
Democracy and Academic Freedom in Nigeria: a Philosophical Perspective

ASSO. PROF. G.A.I. NWOGU
National Open University of Nigeria
gainwogu@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The paper attempts at exploring the meaning of democracy and academic freedom, and the role of education in cultivating the right attitudes, through some sorts of processes, aimed at making citizens effective members of their society. The application of academic freedom in a democratic Nigeria was further examined. A way forward was proffered and the paper finally looked at academic freedom as an extension of individual freedom in a democratic society, adding that it is only when a society learns to uphold the tradition of encouraging the holding of diverse and differing views on any issue that academic freedom can lay a solid foundation for both democracy and freedom in a given society.

Introduction:

Any proposal that education should be democratic cannot seriously be contested in any country. This, however, could be interpreted in many ways. It could mean that the educational system of a country should be democratically distributed and organized or that there is a lack of impediment or constraint on a citizen doing what he might want to do. It might also have to do with the issue of distribution and development of the frontiers of knowledge or the right of parents to educate their children as they deem fit.

Exploring the scenario further, we can say that any system which neglects the education of a majority of its population or about whose people have no say would commonly be thought to be undemocratic. Our assumption, here, are based on the fact that education implies the intentional bringing about of what R.S. Peters in Archambault (1972) says 'is a desirable state of mind'. In this case a plea would be made for the rights of the citizens of that society to have some say in the running of their institutions.

Another way of looking at the democratization of education in a given society might be by insisting that the content of education is democratic since according to Ryle (1949) education relates to some sorts of processes in which a desirable state of mind develops. In that way the school can be seen as a vehicle for training citizens in the right attitudes and skills appropriate in a democratic setting. Before we focus our gaze further on what makes the education of a society democratic, let us examine the meaning of democracy and its application to education.

The Meaning of Democracy:

The word democracy suggests a system of governance in which the people did the ruling. The people according to the Greeks, where the word originated, meant the poor as opposed to the rich at the exclusion of the slaves. The Greeks referred to democratic rule as government by consent. According to Kitto (1951) the Athenians saw democratic rule as a popular participation at every level. All citizens had a right to attend and speak at the Assembly which met every month and which was the supreme legislative body. The 'Boule', the administrative committee of the Assembly made up of 500 persons, was chosen by ballot, 50 from each of the ten Athenian tribes. Each group of 50 formed a 'prytany' and each 'prytany' formed an executive committee of the Boule for one tenth of the year. According to Kitto, one man was chosen by ballot to be the chairman for each day and he presided over the meeting of the Assembly and was the titular head of state for that day.

The administration of justice was also conducted in a democratic way as there were no permanent judges but a jury chosen by lot from the Assembly. In terms of wars, however, though all citizens were liable to military service, the ten admirals who led the nation to war were elected annually.

Attractive as the versatility and involvement in every level of government as the Athenians democracy might look, its application to involvement of large nation states, with permanent civil service, judiciary, a standing army and a police force, should compel us to look at the application of such a democracy as an anathema of the

present day representative legislation. Maybe what can be said of the original intentions of the Greek and Athenian democracy is some established procedure by means of which individuals who make up the population of large nation states can be consulted and can convey their desires and opinions, hereby referred to as the 'will of the people' to a state action and policy.

Howbeit, democracy according to Peters (1966) is an impracticable form of government because it demands of the ordinary citizen qualities which only the few can possess. He went further to state that this is particularly true nowadays, when estimates of government policy depend upon an understanding of economics which is beyond the reach of most people, and of military and diplomatic secrets that no responsible government would ever divulge in public. At this point let us turn our attention to what academic freedom means.

Academic Freedom:

Webster New World Dictionary defines Academic Freedom as the freedom of teacher or a student to hold and express views without fear of arbitrary interference by officials. In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, academic freedom is also defined as liberty to teach and to discuss problems without outside agents e.g. government interference.

