Kinship Structures and Social Justice in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

A major obstacle to the development of sustainable democratic systems of government in contemporary sub-Saharan African states is the difficulty in articulating an adequate conception of social justice to serve as a guiding principle in these polities. This difficulty is a consequence of the ethnically heterogeneous character of most of these states. This article argues that while in traditional sub-Saharan African communities social justice is largely based on kinship relations, that traditional framework is too narrow to serve as the basis for the articulation of this important notion in these ethnically pluralistic polities. Consequently, even though kinship relations ought to be retained in the articulation of social justice in these states, the conception of kinship needs to be broadened to transcend simple familial or ancestral relations.

Key Words

Sub-Saharan Africa, kinship relations, ancestors, social justice, democracy, globalisation, colonialism

Introduction

Many contemporary states in sub-Saharan Africa aspire for the development of democratic systems of government modelled especially to reflect the patterns observed in certain western nations such as France, The United Kingdom and The United States of America. However, the various characterisations of the principles of social justice in these sub-Saharan African states have posed a great challenge to the attainment of this aspiration. Arguably, the problem facing the characterisation of social justice in these states is connected to the fact of the ethnic heterogeneity of most of them. A number of factors are responsible for their ethnically heterogeneous character. Notable among them is the problem associated with the nomenclature of the region frequently referred to as “Africa”.

According to Mogobe Ramose, within the geographical territory referred to as "Africa", there are various ethnic communities that were jointly referred to as "Africans" by Greek and Roman Sojourners. Each of these communities had its own distinct cultural identity. Consequently, referring to all these communities by a single term erroneously suggested that there was a cultural identity shared by all of them (Ramose 2003, 114-115). This problem was further complicated by colonial administrations that took over the political control of many of the communities living in the territories of contemporary African states. In order to group their colonies into administrable units, the colonial administrators merged certain ethnic groups whose culture appeared similar into fairly larger units which they referred to as "tribes". According to Basil Davidson, this was done to reduce the cost of administration of the colonies. However, in order to stand against colonialism, elite Africans built the tribes into "nation-states" that created platforms for strong agitation against colonialism, leading to the eventual attainment of independence from colonial administrations (Davidson 1992, 100-101). This suggests that the various states that constitute sub-Saharan Africa, and indeed the entire African continent, are made up of various ethnic groups with distinct cultural identities.

Consequently, it is difficult to identify a single perspective as being representative of the social or ontological outlook of *sub-Saharan African* states. Owing to this fact, some scholars have suggested that a *particularist model*, which recognizes the relative character of cultural values and thought patterns, be adopted in the discussion of African thought systems (Coetzee 2002, 321-337; Ramose 2003, 115; Kanu 2014a, 91-92). However, in spite of the varied social realities that produced the ethnic diversity in the continent, reflections on African cultures by various scholars indicate that there are a number of essential similarities in the outlooks of the various communities that constitute Africa (Bodunrin 1985; Appiah 1992). Thus in a bid to understand the ontological and cultural foundations of African societies, this article examines selected communities in sub-Saharan Africa as presented in the discussions of philosophers and anthropologists who have studied the ontological and cultural outlooks that shape the values in such communities. The result of this examination may then be generalised to provide a basis for drawing recommendations for developing an adequate conception of social justice for states in sub-Saharan Africa. This is important because social justice helps to create a situation where burdens and

benefits within a society are shared based on certain objective and widely accepted principles. It helps to ensure that human beings are treated with dignity (Jost and Kay 2010, 1122). The communities whose ideas will be considered include the Yoruba, Akan and Lugbara.[1]

In the next section, two levels of kinship structures in traditional sub-Saharan African communities are examined in the light of their relation to the idea of social justice typically found in these communities. The third section examines the relation between democracy and social justice, and argues that traditional sub-Saharan African communities exhibit some form of historical approach to social justice. The fourth section examines the complexities that characterise contemporary sub-Saharan African states, and argues that colonialism and globalisation augment these complexities. The section argues that these complexities must be considered in any attempt to develop an acceptable idea of social justice for sub-Saharan African states. The fifth section identifies a dilemma in contemporary sub-Saharan African states, and explores possible ways of resolving it.

