

EPISTEMOLOGY OF PRO-DEMOCRACY POETICS IN NIGERIAN POPULAR MUSICAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract:

This study explores the epistemology of pro-democratic poetics enshrined in popular Nigerian musical narratives, by analyzing African China's "Mr. President" (2006) and Eedris Abdulkareem's "Emilokan" (2022). Both songs accentuate civic angsts and political appraisals that transcend beyond entertainment, functioning as dialectics of democratic consciousness. While "Mr. President" presents a lyrical petition against systemic corruption, insecurity, and neglect of basic welfare, "Emilokan" challenges elite-driven narratives of entitlement and probes the contradictions of political succession rhetoric in true democracy. The study adopts the maxim of "molue-ism" as a concept with the aim to unearth the motive that shapes these artistes concepts of democracy, equity and justice, as well as social development in democracy. Through content and contextual analysis, the study demonstrates how Nigerian popular musical narratives treats troop of democratic ineptitude through their performative popular styles and rhetorical poetics deployed in their messages. The study situates these songs within Nigeria's broader musical tradition of resistance, arguing that their epistemic value lies in their ability to crystallize collective knowledge about governance and civic responsibility. Ultimately, this study accentuates the relevance of popular music as a catalyst for political consciousness, resistance to democratic deficit, and mediation between the citizens and state for social transformation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Pro-Democracy, Popular Music, Epistemology, Poetics, Nigerian Artistes

Introduction

Globally, political leadership influence development. The effectiveness of the system of governance determines the level or degree of development and progress in the nation. The Nigerian political structure has dual historical features of both military and democratic governance. While the nation recorded a long competitive tussle of power between the military and democrats, the vast majority of the citizens settle for democratic leadership due to its projected enormous dividends. This is so, because, democracy is largely associated with development and modernization (Imoh, 2021). Although, several scholars note that the sole beauty of democracy is premised on the active participation of citizens devoid of authoritarian principles (Iyamah & Obire, 2014; Idogho, 2014). Commenting on the hallmark of democracy which is good governance, Agbese (2012), presents eight fundamental elements of an ideal democratic system, thus: "The government must be participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and adherence to the rule of law (p.4)".

Supporting the above claims, Oke in Iyamah & Obire (2014) believes that the universal acceptance of democracy as the best system of governance is incontestable. This is premised on the

participatory opportunity democracy gives the electorate in the selection and election of their leaders and representatives. It guaranteed certain “recipe for good governance and the fundamental human rights of all law abiding citizens”. (32).

However, the beautiful imageries of democracy painted in his assertion above are hardly seen in the democratic principles practiced in Nigeria. Thus, Ajayi (2014:110) states that “while democracy is synonymous with holistic development and aggregated growth in some climes; it is the representation of betrayal and inhuman deprivation in others. Nigeria probably personifies the latter”. This vividly describes Nigeria democratic system as one deficient of transparency, participation, transformative development...and observance of the rule of law. It celebrates immunity of leaders and prevents their accountability to power and resource management.

Again, cases of unaccountability, ineffectiveness, marginalization, and gross infringement of fundamental human right of the people are preponderance, therefore, dashing the supposed re-awakening hope of the people. Oke rightly posits:

Citizens now experience despair instead of hope, insecurity instead of security, tragic and untimely death instead of long life and high life expectancy, illusion instead of expectation, deficit instead of dividends, militarization instead of civility, dictatorship instead of rule of law, political selection instead of election, etc. (34).

By this, the people’s mandate is loss and there is a shift of positioning power from the people to the few representatives which negates democratic ethos (Harrison, 2011; Egharevba, Akintunde & Olatunji, 2020). The response to this is the emergence of resistance acts to power for civic responsiveness.

One of the medium to help the voiceless people communicate their plight unbiasedly and to challenge the leaders’ is through music (Esimone & Umezina, 2012). Popular musicians positioned themselves as messiah to the masses conveying their plights through their musical composition, challenging the status-quo and demanding the rights accruing to the populace. They serve as the impartial judge on democratization matters in the country and press on for truer democratic practices in the nation.

