

# The Humanities, Humanistic Education, and Democratic Governance

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to explore any linkages there may be between the humanities disciplines and the ideals of democracy. It starts out by looking at the broad group of academic disciplines banded together and called the Humanities; the humanistic values they have sought to impart over the years; and what has led to their denigration globally in recent years. It briefly considers the hostile arguments raised against the Humanities by scientists, technologists and economists, aided by what appears to be the global demand for skill-based education as a key to survival in today's economy. In looking at the ideals of true democracy, the paper acknowledges that democracy is not indigenous to Africa, but then neither is it to any other country or continent on the globe. Democracy as an ideology, whether fully actualized anywhere or not, embodies certain values for good governance that compel virtually all rulers on earth to pay at least lip service to it. If the humanistic values imparted by the Humanities and the values for good governance upheld by democracy can be closely aligned, as this paper seeks to achieve, then the conclusion will follow inevitably that democracy needs the Humanities for sustainability.

**Keywords:** Humanities, Humanistic education, Democracy, Globalization, Values, Governance.

## **Introduction**

The central argument of this paper is to show that the ideals of good governance required for any good and sustainable democratic dispensation cannot be achieved without the humanistic values fostered and promoted by the Humanities as core disciplines. It has been noticed, at least in many of the English-speaking countries of the world, that the skills that are needed to keep democracies alive are being

discarded. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance, public protestations and party names notwithstanding. Here, in our country Nigeria, some might have thought that it was a bad joke when some persons started to talk about what they called “home-grown democracy”. But now it looks as if that “home-grown” version is the one that will accommodate the snatching of ballot boxes, arson and killing of political opponents in contests cruelly and coolly marked as “do-or-die” affairs.

We argue in this paper that without support from suitably educated citizens, no democracy can remain stable, let alone sustainable. We also want to show that what we consider suitable education cannot be divorced from humanistic education anchored in the core disciplines of the Humanities. Based on this, we attempted to explain what the Humanities disciplines are and what they aim to achieve. Then we considered some of the hostile arguments hauled at the Humanities, which are said to account for the declining enrolment in the humanities or arts disciplines generally not only here in Nigeria, but in virtually all countries of the world. Next, we argued and later submitted that some of the ideals of true democracy can be inferred from the Humanities; and by emphasizing the word “true”, we shall insist that there are basic, fundamental principles which should characterize democracy anywhere, and which ought to recommend it to every individual or group that desires the growth, development and stability of their nation.

Furthermore, we shall highlight, in conjunction with the foregoing, those humane or humanistic values that appear to be indispensable for governing human beings and human societies as if they indeed matter. In other words, how do you govern a people, especially a people as diverse as Nigerians, Ghanaians, Americans, so as to keep conflicts at the barest minimum, their co-operation at the maximum, with the aim to attain everyone's highest potentials for the good, in order to realize the great, eternal goals of communal living: freedom, equality and brotherhood? In the final section of this paper, we bring the strands together by arguing that the humanistic values which can only be imparted by education in the Humanities are exactly the same ideals that are needed for a stable and sustainable democracy and good governance.

### **What Are The Humanities?**

It was at the turn of the century that several factors began to raise the question of the relevance of all courses of study on the university curricula. Those factors included government dwindling resources, the dictates of the Bretton Woods Institutes that necessitated deregulation and privatization of government establishments, and the demands of globalization. Programmes of study offered by the Faculties of Arts nationwide came under enormous pressure because of decreasing student enrolment: governments and sponsors of education began to ask these Faculties to show cause why they should be funded. That was when the term “Humanities” became popular

in Nigeria; till then we had very few Schools or Faculties of Humanities in our Nigerian universities. Most of them were and still remain Faculties of Arts.

The name 'Humanities' applied to educational discipline is derived from the Latin word "humanitas" which could mean "humanity" or "humaneness". The term was originally applied during the ancient and classical periods to a group of disciplines called "studiahumanitatis" and aimed at the general and liberal education of a free man for manhood and citizenship. The curriculum of the liberal education consisted of mathematics, rhetoric, grammar, logic, philosophy, poetry, and history. This curriculum remained the basic educational programme throughout the classical period. However, the term "humanitas" dropped out of educational usage during the Middle Ages; but was later revived by the Italian humanists of the 15th century.

