



## Political Thuggery as a Blight to Nation Building and Democracy in Nigeria: Appraising the Role of Drama and Playwright

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### Abstract

Political thuggery is a form of social violence that has posed a lot of problems to Nigeria. The problem is so much that it threatens the socio-economic and political fabric of the Nigerian society. Thugs are often used, especially during election periods, to intimidate, harass and in some cases kill political opponents. This paper critically examines the underlying factors responsible for thuggery as impediment to nation building and sustainable democratic system. The study is anchored on Frustration – Aggression Theory (FAT). The theory was propounded in an attempt to explain the occurrence of violence and crimes in a society. In their view, human beings have needs, ambitions, or expectations in life that are arranged in their order of priority. The paper revealed that unemployment, inadequate political education, poverty (among the citizenry) and inordinate ambition among the political elites are some of the factors responsible for political thuggery. The paper appraises the content of Alex Asigbo's *The Reign of Pascal Amusu* and Tor Iorapuu's *April 1421* adopting the qualitative research methodology. The findings reveal that playwrights and dramatic works have beamed their searchlights on the issues of thuggery as a bane to nation building and sustainable democracy. To this end, the paper concludes that a synergy of efforts by all stake holders in the society can curb the trend if not out rightly eliminating it and recommends among others that both government and non-governmental organization should work hand in hand to provide employment opportunity for the citizens towards peaceful society and sustainable nation building.

**Key words:** Political Thuggery; Political thuggery; Social violence; Drama; Playwright

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### INTRODUCTION

Political thuggery is a devastating phenomenon in Nigeria's Politics. It has brought about the loss of lives and valuable properties with socio-political and economic consequences. This phenomenon is characterized by crisis, conflict, dispute, rebellion, violence and even war which affect political development especially democratic sustainability. The phenomenon has become detrimental to democratic sustainability in Nigeria (the electorates are not at peace with themselves). The thugs move mostly in organized groups victimizing, terrorizing, intimidating and injuring not only politicians but also innocent individuals. Corroborating this, Abubakar, Ahmed and Babayo submit that, "the menace is responsible for poor political culture as it results to death or poses deadly threats by deterring individuals from actively participating in politics and routine socio-economic activities at their homes, shops and on the streets within the country" (16).

According to Hassan, "elite and politicians recruit unemployed youths into thuggery for their self-aggrandizement during political processes like campaigns and elections to serve as thugs, to snatch ballot papers and ballot boxes" (122). In the same vein, "Elite most especially political class who hold political power use various means in order to remain in power without considering the state of socio-political harmony of their respective societies and the sustainability of democracy

(Abubakar, Ahmed and Babayo 16). This class of people recruit and sponsor some youth that pay allegiance to them and consequently they benefit from the services rendered to them by these thugs.

Elections in most African countries such as Kenya, Sierra-Leone, Ethiopia and many more are characterized by uncertainties, due to the possibility of election related violence. Election related violence may take different stages of the electoral process: before, during or after elections. Accordingly, "During the 2003 Federal and states elections in Nigeria, at least 100 people were killed and many more were injured" (*Human Rights Watch 2004* Para 5). Similarly, in the 2007 and 2011 general elections (in Kogi, Bayelsa etc) there were reported cases of violence and maiming in some states and local governments of the federation (country report 2011 cited in Obi 17), the same report was cited in (Avidime, and Agaba 198).

Approximately 600 people were killed in the 2007 election violence in Kenya, following disputes over the results of the December 2007 presidential elections (BBC News 2008). During the August 2007 run-off elections in Sierra Leone, violence erupted following a clash between the supporters of the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) and the opposition All People's Congress (APC). Similarly, violent attacks were also reported against the supporters of the SLPP when the APC leader was sworn in as the new president (BBC News 2007). Elections in Zimbabwe, Uganda, Ethiopia, Chad and Zambia have also been characterized by violence (BBC News 2007). Thus, "The incidence of election-rated violence in Africa is so high that even if election considered to be free and fair, the electoral outcome may not have been free of violence before, during and after the election (Avidime and Agaba 198).

