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## Youths, Social Media and Cultural Production of Poetics of Violence: Harbingers of Violent Elections in Nigeria?

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### ABSTRACT

Efforts to curtail violence in Nigeria's electoral spaces have focused mainly on quelling on-going physical manifestations of violence. This approach is like medicine after death. The approach has, in many instances, failed to prevent violent deaths in Nigeria's electoral processes. Both covert and overt forms of electoral violence have received substantial scholarly attention, yet a critical knowledge gap exists in various narratives of the violence. Less is still known on how the deployment of symbols and poetics of violence shapes and structures violent death in the country's electoral process. This paper, therefore, seeks to contribute to the filling of this lacuna. The paper explores links between poetics of violence and violent election in Nigeria. By exploring the poetics, it aims at articulating measures that may enable legal violent laborers to war at the speed of light to curtail violent election. The paper uses conceptual analysis of relevant documents and draws on direct observations of and participation in electoral processes to interrogate cultural production of violence in forms of narratives, performances, and inscriptions. It argues that such productions collectively give rise to poetics of violence that motivates those who march to the violent front of electoral process and their sympathizers. The paper identifies ways in which poetics of violence are linked with killable bodies as well as indicates how legal violent laborers may genuinely counter and diffuse the violence.

**Keywords:** Culture, social media; youths, violence, poetics, election, democracy.

**JEL Classification:** Z39; B29; H39; J58; P59.

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### 1. Introduction

*Politicians in Nigeria never quarrel but they fight.*

*Whenever they fight, funerals follow (Onoja 2009)*

Many studies on electoral violence across the globe focus mainly on violent events during election process and postelection. In African context, some analysts see the violence as the work of unemployed youths (Onoja 2009). As such, law enforcement agents and other legal violent laborers are wont to arresting any perceived jobless youth in any location near to the site of a particular violence.

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This approach, at best, may lead to the apprehension of some illegal violent laborers. The approach is, however, passive. It is like medicine after death. Legal violent laborers often setup a panel to investigate killings during electoral process, with a view to using the panel's report to dispense immediate and future justice. The impact of such reports on dispensing instant and impending justice has been inconsequential in most cases. The limited impact of the panel and its reports on electoral process is attributable to many dynamics, including the quality of information elicited by the panelists. Various efforts at improving electoral process and reducing its violence include introducing card reader system, using literates as ad-hoc staff, among others (Uzodike & Onapajo 2019). Yet, electoral violence is on the increase in the country. One critical knowledge gap in narratives of electoral violence and in quantity and quality data of elicited by panels investigating some cases of the violence is the paucity of information on deployment of symbols and poetics of violence in Nigeria's electoral process, such as political rallies and campaigns.

Understanding the manipulation and deployment of symbols and poetics of violence in Nigeria's electoral process is highly important to any projects on violence-free election. This is because Nigeria has two publics, namely moral and civic publics (Ekeh 2018). These publics have significant affinities for symbols and poetics of violence in particular political and electoral spaces. Studies in other political contexts show that manipulations of symbols, rituals, ceremonies, and their aesthetics are powerfully evocative. They are often identified as factors that move people into actions or inactions (Ohnuki-Tierney 2010). "The Jacobins in the French revolution, Hitler, Mussolini, Mao, and many other political leaders have consciously deployed symbols and rituals for political purposes" (Ohnuki-Tierney 2004).

This paper, therefore, argues that poetics of violence and symbols for the enactment of particular forms of violence are not less important in the control of those forms of violence, especially in the context of political elections in Nigeria. Poetics of violence are discursive constructions that prompt imagination as well as give motivation and legitimacy to the performance of violence in electoral processes, at least, to the perpetrators. It is a system of impetus for illegal violent laborers, who generously execute morbid imaginations of political gladiators in Nigeria's electoral process. The poetics serve as basis of identification between the executors and their sympathizers, who cheer and thumb up for the murderous mob. Therefore, the paper interrogates cultural production of violence in form of narratives, performances and inscriptions in electoral process. It identifies ways in which poetics of violence are linked with killable bodies as well as indicates how legal violent laborers may genuinely counter and diffuse violence in electoral process. Legal violent laborers bear the brunt and burdens of labors of war and wars of labor in Nigeria's electoral space. As such, the laborers need to be proactive, waring at the speed of light, as emergencies demand. They should demand a degree of responsibility from political war-chest elites in advance.