Historically, Popular Nigerian music has always been an instrument of power resistance in the society. From Fela’s Afrobeat, through Sunny Okosun’s and Majek Fashek’s Reggae, down to Edrees Aldulkareem’s and Falz’ Raps, we see musical poetics in political discourse addressing pertinent democratic issues of civic responsibilities, and leadership accountability. Nigerian popular musicians have risen as intellectual spokespersons of the people in expressing their discontent on governance through the resonance of their voices on concert stage or recording discs.

This study therefore, analyzes the epistemology of pro-democratic poetics in African Nigeria’s “Mr. President”, and Eedris Abdulkareem’s “Emilokan”. “Mr. President” released in 2006 at the height of democratic disenchantment under President Olusegun Obasanjo, typifies this practice. The song directly addresses leadership, voicing citizens’ frustrations about poor governance and infrastructural collapse. Its plain diction and repetitive refrain transform private suffering into

public rage through non-violence medium as artistically demonstrated by the artiste who is both a witness to the injustice and an advocate for equity and justice. Despite successive leadership transition for over a decade, nothing seems changed. This paved way for the re-emergence of Eedris Abdulkareem's "Emilokan" in the popular musical terrain critiquing the elitist leadership paradigm. His classic song retort to the politicization of the Yoruba axiom "Èmil'ókàn" ("it is my turn"), popularized during Tinubu's 2023 presidential campaign for undermining pro-democratic ideals, exemplified in alienating ordinary Nigerians from power.

Conceptual Clarification

This study adopts the concept of "Molue-ism" as a conceptual strand that pilot the work. "Molueism" as propounded by Leke Alder (2024) is a leadership concept that characterized Nigerian governance structure. Molueism is an ironical representation of the "Molue", a long yellow truck that transport loads of masses around the sub-hub of Lagos city in an unhealthy and unsafe condition. Firstly, the environment is shabby and crowded with various overloaded people standing and sitting. Secondly, the language of communication and transaction is unrefined, the driver drives rough and often on high wine, lastly, it never stops for you to either enter or alight. Akin states eleven characteristics of maxism of Molue-ism thus:

1. Impunity is legal
2. Might is right
3. Economic loss is never quantify at National level but at individual level
4. The quality of the driver does not mater, he can be drunk
5. National Irrelevant
6. Vision does not matter, navigation is by intuition.
7. No maintenance culture, but there is maintenance budget.
8. Matrix does not matter
9. Religion is critical.
10. Live must be hard is the motto of molueism
11. Moral Values does not matter, history does not matter, too.

These eleven maxisms of molueism shall form the bastion of our analysis of the selected popular Nigerian music in this work to ascertain the actual system of governance being operated in the nation, either Democracy of Democrazy.

Popular Music and Pro-Democracy in Nigeria

There has been a long tradition of scholarship and discourse on pro-democracy poetics in Nigerian popular music as it position's music as both a cultural and political instrument. Popular music in Nigeria has historically served as a medium of critique, memory, and weapon of resistance and rage against authoritarianism and democratic debacles alike (Osumah, 2016; Olaniyan, 2004; & Mokwenyei, 2001). It is worthy of note that Nigerian musicians frequently transcend their role as entertainers, becoming voices of conscience, projecting civic knowledge through their musical oeuvres.

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's legacy for instance, remains central in this discourse. His Afrobeat repertoire has been analyzed severally as a corpus of counter-hegemonic texts that challenged military dictatorship and corruption, entrenching epistemic claims about justice and people's supremacy (Olaniyan, 2004). Subsequently, successive generations of musicians are inspired by this model, in adopting styles of plain speech, satire, and moral appeals to address contemporary challenges. Adedeji (2015), observes that hip hop in Nigeria, for instance, has developed as a "culture of resistance," giving young people a platform to narrate their socio-political realities. This is reflected in the corpus of works by young Nigerian popular musicians.