This phenomenon as noted by Abubakar, Abdulkereem, Bale, and Ramatu that, "it is characterized by crisis, conflict; dispute affects the development of modern states in all their ramifications" (167). Thus, from Europe to North America and from Latin America to Africa and Asia, many states are facing political challenges, which often involve violence. For instance, Harroff-travel in 2010, has cited few of such cases which transverse the globe in the 21st century. The first case was the 2005 experience of a wave of violent disturbances which beset the Paris suburbs, eventually spread to 200 cities in France. The second case is the 2008 experience of armed violence among different gangs in Cape Town, South Africa. The third case was the 2010 Brazilian experience of violence between drugs gangs and the police in Rio de Janeiro. Similarly, United States also experienced a number of incidents of violence in 2012 including wanton killing by gunmen. "Many countries in the Middle East were also engulfed in violent social and political crises in 2012" (Abubakar 15).

Violence of different forms have also been recorded in different regions and at different times in Nigeria, throughout its political history. The trends of violence continued in the Nigerian cities even after the 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1960 celebration of the Nigerian political independence from the British government. Cases of violence were recorded in the Nigerian cities in the 60s and beyond. Such cases include the riots that erupted from political party conflicts in the 1964 general elections and the civil war that extended across the Nigerian rural and urban areas between 6<sup>th</sup> July 1967 and 7<sup>th</sup> January 1970 (Akeem and Adeyinka, cited in Abubakar, Ahmed and Ramatu 20). There have been, particularly in the North Central part of the country, ethno-religious violence, election violence and communal conflicts in the form of pastoralists-farmers, settlers-indigenes and land disputes. Most northern Nigerian States such as Kano, Kaduna, Plateau, Borno, Bauchi, Gombe, Adamawa, Taraba, Yobe, Katsina, Nasarawa and others have experienced one form of violence or another. There are also incidences of violence in eastern Nigeria, especially through the activities of the thugs in the areas of Aba, Abakiliki Onitsha, Enugu, and Owerri. "The activities of the Oduduwa People's Congress have also contributed to a trend of violence in western Nigeria, particularly in Lagos and Ibadan. Several cases of violence have also been recorded in Warri, Port Harcourt and Yenegoa in the forms of militant attacks on multinational oil companies and kidnapping" (Abubakar 20).

Political thuggery and violence have been rooted in Nigerian democracy such that they (elites and politicians) have killed the spirit of genuine political participation both at the leadership level and among the electorates. Where these abound, the future of democracy is in doubt as a result of the fact that credible people are discouraged from participating in democracy. Among the African nations, political thuggery in the form of using the unemployed youth and the security agencies by political demagogues has created a serious setbacks and underdevelopment as the electorates are discouraged from participating in political activities. Democracy as one of the important agenda before the United Nations, to protect human rights and encourage development, has been endangered by political thuggery making it necessary for scientific evaluation.

Okafor and Okafor note that, "Nigeria as a nation is characterized with high level political apathy resulting on low turnout during general election. Electorates have alleged it is on the account of political thuggery and their destructive attitude in Nigeria" (18). The present study is focused on political thuggery as the bane of democracy in Nigeria. What are the immediate and remote causes of thuggery in Nigeria?

## THUGGERY, POLITICAL THUGGERY AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA AND OTHER CLIMES

The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (1995:1031) defined thug as "any person who uses violence or brutality". Thuggery, according to the Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1998:952), simply means "violent act or behavior by ruffians". Also, Lawal cited in Idris (2011:1) views thuggery as criminalization of politics. He noted that when politics is criminalized, it is left in the hands of ruffians, thugs and hooligans, while the good citizens are scared away. On the whole, political thuggery is characterized by robbery, intimidation, gangersterism, murder, physical assault and often involves physical combat between two opposing gangs or groups which ultimately generates inter-personal or group hostilities. Since the pre-independence General Election of 1959 politics in Nigeria has been characterized by thuggery and violence (Alphonsus 2015).