The methodology of this paper is mainly a collection of both secondary data and primary data. The secondary data were collected through a desktop review whereas primary data were collected through direct observation and participation in the electoral processes in Nigeria. The authors have participated as voters as well as umpires in the fourth republic. Some of the sources of the secondary data are national dailies, online videos and internet blogs. The videos were watched and transcribed accordingly. Beginning from 1960 to 2019, Nigeria has had four republics. The focus of this paper is on the fourth republic. Reference is made to other republics just to buttress the argument of the paper. Both the secondary and primary data collected were subject to conceptual analysis. Findings of the paper are divided into four sections. This introductory section is followed by conceptual clarifications. The third section is the presentation of some poetics of violence and discussion while the fourth is the conclusion and recommendations.

## **2. Conceptual clarifications**

In general discourse, violence is often viewed as a reaction or by-product of quest for power, power imbalance or inequality that ensues or results from the distribution of resources in human society since every human society is distributive and competitive. Violence is a disputed concept in scholarly writings and practice, especially in literatures where definitions vary as the scholars attempting to give the definitions vary.

Political violence is a form of violence with ubiquitous nature. Conceptually, there is a general lack of consensus among political theorists about the precise nature of political violence. Varying perspectives and approaches usually accompany attempts to define the term. The resulting differences of viewpoints are not easily reconciled in view of the very elastic and often illusive nature of the concept (Mars 1975). However, political violence is a type/kind of violence orchestrated by some identified individuals, groups, or government in order to achieve some political goals. It could be violence emanating from citizen's reaction towards government programs and policies. Unlike structural violence, the source of political violence is easily locatable and attributed to certain individuals or groups.

Political violence is the use of force, typically, but not only, physical force, to harm or destroy human beings or nonhuman objects, for the purpose of preserving or altering political institutions, systems, governments, or policies. On this definition, an act may count as an act of violence both when used to maintain an existing arrangement and when used to change it (Fashina 1989). Unlike structural and cultural violence, political violence often involves the use of force. Nigeria, as in other African countries, is a transitional society. According to Gopal Singh, transitional societies, as opposed to traditional and modern societies, suffer from political violence every now and then. Maladministration, poverty, insurrections, frustrations, assassinations, economic backwardness are common features of transitional societies (Singh 1976).

### 3. Poetics of violence

Framings of violence are mainly anchored in a number of disciplines such as biology, environment, psychology, politics, economics and culture. Mkandawire (2002) identifies the following perspectives, namely, the apocalyptic, the political economy, and the culturalist as the dominant views informing various framings of violence in postcolonial Africa. This paper draws from two main theoretical strands in political economy and one view from cultural perspective to elucidate poetics of violence and violent imaginaries as harbingers of electoral violence in Nigeria.

Within the political economy paradigm, rational economic activity and rational strategy for power struggle are deemed appropriate to account for electoral violence in Nigerian context. These frames are actor-centered approaches seeking to elucidate the interests guiding violent practices (Schmidt and Schröder 2001; Perryman 2011). Although the models are often discussed as alternate explanations, a common thread structures underlies their main thrusts. What connects the perspectives that views violent practice as a rational economic activity and the one that sees it as a rational strategy for power struggle is their much emphasis on instrumentality and rationality of the violent action. Based on the commonality of these views, perpetrators of electoral violence are driven by economic gains as well as by political power the violence offers.