In order to appreciate what the true meaning of freedom is, let us examine the statement 'I am free'. This statement immediately conjures the question "Free from what?" or "what do you mean by freedom?" According to Cranston (1967) Freedom is not a 'unitary' concept. This means that there may be many freedoms.

According to Schofield (1980), Freedom may mean 'absence of constraint'. The removal of constraints gives an individual the opportunity to indulge his desires without a limiting factor which may be natural or artificial. The interpretation of freedom as inunciated by Cranston (1967) can be better understood when we bring to memory the fact that when Medieval Universities were founded, individuals were free to pursue secular knowledge of their own choice without being forbidden to do so by the authority of the church.

Section 42 of the National Policy on Education (1999) encapsulates the essentials of academic freedom to include the internal organization and administration of each university, freedom to select students, to appoint staff, to teach, select areas of research, and disseminate the result of such research and to determine the content of courses.

Academic freedom as it affects the individual involves the freedom of the individual teacher-scholar to inquire, speak, write and publish without fear of sanction. According to Harvey (1977) academic freedom is the freedom claimed by a college or a university professor to write or speak the truth as he sees it, without fear of dismissal by his academic superiors or by authorities outside his college or university.

Harvey's definition taken hook line and sinker poses some fundamental problems. Dismissal of a university teacher is not the only sanction which would violate his freedom. Such primitive measures as demotion, withholding of merited promotion, adverse salary adjustment, censor, etc. could also lead to the conclusion that a university teacher has been deprived of his academic freedom.

In other words, academic freedom does not exist where there is an imposition of any type of barriers, or disadvantages or even withholding of a teacher's benefits such that limits the teacher in his search for truth or in his/her transmission of the 'fruits of that research' to the reading world. No matter how much we attempt justifying academic freedom as it affects a teacher and his student, it should be noted that academic freedom carries with it duties correlative with rights. A statement released by American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 1940) states

College and University teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their position in the Community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public might judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.

Lending a complementary voice to the above statement, Brubacher (1969) states that the purpose of academic freedom is not only to protect the teacher from influences, which prevent his stating the truth as he sees it, but also that he must be thoroughly competent in his field to investigate the truth. The implication of these two statements is that an effective protection of freedom does not by any means go without constraints or possibilities of

sanctions. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) quoted above makes it clear that the teachers newly acquired freedom is not licence for him to introduce controversial matter unrelated “to his subject”. Though the Association recognizes the full entitlements of a professional teacher; they are of the opinion that the teacher should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, and should show respect for the opinion of others. They went further to add that every effort be made to ensure that the teacher does not portray himself as an institutional spokesman. The teacher’s freedom does not absolve him of procedural institutional sanctions. This implies that his position as a teacher can be terminated for “good cause”.

A further investigation into what is good cause, may be the way the teacher is perceived by his peers in terms of competence, moral delinquencies and rationally, inability to perform teaching and research functions implicit in his effectiveness as a teacher. In essence his immunity from external sanctions relating to his teaching and research does not immunize his professional activities from criticism, evaluation and scrutiny (Bako, 2004).