The central argument of this article is that although the consideration of kinship ties as the basis of social justice need not be eradicated from African societies, there is need to broaden it to develop an acceptable model of social justice in ethnically heterogeneous contemporary African states.

The Kinship Structure of Traditional African Communities

Comments from various African philosophers suggest that traditional African societies are characterised by an essentially communal or communitarian structure. For instance, taking a lead from the likes of Senghor, Kenyatta and Menkiti, Kwame Gyekye argues that African societies exhibit some sort of outlook which engenders a feeling of community in social relations among individuals (Gyekye 2002, 349). At

[1] The Yoruba are one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, primarily occupying the South-western part of the country, with members in Diaspora in various other countries such as Benin Republic, Togo, West Indies, Cuba, etc. [see Onadeko, T. "Yoruba Traditional Adjudicatory Systems". *African study Monographs*, 29(1), 16]. The Akan ethnic group primarily lives in Ghana and in parts of the Ivory Coast [see Wiredu, K., "An Akan Perspective on Human Rights" in Coetzee, P.H. and A.P.J. Roux eds. 2002. *The African Philosophy Reader*. Capetown: Oxford University Press, p.367. The Lugbara people occupy the West-Nile Regions of Uganda (see "Lugbara Tribe Profile". *Music of Northern Uganda* http://www.singingwells.org/lugbara-tribe-profile-music-of-northern-uganda-1212

the base of this communal structuring of African societies is an ontological commitment to the idea of kinship within these societies. Individuals are regarded as persons not solely based on any attribute they may possess as part of their individual material or immaterial make up; rather, the personhood of individuals is largely determined by their relationship with other individual human beings, as well as their relationship with certain non-human agents. This idea of kinship implies that a person cannot be adequately described without reference to other individuals within the person's community. This outlook is affirmed by John Mbiti's famous statement about the individual's understanding of his/her status with regards to the community, namely, "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1970, 141).

The kinship structure in traditional sub-Saharan African communities may be understood at two different but related levels. At one level, it presents horizontal relations among human agents. In this regard, it is believed that there is a strong interconnectedness among human agents. At the base of this belief in the horizontal plane of kinship is the fact that the biological make-up of individuals is owed to other individuals. In the analysis of the concept of person in the Akan thought system, Kwasi Wiredu notes that a person is constituted of three basic ontological elements, namely, *Okra*, *Mogya* and *Sunsum*. While the *Okra* is the life principle given by God, the *Mogya* is the blood principle which is received from the mother, and the *Sunsum* is the personality principle which is received from the father. The *Mogya* is the basis of lineage while the *Sunsum* combines with the *Mogya* to constitute the human frame. The possession of these three elements situates the individual person within a network of kinship relations (Wiredu 2002a, 367-368). Thus at this horizontal level, there is a perceived kinship among individuals that make up a family, clan, and the ethnic community at large.

Consequent on the kinship structure of Traditional sub-Saharan African Communities is a particular conception of personhood. According to this conception, personhood is not determined solely by individual traits. The biological features inherited by individuals from their parents are the first indications that human beings are essentially social. These biological links place human beings in inalienable mutual relations. As such, the status of personhood of a particular individual is determined by the roles that such an individual plays within the community. Each individual has access to certain basic resources such as land, and is also expected to play a role

directed towards the sustenance of the community. Recognizing this fact, Wiredu argues that kinship relations provide the basic units of political organisation in African communities (Wiredu 2002a, 370).