Those struggling for power and distributing economic rewards of electoral violence are mainly the elites. According to Mkandawire (2002) to understand violence practices and actions of actors, "we must understand not only the elites and the intra-elite conflicts that produce their leaders, but also the actions and responses of the wider population". This category of individuals shares various forms of relationship with the wider population. However, these relationships are not only mediated by economic gains and political rewards, as the political economy perspectives indicate. They are also informed and shaped by cultural affinity, signs, symbols and other forms of belonging. In the context of electoral violence, the instrumentality and rationality gazes of the political economy approach do not account for affective and "irrational" motivations of action that together with rational behavior, although not necessarily economic rationality, define the basis for violent actions (Schmidt and Schröder 2001; Ellis 2003; Whitehead 2004). Moreover, the conceptualizations of violent electoral practice solely as a rational economic strategy and as a rational strategy of authority neither improve our understanding of the forms of socio-cultural transformation during electoral violence nor illuminate the cultural ideas that structure such violence, making the act even legitimate (Schmidt and Schröder 2001; Ellis 2003; Whitehead 2004).

This paper, therefore, adds cultural lens to further explain how poetics of violence and violent imaginaries become forerunners of electoral violence. The paper draws from poetical analysis of violence. Poetics of violence refers to violent practices that are discursively constructed from collective

signs and symbols, rituals and histories such that the performance of such acts becomes culturally meaningful and appropriate (Whitehead 2011). It is a form of a discursive practice and derives its legitimacy, at least for perpetrators, from the manipulation of symbols and shared perspectives. Poetical analyses, therefore, seeks to understand the interplay of individuals' and groups' agencies, signs and symbols, rituals in the performance of the electoral violence through which forms of cultural expressions and meanings are articulated. The cultural productions that characterize particular election process may offer insights. Thus, electoral violence is not only instrumentally rational strategy of bargaining for power and economic ends but also a form of symbolic action that conveys cultural meanings, most importantly ideas of legitimacy.

Based on Weber's classic definition, the concept of legitimacy entails that a social order is accepted as valid either due to its historicity, to its emotional/symbolic value or to instrumental value (1978). Similarly, Schmidt and Schroder (2001) posit that the code of legitimization of particular violence is its historicity, which accounts for its efficacy both at the discursive and practical levels. Thus, understanding cultural construction of electoral violence entails grasping its historicity and symbolic value.

In the context of poetical analyses, electoral violence begins with the manipulations of collective symbols and discursive construction of violent practices by war chest elites and their supporters. In the process, some of the elites may purchase some violent laborers. However, majority of others may not be paid but are drawn into participation in the violent electoral practices by issues of historicity, symbols and shared idiom of meanings. This view explains mob's violence in the electoral process in Nigeria. The cultural formulations on electoral violence pay adequate attention to issues of historicity, which, is the code of legitimization of any violent practice (Schmidt and Schröder 2001; Whitehead and Abufarha 2008). Cultural lens, also, explains ways in which legitimacy of a particular electoral violence is impressed upon those who march into the battle and those who cheer them on (Schmidt and Schröder 2001). It illuminates how elites may use particular strategies, not necessarily monetary or promise of political positions, to motivate and mobilize mobs' violent actions in electoral process in Nigerian context, where cultural affiliations are highly prized over national commitments. In this view, electoral violence is not absence of meaning, a cultural malpractice, or a breakdown of law and order. Rather, it becomes an authentic cultural expression. The consequences are that Nigerian electoral spaces are littered with violent death and poetics of violence. The next section of this paper explores the link between violent death and poetics of violence.

#### **4. Poetics of violence and violent death in electoral spaces: Making the connections**

Violently killed or killable bodies in Nigeria's electoral spaces are easily linked to gunshots, mutilations, machete wounds, among others, but never to poetics of violence or to the cultural production such as narratives, performance and inscriptions that underpinned the legitimacy of the violent acts, at least from the perpetrators' viewpoints and their sympathizers. Yet, over the years, deployment of poetics of violence and its consequences in Nigeria's electoral space has become phenomenal. The increase is not only in content but also in the mode of storage and circulation as well as in many cases of violent deaths.

Poetics of violence were once considered by media houses as inappropriate speeches, cartoons and graffiti. As such, only euphemistic versions of these poetics were available to a limited segment of the masses. With the advent of social media, however, there have been explosions in the distributions of the violent narratives, performance and inscriptions. Before the advent of internet, poetics of violence were stored mainly in print media and archives. But today, the poetics are stored not only in print media but also in audio-visual forms, which enable them to circulate in both organic and mimetic memories (Whitehead 2004). As a result, poetics of violence are now available and easily accessible not only to the agents of Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau Investigation and Nigeria Intelligence Agency. The poetics are also available in everyday life world of ordinary citizens, including perpetrators, victims and witnesses of electoral violence.