Throughout their history, the "studiahumanitatis" envisioned the equipping of a person, not with any specific technical skills; but with the sort of knowledge that would equip him for public life, and could raise him to the peak of his capacities in all that was most distinctively human. In other words, as we argued in an earlier work (Etuk, "Humanities", p. 12), the Humanities or Arts disciplines aim at educating men and women in human values. Today in our institutions of learning, the disciplines covered by our humanities curriculum include: communications skills which take in the mass media and information management; language studies taking in both local and foreign languages; history with diversifications into local, national, international, economic and political history as well as international relations and diplomacy; philosophy, a discipline with ancient pedigree searching into knowledge – its origin, types, and justification; values: the theories behind and the guiding principles that determine that one thing is to be valued and another not; religions that constitute the hub of human existence and the defining characteristics of the human culture; then there is music and the performing arts where human creativity appears at its highest level. As one unnamed writer has said, "the Humanities remind us where we have been and where we are going. Emphasising critical perspective and imaginative response, the Humanities foster creativity, appreciation of our commonalities and our differences, and knowledge of all kinds".

In June 2006, a columnist for the Punch newspaper named Segun Olugbile wrote that the labour market no longer had room for humanities graduates; and that in another decade most universities would have closed down their Arts Faculties (*Punch*, June 27, p. 42). It may interest us to discover that this poor perception and judgement of, and prognostication for the Humanities did not begin from Nigerian governments and institutions. Martha Nussbaum in her very evocative book, *Not For Profit* (130), records that in India, the denigration of the Humanities started with Prime Minister Nehru's emphasis on science and economics as the linchpins of the nation's future. In the US, it is on record that between 1966 and 2010; the number of candidates who completed their Bachelor's degree in the Humanities was halved nationwide, falling from 14% to 7% of all degrees taken. In Nigeria, it started with the emphasis on science and technology as the key to development, with admission quota

into the universities pitched at 60/40 in favour of the sciences. In many discourses on research and development in Nigeria today, nothing is said about research in the Humanities disciplines at all; and yet it would seem that all the efforts and all the large sums of money devoted to research and development are geared to national development or nation building.

In order for us to find out why this situation has developed in which the Humanities disciplines appear to be scorned, it might be necessary for us to consider some of the hostile arguments raised against the Humanities by the other disciplines, notably science and technology.

### **Hostile Arguments: Any Answers?**

In a document captioned “The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future” which these writers stumbled upon, it is stated (30) that “the Humanities have always had, and always will have pragmatic detractors...” Indeed, it was reported of one such detractor long ago as saying of Philosophy thus: “Philosophy bakes no bread”. This individual meant to say that philosophy was not a productive enterprise. One Nigerian philosopher, in an attempt to rebut that charge, said that the baking of bread was an eminently philosophical undertaking, because it touched upon such philosophical issues as the value of life, the worthwhileness of labour, and so on. But it would have been sufficient to tell the detractor that the baking of bread is not the highest or noblest vocation of man. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle in his ethical inquiry as to what conduced to the highest good of man quickly eliminated the life of pleasure, honour, virtue that was compatible with inactivity and misery; and settled on the life of contemplation (*theoria*) which was productive of *eudaimonia*, or happiness. He concluded that *eudaimonia* or happiness must be a life of the highest faculty of man, viz., reason; it must be an activity, not mere potentiality; it must be in accordance with virtue and if there be more than one virtue, with the best and most perfect of them; and, finally, that this *eudaimonia* or happiness must be manifested not merely for short periods of time but in a complete life (See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097-1098; Ross, Aristotle, p. 191).