One implication of Wiredu's observations above is that in traditional sub-Saharan African communities, benefits and obligations are determined by kinship structures. The duties assigned to individuals depend on the family lineage to which they belong. Consequently, the privileges enjoyed by individuals within the society depend on their roles within these kinship relations (Coetzee 2002, 328). Sometimes these kinship structures and the corresponding roles of individuals are reflected in the naming practices of the Communities. Thus in his discussion of the roles of proper names in the Yoruba thought system, Gbenga Fasiku notes that names show the work of the bearer's family, and also shapes the expectation that people have of the bearer of the name (Fasiku 2006, 55). This point is further emphasised by Janet Finch, who states that "the social act of naming, the very act of constituting personhood, is fundamentally rooted in kinship" (Finch 2008, 721).

Given the kinship foundation of the allocation of roles and benefits in traditional sub-Saharan African communities, the prevailing conception of social justice in such communities is inextricably bound up with their conception of kinship relations. Leadership roles, for instance, in many traditional sub-Saharan African communities, are not based on the western type laissez faire democracy[2]. Instead, they are based on kinship structures such that only members of certain families are entitled to hold certain leadership positions. Thus in the political organisation of traditional Yoruba communities, only members of certain family lineages are entitled to the position of kingship. To make a person who does not belong to such lineage a king is regarded as an injustice. Similarly, to deny people benefits to which they are entitled by the roles they play based on their lineage is considered to be an injustice (Onadeko 2008, 18).

A second level of kinship pertains to the vertical plane, where persons share kinship relations with certain non-human (and quasi-human) agents within the cosmos. This level of kinship is part of a belief in a hierarchy of existents among many African communities (Etim 2013, 11-17). While the focus of this article is not the doctrine of hierarchy of existence in African ontology, this doctrine is itself instructive in

[2] A brief clarification will be made about this in the next section.

understanding the perceived relations between human beings and other elements in the universe within African communities. Anthony Kanu (2014b, 56) presents the hierarchy of existence with God at the apex. Other entities then follow in the order of Divinities, Spirits, human beings, Animate Realities, and Inanimate Realities.

According to Etim (2013, 13), many African communities regard ancestors as divinities who rank next to the Supreme Being, and who sometimes act as intermediaries between human beings and the Supreme Being. They rank higher than human beings, and are revered as leading agents in the affairs of the community. Whichever way they are viewed, ancestors are spirits of members of the community who have died. Even though the ancestors are no longer mortal human beings, they have deep ties with human beings, and so may be taken to be quasi-human. This is to say that ancestors enjoy a supernatural existence while also maintaining their links with humans. They are revered because they have contributed to the foundation that makes the community what it is.

An appreciation of the two levels of kinship within sub-Saharan African communities discussed above (among living human beings on the one hand, and between living human beings and the ancestors on the other) is essential to understanding the concept of social justice in sub-Saharan Africa. When there are violations of the social order, injustice is committed not only against living members of the community, but also against the ancestors. In other words, when individuals get allocations of responsibilities or benefits that are not justified within the horizontal or vertical planes of kinship relations, there is social injustice. At the horizontal level, such violations are reprehensible on the ground that moral common sense demands that one behaves decently towards one's kin. On the vertical plane, the undesirability of such violations stems from the fact that they unsettle the order which the ancestors have established in the community. Thus Albert Dalforo notes that for the Lugbara people, the fact that the ancestors laid the foundation for the order in the community is so important that it behoves the living human beings to conform to the behaviour patterns of the ancestors (Dalforo 1997, 488). The attempt to avoid a loss of connection with ancestral patterns of conduct partly explains the resentment that African communities usually have towards social systems that tend to ignore that connection. This, for instance, justifies the claim that the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s was an attempt to oppose

a regime that dispossessed the Kikuyu ethnic group of their ancestral land (Teffo and Roux 2002, 200-201).

Democracy and the Demands of Social Justice

The aspiration of many sub-Saharan African states for workable democratic systems of government is a justifiable one. According to Abd-el Kader Boye, only the democratic system of government has shown the capability to manage the conflicts that are characteristic of complex modern societies in a peaceful and tolerant setting (Boye 2008, 42). Similarly, Alain Touraine defines the central principle of democracy as "the ability of political institutions to articulate the diversity of interests or opinions with the unity of the law and of the government" (Touraine 2008, 88).