This shifting landscape of poetics of violence highlights and underscores changes and continuities in Nigeria's electoral process. In the 1920s for instance, Onoja (2009) notes that political parties often campaigned to the same audience together. The parties would sit down together and

present their manifestoes to the same audience one after the other. Then the audience would in turn pose questions to the parties. The electioneering campaigning of the 1920s was, thus, relatively marked by utmost decorum, urbanity and civility. At the advent of the fourth republic, however, those forms of arrangement had disappeared in Nigeria's political landscape. The republic was barely 11 years old when poetics of violence, like 'this forthcoming election is a do or die affair', began to inundate the political and electoral landscapes. Of course, the reported violence that followed the 'do or die' regime exceeded that of 1999. By 2011, the orgies of electoral violence and the underlying poetics of violence became so overwhelming that the Human Right Watch report indicates that over 800 people were brutally killed in pre- and post-election violence in twelve states of northern Nigeria. Additionally, 2015 was very exceptional in that its pre-election year was marked by many virulent poetics of violence such as: *Their baboon and dogs will be soaked in blood (Buhari 2014). It is going to be rig and roast (Tell, 7 July 2014). On Saturday, if anyone of you, I swear in the name of God, goes against my wish ... the person is going to die inside this water'.*

At 2019 pre, during and post election, the content of the poetics of violence were very phenomenal in their brutality (Onimisi & Tinuola 2019). The consequent violence also took a more divisive dimension, making the election the worst within the living memory of Nigerian political and electoral landscapes. In some states where the contents were too raw, mini-pogrom followed just as many individuals, who were not even participants in the election, became perpetrators, victims and witnesses of electoral violent deaths. Moreover, violence without borders emerged: The boundary between election sites and sacred sites of worship disappeared; between political thugs and law-abiding citizens; between militants and military; between the police and the policed as scores of people were killed not only at the election venues but also in the market places, mosques and churches. Also, there was erosion of demarcations among such categories as victims, observers and perpetrators. Thus, victims in a given electoral violent scene became perpetrators while innocent observers became perpetrators or victims in other scenes of the violence. The erosion of these boundaries, especially between international observers' category and victims' was also highlighted in one of the 2019 poetics of violence performed in Kaduna state, Nigeria: *You'll all go back in body bags if you interfere in Nigeria's affair (El-Rufai 2019).*

The disappearances of these boundaries, in concrete terms, were evidently illustrated by trends and trajectories of an electoral violence in Lagos, which started in Okota area where a disenfranchised, shot, angry mob had on the day of the 2019 presidential election apprehended a member of political thug groups. The mob claimed that the apprehended thug had shot at people in some electoral venues as well as snatched and burnt many ballot boxes. The mob, therefore, set the thug ablaze. As the thug was burning and groaning in pains, observers dutifully filmed the violent scene and made it to go viral on various social media platforms. Eventually, some individuals came and took the perpetrator-turned-victim to hospital. While the burnt thug was oscillating between life and death in the hospital, some analysts indicate that the violent and barbaric actions of the mob have maximally satisfied the poetics of violence performed by the sitting president in Abuja with respect to snatching ballot boxes: *"I am going to warn anybody who thinks he would lead a body of thugs in his locality to snatch boxes or disturb the voting system; he would do it at the expense of his/her own life" (Buhari 2019)*

The capturing and setting ablaze of the daredevil political thug by the disenfranchised and shot angry mob in Lagos state further matches two more poetics of violence performed by one politician and a crowd of voters in a rally held in Kaduna state and another performed by another politician in Lagos. The Lagos performance says: *It- (This election) is going to be rig and roast (Tell, 7 July 2014)* whereas the Kaduna's is as follows:

*Politician: If they touch your votes deal with them.*

*They are now begging that the military should be brought on election day; we wanted soldiers when our people were being killed, did they bring them?*