African China's Mr. "President" is widely acknowledged in Nigerian music criticism as one of the most poignant post-2000 popular songs to capture public rage with governance (Ogunleye, 2017). The song's sustained relevance has been highlighted in journalistic retrospectives and academic commentaries, which interpret it as a populist anthem that combines everyday language with prophetic lamentation (Okafor, 2015). Its epistemological significance lies in its role as a text that codifies the people's grievances and demands for accountable leadership.

Similarly, Eedris Abdulkareem's oeuvre has attracted scholarly attention for its direct engagement with political discourse. His earlier hit "Jaga Jaga" has been analyzed as a metaphor of national deterioration (Osumah, 2016), while "Emilokan" extends this trajectory into the democratic context of the 2023 elections. Though formal academic studies on "Emilokan" remains scarce, preliminary commentary situates the song within broader critiques of entitlement politics in Nigeria (Adebayo, 2023). By transforming a political slogan into a site of cultural contestation, Abdulkareem accentuates the role of music in critiquing elite narratives in a democratic land scape and magnifying civic skepticism.

Other contemporary artistes, such as Asa with "Fire on the Mountain" and "Mr. Jailer", Shockey's "Fire Fire", Falz's "This Is Nigeria" and Burna Boy's "Another Story", have also boosted the archive of protest poetics, especially in the context of the #EndSARS movement (Nwankwo, 2021). These contributions demonstrate that Nigerian popular music continues to evolve as a key medium for producing and transmitting knowledge about democratic struggles.

The present study extends this literature by closely analyzing Mr. President and Emilokan as case studies that exemplify how musicians construct epistemic frameworks of resistance, offering insight into the political consciousness of their era. Thus, their music conveys powerful lucid messages of transformation crucial to the people.

Analysis and Discussions

"Mr. President" by Africa China (2006)

Verse 1.

Food e no dey
Brother eh water no dey
And our country no good o
Everyday for thief one day for owner e
Poor man wey thief maggi
Omo dem go show him face for crime fighter (crime fighter)

Rich man wey thief money
Omo we no dey see their face for crime fighter
Tell me something I don't know
Rich man go deyhalla prayer (modupe)
Poor man go dey shout (Anwuola me e)
Rich man go dey halla prayer (modupe)
Poor man go dey shout (Anwuola me e)
Make una lead us well
No let this nation to fall inside well o

Chorus:

Mr. President lead us well
If you be Governor, govern us well
If you be Senator, senate us well
If you be Policeman, Police us well, no dey take bride.
Oya lead us well (Nne me e)
Govern us well
If you be senator, Senate us well
If you be Policeman, Police us well, no dey take bride.

Verse. 2

Fuel e no dey
Brother eh transportation no dey
What about NEPA people o
We no get light
Everybody just dey halla
Fuel no dey na how we want survive
My God many youth ready for work
But as work no dey
Na how dey wan survive
We be giant of Africa
But to get visa enter Ghana na WAEC
My God police man go see white
E go tell you say I don't know
Make una lead us well
No let this nation to fall inside well

Excerpt of “Emilokan” (It is my Turn) by Eedris Abdulkareem (2024)

verse 1:

...You say make we sacrifice for Nigeria
7 billion to renovate your residence
15 billion for your travel allowance
That na for you and your only vice President
40 billion for Aso Rock Maintenance
5 million for food and refreshment
100s of millions for dogs and animals

Meanwhile, hunger the kill Nigerians
Wetin Nigerians do to warrant this treatment?
Even Garri them no fit afford for the family.

