

TOWARDS A FUNCTIONAL DEMOCRACY WITH AFRICAN VALUES

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Abstract

Democracy in Africa has been threatened by a lot of problems such as terrorism, violence, ethnicity, corruption, misappropriation, embezzlement and disrespect for local value systems. Indeed, disrespect for local value systems such as family, cultural, moral, political, economic, human, religious and social values are some of the central factors affecting democratic institution in Africa. While it is important to emphasize the urgent need for mutual respect among Africans; for the necessity of love and an appreciation of native value systems, it is also pertinent to undertake a philosophical re-evaluation of the aforementioned for a better democratic system in Africa. The need for an integration of traditional systems into the postmodernist rationality that underpin contemporary life in the African continent remains necessary for improved democratic system in Africa. The major concern of this paper is to see how these can improve African democratic system.

Introduction

African countries are bedeviled by myriad crises including fragmentation of various aspects of their political systems and their institutions of governance. Africans adhered basically to traditional institutions before the advent of colonialism. The emulation of western institutions of governance created problems for local forms of existence in Africa. This led to Africa's crises resulting invariably in the failure of the nation-state and political mis-governance. The most dangerous issue is that many African countries are unable to establish rights-based political governance that is rich in African values. Most importantly that will facilitate and consolidate the democratic governance in Africa. To a large extent the problem is due to the fact that many African countries have detached themselves from their institutional and cultural values.

The prevailing state of poverty in the continent, the persistence of widespread ethnic and civil conflicts, terrorism and regular and post-electoral strife are some manifestations of the failure of the African continent. The insensitivity of African countries to inculcate local ways of life and their alienation of traditional institutions indicated also the failure of the African continent. Africans' ways of life are not integrated into our democratic system of government. This is in spite of the widespread belief that our survival is anchored on our deeper understanding of local ways of life.

The issue of values cannot be over emphasized. Deeper philosophical grounding on issues relating to our values can help in averting some of the challenges we are facing today such as terrorism, corruption and many others vices. People have developed low attitudinal bias towards local cultural values. One can argue that moral values are important in determining the parameters of growth and change particularly in improving the system of government. It is assumed that the older generation and certain parents are responsible for the destruction of the structures needed to enhance our democratic system. According to Pathokm "as societal norm enlarged it was further assumed that the elder who had accumulated this store of knowledge could pass it on to the young"¹.

In recent times the reverse is the case such that parents and elders have abandoned their family and noble role of genuine transformation in the society. Following Ugwanyi's view, there is no moral commitment on the part of parents, teachers and government, pastors and priests; what matters essentially is money issue. The rhetorical question remains whether Africans possess any morality. This is a question that has been repeatedly asked by certain individuals especially given the misfortune bedeviling such virtues as sincerity, honesty, love, respect for people's lives and dignity, among others. Indeed these virtues have been undermined and unduly relegated and thus a moralist would argue that this has directly or indirectly threatened our socio-cultural and political institutions.

We can assume that democracy cannot survive in Africa when we do not uphold our ways of life. As the younger generation embraces the act of bribery and corruption, resistance to genuine hard work and productivity, lack of love and honour, terrorism, it is assumed that our democratic bulwark will remain shaky. Local value systems need philosophical re-evaluation and they are the fundamental issues that will usher a fertile ground for democracy to thrive in the African continent. There are a lot of problems in Africa today mainly due to discrepancies that exist between the practice of democracy and the African values. The question is whether democracy is really the best system of

government for Africa. Is it possible to invent a system of government that will incorporate local ways?

Democracy

Democracy in a commonsense understanding is “government of the people, for the people and by the people”. Democracy has its origin from the Greek words “*demos*” meaning people and “*Kratos*” meaning rule. In a modern sense, it signifies the following:

1. *A form of government in which the right to make political decisions is exercised directly by the whole body of citizens, acting under procedures of majority rule, usually known as direct democracy.*
2. *A form of government in which the citizens exercise the same right not in person but through representatives chosen by and responsible to them, known as representative democracy.*
3. *A form of government, usually a representative democracy, in which the powers of the majority are exercised within a framework of constitutional restraints designed to guarantee all citizens the enjoyment of certain individual or collective rights, such as freedom of speech and religion, known as liberal or constitutional democracy.²*

Democracy means that people have absolute power to choose those that will represent them. In the Greek city states some officials were elected and some were selected but one basic issue was that the officials were responsible to the whole assembly to whom they rendered account of their work. The question would be: what is the difference between Greek democracy and the modern day democracy? The modern day democracy and democratic institution emerged out of the practice known in the medieval Europe where kings had to consult and seek the support of interest groups in the imposition of levies and policies.³ This was the origin of modern parliaments and legislative assemblies.