Political thuggery is a tool for the perpetration of political violence and subversion of democratic order. Some political leaders employ the services of thugs to intimidate majority of party members in order to impose candidates during party primaries, and to ensure that such candidates win the general election. Omotosho observed that it is as a result of the desperation of some politicians and their high handedness that there is virtually a total lack of democratic process in our political parties. Thuggery also discourages the electorates from exercising their franchise and thereby creating the unacceptable situation of low turnout during general elections (Okafor and Okafor 28).

The concept of democracy has been defined differently by different scholars depending on the circumstance and interest of their research. Accordingly, democracy here emphasizes political freedoms and procedures, including 'government by the people', political rights and elections or civil liberties. It entails 'civilian politics' that provide substantive values such as peace, social and economic development, or equality and justice in every political community.

The meaning and nature of democracy are subjected to its application in different environments. In discussing the nature of Nigeria democracy, Jega (15) observes that "the dominant model, historically and contemporarily, in terms of the number of the countries who have used or are using it, is a liberal democracy. It is predicated on the individual freedom; equality before the law; universal suffrage (voting rights); election and representation". Additional features include popular sovereignty; popular representation; majority government; guarantee of freedom (basic); consensus and accommodation; peaceful resolution of disputes; free market and enterprise. Liberal democracy is also variously referred to as bourgeois democracy and elite democracy.

A democratic system is said to "enable citizens to control public policy pertaining to the holding of elections under certain forms, to the central, national decision-making organs and to the maintenance of certain fundamental political liberties" (Hadenius cited in Umar 3). However, this definition limits the scope of democratic experience to the central level of governance by excluding other important levels of analysis such as the state and local governments that played an important role in a federal system of government. Thus, any definition of democracy should not only consider the system that observes election to control public policy decisions alone but also recognizes other fundamental issues that have to do with social justice, economic development, political rights, harmony and social security as the major pillars of democratic sustainability.

Furthermore, sustainable democracy is seen as the imperative for states to uphold democratic values, nation building and institutions that is premeditated for states to uphold democratic values. Sustainable democracy allows the citizens to know the processes of decision making with regard to the issues affecting their societies, hence gravitating towards nation building. Transparency, accountability, rule of law, constitutionalism and justice are the pivotal principles that accompany the human coexistence in a democratic system without infringing on their Fundamental Human Rights (Umar 27). And, above all, they are pointers towards nation building and acceptable and amicable democratic hegemony.

Sustainable democracy is not merely the establishment of democratic structures, institutions and procedures; it is also about the way democratic values and processes become embedded into the minds of individuals and groups in their political communities. In this view, some scholars are pessimistic that democratic values are blunted because the daunting economic difficulties, human rights violation and other abuses, ethnic cum religious crises, corruption, violence, political thuggery and fragility of civil society have disclosed and exacerbated the major challenges of democracy and democratic sustainability in Nigeria (Diamond, 1996, Monshipouri, 1995, O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1993 cited in Umar 3). Democracy in developing countries of Africa has not accompanied with the designed principles as "many cases of transition to democracy have spawned up what can be referred to as democracy without democrats or democratic dividends" (Jega 20). Nonetheless, Ake also strongly argues that democracy accommodates popular participation but such participation is highly restricted and accompanied by threats to socio-economic and political stability and development. As such, Umar also views democracy as a system that allows elite instability as a condition in which members of the political elite use violent actions or the threats of violence to remove persons from their command position in the national government (27).