Chorus:

Tinubu Government Blame Buhari (Buhari)
Buhari Government blame Jonathan (Jonathan)
Hunger dey people dey die (dey die)
This one don pass jagajaga ooooo
Emi lo kan
Oti di Ebi lo kan (Baba)
Emi lo kan
E da kun ebi pa waoooo
Emi lo kan
Oti di Ebi lo kan (Baba)
Emi lo kan
E da kun ounje ti won oooo

Episteme of Pro-democracy Poetics

The two songs are situated within their historical and political contexts. “Mr. President” which was released in 2026 is read against the backdrop of Nigeria’s post-1999-2003 democratic transition, marked by widespread corruption and disillusionment with governance. “Emilokan” is interpreted within the climate of electoral contestation and shifting power blocs in the Fourth Republic. This contextual lens highlights how socio-political conditions shape musical production and reception. Therefore these songs projects distinct episteme of pro-democratic poetics, thus:

1. **Positive Political Representation and Accountability:** Unlike the dogma of moluiesm where the driver of the bus and its bus assistants are not accountable to anyone, the epistemology of positive political representation and accountability is enshrined in the music of African China and Eedris Aldulkareem. By aptly calling on the political office holders to “lead”, “govern”, “police” ...the people well, stresses more on right leadership representation, accountable to the people in an ideal democratic state. Here the doctrines of impunity and immunity have no place. Political office holders are challenged morally through the music that their representation should be to those who votes them to office not to their pockets, stomach nor family associates. Therefore, funds budgeted for constituency projects should be factual and well utilized for such, not looted.
2. **Leadership Integrity:** Integrity which is a priceless jewel, and a rare gem is highly needed in African democratic state. In Nigeria for instance, right from the first republic to the fourth republic, political leaders have integrity questions. In fact, most if not all coup d’état were tied to corruption issues. Public leadership should be highly prioritized and not be freely accessed by every mediocre citizen with integrity question. It is only in Moluiesm that the quality of the driver is immaterial, he can be drunk (Leke, 2024). Not so in truer democratic state because, lives of millions of citizens are committed into the hands of a few trusted state driver who should be accountable for every actions or inactions. However we see a great eco of discontent by the musician as wailed in verse one that “You say make we sacrifice for

Nigeria, 7 billion to renovate your residence, 15 billion for your travel allowance....” What a contrasting claim of integrity? If leaders truly want followers to sacrifice for the better tomorrow, they should take the lead in the crusade.

3. **Competence and Heart of Service:** The essence of electing leaders into political offices outweighs self-aggrandizement, self-satisfaction and self-celebration but for societal transformation. As important as competence might trigger results in executing a task, true heart of service makes the result beneficiary to the people. Abdulkareem’s songs condemn the habit of situating and restricting leadership on certain elitist inheritance by contrasting the mantra “emi lo kan” (It’s my turn) with great incompetency like “ebi lo kan” (hunger’s regine) Oouje ti won” (scare commodities). Thus, competence showcases the skillfulness of a leader triggering endorsement like “Joseph in Egypt”, but the reverse is prevalence in our political system as Abdulkareem lamented “you know say Buhari was incompetent but you still bring am to destroy Nigeria, padi, padi government”. Well, our political competence seems evident in the maneuvering and amassing state resources for self against the travail of the people. Such competence devoid of humane spirit only lead to self-aggrandizement, greed, self-adulation, power tussle, even embezzlement. However, a leadership built on true service, never lords over the citizens but utilizes the available resources at their disposal for the common good of all. Therefore, as long as our political axiom celebrates rotational leadership, meshed in religion, regional and personal agitation for power, our output will not be far from molue-ism. The molues load in turns even if there is no fuel or the vehicle is faulty. Molues drivers always claim it is their right/turns to load and transport the people notwithstanding if they get to their destination or not. No true service triumph in such.
4. **Concrete Vision:** Vision seems to be the primary aim of leadership and should be cast on global importance. The vision of the leader makes provision that meets the citizen’s needs. Be it short or long time vision, it should address pertinent issues for the nation’s transformation and not the leaders’ satisfaction. So, Eedris, asks “....where our refinery wey una promise to fix, abi na Dangote we go dey depend on?” . African China also in verse 2 of his song lameted “Fuel e no dey...what about NEPA people, we no get light ooo....”. This is a big blow. For more than two decades since the return to democracy, Nigeria is neither yet to celebrate a perfect working refinery nor stable power supply, yet, annually, there are budgets for fixing the refineries and power sector. However, in less than two decades, a single business tycoon, Dangote built a global masterpiece refinery. If vision provides the foresight for ideation and transformation agendas towards national development, then the pectoral problem of collapse of national grid should have been tackled. Small businesses collapsing and great multinational exiting the nation due to poor power supply. More so, citizens spend heavily on transportation and are left with little or nothing to save. It is time for our leaders open the grids and partner with states or private individuals to for functionality. Maybe full privatization of the refineries would help revamp them and save our monies.
5. **Institutional Responsibility:** An ideal leader gives no room to trade blame. They shoulder the responsibilities place upon them and accept failure or success of their actions and those of their subordinates. This cuts across both the leadership and followership as the artist call on both Govern and civil servant account for their actions while serving the people. Can Emefiele

