

## **INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY: POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, 'Intercultural Philosophy: Politics and Democracy in Africa,' I argue that philosophers down the ages have been men who have continually asked fundamental questions that have kept men thinking thoughts that have produced significant results in the history of the human society. These thoughts have often crystalized into ideologies that have refashioned the ideals of the society in the search for a better socio-political system. Philosophy and philosophers must continue this search to reposition the political ideals and systems conducive for governance that is geared towards development. This paper, using the method of critical examination argues that the system of governance that can stem the tides of bad leadership and poor governance is democratic communalism with the principle dialogue – *communalis kratein dialogic*.

**Keywords:** intercultural philosophy, politics, democratic communalism, bad governance, Africa.

### **Introduction**

Philosophy as a discipline is intrinsically inextricable connected to every area of human existence. Philosophy is intercultural and interdisciplinary. Philosophy is not just the mechanism for acquiring knowledge it is also the knowledge itself that every discipline seeks. This cuts across thought articulation to praxis. In the area of politics and democracy, philosophy is useful and has been useful from the time of the Sophists who were the first to divert the attention of philosophy from cosmology to ethical and cultural issues as they concern human life in the society.<sup>1</sup>

Since then philosophy in every era has continued the search for a political society that satisfies the cravings and yearnings of her citizens. Many ideologies have been framed and many systems of government projected for the proper anchoring and ordering of human affairs and philosophers have

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<sup>1</sup> D. J. Soccio. *The Archetype of Wisdom* (2nd ed.) California Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995, p.

been in the forefront of these ideological formulation and formation. Nwala corroborates this point thus:

The greatest philosophers are those who lived during a period of mankind's transition from one epoch of socio-cultural and intellectual development to another and who are able to provide the intellectual compass for not only understanding the course of that transition, but also help to influence and determine its progress into the next succeeding phase.<sup>2</sup>

From oligarchy, Aristocracy, socialism to democracy and other forms of representative systems of government, philosophy and philosophers have continued to advance systems of governance and especially appraising democracy as the most ideal system because it hinges on the people. It is against this background that Okaneme speaks in praise of democracy as one of these ideologies that have crystalized into systems of government that have influenced governance across the globe.<sup>3</sup>

As a system of government, democracy has been acclaimed the world over as the most acceptable system of government. The reason is not farfetched. It is the system of government that is most people friendly. Abraham Lincoln has succinctly defined it as "the government of the people, by the people and for the people."<sup>4</sup> Democracy can therefore be seen as the people's government, a people-based government and a people-driven government.

In the same vein, Azikiwe defines democracy as:

The rule of the people by its majority inhabitants and includes a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation, usually involving periodically held free and fair election.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> T. U. Nwala. "Otonti Nduka: The Rationalist Social Philosopher," in B.A. Ehezue (ed.) *Otonti Nduka: The Man and His Works*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Nigeria Plc, 2006, p.54.

<sup>3</sup> G. Okaneme. "Uzodinma Nwala: A Bastian and Doyen of Democracy in Nigeria" in T. Uzodinma Nwala: The Philosopher – Statesman, Joseph C. A. Agbakoba and J. Chidozie Chukwu Okolo (eds) (Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited 2022) 185.

<sup>4</sup> I. F. Esikot. *Socio-Political Philosophy: The Bases and the Issues*, Revised Edition Lagos: MacGrace Publishers 2021, p.158.

<sup>5</sup> N. Azikiwe. *Renascent Africa*, London: Frankcass, 1937, 2-3.

This definition by Azikiwe is concise and broad and covers a wide range of some salient democratic principles. The definition highlights the fact that democracy is the people's rule exercised directly or indirectly through representation in a process that accommodates elections that are free and fair. Here then lies the major problem of democracy as a system of government: The problem of representation and election; the problem of how to fashion out a democratic system that truly represents the people and takes into cognizance their peculiar problems and aspirations especially in Africa, has remained a perennial problem of democracy in Africa. In this Uduma argues that:

For Africa to adequately tackle the problems of leadership and underdevelopment, she must find a way of touching base with her spirituality. Alien religions and spirituality cannot help her since they serve as basis for alien political and economic systems. A society gathers cohesion when her ideological orientation is indigenous to her.<sup>6</sup>

The point underscored by Uduma which we emphasize here is that alien political systems have not and will not help Africa. What would help Africa is a system that touches base with her spirituality. This is what we advocate for in this paper. It is to evolve a democratic system that is peculiar to the African scene and equally addresses her developmental needs. This democratic system is what this paper describes as *Communalis Kratein Dialogic*; democratic communalism – community-rule as against the popular definition of democracy as the people's rule. Ntui defines democratic communalism as:

African democratic communalism or communal democracy is community base democracy. Everything revolves around the community and not on the single individuals (elected or appointed) in the community as it is the practice today. The community is not a stakeholder in the democratic process. Community involvement in the democratic arrangement is so minimal that one can rightly argue that it is totally absent. There is no communal dialogue that is geared towards communal consensus and consent even on grave matters of paramount concern. Community consensus and approbation is an indispensable complement of community involvement. It is the community that first shapes the life and character of the individual. This begins at the smallest unit of the

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<sup>6</sup> U. O. Uduma. "Democracy and Culture: Deliberating with Communalism as an Imperative for Democracy and Good Government" A Paper Delivered at the 16th Annual International Conference of International Society for African Philosophy and Studies (ISAPS) at the University of Ghana, 17-19th March 2010, p.3.