Today, democracy is a representative form of government where people are being represented in decision-taking and law making which is contrary to authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. So from the Greek city state down to the period of medieval Europe and to modern democratic period one will understand the dynamic nature of democracy. Why is democracy dynamic and not static? As far as this system of government tries to accord individual and collective right and freedom, it must be dynamic and this reminds one of Karl Popper’s view concerning critical rationalism. This gave impetus to the need for popular participation of all by way of representation and class with party politics in the modern era.⁴ Democracy in Africa should be accepted as a way of life and there is a need for it to be guided. African ways of life remain indispensable for better democratic system.

Towards a functional Democracy with African values

The nature of African values is the underlying ground essential for democratic governance in Africa. It is very important to note that the more African values work in alliance with the democratic principles the better for democratic governance in Africa. The signage between African values and democratic principles will contribute to democratic transformation in Africa. We have many institutions that contribute to the development of Africa but most are assumed to have emanated from the family unit including traditional and political institution. In Africa we enjoy communal living in our family and this gives fundamental ground for other institutions. This is exactly why we have decentralized political systems in Africa. Considering the potential for healthy democracy the following are expected: participation in decision-making, decentralization of power, proper resolution of conflicts, consensus on decision with proper respect for dissent and safeguarding of minority views, equitable access to land, reducing the gap between the leader and the led through direct participation and the implementation of the issue of agreement for better governance.

There is a yearning, mainly at the grass-root level, for the above mentioned, starting from the family to other institutions. Actually these values are not limited to a specific type of a political system contrary to the claims that political culture tends to be vertically organized in rural African societies.⁵ African values especially the political values create the opportunity for proper participation of people, particularly in the area of consensual systems. People deliberate over issues and exercise the power of critical rationalism prior to consensus. This allows the general public to exercise control over decision making on issues that have to do with public concern being contrary to Beetham view that consensual systems are crafted to allow the general population to exercise control over decision-making on issues of public concern.⁶ The idea of consensual system is of great benefit to local communities in decision-making thereby putting no limitation to proper democratic governance in Africa. Subsequently the idea of conflict – resolution mechanisms remained paramount for internal democratic system among all the parties. This enhances the issue of people participating directly as the sovereign to elect those to represent them. For the fact that decisions are made on consensual basis, such does not sidetrack the procedures required to elect the best candidates thereby instituting peace during the electoral contests.

Furthermore, some mechanisms of traditional institutions can help in developing our democratic system in Africa, through that the following ideas can be achieved: State building, accountability of leadership and state reconstitution management of conflicts and expansion of public services.

Africa's process of state-building can benefit a lot from the application of the mechanisms of conflict-resolution and consensual decision making. For example the issue of settlement of border disputes among African countries for state-building. Actually, those factors that cause civil wars are numerous and differ from place to place. So conflict resolution and consensual decision-making can lead to wider agreement among various ethnic groups. It is evident to note that using force to suppress the enormous challenges we have in Africa rarely advances state-building. For this reason

Okafor notes that “coercive approaches to state-building fail because in the contemporary view of human rights, violent, coercive unification and repressive homogenization are morally and socially bankrupt”.⁷ This leads to intense resentment and resistance which followed by a cycle of hostilities. The main purpose of African-problem-resolution mechanism is to affirm peace and harmony and its development. It is very important to note that even during the election, there is need for African countries to explore alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms and apply that greatly through conflict-resolution and consensus – building for state building. Electoral laws can be enhanced when the ideas of conflict – resolution and consensus-building are applied in concrete manner. This attracts many interest groups for effective governance and development.

Concerning accountability of leaders and state reconstitution, Samatar has considered the despotic and self-serving nature of the African state to be a major hindrance to African’s political rural economic transformation.⁸ The adoption and incorporation of African traditional political values to our democratic governance constitutes a great and critical step in making African states better. Broader decision-making leads to broader popular control and this makes leaders to be accountable.

Furthermore, for expansion of public services, democratization of the state with the incorporation of African traditional institutions can contribute meaningfully to the improvement of service delivery in many ways. Traditional authority can help in mobilizing local communities for political participation, thereby empowering them to play a part in influencing policy on the distribution of public services. They have the potentialities to support the efforts of governments in service delivery through proper participation in the administration of justice for better development. African values are not only important but also have the potentiality to complement the principles of democracy for the expansion of the public services. African values help in the mitigation of conflicts such as resource-based conflicts. The idea of communal land tenure system that is known in Africa is the foundation for the traditional political structures and democratic values. This ensures equality among members. The communal tenure system remains a very important issue for reducing rural unemployment, poverty and inequality. This authenticates the traditional democratic values as a way forward for good governance in Africa.