Furthermore, it can be said that the freedom of the teacher centres on his right to teach what he likes and to put forward his own views about controversial matters. But some philosophers are of the opinion tht truth is only advanced if people are allowed to voice their own opinions however heterodox. J.S. Mill in his essay on liberty argues that if orthodox opinions are true their truth will be strengthened by being challenged by conflicting opinions. If on the other hand, they are false, their falsity cannot be exposed unless challenge to them is permitted. He opines that the pursuit of truth develops only by the progressive falsification of orthodox opinions. A difficulty, however, arises in our interpretation of laws forbidding the expression of extreme forms such as law against libel, obscenity and sedition. What should the attitude be of someone who believes in toleration to opinions that are directed against a system that makes toleration possible? We are aware that in every democratic society a balance in favour of toleration is preached. But there are such irrational forces in man that sustain and magnify his intolerance that a bias in favour of toleration is justified (Schofield, 1980). For example, “insecurity and unemployment may make men disposed to listen to those who use the free speech afforded by a democratic society to suggest that the system which makes it possible is nothing but an instrument of class oppressions”. This is the crux of the matter. A teacher’s position in regard to his expression of opinion is sometimes in jeopardy since by performing his educational role; he deals with people (his students) whose minds are immature. This imposes special responsibilities on him. At the university level, teachers’ main concern is the pursuit of truth. They often times present their own point of view strongly about controversial matters in their field of studies to their students. Many a time they are aware that there are others with different points of views to whom students can listen since at this stage many of their students have also acquired for themselves ability “to sift, assess and criticize their teachers’ views”. At Secondary School there are students who will not hear another point of view about the same matter from someone else. This is because they are not fully equipped to assess and criticize what their teachers’ opinions are. This is why a teacher is cautioned not to ‘pump opinions’ into his students but ensure that they rather acquire the competence to form their own opinions themselves. The teacher has to teach in such a way that his students can eventually dispense with them (Schofield 1980). Perhaps, it may be necessary at this stage to pay attention to Democracy and Academic Freedom in Nigeria as a digression from their philosophical analysis which has occupied much of our attention in this paper, so far.

Democracy and Academic Freedom in Nigeria:

The National Policy on Education (1981) aims at building “a free and democratic society”. Thus it can be said that this National Policy accepts academic freedom as bedrock for a free and democratic society. In the same vein, it can be argued that academic freedom cannot thrive well in a non-democratic society.

This is in tandem with the opinion of Hanson (1965) which states that “before one argues any case for academic freedom, then one must assume that the nation concerned has chosen to be democratic, open, and self-renewing, not authoritarian, closed and merely self-perpetuating”. The implication of Hanson’s statement is that though our democracy is still referred to as nascent; which means that it is still at its infancy; the free and democratic society that Nigeria aims to build is a society where citizens will not be hindered to pursue their social and economic interest in naturally acceptable ways. But the question is: are we socially and economically equipped as citizens of Nigeria? In a country where most of the citizens are semi-educated, unskilled, and many live in abject poverty, it is difficult to appraise our democracy and say that our citizens are free. The political structure in Nigeria is characterized by politicians who make a career out of politics and aim at perpetuating themselves in office by making bad laws which only oppress the people they claim to represent. It is obvious that law makers who rig elections solely to access public funds and enrich themselves cannot make laws that can sustain why visible democracy. A society that enthrone infringement of people’s right, or where some members of the society are

regarded as sacred cows and are given a free hand to flout the laws of the land, cannot be said to be democratic. A country that transfers to National Universities Commission (NUC) powers of individual university senates to regulate their academic programmes cannot be said to be academically democratic. In the same way, a nation which gives the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) unlimited powers in admission exercise, violates the freedom of the Nigerian Universities to admit their own students. This is why our university system is crisis prone as a result of avoidable breaches of academic freedom either as a result of insufficient funding from the government or undue interference in the day to day running of the universities by the government and their agencies. Invariably, this is a contradiction to what the National Policy in education provides as academic freedom for Nigerian Universities. The unredness of government to implement whatever agreements it reaches with Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) does not assuage the situation. This explains why motley provision of dilapidated infrastructure, limited funding of teaching and research facilities, dot our educational institutions.

On the other hand, a society where unresearched 'handouts' are sold for "a morsel of bread' or where 'marks for sex' are encouraged cannot be said to be democratic. A society where the influential and well to do members force their candidates on academic institutions, when such candidates do not meet the prescribed conditions for admission; and as such have no reason to be there, other than constituting themselves as threats to the institutions in the name of cultism and drug abuse; cannot be said to be democratic. A society where female students wear dresses that expose sensitive parts of their body in the name of fashion and to the consternation of the decent members of their academic community cannot be said to be democratic.