*Crowd: No*

*Politician: Did they bring the Police? Why should soldiers be brought during election? Are we fighting? It is just election. Why should they bring soldiers? To guard whose mother?*

*Crowd: Their mothers*

*Politician: Be watchful in your areas during election; anyone you see voting differently is a*

*betrayed. He is one of those being used by those in Kaduna. After the election and you come back what are you going to do?*

*Crowd: Deal with them.*

*Politician: What are we going to do with those who betray us?*

*Crowd: Kill them.*

*Politician: What are you going to do to them?*

*Crowd: Kill them.*

*Politician: What of those who collect money?*

*Crowd: We kill them.*

*Politician: That is it.*

From the foregoing discourses, poetics of violence, knowingly or unknowingly to their narrators, performers and writers, do not only beget further poetics of violence. They also may prompt the physical execution of violent acts causing not only psychological but also physical harms, injuries and death perhaps in different geographies. The poetics of violence of the 2019 election and their consequent Okota's violent election follow the view of Whitehead that *when atrocity and murder take place, they feed the world of the iconic imagination that transcends reality and its rational articulation; but in doing so imagination can bring further violent realities into being* (Whitehead 2011). The violent election brought further violent realities into being: As the violent image of the burnt political thug, stored both in organic and mimetic memories, went viral on the internet, it drew supporters', opponents', and observers' attention in the same way a bar magnet attracts iron filings. The supporters of the mob action against the political miscreant argue that the mob has satisfied the poetics of violence and the violent imaginaries of the sitting President who declared to the whole nation that... *anybody who thinks he has enough influence in his locality to lead a body of thugs to snatch boxes or to disturb the voting system, he will do it at the expense of his own life.* The supporters also say that the burning perfectly satisfies the violent imaginaries of one of the foremost politicians in Lagos state who had once stated that the election was *going to be rig and roast.*

The opponents of the burning say that the extant electoral act does not stipulate capital punishment for any electoral offenders. They maintain that the offender ought to have been handed over to the legal violent laborers. Eventually, an extreme group with more deadly ideologies emerged from the opposition group. One of their topnotchers enacted another poetics of violence and circulated the performance through mimetic memory. An excerpt of the performance:

We shall slaughter you like animals  
We are going to kill you... call the UN  
We will revenge for every atrocity you commit  
We will waste you like animals  
They will be revenge  
Horrible people  
Heads will roll  
We will not allow you vote for the people we don't like  
We will take our own pound of flesh  
You guys are nothing.

This new poetics of violence meant to avenge the burning of the thug prompted a new set of mobs. The new mob identified, defined its target to be people of particular ethnic group. Thus, for the first time in the history of election in Nigeria, ethnic cleansing was inaugurated in Lagos state. The mob invaded markets closing shops and chasing way the identified targets. For days even after the election results had been announced, the mob held sway and led siege in the economic realms of the identified and defined target. It took the intervention of some legal violent laborers to dislodge the rampaging mob.

Therefore, poetics of violence are actually the harbingers or even the beginning of electoral violence. Electoral violence is not a haphazard activity. It is imagined and performed. Poetics of electoral violence prompt imagination as well as guide modes of action. The poetics begin with the production of enemy through the creation of binary oppositions such as 'us' versus 'them', 'our people'

versus ‘their people’ (Geschiere 2009). To make the produced enemy killable, the poetics would dehumanize the enemy’s body. Hence, the poetics of violence may feature animal metaphors like *Their baboon and dogs will be soaked in blood*. The process of dehumanizing the enemy does not only make the enemy’s body killable but also placate the conscience and shield the identity of perpetrators.

The production and dehumanization of the enemy through poetics of violence is a constant practice before any genocidal war, ethnic cleansing, pogrom or coups in Africa. For instance, reports of some soldiers deliberating on putting the big bird in a cage to mean plotting to violently overthrow a sitting government are commonplace in Africa. Before the pogrom against the Igbos in the northern Nigeria in the 1960s, Charles Keil (1970) writes that: *The Igbo and their ilk...vermin and snakes to tread underfoot...dogs to be killed*. Before the infamous April 1994 genocide in Rwanda, an image of a machete appeared on the front page of a Hutu publication under the headline ‘What to do about the Tutsis?’ (Taylor 2004).