For proper understanding of the African democratic values Bashir argues that “culture and democracy are mutually dependent, the sustainability of democracy depends on the culture of the people”.¹⁰ There is a great relationship between various values in Africa. African values could be known as traditional moral values or religious moral values. Based on the relationship of all these values, Cyril O. Imo asserts that in Nigeria both can be interchangeable, for the fact that, there is a close link between values in traditional Nigerian societies. In those societies moral values are derived from religion since the later permeated into every sphere of the society especially the moral aspect.¹⁹¹⁰ African traditional values have great connection with the principles of democracy. On the political setting, African society is headless in nature and the power of authority does not reside in the leader or the individual. There were checks and balances when the traditional leader is enthroned and that paved way for leaders to be accountable to the people. In Africa, leaders consult their council members who were identified by gods to be special with minds full of wisdom. They actually deliberate on issues properly beginning at the family to the village and to all sectors. People that are brilliant are

mostly involved. In this angle we can understand that it is a taboo and offence when unilateral decision is taken. This idea cuts across every sector such as the electoral system.

A leader that is accountable shows that he or she is morally reputable and everyone tries to associate with the person, this means that character formation is very paramount. This is formed by life itself in Africa. For Yoruba people, character is taken to be *Iwa* and *Idowu* described it as “the very stuff which makes life a joy because it is pleasing to God, stressed that good character must be the dominant feature of a person’s life.” The issue of character is very necessary for any form of democracy because such has a lot of influence on the principles of democracy. Under moral values the following are important: selflessness, justice, kindness, truthfulness and generosity. Both minority and majority come together after election on consensual ground to decide on issues for their growth. Having known what African values are and what they can offer for better democratic system in Africa, it will be necessary to delve into the need of integrating traditional authorities into the democratic governance in Africa.

Integrating Traditional Authorities into Democratic Governance in Africa

As far as African continent needs transformation, there is a need for the integration of the traditional authorities into our democratic governance. Most of our values can be well known when we have the grassroots body that can institutionalize those values for better democratic system in Africa. The role of the authorities in the maintenance of those values is indispensable. Chiefs especially those at the grassroots level and leaders in the decentralized political systems are leaders that in totality practice those values and they can institutionalize them for better or sustainable democracy in Africa. Precisely, those leaders form an integral, albeit, informal part of governance in Africa. For Von Trotha Chiefs and village heads under civil chieftaincy constitute a forum where local interests are debated and articulated. Thus they can constitute a valuable resource in informing the state about the interests of local communities as well as in mobilizing rural populations for active engagement not only in development activities and the distribution of public services but also in the rational political process.¹¹ The lower-level chiefs and village heads or leaders live commonly and largely similar to those of their communities. They share common interests and reason alike. For this reason, they are better equipped to represent the interests of their local communities unlike government appointees.

Partnership in development between local traditional leaders and government administrators is likely to promoting good democratic governance in Africa. Government has invariably underutilized the authorities at the grassroots thereby underrating the African values and precisely not integrating them into the system of governance in Africa (democratic system). Nevertheless, a growing number of African countries including some of those that had previously attempted without success to strip chiefs of their power or to completely or totally abolish traditional institutions, have known the political status that chiefs possess. For Von, they also now concede to the political risks or opportunity costs involved in abolishing chieftaincy. For them chiefs have become “Vote brokers” in rural areas and exercise significant informal control over the state’s intervention in local affairs.¹² Contrary to that they pull the interests of the people for democratic governance.

This reduces the chances of unreasonable oppositions. Countries like Uganda and Zimbabwe have taken measures to reinstate and to integrate chiefs into their governance structure. The ways of integrating chiefs into our democratic governance vary across countries but the most common form has been the creation of an upper house (house of chiefs) in parliament mostly for the advisory role. Our democratic system in Africa will be better when we integrate the traditional authorities into the democratic system and then uphold the idea of 'African values.' This idea can reduce the issue of insecurity in Africa and enthrone good leaders that will help in paving ways for economic growth. It is very vital to transform African democratic system for better development in line with our values and systems.

Conclusion

From the discussion so far, it is pertinent to note that African values and culture are the life-wire of our existence and they can help in transforming our democratic system for better governance. African leaders, from family to the state should lead the younger ones with good qualities for better living. Most of the issues that surround African values such as folktales should be taught in the school, homes and other social gathering to improve moral values. Our traditional institutions should be respected especially traditional authorities as the custodians of African values. The central problem in Africa is such that we do not value those things that give meaning to our lives or existence. The duty of African philosophy is to pave ways for Africans to appreciate those things that add value to their lives. It is very necessary for us to build on our values in line with the democratic principles for good governance in Africa.

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