It is important to note here that the democratic system of government is not strange to traditional communities in sub-Saharan Africa. According to Kwasi Wiredu (1996), traditional African communities practice a consensual model of democracy. According to this model, the various clans or families that make up a particular community are represented in the governing body by the head of the clan or family. This governing body, led by a chief, takes decisions based on consensus after thorough deliberations. This, for Wiredu, helps to ensure that the interests of everyone in the community (including those of people from the minority groups) are well considered. However, given the complexities that characterise contemporary states in sub-Saharan Africa, the consensual model of democracy, as practiced in traditional African societies, are no longer viable. Certain features of the complexities of contemporary sub-Saharan African states will be examined in the next section. The complex nature of these states is partly responsible for the desire to attain laissez faire democracy in many of them. Within a laissez faire democracy, there is minimal control of social and economic life. Personal freedom is highly valued, and independent market forces are allowed to determine solutions to basic economic problems. The role of the government is to ensure the security of the state and the citizens (Basu 2008, 82).

Certain principles are essential to attaining the laissez faire democratic system of government. One of those principles is that every citizen is allowed to have a fair access to the opportunities that accrue from the society. This, according to David

Beetham, is because excluding certain people from the opportunities accruing from the social and political setting breeds intolerance which impairs the growth and quality of democracy (Beetham 2008, 22). The challenge of ensuring fair access to social opportunities is the problem of social justice. This suggests that there is a strong link between democracy and social justice. It also helps to explain why articulating the idea of social justice is important in a bid to attain an acceptable democratic system of government.

The concept of social justice itself is difficult to characterise. This difficulty is reflected in the volume of literature that has been devoted to discussing the concept, as well as the various, sometimes conflicting, characterisations of the concept that have been presented by various social analysts. In this regard, one may identify, for instance, the marked contrast between John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness focused on end states (Rawls 1975) and Robert Nozick's historical principles of social justice (Nozick 1974). For Rawls, the principles of social justice, adopted under a "veil of ignorance", must ensure that individuals within a society are given equal rights to the most extensive total system of equal liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all. Again, where there are unavoidable social and economic inequalities, they must be arranged such that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, and be attached to positions that are open to all individuals under conditions of fair equality and opportunity (Rawls 1975, 164). These principles are informed by the fundamental belief that cooperating individuals make up societies. Rawls' idea of the requirement of social justice is one in which what an individual participant in the social cooperation gets as obligations and benefits from the cooperation is the most important factor to be considered. For him, what such an individual possessed before the cooperation cannot be the basis for allocating benefits and obligations in the society.

For Nozick, on the other hand, an adequate theory of social justice must recognise the original acquisition of holdings of members of the society. For him, the original possession of certain properties (including benefits and obligations) by an individual *entitles* such an individual to such properties. Again, an adequate theory of social justice must specify means of transfer of holdings among cooperating individuals that make up the society. Where there has been an unjust transfer of holdings, a theory of justice must specify means for the rectification of such unjust transfer (Nozick 1974,

150-152). Thus for Nozick, the most important principles of social justice are those that give priority to individual entitlements based on persons' original or initial possessions.

However, in spite of the variations in the conceptions of social justice, certain elements appear common and essential regardless of what conception a person may adopt. According to Colin Bonnycastle, "one can see that the concept of social justice is shaped through claims making, societal obligations, social relationships, context, and cultural practices" (Bonnycastle 2011, 269). This suggests that in order to adequately address the concerns of social justice in a specific society, due consideration must be given to the way in which its cultural practices have a bearing on how its members relate to one another. In the case of traditional sub-Saharan African communities, these relations are explained in terms of the kinship structures identified earlier. Understanding the kinship relations among members of a traditional sub-Saharan African community on the one hand, and the kinship relations between members of that community and its college of ancestors on the other, helps to explain the distribution of benefits and obligations within that community.