Appraising the nature of democracy in Nigeria, Steenis (5) notes that the “present elitist democracy is petrifying because dead money suppresses original ideas of free people. Creativity and autonomy are not appreciated. Democracy is hardly less violent than other social systems. Hundreds of millions of people are killed in wars started by democrats. Rich Western democracies support regimes that maintain a situation in which many people do not even get enough food” (Steenis 25). This shows that democracy in Nigeria is misused by the people in power at various levels of government without considering the social milieu which determines social coexistence to reach peaceful, stable and harmonious political communities. Hence, democracy is associated with negative values, more especially in Nigeria where social vices including corruption, conflict for resource control, ethno-religious violence, armed robbery and kidnapping are engineered by known and unknown people to achieve selfish interest. These and many are inimical to the democratic sustainability in Nigeria.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The need to understand the people’s perception of political thuggery in Nigeria is necessary, this is because people hold different beliefs in different society, which are in most cases instructed by educational status, cultural and economic standing. In order to understand this factor properly one theory is adopted. The theory is Frustration-aggression theory to better explain this paper.

As noted by Galadima, Sivapalan, Abd Hair (2019) this research adopts Frustration-Aggression theory that was propounded by Dollard et al in 1939 and was cited by Chiazor in 2017. The theory was propounded in an attempt to explain the occurrence of violence and crimes in a society. In their view, human beings have needs, ambitions, or expectations in life that are arranged in their order of priority. That once the attainment of these needs, particularly the basic needs are delayed, prevented or denied frustration sets in and the consequences could be aggressive. The implication of this theory is that aggression is a consequence of frustration due to unobtainable needs or expectations in life. This Frustration-Aggression theory is opted for this research and could be used to link up with the ever increasing rate to youth unemployment and political thuggery in Nigeria. The inability of Nigerian government providing employment opportunity for its unemployed youths has provided a fertile atmosphere or environment for frustration for the unemployed youths. It is strongly believed that there is a feeling of joy and expectation when a student is about finishing from university or other higher institution of learning. This expectation gradually declines away and is replaced with frustration after some years of hopelessness as necessitated by unfruitful efforts made to secure employment opportunity. When the frustration prolongs

as the employment delays or denied, there could be the earnest probability that the unemployed youths may resort to unethical engagements, activities or means to actualize their desired goals or needs in the society. The implication of the above is that, Political thuggery and its violence activities in Nigeria is a glaring exhibition of Frustration-Aggression theory from the great number of unemployed youths in Nigeria, especially the North East due to the denial of employment opportunities for them to earn a living. And it is most applicable and useful in this context, coupled with a Nigerian adage that says a hungry man is an angry man. (Breuer & Bison, 2017; Dialoke & Edeja, 2017; Nwogwugwu & Irechukwu, 2015).

## APPRAISING THE ROLE OF DRAMA AND PLAYWRIGHT

Playwriting is one of the oldest arts in the theatre. It is the act of critically and creatively putting down events and societal happening on paper in a sequential and organized way in order to convey a message to the reader. According to Yerima, “playwriting is the act of putting words together to form dialogue existing in its logic and reality. It could be from the playwright’s personal experience or from the society” (9). Duruaku opines that, “playwriting demands courage and discipline, courage to face a critical society, discipline to document on experience through a severe punishment of the corporeal body and the brain on mental resources” (42). Example of this, is Tor Iorapuu’s *April 1421*, a play text sets in a construction site which is a metaphorical representation of Nigeria.