So, dominant pre-election iconographies might be a sensitive barometer for gauging political pressure and violence. The iconographies may be forerunners of violent actions. Finally, by describing or painting the produced enemy as a ‘wild animal’ or a felon worthy of death, the poetics of electoral violence give motivation and legitimacy to perpetrators’ violent actions and simultaneously launder perpetrators’ identity as vanguards of a new order as opposed to agents of disorder (Mkandawire 2002). Therefore, legitimate violent laborers may counter electoral violence at the poetics level without impinging on people’s freedom of speech by keeping track of pre-election’s poetics of violence. It may be advisable for any panel of inquiry go beyond mere oral testimonies of victims and witnesses to review pre-election’s iconographies. The production and circulation of violent images and narratives in pre-election should be of concerns to every legal violent laborer. State as the sole legal producer of violence should retool its security architecture to proactively address issues of poetics of electoral violence. Security agencies and legal violent laborers should create an electoral violence clock, after the Doomsday Clock, to clearly send signals across the general public. The clock should be made to inform every stakeholder on the rising danger and the need for political gladiators to tune down their poetics of violence. The agencies should work with appropriate organs of the legislature to produce clear reward systems for prosecuting purveyors of deadly images and narratives as well as protecting any threatened groups.

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

This paper fills a major lacuna in the narratives of electoral violence in Nigeria. It shows that deadly poetics of violence has always preceded every genocide or pogrom in Africa. The paper demonstrates that poetics of violence is the template for implementation of every electoral violence. The template is the lens through which violently killed and/or killable bodies are identified. As a sieve, poetics of violence smoothly sieves and separates killable bodies from untouchable ones, through the creation of binary opposition- our bodies versus their bodies; ours versus theirs; indigenes versus non-indigenes in Nigeria’s electoral spaces. The boundaries between these oppositional categories are reified and naturalized as the demarcation between good and evil, human and animal. The naturalization phase of the poetics opens the floodgate of dehumanization. The ‘other’ in the imagination of the purveyor of poetics of violence becomes ‘a wild animal’ or a felon worthy of violent death or bodily harms or other forms of punishment.

Purveyors of poetics of electoral violence may not know its ramifications. They may not intend to have it executed physically by their supporters. Some purveyors may think venting morbid imaginations as a strategy for winning election. Ignorance of tragedies lurking at the instance of such venting does not minimize its tragicness. Willful executors may derive motivation and legitimacy for their violent actions from the poetics and not necessarily from money of war chest financial elites. Additionally, the poetics simultaneously launder perpetrators’ identity. It bequeaths on the executioners the identity of authentic cultural agents as opposed to that of agents of disorder and violent death. In this light, electoral violence is not a breakdown of law and order that requires police or other legal violent laborers. Rather, it is a form of authentic cultural expression, for which its perpetrators are to receive heroic titles. The coronation of promoters and perpetrators of electoral violence as cultural heroes is a common phenomenon in Nigeria’s fourth republic.

Addressing electoral violence, therefore, requires a broad-base collaborations of every stakeholder. This is imperative to ensure a proper disentanglement of electoral violence from culture. Legislatures and legal violent laborers are to look beyond physical manifestations of electoral violence to focus on poetics of violence. These stakeholders must constantly examine iconographies, cartoons, jingles and narratives of political gladiators and their supporters in election year. Perhaps, the services of cultural brokers should be employed for proper scrutinization political jingles. Leaving such a duty solely for media houses and advertisement companies is no longer safe, especially in this age of ubiquitous social media. Legitimate violent laborers and other relevant agencies may address may counter electoral violence at the poetics level before its physical violent manifestations through political education. The content of such education must be framed to counter appropriation of local cultures for production of poetics of violence. Since, poetics of violence is always deployed during elections in which candidates of dominant political parties are from different cultures, the principle of zoning, which was used to reduce poetics of and electoral violence in 1999 should be made a sacrosanct feature of Nigeria's democracy.

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