Placed under the lens of the contrast between Rawls' end-state and Nozick's historical principles of social justice, traditional African communities exhibit some form of historical approach to social justice. Rights and obligations depend on certain original holdings which are tied to kinship relations within the communities. To be denied positions and benefits attached to such holdings is unjust.

The Complexities of Contemporary Sub-Saharan African States

As noted earlier, many commentators regard traditional sub-Saharan African communities as well ordered and peaceful. This appears to be due to the fact that the conception of social justice characteristic of these communities was adequate and well accepted by their members. However, this acceptability is not characteristic of contemporary states in the same region. It has been difficult to develop a conception of social justice that is adequate and acceptable to most of these contemporary societies. This partly accounts for the usual experience of various levels of crises in many of them.

At this point, it is important to address the problem of the essential distinction between traditional sub-Saharan African communities and contemporary sub-Saharan African states. What accounts for the relative success of the traditional mode of social justice and the failure of the contemporary attempts at developing acceptable principles of social justice? Many factors could be responsible for this difference. However, some of the answers are obvious. The group cohesion that characterises traditional sub-Saharan African communities points to the presence of certain important homogenous cultural elements within them. Since the identities of individual persons are shaped by the roles they play in their particular social worlds, it is understandable that the values that develop in such communities are shared among their members. Each individual grows within a particular system of values, and grows to align his/her values with those of the wider community (Gbadegesin 1991, 65). However, it is important to bear in mind that these values arise from within a social structure characterised by close kinship ties.

In sharp contrast to the traditional African communities described above, contemporary sub-Saharan African states are the result of Western colonial administrators merging various ethnic groups into single units, thereby creating polities with wide varieties of cultural identities and values. Consequently, many of these polities consist of various ethnic groups trying to identify common values within the diverse cultural realities that make up the states. In his description of the effect of colonialism on African culture and civilisation, Precious Obioha writes: “In the historical moment of colonialism, through the process of forced acculturation, western civilization came heavily on the African cultural world bringing about a battering and shattering experience and an irreparable cultural trauma” (Obioha 2010, 3).

One other notable factor partly responsible for the complexity of contemporary sub-Saharan African states is globalisation. According to Obioha, Globalisation aims at bringing together the nations in the world to enhance “socio-political and economico-cultural interaction, integration, diffusion and give and take facilitated by information flow and perhaps for the enhancement of the global world” (Obioha 2010, 2). This implies that globalisation is an attempt to overcome the barriers that exist among peoples of various cultures and states. This makes it easier for people to move across various states in the world regardless of their varying cultural backgrounds. One advantage of globalisation for sub-Saharan Africa is that the cultural integration that

accompanies it has helped to eradicate certain outdated belief systems and practices. However, globalisation has also led to the erosion of valuable customs (Obioha 2010, 2). As a result, the social structure and family patterns of traditional sub-Saharan African communities have been altered (Yankuzo 2014, 3).

Colonisation and globalisation, therefore, are two major factors that have contributed to the heterogeneous character of contemporary states in sub-Saharan Africa. The implications of this heterogeneity to the idea of social justice are grave. With regard to this, Wiredu states: "…, if urbanisation and other apparent concomitants of modernisation are not controlled with conscious and rational planning based on the human sensitivities of the communalistic ethic, then this fund of automatic good will dry up and African life will experience increasingly the Hobbesian rigours of a single-minded commercialism" (Wiredu 2002b, 345).

Within such heterogeneous states, while dominant groups enjoy the bulk of the benefits accruing from the resources of the society, other groups complain of marginalisation in the allocation of benefits and obligations. This situation leads to protests by various individuals and organisations, civil wars, military coups, or even secessionist drives. The social conflicts arising from the diversity in the cultural backgrounds of sub-Saharan African states makes it difficult to develop an acceptable conception of social justice to guide democratisation efforts. Deng (2004) succinctly states this problem as follows:

> The main point is that while democracy, broadly defined in terms of normative ideals or principles, is universally valued, it needs to be contextualised, by putting into consideration the African reality and making effective use of indigenous values, institutions, and social mores to make it home-grown and sustainable (Deng 2004, 503).