Today's detractors assume diverse formations. There are the economists who gauge everything in terms of economic growth. The economic growth experts were the inventors of the strategic plans which pestered all programmes in our Universities about a decade ago. The strategic plan required that you should state clearly the objectives of your academic programme; that you should show what the graduates of your programme will be able to do in concrete terms, or what they will be able to contribute to the economy in fiscal terms when they enter the job market; and you had to show what consultancy outfits you could run to augment your budget and enhance your earned incomes. Unless you were able to do all the above successfully, you could not continue as an academic department. We in the Faculty of Arts were stunned; because these were attempts to turn us into agents of development or

corporations in gowns. Evidently, this pressure for economic growth did not start with Nigeria. Professor Nussbaum in the work cited earlier has noted that pressure for economic growth has led to changes in curriculum, pedagogy and funding. We shall quote her at some length in this work.

Meanwhile, the pressure for economic growth has led many political leaders in Europe to recast the entirety of University education - both teaching and research - along growth-oriented lines asking about the contribution of each discipline and each researcher to the economy. Take Britain, for example. Ever, since the Thatcher era, it has been customary for Humanities Departments in Britain to be required to justify themselves to the government, which funds all academic institutions, by showing how their research and teaching contribute to economic profitability. If they cannot show this, their government support will drop and the number of faculty and students decline (127). So now we can see where all the pressures on the Humanities were coming from.

Then there is the so-called “Vocational Argument”. Parents and sponsors of education want programmes that guarantee their wards job upon completion of their programmes, the more lucrative the job the better. History as an academic programme was becoming threatened in our Universities, until necessity forced them to become inventive by changing their name to “History and International Studies”, to obviously sound more attractive. Now many parents want their wards to register there for their degrees in the hope that upon graduation they will secure jobs in the diplomatic services or global organisations. The vocational argument may take different guises. The way the Harvard College document reports this is:

Research has demonstrated that University disciplines must do at least one of three things to draw the support of University administrators. To be successful, the discipline must either (i) be devoted to the study of money; or (ii) be capable of attracting serious research money; or (iii) demonstrably promise that its graduates will make significant amounts of money. The University study of the Humanities is thought to score zero on each count. The fact that Humanities enrolments are declining merely shows that departments are failing in the vocational market place. Students are voting intelligently with their feet. (5)

We shall consider one more hostile argument, this time the technological argument, before we attempt a brief rejoinder. The point made by the technological argument is that the new and emerging technologies are not in favour of the long narratives and tedious reading that is the trademark of virtually all the Humanities disciplines. It says that students born after 1990 will not read paper books and that they might not read books at all, because the popularity of the internet's visual or virtual culture is stifling the reading culture even where it had existed before.

Now these arguments may express real perceptions; but if they are valid they

are nothing to celebrate because they are wrong. Consider for instance the oft-repeated statement that our economy demands skill-based education, not merely liberal education. Nowhere is the nature of the skill clearly defined. Beyond computer literacy which appears to be indispensable for survival in today's age, what kinds of skills do employers of labour want? We wonder if anyone has ever taken the pains to find out from the leaderships of financial houses, communications industries, the military establishments and the administrative machineries of governments how many of them are graduates of the Humanities. Among many circles and at interview panels, it has merged that business leaders today are looking for a diversity of skills, not just technical skills. They are looking for listening skills, ability to empathize, understand, critical thinking, communication skills, ability to sift and evaluate evidence, to distinguish valid reasoning from emotions and prejudices, and the ability to separate right from wrong, truth from fantasy. These are all human and humane skills that the Humanities seek to impart. If the future generations will no longer read books, what will they read, or will they be able to read and write at all? We think that all humanists ought to show grave concern over this situation.

### **The Ideals of True Democracy**

Many nations of the world today pay at least lip service to 'democracy', even when their leaders have turned monstrous tyrants wanting to continue in office for their life time. As we all know Abraham Lincoln, the man who had the onerous task of steering the affairs of his nation during her Civil War years, was supposed to have defined 'democracy' in his now famous Gettysburg Address, delivered on 19th November, 1863. Actually, Lincoln set out neither to theorize about forms of government, nor to define 'democracy'. He had a much grimmer task on his hands; the dedication of the bloody Gettysburg battle field as a military cemetery. To quote from the last statement of his address:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth (Bartlett, 523#4).