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family. A man and indeed everyone is largely and essentially the product of his environment, of his community. Without even showing it, the conscience we have that resides everyone's heart is dictated by the community, societal norms the 'dos' and the 'dons' are all in subtle ways nurtured by the community. These are not natural to anyone. The community therefore is a powerful stakeholder in what its citizens (numbers) become in life in the latter days and years that follow. Even in the present day permissive society, there are still (more than a handful) of communities where there are decisive ways of dealing with criminality. These decisive ways are still very strict, forceful and compelling with the same spirit of obedience and compliance as in yesteryears.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper therefor, we shall examine this unique democratic system, and its functionality in Africa. We shall equally examine the unique African experience in the African universe and finally look at the implications of evolving this system of democracy for Africa's development.

### **African Democratic Communalism**

African democratic communalism is the special/peculiar brand of democratic model that we suggest as a model that fits into the African clime that can stem the tides of bad leadership, underdevelopment, insecurity and reposition Africa for integral development. It is a system of democracy that is community-based. It is a system of democracy that gives credence not just to the people but to the community. In Africa, people do not live alone in isolation. It is in the community that people find cooperation, solidarity and brotherhood. The community wields people together and gives them identity, protection and a sense of belonging.

Onyibor supports this position thus:

Liberal multiparty democracy which has been fastened on Africa should be adopted to African existential realities especially their ontology, which advocates the principles of consensus in decision making in governance... which is based on communal spirit of consensus and brotherhood.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> V. N. Ntui. *African Democratic Communalism: A Re-evaluation of Nyerere's Ujamaa*, (Ikot Ekpene, Pax Media 2021), 43.

<sup>8</sup> M. I. S. Onyibor. "The Changing Application of Democracy" in I. Odimegwu (ed.) *Nigeria Democracy and Global Democracy, World Philosophy Day at UniZik*, A Publication of the Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe

Democratic communalism therefore thrives on consensus, dialogue, communal spirit, brotherhood and is hinged on African ontology. African ontology recognizes that for the African, life is lived beyond the physical realm to the spiritual and the ancestral and these are connected and interdependent. In the same way Ntui says that:

African democratic communalism will create community-based governance. Community-based governance lays emphasis on the community more than on the individuals that make up the community even though the community is nothing without these individuals that make up the community the individuals also are nothing without the community in traditional African society. No individual is a floating entity. Every individual is attached and tied to the community and it is the community that gives the individual both relevance and residency. Community-based governance therefore focuses on the entire community as a collective and cooperate unit put together with everyone as a member usually with equal right and privileges... the community becomes the overseer of every aspect of the community's life.<sup>9</sup>

African democratic communalism therefore advocates that, government and governance should move slightly away from the government of the people to the government of the community. The community has greater hold over its people. There are many regulative principles in the community that check the people's behaviour. No one is bigger or stronger than the community. The community base of African society is so strong that it transcends the ordinary and the physical and also includes the ontological, the ancestral in cobweb of interconnectivity, interdependence and interrelationship. These call people easily to responsibility and accountability knowing the obvious repercussions of any default or obnoxious behaviour.

In communal democracy or democratic communalism, the traditional institutions of traditional rulers, age-grades and other apparatus of vigilantes including other sacred security outfits are usually activated for effective check in compliance enforcement. African democratic communalism which is rooted in African traditional ethics and communal existence is Africa's peculiar way of life Omoregbe argues that:

Having attained independence from their colonial rulers, the big question for many African nations then was, where do we go from here? What political system shall we adopt, capitalism, welfarism

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<sup>9</sup> V. N. Ntui. *African Democratic Communalism*, 149.

or socialism? Shall we go back to our African roots and adopt communalism, which was our traditional, social and political system?<sup>10</sup>

It was actually a big question and many African leaders were not able to answer it properly. The answer they gave is what derailed their search for a system of government that is peculiar and unique to the African clime. Going back to “our African root to adopt communalism that was traditional to African social and traditional system” could have served the Africans better since it is a system that aligns more with her nature, nurture, culture and traditional values. Stretching this point, Ntui maintains that Africa should go back to her rich cultural heritage to sift values and ideologies that align with her experience of life.<sup>11</sup>

African problems of governance and development will not be properly addressed until and unless Africa returns to what is at the root and heart of her own experience of life and that is what democratic communalism is all about. This democratic communalism has embedded in it a fundamental principle of dialogue that produces consent through consensus. Onyibor has made it abundantly clear that:

Liberal multiparty democracy which has been fastened on Africa should be adopted to African existential realities especially their ontology, which advocates the principle of consensus in decision making in governance... which is based on African communal spirit of concern and brotherhood.<sup>12</sup>

This principle of dialogue that democratic communalism advocates for is the dialogue which is arrived at through consensus. This consensus is the core of African communalism, which is anchored on togetherness in a spirit of brotherhood. It is a dialogue without prejudice, intimidation and victimization. It is frank and honest dialogue with the sole aim of resolving amicably the issues involved.