It is worth noting that the difficulty in coming up with an adequate concept of social justice in contemporary sub-Saharan African states does not suggest that the idea of social justice was alien to traditional communities in this part of the world. In fact, scholarly evidence abounds that there were accepted and effective models of social justice in those communities (Davidson 1992, 100; Yankuzo 2014, 3-6). So successful were those traditional models that philosophers such as Julius Nyerere (1968) have advocated a return to those cultural ideals (or at least to some of their basic principles) in the organisation of contemporary African societies. However, the models of social

justice that worked for traditional African communities are not effective in the culturally pluralistic contemporary African societies, unless, of course, certain elements of those traditional models are adapted rather than adopted. One such element that requires serious revision is the kinship structure that forms the foundation of social relations in traditional African communities.

The Dilemma Facing Contemporary African Societies

The fact about the heterogeneous character of contemporary sub-Saharan African states, and its relation to the problem of social justice, underscores a dilemma which is present in these polities. On one hand, contemporary African societies may attempt to rediscover the kinship structure on which the traditional concept of social justice is built, with the attendant historical basis for the allocation of benefits and obligations. On the other hand, these states may consider a shift towards adopting a more liberal structure which will focus on developing end-state principles of social justice. These end-state principles would ensure that citizens are treated to some share of the benefits and obligations accruing from the society regardless of their biological or ancestral kinship connections to the states. While the former option promises to retain the totality of the African consciousness and connection with their familial and ancestral kinship, it ignores the reality of the multiplicity of cultures and values which characterises contemporary sub-Saharan African states. The latter option seems to be more in tune with the reality of the heterogeneous character of contemporary states, but threatens to disconnect many African peoples from a part of them which they hold very dear - their sense of connectedness to their kinsfolk and to the ancestors to whom the living believe they owe the duty of protecting the traditional order of social justice.

It appears that the above-mentioned dilemma is exactly what has plagued African societies during and after colonialism. Unless it is resolved, the problem of social justice in sub-Saharan Africa may linger. Some African societies are beginning to recognise this dilemma, and have decided to resolve it one way or the other. The recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa seem to provide ample evidence of an African society whose indigenous population, to a notable extent, has chosen the option of rediscovering its traditional kinship structure and ensuring that rights and obligations are shared on this basis. This explains the rejection of non-indigenous

persons within the South African society to the point that certain indigenous persons go out in groups to torture, and sometimes to kill, non-indigenous persons within the society. An excuse that seems to be prevalent among those involved in these xenophobic attacks is that the "foreigners" are taking over their positions and thereby making it difficult for them to survive (Akanbi 2015; Olupohunda 2015).

While many Africans dream of societies that will be fair to them regardless of their kinship relations, such a dream is hard to fulfil. Even in societies that appear to practice some sort of *inclusive* democracy, the influence of kinship structures and values are reflected in voting as well as in administrative patterns. Majority of the members of the electorate vote based on ethnic and familial considerations, and persons in charge of allocation of benefits tend to favour people with whom they share ancestral or familial kinship relations. In some sub-Saharan African states, the kinship influence on allocation of benefits is so pronounced that it probably forms one of the bases for which those societies are described as corrupt (Alumona and Fasiku 2015).

The concept of social justice in any society must consider the social realities prevalent in that society. The nature of the constitution of membership of the society is important in determining how its benefits and burdens are to be shared. One may even argue that the failure to adequately consider this is mainly responsible for the failure of the implementation of social justice in contemporary African states. The attempt at a strict return to the traditional pattern, based on strict kinship relations, is probably going to be neither achievable nor effective. This is because of the wide divergence between the character of traditional African communities and contemporary African societies. Such an approach will require that the societies be further fragmented along ethnic lines.