In as much as a playwright functions as a mirror of his own society, some playwrights in most cases based their writing not on the need to arouse the consciousness of their people but to rather entertain and relieve the audience from tension. This explains the reason why a writer employs an approach of his choice in writing his play. Approaches such as Marxist, feminist, mythological, sociological, deconstructive approach exist, but a playwright always based his writing on the one that favour him that is why Ngugi Wa Thiong’o says that: “A writer has no choice, whether he is aware of it his work reflects one of or more aspect of the intense economic, political and ideological struggle in a society, every writer is a writer of politics but the only thing is who’s politics” (2). Thus, a playwright, writes for or against any subject matter he sets to discuss in his play depending on his stand point, and perception of the issues under-discuss, but the issue here is how playwrights in recent time have tried to recast our mind back to the inception of democratic practice in Nigeria till date. This paper by and large analyses Asigbo’s aesthetics and ironical application of symbolism as a means of navigating through his play *The Reign of Pascal Amusu* to show how the Nigerian democratic practice is full of greed, insensitivity,

hypocrisy, corruption and ineptitude. The paper further describes the concept of democracy in relation to the prevailing situation in Nigeria's democratic space and the correlation with the mirrored realities in Alex Asigbo's *The Reign of Pascal Amusu* featuring leadership failure in a democratic environment and struggle.

In the same vein, Tor Iorapuu's *April 1421* demonstrates the typical situation of ballot box snatching, votes buying, votes selling amongst other things that have served as bane to nation building. This can be seen in the words of the playwright, though in pidgin language thus:

**Corporal:** Oga, e be like say tori don the yawa for construction site. First, I hear say the people wey the look for work push the construction gate open waka enter. Second bi say, the construction workers too don vex. I hear say Hon. Senator Carry voting machine come site. Na there dem manufacture ballot papers; Oga, if we too go vote for police station, I go recommend Ghana Must Go as ballot box. See am, everywhere the place the boil like Christmas tomato, If na Ghana Must go, who for shout say dem steal election? Because why, Ghana must go no de transparent (Iorapuu 16)

No state would be bedeviled with this kind of problem of election malpractices like, hiring of thugs, vote buying and selling, snatching of ballot boxes and printing ballot papers against the people's interest will experience nation building and enviable democratic process. Therefore, the playwrights and their dramatic pieces have engaged this menace or cankerworms that impeded the growth of the nation and democracy. Because the challenge is that, the people would have lost the chance of selecting good leaders who would have piloted the affairs of the state towards nation building. Since they do not possess the ability to elect their leaders, the resultant effect according to Mrs. Akpambo, is that:

some these awful men impregnate women, becoming biological fathers. In doing this, these men sometimes begin a new generation of irresponsible lazy, hateful liars, who depend on the gun and other corrupt ways for power. What a shame, people. (Iorapuu 8)

Like the typical Nigerian society and its prevailing realities as regards our elections and appointments of leaders, Iorapuu as a playwrights interrogate the recruitment and dumping of thugs after elections which obviously are inimical to nation building.

**Mrs. Akpambo:** You are right Four years ago I was much younger and stronger. I am older and as a matter of fact tired. I pray to see the end of this struggle. Many of us are felling by the way. The former Youth Leader has joined them. Unfortunately, he did not last long. That is their strategy; Use you and kill you.

**Youth Leader:** Our brother was deceived. He thought he was in a deal with human beings. The y recruited him among others to rig elections and soon after they were set up and killed. (Iorapuu 27)

Thus, drama as Kofoworola points out in Peter Emeka "...provides an existing forum for dissecting societal ills and problems with the ultimate aim of finding solutions" (285). He further opines thus: "Hence playwrights use drama as a medium of re-enacting some prevailing realities in the society in a bid to instigate public debates which are aimed at creating the fore for mind-rubbing, which in turn will generate robust awareness amongst the populace in order to trigger positive communal quests for solutions to varied societal maladies and anomalies" (285). The submission above in a nut-shell tells us that drama is not just a mere instrument of entertainment but a weapon that conscientizes and sensitizes the masses on what have to do with them and a need to call for positive change that in turn will benefit the society. Drama to Dryden in Nwabueze that: "a play ought to be just and lively imagination of human nature, reproducing the passions and humours, and changes of fortune to which it is subject, for delight and instruction of mankind" (17). However, there are things to consider in playwriting the first is: The Target Audience: The creative writer or playwright has to determine his or her audience. The protected readership often decides for him how to approach his work. A play for children is quite different from adult drama and a religious play must not abuse the sensibilities of the target audience.