From the foregoing, we can deduce that both our society and our academic institutions are neither free nor democratic unless conscientious efforts are made to rid ourselves of these evils. We may at this stage turn our attention to the way forward, since R.S. Peters (in Archambault, 1972) states that the job of the educator is not simply to build on existing wants but to present what is worth wanting in such a way that it creates new wants and stimulates new interests.

The Way Forward

According to Hanson (1965):

democracy is deliberately designed to be a self criticizing, self renewing social system. The success of any... nation in the long run will be determined largely by its ability to promote an atmosphere of freedom and provide an education which will nurture new ideas, which will subject the false and unworthy to human scrutiny and inquiry, and which will shape its dignity in the light of released human intelligence. It is for this reason that democratic societies, in all their activities, must aim to be educational societies, it is for this reason that democracies must rest their case ultimately upon education, for education alone can develop minds and creative talents capable of producing abundant and worthy lives for all.

Hanson in this contribution significantly gives us direction to what our nation and our educational institutions should do to gain legitimacy and be described as democratic. One sure way of achieving this is for governments and the various teachers' and non-teachers' unions to engage on regular dialogues as concerning the erosion of academic freedom in our academic institutions. Agreements reached between government and these unions should be honoured by government. It is widely observed that most of the trade disputes between ASUU and government hinge on the unending issues of funding, salaries and autonomy.

Furthermore, for our educational institutions to be truly free and democratic

- i. Senates of universities should be allowed to design their own curricular and determine the procedure for its research and teaching.
- ii. Senates of universities should set their procedures for selecting their students. The imposition of Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) on tertiary institutions in Nigeria has led to several agitations from these institutions for its discontinuation. The universities should also determine procedures for their internal examinations.
- iii. Governing Council of tertiary institutions should select and appoint their teaching staff and administrators. They should also determine their respective conditions of service.
- iv. Governing Councils should determine and decide the judicious allocation of financial resources of their institutions.

- v. Various governments at the Federal and State levels should fund education at the various levels. Conscientious efforts should be made by governments to fund education in order to improve the dilapidated infrastructure (laboratories, libraries, sports facilities, etc.).
- vi. Government should divest itself from the provision of hostel accommodation in our tertiary institutions. Private investors should be encouraged to build hostels which are affordable and accessible to students. This will in no doubt solve the paucity of hostel accommodation as witnessed in our campuses today.
- vii. The appointment of Vice Chancellors, Rectors and Provosts of our tertiary institutions should be an exclusive right of the Governing Councils. The present tensions raised in our campuses when three names are submitted to government, and political considerations determine who is appointed is odious. The practice where candidates to this lofty office externalize their appointment by delegating Chiefs and Emirs to lobby the authorities that be, should be discouraged.
- viii. Government should consult tertiary institutions when taking decisions affecting them. The present complaints by university councils about their lack of opportunity to make adequate inputs into their university budgetary formulation exercises should be discouraged.
- ix. Students should be taken into confidence in some issues affecting their welfare. Regular interactions between students and their college or university administrators will trim down the number of conflicts in our campuses.
- x. Academic freedom as canvassed in this paper should not be a ploy for teachers in our tertiary institutions to fleece their unsuspecting students by introducing 'manuals' and 'handouts' under spurious covers in order to acquire the necessary things of life which they assume are denied them by way of remuneration from their employers. They should not, under the cover of academic freedom publish libelous and slanderous materials.

Draconian laws and circulars from the various ministers of education and governments in Nigeria which aim at muzzling the academic freedom of the teacher in his bid to actualize his idea of 'self creation and persistent radical self-questioning' (Benson, 1982) should be discouraged. As such, academics should be allowed to be critical of the conditions of violations of human rights within their given society.

Planners of our education should also have a rethink as education should aim at shifting focus from what educators do to children to show how children develop (Karmi, 1982). The practice where our educational system encourages rote learning instead of practical and exploratory search for knowledge tend to make our educators too powerful and the students helpless. Where possible, students should participate in the governing bodies of their institutions, to express opinions on national and other problems as they affect their well being. Students in our tertiary institutions should be free to choose their fields of study from available courses. This is aimed at satisfying the professional aspiration of such students.