That has become the off-the-cuff definition of 'democracy', even though the concept and practice had been in use for over two thousand years before Lincoln; and a biographer of Abraham Lincoln has shown that Lincoln had borrowed the definition of 'democracy' from Theodore Parker, a Unitarian Theologian, scholar, and social reformer who, in several of his speeches, had said: A democracy – that is a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people; of course, a

government of the principles of eternal justice, the unchanging law of God; for shortness' sake, I will call it the idea of Freedom (Parker, *The American Idea*, 1850).

Now there are certain ideals about democracy – ideals that appeal to human reason and also touch the human heart. These ideals are the reasons why even tyrants pose their regimes as the most democratic. Let us take sometimes to consider a few of these ideals. Corliss Lamont, a man who claims to be the spokesperson for Western atheistic humanism says:

Democracy is a method as well as a goal. It is the most intelligent method of conducting political life, of carrying through social changes and of settling disagreements in the realm of public affairs. The life of reason, the appeal to the supreme court of the mind, for which philosophy stands, implies in its very essence peaceful persuasion through the free exchange and competition of ideas in the wide arena of social discussion (26).

The first ideal of democracy that we would like to uphold here is the fact that democracy is a rule of the people by the people themselves and for the good of the people. The understanding in modern-day democracies is that power belongs to the people – the power to elect those they wish to represent them; power to give free expression to its will as to how it wishes to be ruled; and that the will of the majority is expressible through periodic general elections that are free and fair.

The second ideal as expressed by Etuk (117) in his book entitled *The New Humanism* is respect for the rule of law. We do not require going into the procedures of making laws here; from deciding who has the initial powers to make laws, to the power to interpret and then the powers to enforce laws. The democratic understanding of the laws that govern a people is that such laws must emanate from the will of the people, not from the whims and caprices of a tyrant, or a military cabal, or a junta. Worse still is a situation in which law appears to have completely broken down, such as we see in failed states today. For very obvious reasons there is a strong positive correlation between governance that is outside or above the rule of law – where law has been suspended or subverted – and the disregard of and trampling down upon human dignity.

The third ideal of democracy is provision for change. Change being a necessary and the only constant factor of life must be expected and provided for in the governance of any group of people. Democratic politics provide that when changes take place, they do so as stipulated by law. Such laws help to ensure that any changes in government and its functionaries are carried out with the minimum of disruption to the business of governance and the normal life of the polity. These laws will also ensure that justice is done to all in the process of bringing about desired changes. Governance in Africa today is a far cry from this ideal. Now that military coups appear to have gone out of fashion, rulers once they get into positions want to remain there forever, clamping down on any opposition, subverting the political process and

silencing the press.

The fourth ideal that we shall mention here is what Etuk (119) in his book already cited, calls gradualism. He says truly that the task of governing any group of people, especially where the group is as numerous and diverse as a whole nation such as Nigeria, cannot be an easy task. When people assume this task, therefore, they need time to learn, to make mistakes and to correct themselves. After all, there has never been a perfect human system since the operators of any system are not themselves perfect. “The experiences gained by any group of leaders in the course of their governing the polity”, says Etuk, “goes into the collective experience of the people; and serves as guide to future generations of aspiring leaders”.

What gradualism is saying, in short, is that the art of governance is a slow process; it is a gradual evolutionary process, rather than a revolutionary one. So, the people who have been entrusted (that is, where they were really entrusted) with the business of governance must be given time to learn; to make mistakes and correct them; and plans that they have put in place must be allowed to reach maturation.

Finally, we hold high the recognition, respect and protection of human rights as a democratic ideal shared by democratic polities all over the world. These human rights are inalienable; they attach to persons as person; rather than as the rich, the educated, or the influential. Every human being deserves to be treated with respect and dignity. The dignity of every human being is one thing we cannot prove or demonstrate with regard to any one individual. It is rather axiomatic in the sense that any meaningful discourse concerning man presupposes it. Human rights are not tangible or quantifiable goods in the global market – place; but where they are recognized and protected, they are most valuable and indispensable goods for the highest development of the citizens, and for the fullest realization of their potentials.

