to renew it.... Through
having willed in this manner, through having ventured to take a decisive
step in the utmost intensity of subjective passion and with full
consciousness of one's eternal responsibility (which is within the capacity of
every human being), one learns something else about life, and learns that it
is quite a different thing from being engaged, year in year out, in piecing
together something for a system” (quoted in Blackham 1972:8-9)

What is crystal clear from the above quote is that the individual human being gives
himself a stable ethical reality by forming and renewing himself in critical decisions which
are a total inward commitment (decisions, for example, as to vocation, marriage, faith). In
this, Kierkegaard displays Socrates’ unmistakable influence on him. Socrates had redirected
philosophic attention from the cosmos to the individual through his famous epigram, “The
unexamined life is not worth living” with which he critiqued Greek social culture.

Kierkegaard praised such redirection and held that “Socrates was a man whose energies
were devoted to thinking; but he reduced all other knowledge to indifference in that he
accentuated ethical knowledge” (quoted in Blackham, 1972:8). Kierkegaard’s existentialism
is in a way fruition of Socratic injunction to examine life for as Kierkegaard says, “My
whole life is an epigram calculated to make people aware”. (Quoted in Blackham, 1972:6).

What is more, Kierkegaard regarded Socrates as an ethical hero having rejected the options
to go into exile or renounce his teachings and chose instead to die for his convictions.

Kierkegaard’s life mission which he had earlier envisioned and thought incongruous
with marriage (and broke off his engagement to Regina Olsen) was, as he said above, “to
make people aware”, to make people conscious of their absolute freedom, choice and
responsibility, to make people know that in every life situation they face either—or, they are
confronted by alternatives which they must choose and then face the attendant
responsibility. At this point, we have come well-nigh the threshold to understanding the
existentialist concept of authentic existence. When a person is confronted by life situation
and he procrastinates, postpones or evades commitment or taking decision, he is, to the
existentialists, not living authentic existence. Such person, the existentialists would tell us, is
evading his freedom, choice and the attendant responsibility. However, such
procrastination, postponement or evasion is only apparent because, according to the
existentialists, freedom, choice and responsibility are ineluctable as they constitute the very
structure of man's being and to evade them is inauthentic existence. One may, according
to the existentialists, also evade freedom, choice, commitment and the attendant
responsibility by allegiance to idealisms or abstractions (thought systems) which
existentialists generally reject as unhelpful and irrelevant to the individual man in his
concrete life situations because they shift attention away from the concrete individual to
the concept of universals, inclining the individual to think instead of to be, to think the
Absolute Thought instead of being involved in decisions and commitments. Such idealisms or abstractions include the ideas of 'human nature', absolute values, rights and wrongs and passive conformity to social patterns of behavior.

It is important to note that the existentialists stress that authentic existence involves a foundational/basic attitude of the mind, namely, commitment or in the words of Kierkegaard, passion as in the absence of this the individual cannot exercise his freedom, choice and the attendant responsibility. Our chosen task is to show how the notion of authentic existence can catalyze Nigeria's democratization project but before we do so it is important to have a panoramic view of the country's socio-political experience. To this we turn.

The Nigerian State and Society in Democratic Transition

The modern state paradigm in Africa is imperiled so much that there are whispers in Western capitals and among disillusioned Africans whether surrender of these fragile sovereignties to their former imperial powers would not be a viable option. The Nigerian state today is severely challenged not only by the Boko Haram's terrorism but also by ethnic chauvinism and hatred, bigotry, illiteracy and endemic corruption which had once plunged the country into hellish strife and civil war. These challenges are so serious that there are fears whether the American prediction of the eventual unraveling of the Nigerian will turn out true. The shambolic socio-political condition in Nigeria and some other sub-Saharan African countries is brought about mainly by dictatorship which, by its nature, engenders corruption. This parlous state of affairs is more regrettable against the backdrop that at the independence of Nigeria from Britain in 1960 there was a great hope that self-rule would heal the wounds of colonialism and turn the country into a homeland of the black race. This was not to be as the crass ineptitude and corruption of the new indigenous political elite pushed the country to the precipice and evoked mass disenchantment and revulsion. The result was a violent coup d'état on January 15, 1966 which was the first ever military intervention in the politics and governance of Nigeria. The following excerpt of the Speech of the military revolutionaries is a vivid reflection of the social rot the first indigenous government brought about:

“Our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten per cent; those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers or VIPS at least, the tribalists, the nepotists, those that make the country look big for nothing before the international circles; those that have corrupted our society and put the Nigerian political calendar back by their words and deeds…” (Quoted in Madunagu 2001: 32).