account for '23 trillion Naira" minted during his 8 years service as the head of the apex bank during Buhari regime? What about the electoral body accounts for the \$ 6 million dollars. As the leaders are expected to pilot the affairs of the nation judiciously in equity and fairness, managing the available resources for the benefit of all, citizens are also expected to be law abiding and fulfil their expected civic responsibility with pride and honour. By calling on the "president, governor, and senator to lead well" African China uses them as a metaphor of power and leadership to represent every political office, and by calling on the "police man" who he uses to represent other civil servants, to "police well" he draws attention towards institutional responsibilities of resources and privilege of office entrusted to all. Therefore, when we sing aloud the song of liberty/freedom, we should also be willing to chorus that of responsibility. More so, responsibility rest on leaders too for revival and effective functioning of public institutions across all sectors: health, education, transportation, and power.

6. Civic Pedagogy: These songs raised discourse of civic pedagogy in the society. This helps to enrich discourse on democratic epistemology. It is inadequate civic education reflected in citizens' dead consciousness that breeds corruption in every sector of the land. From leaders down to the citizens, people are at pal with corrupt practices because of weak civic pedagogue and effective justice system. For Eedris to heavily lament on the spending of "7 billion to renovate" the residence of a nation's leader, "15 billion naira for travel allowance" among other similar homogenous spending by Governors, Senators and other government functionaries, we have a moral issue to tackle. He also bewailed on "Emefiele's minting of "23 trillion naira within 8 years" and the spending of "\$6m for election". He further wailed "how much una don save for subsidy removal?" This shows more moral education is needed for character formation towards leadership and citizenry integrity.
7. Structural Justice System: An ideal democratic state thrives in systemic justice. Eedris lamented song ago lamented on the gross unruliness and injustice mated on the citizens while the politician enjoy endless impunity for wrong, embezzlement and frauds saying " if the Government say dem no fit pay 65k, then, let dem pay senator and Reps 65k, make all of us dey suffering and smiling....". Weak and unfair justice system can never promote democratic processes in the land. Nations like China, Dubai, and Japan operates firm justice system which promotes accountability among public officers and results in good governance. Unfortunately, Nigeria's democratic system is highly bedeviled with serial socio-economic biasness and political pilfering. This African China lamented upon thus: "poor man wey thief magi, omo dem go show him face for crime fighter. Rich man wey thief money, omo we no dey see their face for fire fighter". Parties and individuals grossly demonstrate these with pride and cruelty to claim and reclaim political position because the laws guiding democratic accountability for public officers are loose and there is no legislation for severe penalty for abuse of political offices. Furthermore, the privileges of political offices are so enormous that politics seems to be the best occupation for generational wealth in Nigerian and a haven for the smartest.
8. Good Governance: The episteme of good governance which is a fundamental of democracy is the major motif of these two artistes re-echoed in their music. In fact, this theme anchored the chorus of the two songs analyzed. African China wailed aloud "If you be President, lead us well, Governor, govern us well, Senator, senate us well...." and verse two focuese on

unemployment “ My God many youth ready to for work, but as work no dey na how dey wan survive?”. Also, Abdulkareem lamented “hunger dey people dey die, this one don pass jajajaga oooo, Emi lo kan ti da ebi lo kan” (there is hunger in the land, and people are dying of hunger strike. It is my turn has become it is hunger’s time). Food security is a global phenomenal because food crisis triggers several crisis like insecurity, crime, malnutrition and death. Nigeria, as well as Africa blessed with large arable land should have no business with hunger. Therefore, the provisions of basic social amenities like good road network, drinkable water, security system, reliable and adequate power supply, affordable shelter, and food security make democracy blissful to citizenry. This paves way for business to thrive, decrease crime rate, and lead to the overall gross domestic production.