The playwright should also consider Dramatic Questions: Every play evolves from the need to point out a condition in human life by presenting things the way they are, how they are, how they are not, how they may become and how the dramatist wishes them to be. He bases his attitude to his work on his observations of man in the society. Therefore, every play seeks not just to entertain, but to solve a problem. It is the effort to solve this problem that creates conflicts and resolutions, suspense which make the dramatist genre so enthralling. From the beginning of a play therefore, a question arises as to how one or more issues introduced early in the play will be resolved. Even before the theme of the play is apparent, the dramatist questions emerge: who will win the conflict? Will the find the solution? How will it be resolved? Will the evil character get away with his plans? Every play generates a dramatic question. Usually, it is on this that much of the suspense in the drama hinges.

Also, the playwright should consider the dramatic structure, and dramatic dialogue in order to make or produce a comprehensive text. Playwriting is a tedious effort. The necessity for compressed storytelling, implied meaning and economy imposed by the dramaturgical form, tasks the playwright in a manner that sometimes seems to construct the expression of his vision. He has limited time and space to communicate. Therefore, the formal tools of playwriting are crucial to writing a play in a clear, exciting and ever meaning-revealing manner.

This means that a play must imitate and impersonate, and must deal with the actions of human beings, with the aim of instructing and entertaining a target audience. It is very important to point out here that:

drama uses imitation and impersonation to speak to the audience's mind, which is a clear picture of what Alex Asigbo's *The Reign of Pascal Amusu* represents". The play though an ironical and symbolic representation of characters and characterizations is the playwright's thought and imagination to bring to the fore a national issue. (Mohammed-Kabir and Yunusa 1)

They argued that, "this agrees with the reason why drama involves imitation, impersonation and a deliberate interest in costume, speech production, gesticulation, and rhythmic movement of the body" (2). The emphasis here is on the imitation of human beings action acted out by people on stage before a targeted audience with the sole aim of educating, informing, entertaining and above all. conscientizing and sensitizing the audience. Perhaps it is clear that based on Asigbo's characterization in the play, he attempts to create a mental picture of Nigeria democratic space. Also, it is worthy to note that the thematic pre-occupation of the play is not centred on the issue of democratic practice alone but reflect the question of good governance and leadership.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings show that unemployment is a factor aiding political thuggery among the Nigerian teeming youths. Therefore it is recommended that government and non-governmental organizations should work hand in hand to create employment opportunity for the teeming youths for aggressive nation building.

Since Nigeria has a strong personalities and weak institutions. It is recommended that instead of weak institutions with strong personalities there is rather immediate need for establishment of strong and workable institutions that can resist the wave of electoral violence for sustainable nation building and democracy.

Playwrights should intensify their efforts in a bid to explore on democratic issues that are bedeviling the nation and hindering the growth and development of Nigeria towards the enviable democracy and infringed nation building.

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## CONCLUSION

From the findings and recommendations, the paper asserts that holistic approach which entails provision of employment opportunity for the teeming youth and synergy of effort by the law enforcement agency and judiciary to deal with the culprit which will out rightly reduce or eliminate political thuggery from our domain which will definitely bring peace to the society at large will surely gravitate towards nation building.

Political thuggery as the bane for democracy and nation building in Nigeria started with the introduction to the study, as what the thugs stand to cause for the society and various concepts by different scholars were explained, literatures were reviewed to see the major findings, frustration and aggression theory was used to explain the work. It is discovered during the course of research that unemployment is one of the major causes of political thuggery and thus hostile to nation building. It is also found out that African state (Nigeria) has a strong personalities and weak institutions. Finally, there is always lack of security since all the security personnel are used in distorting electoral processes thus causing insecurity in the country antagonistic to sustainable democracy and enviable nation building.

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