It is a tragic irony that successive military regimes from 1966 to 1999, punctuated by short civilian regimes, failed in their ostensible mission to stabilize the Nigerian state and upgrade the society. The long period of military rule continued a hideous assault on the
Nigerian psyche from where British colonialism left off. At the time the most notorious of the military despots, General Abacha, died in bizarre circumstances after his eight years reign of terror and barbarism, the Nigerian state and society were at the lowest ebb in all the known indices of modern civilization. Crass corruption and impunity had become the order of the day. And what is worse, the Nigerian military as an institution became as parlous as the society it came to mend. Indeed the handover of power to elected civilian government in 1999 was a dual anodyne: the military was happily released from their self-inflicted burden of ineptitude and corruption while the society was released from military dictatorship. The myth of military interventionism exploded as the myth of the civilizing mission of colonialism before it.

Civil rule resumed in 1999 and periodic elections have been had in 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 but these periodic elections merely signify democratic transition; they were not definitive democratic elections because they were neither free nor fair. Respect for human rights, political participation, free and fair elections, transparency and accountability remain daunting tasks for democracy in Nigeria. This condition prevailed and still prevails because of two reasons. In the first place, the military, having been infiltrated and influenced by the bankrupt national political elites shortly after the coup d'état, was not corrective and redemptive. Instead, it raised the co-efficient of National decay as witnessed in the notorious regimes of Generals Babangida and Abacha. In the second place, the long years of military rule has exacted a mortal wound on the national psyche. The national psyche is brutalized, militarized and vulgarized and, in consequence, has precipitated a culture of impunity in public affairs.

This impunity in public affairs is symbolized by electoral fraud which has become a feature of elections in Nigeria, a condition under which former President Obasanjo declared the 2007 election “as do or die election” and the ruling party’s secretary, Vincent Ogbulafor, declared that the party will rule Nigeria for 60 years. This appalling condition prevailed even in the 2015 general election, what with the innovation in electoral violence and intimidation by Senator Omisore, a governorship candidate in the August 9, 2014 gubernatorial election in Osun state when he campaigned guarded by hooded gun-trotting security men (The Nation on Sunday, July 6, 2014, 4). Although the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) chairman condemned it (The Nation on Sunday, August 24, 2014, 15) and assured that never again shall the 'unknown security official' be a feature of the nation’s electioneering process, the Ekiti state governor, Mr. Ayo Fayose, used violence on 22 and 25 September 2014 to abort a court sitting to hear a case against his eligibility to stand in the election. The government agency entrusted with the supervision of the Judiciary, the National Judicial Council, reacted to the attack on a sitting court regretting it has become a common feature in the country’s body politic in the following words:

“Council in very strong terms condemned the attacks on the judiciary and judicial officers in general across the country and in particular, the one
carried out in high court complex, Ado-Ekiti on 22nd and 25th September, 2014. Council requested the inspector-General of police to take over and investigate the alleged attacks on Hon. Justices John Adeyeye and Isaac Ogunyemi, some members of staff of the court and vandalizing of property of the high court of justice, Ado-Ekiti and bring the culprits to justice” (The Nation on Sunday, October 5, 2014, 67)

This impunity explains why the world ethical watchdog, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index showed Nigeria has not made any appreciable progress in her much-touted anti-corruption campaign with her 139th position out of 176 countries in 2012 from her 30th position out of 180 countries in 2009 while the Mo Ibrahim Foundation rated the country as 14th out of the considered 16 countries in West Africa on human rights, political participation, transparency and accountability (The Nation on Sunday, October 21, 2012, 15). Perhaps, what qualifies as a stronger testament to the degree of impunity and corruption in public affairs in Nigeria comes from World Bank's former technocrat, Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. She said in an article in a British newsmagazine that she would be quite satisfied if by the end of her term as the country's finance minister and the co-coordinating minister of the economy she would be able to reduce the scale of corruption and mismanagement in the country by 4% (The Economist, March 2012). All these aberrations show the country is neither a democratic state nor a good soil for democratic incubation, even though it is under a civilian government. At best, it is only transiting to democracy and this requires weaning the average Nigerian off the undemocratic habits acquired in the long years of brutalization, militarization and vulgarization of the national psyche and culture under military rule. What is required at this juncture of the country's historic evolution is attitudinal change and value re-orientation especially on the part of the political elites who should be salt and conscience of the body politic. This is where the existentialist philosophy of authentic existence comes to the bargain as an intellectual instrument for democratization and it will be against the grain of the country's political elite whose predatory politics a popular columnist, Tatalo Alamu, once lamented in the following words:

"Is there an elite conspiracy against democratic rule in this country? The attitude of many members of the ruling class does not reflect the mental conditioning of those committed to the general principles of democracy either as a short term prospect or as a long term project. Yet without such mental conditioning, we can never build durable institutions, and without such durable institutions we can never sustain democracy. It is an appalling prospect for nation and society. The international community must be watching Nigeria with a degree of sympathy-fatigue. The cost of maintaining a deficient democracy is becoming truly prohibitive in terms of
human toll and economic wastage” (The Nation on Sunday, December 23, 2012, 3)

The fundamental thesis of this essay is a call on every Nigerian to become an actor in the political process of the country as it is believed that such commitment will yield faithful political leadership and vigilant political followership. The organic and dialectical relationship between these political classes, it is further believed, will catalyze the democratization process. This call is predicated on Professor Ake's thesis that political conditions are the greatest impediment to development in Africa (Claude Ake 1996: 7-9). The extant political conditions which manipulate and employ the state as an instrument of predation by elite minority should be superseded and replaced by the political conditions of true democracy which history has shown to be the only path to sustainable development. The intellectual attitudes necessary for incubation of such political conditions of true democracy is what existentialist philosophy of authentic existence has spelled out.