Member of academic community should be given research grants to carry out research works without hindrance, provided the universal ethical principles of scientific enquiry are followed.

The curricula of individual tertiary institutions should be tailored towards the fulfillment of the socio-cultural, economic and political rights of their communities and shall endeavour to ensure that their application of science and technology does not encroach on the peoples' rights. In other words, the curricula so canvassed must address the contemporary problems of their immediate society.

Conclusion:

Various governments have always paid lip service to the issue of democratization of education in Nigeria. Crises in Nigerian educational institutions have been characterized by issues such as poor funding, dilapidated infrastructure, absence of teaching-learning equipment, lack of books and furnished libraries, lack of research materials and endemic secret cults activities. Academic communities in Nigeria have also been inundated with series of attacks by the various governments of the country, who have at one stage or the other refused to honour agreements reached with either the academic staff unions of the tertiary institutions or sometimes the Nigerian Union of Teachers. These breaches bring about interruptions in the academic calendars of these institutions and as a result affect the quality of education in Nigeria.

The aims of education as stipulated in the National Policy of Education in Nigeria (1984) are to develop a free and democratic society. The development of critical thinking, transmission of knowledge through research, study, discussion documentation, teaching and learning are necessary tools for the actualization of this lofty aim.

Our justification for academic freedom centres on its benefits to humanity in the form of the growth of knowledge and its dissemination. It is only when we accept academic freedom as an extension of individual freedom in a democratic society that we can appreciate education as the training of reason and the utilization of reason when trained to raise the human level to a cultured life far above the animal level. It is only when a society learns to uphold the tradition of encouraging the holding of diverse and differing views' on any issue and seeing it as the hallmark of academic freedom that a solid foundation would be laid for democracy and freedom in that society. Afterall, without education an individual in a modern industry society would not find it easy to proceed very far in developing the worth while life to which he aspires since an educational system acts as a leverage in equipping citizens with skills and knowledge that are needed for the development of every society. This, no doubt, is the reason why every democratic system insists, that education should be made available for all and should be fairly distributed.

References:

- American Association of University Professors (AAUP): 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure.
- Bako, R. (2004): Academic Freedom or Academic Anarchy: What exactly do Nigerian Academics want? In Nigerian Journal of Educational Philosophy, Vol. 11 No. 1, 2004.
- Benson, J. (1983): "Who is the Autonomous Man"? Philosophy Vol. 58 p. 3.
- Brubacher, J.F. (1969): Modern Philosophies of Education. New York, McGraw-Hill, P. 60
- Hanson, J.W. (1965): Imagination and Hallucination in African Education. Michigan State University, Institute for International Studies in Education, p. 3
- Harvey, W.B. (1977): Freedom, University and the Law: The Legal Status of Academics Freedom in the University of Black Africa. Lagos University Press. p. 17
- Karmi, C. (1982): "Autonomy: The aim of Education Envisioned by Piaget". Opinion paper.
- Kitto, H.F. (1951): The Greeks: Harmandsworth, Penguin Books.
- Mill, J.S. (1955): On Liberty. Regnery, Chicago.
- National Policy on Education (1981): Federal Ministry of Education, Lagos.
- National Policy on Education (1984): Federal Ministry of Education, Lagos.
- National Policy on Education (1999): Federal Ministry of Education, Lagos.
- Peters, R.S. (1966): Ethics and Education George Allen and Unwwin Ltd., London.
- Peters, R.S. (1972): "Education as Initiation" in Philosophical Analysis and Education edited By Archambault, R.D. (1972): Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Ryler, G. (1949): The Concepts of Mind. London Hutchinson p. 149.
- Schofield, H. (1980): The Philosophy of Education: An Introduction, Unwin Education Books, George Allen and Unwin, London.

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:**

<http://www.iiste.org/Journals/>

The IISTE editorial team promises to review and publish all the qualified submissions in a fast manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