Having stated the ideals of democracy thus far, we need to take a quick look at some of the objections and resisters built against it. Bayo Okunade (135) writes that “the problem with democracy and human rights in Africa is not about their desirability but that of feasibility and sustenance”. There are others who argue that Western style liberal democracy will not work for us, either because we do not have the enabling environment; or because we have to fashion out something peculiar to us without having to copy from any finished model. Emmanuel Akpanobong (105), for instance, argues that the citizens of the new States of Africa had no prior experience of living under a democratic system of government; so he goes on to conclude: “There cannot, therefore, be any talk of 'installing' democracy in Africa”. Earlier on, he had appeared to throw his weight behind the calls for “home grown democracy” when he wrote (104-5): “There is a growing conviction that the future development of the new states should be based upon their traditional or indigenous political systems”.



### **How Do We Respond To These Objections?**

The first thing that needs to be said is that if the concerns for democracy are about justice and the rule of law; governance by popular participation and the sovereignty of the will of the people; free and fair elections – where the elections really count in a multi-party system; orderly change and succession in government; and moral probity and accountability on the part of those who govern; then it does not take much argument to recognize these as universal values that are applicable and unexceptionable everywhere. If democracy is not indigenous to Africa, it never was indigenous to any nation in the world either. Some European nations today still retain vestiges of their ancient monarchies; but they are for the most part ceremonial while democratic parliaments govern the people. But once greed, vested interests, inveterate corruption have given way to genuine democracy; people have found that it is workable, humanistic and instrumental to the attainment of multiple societal goals.

The second rejoinder is quite simple and straightforward. The traditional and indigenous political systems might have been adequate for the traditional, semi-autonomous tribal groups, where exchange with other groups was minimal, and absolute allegiance was held to the chief. The indigenous populations did not know any better. But now, the narrow, limited values which were bulwarks to these traditional societies have been eroded for good; and there can be no doubt that new values, vastly expanded and transformed, are required for today's multi-national states, as well as for conducting the affairs of the nation on the global market stage.

Having come this far, we would now like to take a look at some of the humanistic values that are required for good governance. Our reason for doing this is to highlight the dominant values that education in the Humanities has always sought to impart, and to join Nussbaum (17) in sounding the alarm that “the goal of education is not economic growth alone”.

### **Humanistic Values for Governance**

Martha Nussbaum (24) holds out two models of education: one she calls “the economic growth model,” while the other is “the Human Development Model”. The economic growth model, according to her, holds in contempt education in the Humanities disciplines, such as, arts and literature, because they are not likely to lead to individual or national advancement; the economic growth model respects only the aggregate. For the human development model, however, what are important are the opportunities each person has in his or her life, ranging from personal life to freedom, political participation, and education. Nussbaum (24) states that “the Human Development Model is committed to democracy since having a voice in the choice of the policies that govern one's life is a key ingredient of a life worthy of human dignity”.

To have a voice in the choice of the state policies, of course, entails or

presupposes an education in the broadest possible sense, to be able to widen the horizons of the learner; to enable the person to see the other person's point of view; to become less bigoted and less narrow-minded; but more tolerant of differing opinions. Certainly, these are the qualities that can equip citizens to participate in their own governance and engage with the world.

No informed person would deny the rapid advances and the vast blessings that the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines have brought on human life. But a brief reflection will also reveal that it has not all been bliss. The horrors that ICT has unleashed on the globe is a clear indication that, whereas science and technology may be value-blind, the world needs the Humanities disciplines to teach us to question, analyse, debate, evaluate, interpret and compare the evidence, and communicate meaningfully. These are all skills required to hold a people together, and make them useful and productive members of their society.