Existentialist Notion of Authentic Existence as a Catalyst to Nigeria's Democratization Process.

The existentialist notion of 'authentic existence' holds strong remedial prospects for driving the much vaunted Nigeria's democratization process. Its constitutive elements viz, freedom, choice, commitment, responsibility, critical individualism and a focus on man's work-a day-life as against pure thought or idealism are powerful germs of cultivating enlightened citizenry or as Kierkegaard himself would put it 'make the citizens aware'.

Freedom, choice and responsibility constitute a trilogy in existentialist thought and the existentialist's formulation of the trilogy provides a formidable bastion of democracy with the latter properly understood as ultimately mediated by, and anchored on, the individual both through knowledge of oneself and the other. The individual under existentialist thought is every time confronted with absolute and inalienable freedom to choose from alternatives and he cannot evade this freedom and choice. Even where, as it so often happens, he tries to evade this by pitiable efforts at postponement or procrastination, he has indeed made a choice howbeit in a negative direction. Every Nigerian has inalienable freedom to make political choices that can deepen the country's democracy be it in the form of socio-political advocacy, activism, civil protests and voting for patriotic elements during elections.

To be a truly existing individual within the context of existentialism, every Nigerian must be actor and not a spectator. Such exercise of political consciousness or vigilance would have saved the country the problems and pains of military interventions in governance (coup d'état), aborted political transitions, corrupt and inept governments which have characterized the country's history since independence in 1960. Majority of Nigerians evaded the exercise of their political freedom and, in existentialist terms, that evasion is a choice to continue to live with corrupt and inept government. The country's
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duplicitous political leaders and the politically naïve members of the public distorted, misconstrued and projected this act of bad faith or inauthentic existence to be a virtue. Indeed they speak glowingly about Nigerians being gifted, hardworking and long-suffering people.

The third arm of the existentialist trilogy I am proposing and propounding as a catalyst to the democratization process in Nigeria is the existentialist notion of responsibility. Another aspect of bad faith or inauthentic existence or self-deception common among majority of Nigerians is the shirking responsibility for the collective failure to build a virile democracy occasioned by their inability to exercise their inalienable freedom and choice to bring about a truly democratic state. Existentialist concept of authentic existence stipulates that the actor in the drama of existence should take responsibility for his actions. But majority of Nigerians instead find excuses and attribute the causes of the country's dysfunctional democracy to ethnicism, failure of leadership, military incursion into politics and international sabotage.

The existentialist notion of responsibility adopted and adapted to the context of this essay demands Nigerians to choose to belong to either the ranks of faithful political leadership or vigilant political followership. It has no room for political apathy because as the existentialist political activist, Malcom X, puts it “every onlooker is either a coward or a traitor”. As Aristotle rightly reasoned deductively, man is both a rational animal and a political animal and these attributes predispose man to live in polis (a polity). For the existentialist, to “live in polis” is to be involved in the political life of the polity or society. Although the existentialist notion of responsibility does not connote moral responsibility, a political leadership has a contractual duty under the theory of social contract to be faithful. This is the ground for my use of the term “faithful political leadership”.

Indeed to “live in polis” is, from existentialist stand point, aggregating social actors into the ranks of faithful political leadership and vigilant political followership. In the nature of things, there is organic and dialectical relationship between the ranks of faithful political leadership and the ranks of vigilant political followership because both are products of social action and such relationship can operate as a strong catalyst to the democratization of Nigerian polity when properly nurtured and harnessed. It is not difficult to comprehend how the organic dialectics between faithful political leadership and vigilant political followership can catalyze the democratic process. This is because there is inter-breeding, inter-borrowing and mutual checks and balances between them. And the manure for nurturing the organic and dialectical relationship between faithful political leadership and vigilant political followership is the inculcation in, and assimilation by, Nigerians of existentialist notion of freedom, choice and responsibility. These are themselves the engines of social action.
Conclusion

From the forgoing, it is indisputable that Nigeria's democratization process should be seen as a common existentialist project of all Nigerians irrespective of the obvious cultural pluralities of her indigenous peoples. The corollary is that passionate nationalism is more than ever a desideratum. Such passionate nationalism should fire and drive the organic and dialectical relationship between faithful political leadership and vigilant political followership propounded in this essay as being both a catalyst of democratization process and the product of social action. But the engine and ultimate catalyst of both social action and the dialectics of faithful political leadership and vigilant political followership is existentialist notion of authentic existence as expressed by, and argued through, the kindred notions of freedom, choice and responsibility in this essay.
References