However, the implications of attempting to balkanise sub-Saharan African states are grave, unacceptable and unachievable. For example, the United States Embassy put the number of ethnic groups in Nigeria at about 250.[3] With such a large number of ethnic and cultural groups in Nigeria, it is clearly not achievable, or advisable, to

[3] "Nigeria Fact Sheet". A Publication of the United States Embassy in Nigeria. http://photos.state.gov/libraries/nigeria/487468/pdfs/Nigeria%20overview%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf

develop the idea of social justice along traditional kinship structures. Apart from the multiplicity of ethnic groups, many African countries play host to a number of foreign persons whose interests ought also to be considered in the administration of social justice. These foreign persons also contribute to the progress of the various societies in which they reside.

The foregoing reflections seem to suggest that the traditional kinship structures of sub-Saharan African communities ought to be abolished in favour of a more liberal end state principle of social justice. In other words, it appears that the option available to African societies is to lay aside their ancestral and familial affiliations so that principles that will allow resources and roles to circulate among members of contemporary societies, regardless of their kinship status, can evolve. This is a difficult string to pull. In fact, any attempt to abolish the kinship structure is likely to meet with strong opposition. Besides, such an attempt has no foundation in the lineage-based character of the traditional African consciousness. Indeed, no nation can progress by abandoning its roots in their entirety. Although it is helpful to be critical about cultural values, this criticism ought to result in the retention of vital aspects of those values and the jettisoning of outdated ones. In line with this, Jay Ciaffa writes: “Progress in any society requires adapting, changing, and in some cases abandoning traditional ideas and behaviors. It also involves borrowing and adapting ideas from other cultural contexts” (Ciaffa 2008, 142).

An adequate solution to the problem of social justice in contemporary sub-Saharan African states requires a rigorous balancing act in the consciousness of their citizens. They need to reconcile their affinity to their kinship relations with the reality of the heterogeneity of their societies engendered by a plurality of ethnic groups with their distinct cultures, and augmented by colonisation and globalisation. Consequently, this article advocates a model of social justice in which the consciousness of kinship relations among Africans is adapted in such a way that it transcends the narrow limits of simple familial or ancestral relations to reflect the diversity of cultural values and interests that characterise contemporary sub-Saharan African societies. The argument here is not that citizens of states in sub-Saharan Africa ought to abandon their connections to their ancestors. However, strictly holding on to resources by various familial groups, if achievable, can only lead to extreme isolation among persons and communities. In such situations, conflicts are more quickly generated and more

difficult to resolve. A more acceptable approach ought to recognise that regardless of kinship connections to certain resources, there is need to allow fellow citizens to freely share them. For example, political leadership positions ought neither to be restricted to certain ethnic or ancestral lineages, nor determined by familial connections alone, as is the case in some of the indigenous African communities.

It therefore turns out that with regard to the formulation of an adequate conception of social justice for contemporary African states, end-state principles are more suitable than historical ones. However, these principles cannot be determined under a veil of ignorance as Rawls suggests. The concession required of Africans is not one that will cut them totally from their ancestral links. Instead, it requires a reasoned determination of the elements of their ancestral inheritance that ought to be jettisoned and those that must be retained even in the face of the heterogeneous character of their contemporary societies.

Conclusion

This article has argued that there is a very strong link between the concepts of democracy and social justice. As such, in order to build viable democratic systems of government in contemporary sub-Saharan African states, it is necessary to articulate an adequate notion of social justice. Towards this end, it is crucial to understand the complexities that characterise sub-Saharan African states. These complexities result from ethnic plurality augmented by colonialism and globalisation. The article has argued that to be able to combat the problems that result from this complexity, it is necessary to broaden the conception of kinship relations that form the basis of social justice in indigenous African communities with a view to developing a consciousness of a wider framework of kinship relations among Africans across ethnic divides. This task is crucial, but the present article has not focused on how it might be accomplished. Instead, it has merely endeavoured to create an awareness of this need, leaving the determination of the details of how to meet it to further reflection.

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