9. Reawaking Hope amidst Hopelessness: Since the return of Democracy in 1999, there seems to be rebirth of hope in the society. However, with the experiences of successive democratic leadership, the peoples’ hopes are dashed. From axioms of “power to the people” to “change” to “renewed hope”, nothing changes as the people are rendered powerless in their hopelessness. This led to a rethought of many preferring the military as against the democratic order. In fact, the perceptive claim of integrity influenced the election of late President Mohammadu Buhari, believing that the acclaimed “Mr. Integrity” would savage the nation from peril and doom. By addressing this through lyrics of popular song chorused multiple times “lead us well” means the peoples hope seems dashed as they have not being lead well. Well, maybe even the renewed hope agenda is ineffective in salvaging the populace and needs to be reawakened.
10. Improved Socio-Economy Development: All democratic principles are hinged on social and economic development. Most campaigns are tied to this which makes it pertinent. However, the democracy that only celebrates improved life style for the leaders while the citizens are subjected to beggarly state, where their monthly wages are just within an hourly wage of \$50 in developed nation is frowned at. The lamentations sung by both artistes showed that citizenry lifestyles have not improved. By lavishing “40 billion for Aso Rock maintenance, 5 billion for food and refreshment, 100 of millions for dogs, meanwhile, hunger don kill Nigerians, even garri them no fit afford for family...food don turn gold for Nigeria”, indicate an impoverished economic system that needs improvement. They soundscape their songs into the hearts not just ears of the leaders for better action.

Summary

One of the dividends of democracy is an improved human life manifested in social transformation. Again, fundamental freedom symbolizes an ideal democratic state. Hence, these songs deploy sarcasm to convey their citizens’ plight to the political pilots of state for transformative and transformative lives. Therefore, this study explicitly examined the epistemology of pro-democracy poetics in Nigerian popular music through African China’s “Mr. President” and Eedris Abdulkareem’s “Emilokan”. Both songs, spaced by almost two decades, has symmetrical content stressing the persistent role of music as a repository of civic consciousness and catalyst for political critique. On the one hand, African China’s work reflects the frustrations of the early Fourth Republic, when promises of democracy were dented by corruption and mis-governance. Abdulkareem’s mediation, on the other hand, confronts the manipulation of democratic dialectal

in contemporary electoral politics, probing how political entitlement narratives threaten the principles of representation and accountability.

Consequently, the songs demonstrate how Nigerian musicians function as cultural critics and knowledge producers, articulating the people's grievances while reinforcing democratic ideals. They show that popular music in Nigeria does not merely entertain but also educate, mobilize, resist power hegemony, and preserves political memory. The epistemic value of these works lies in their ability to crystallize collective knowledge about governance, serve as informal civic writings, and sustain public engagement with democracy.

The study therefore, reinforces the argument that Nigerian popular music transcends beyond mere entertainment but stimulate active political discourse central to understanding the dynamics of democratic struggle. Its pro-democracy poetics are not confined to mere lyrical protest but extend to productive assemblage of cultural archives that contest state hegemony and envision alternative civic futures. By positioning "Mr. President" and "Emilokan" within this tradition, the paper affirms the critical role of musicians as intellectuals, advocates, and mediators of democratic discourse and principles in Nigeria's socio- cultural and political life. So, the epistemology of pro-democracy poetics in Nigerian popular music thrives above protest songs cataloguing; it triggers our understanding of these works in generating, transmitting, and preserving collective knowledge about governance, justice, and people's representation.

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