In the world in which we live today, there are many widely differing and divergent world-views, religions, and ideologies. Some, we think from our perspectives, are plainly wrong; others we embrace, as not only being rational but humane and tending to promote the ends of nature. But whether we embrace or disdain them, there is primarily a need to understand, to establish dialogues. These attitudes cannot be encouraged by disciplines with rigid, hard and fast rules; they can best be encouraged and promoted by the human disciplines that encourage and thrive on dialogues, discussions, looking for points of agreement and commonalities, rather than exacerbating the differences. These are exactly the same attitudes that we need to transfer into our governance styles in order to promote tolerance, diverse opinions, and so on. Nussbaum is worth quoting one more time thus:

During the era in which people began to demand democratic self-governance, education all over the world was remodelled to produce the sort of students who could function well in this demanding form of government: not a cultivated gentleman, stuffed with the wisdom of the ages, but an active, critical, reflective, and empathetic member of a community of equals, capable of exchanging ideas on the basis of respect and understanding with people from many different backgrounds (141).

It has been said that knowledge is no guarantee of good behaviour; but that ignorance is a virtual guarantee of bad behaviour. We say this prefatory to our next remark that when persons in leadership positions behave badly, it does not necessarily follow that they do not know what is right. A great deal of the problems we have in our nations with leaders, politicians, and many in managerial positions is the absence of trust, a sense of responsibility and accountability. There is a story that once upon a time, sage got into conversation with an aspiring young politician. The sage told the youth that if he the sage were aspiring for an elective post, his greatest pride and satisfaction would come from his standing up in front of his electorates,

along with all the contestants; and whoever the majority of the electorates chose, would be declared the winner. The youth told the sage that he did not know what he was talking about. Why? Wasn't the sage talking about truth, honesty, integrity, and uprightness even in politics? When persons with shady, dubious characters get into politics, what can his citizens expect from him? And where is the ground on which he will stand to demand truth, honesty, integrity and uprightness from those he is leading?

### **Why Democracy Needs the Humanities**

We want to conclude this paper with the insistence that the models of the globalized and “technologised” economy being touted, which is what a researcher like Nussbaum (24) is opposing, are not consistent with the kinds of vision statements prevalent in university catalogues world-wide. To begin with, the Nigerian National Policy on Education (1998) spells out the goals it sets for tertiary education the development and inculcation of proper values for the survival of the individual and society; and the development of the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments. The document further states (p. 32) that “University Education shall make optimum contribution to national development by making all students, as part of a general programme of all-round improvement in University education, to offer general studies courses such as history of ideas, philosophy of knowledge and nationalism”. The Calendar of the University of Uyo (2002-2005) mentioning specifically the philosophy of the arts disciplines states: “Its mainstay lies in the realization that, in an age dominated by Science, the Arts retain an unquestionable relevance in the cultivation of human values and the preservation of what is best in human culture:” (p. 130). Paul Locatelli, writing while he was President of Santa Clara University, USA, said that rather than globalization helping to cripple Humanistic education, it should in fact help us expand the traditional moral question of humanistic education, from “How should I live in this world” to “How should all of us live together in this time and place?”

We must acknowledge and give credit to planners of university education in Nigeria, for their insistence on giving all undergraduate students a few courses in Philosophy (including Logic) and other subjects in the Humanities. These courses, as they have proven wherever they have been offered in other countries, will stimulate and equip the recipients to think and argue for themselves; instead of allowing themselves to be led by the nose by demagogues and charlatans. Idang (13) writes that “human beings truly ought to live by values and realities, which are above time and are worth knowing for their own sake.” What philosophy does, for example, is to help people enlarge the areas of their awareness, to become more alive, more knowledgeable, more discerning, more critical, and more intelligent; and to be able to live their lives usefully in the society (Idang, 13).

To conclude our arguments, we maintain that for our democratic institutions to be established, for them to become stable and sustainable, we need the contributions of the Humanities disciplines, as they continue to impart liberal education, to equip men and women with the kinds of skills that will make them well-informed, well-rounded and cultured individuals, and contributory members of their societies.

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