In Africa, the biblical question – “where is your brother” (Gen. 4:9) that God asked Cain is absurd and unthinkable. My brother is not someone I should look for or someone I should be asked about or asked after. My brother

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<sup>10</sup> J. I. Omoregbe. *Socio-Political Philosophy: A Systematic and Historical Study*, (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publications, 2010), 137.

<sup>11</sup> V. N. Ntui. *African Democratic Communalism*, 140.

<sup>12</sup> M. I. S. Onyibor. “The Changing Applicable of Democracy” in I. Odimegwu (ed.) *Nigeria Democracy and Global Democracy*, World Philosophy Day at UniZik, A Publication of the Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, 2008, p.164-169.

is always with me. I am always with my brother. My brother cannot be lost in my presence. What is even more disheartening is the answer Cain gave, “am I my brother’s keeper.” In African communalism (and in this article as a system of governance), African democratic communalism, Africans are their brothers’ keepers, Africans are people’s keepers, Africans are each other’s keepers. Africans owe each other a lot of responsibilities. These responsibilities cannot be sufficiently captured in any legal code. In fact, they go beyond any legal prescription to moral prescriptions that truly indicts one if he fails to account for and take responsibility over his brother’s welfare and where-about. Africans carry each other along through dialogue that brings out the areas of needs to be attended to. Chukwuokolo uses the concept of consensus democracy<sup>13</sup> but we feel democratic communalism is most appropriate since in it the community is deeply involved at all the stages of governance. Democratic communalism is open to dialogue with all relevant stakeholders who are indispensable in the process of governance and this ensures participation in the democratic process. Uduma captions these dual principles of dialogue and participation thus:

Democracy entails the participation of the demos (the people) not only in the process of choosing those who will represent them, or in empowering leaders, but more about the process of dialogue which saw the people partake in the legislation of the laws that govern them.<sup>14</sup>

This dialogue and participation are the hallmarks of African democratic communalism, and the processes involved are not alien to the African environment. Bamikole asserts that:

There were forms of democratic practices in traditional Africa long before the advent of colonialism. Such democratic practices took the form of mass participation in the decision about issues of the people’s welfare. Decision making was characterized by such democratic elements like debate, discussion and dialogue. At the end of the meeting which was usually held and presided over by the

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<sup>13</sup> J. C. Chukwuokolo. *Democracy in Nigeria Development* Unizik Vol. 3. Publication of the Department of Philosophy, Awka, 2007, p.121.

<sup>14</sup> U. O. Uduma. “Democracy and Culture: Deliberating with Communalism as an Imperative for Democracy and Good Government” A Paper Delivered at the 16th Annual International Conference of International Society for African Philosophy and Studies (ISAPS) at the University of Ghana, 17-19th March 2010, p.147.

elders under the shades of big trees, consensus was often reached about specific items on the agenda.<sup>15</sup>

This is specifically what African democratic communalism offers the Africans. It offers the Africans a unique system of government that aligns with her experience and existence in the African universe. The principles of consensus arrived at through dialogue that is participatory and yields consent is what this democratic system is all about. The point being raised here is on the proper consultation with the people before important decisions are taken. When people are listened to as they pour out their grievances even as they know these would be given proper attention, their restiveness is averted. The major problem of liberal and representative democracy as it is practiced in Africa (Nigeria) today, is its inability and or unwillingness to listen to the complaints (and some of these complaints are genuine) of the people through whose mandate they have received their authority and in whose name this authority is exercised.

What makes the matter even worse is that the principle of recall, “whereby the people can recall a non-performing representative”<sup>16</sup> is not functional. What seems to play out is that once elected, the elected representatives become so powerful that the common people, the masses who gave them the mandate become their “slaves,” they do their bidding. They are not consulted over any issues about their expectations of government. In fact, government and governance is not about the people but about the pockets of the elected representatives. The masses being gullible succumb to all kinds of dehumanization; including trading their rights, their voices, their votes and the power to hold them accountable through the recall principles. This gullibility makes them accept envelopes that envelop and enclose them rendering them incapable of any decisive action. These in addition to the principle of immunity that the elected representatives enjoy exacerbate the situation. This immunity leads to impunity in all ramifications. This solution to this problem and the way forward is the fulcrum of this paper. But before we consider the way forward, let us briefly examine the unique African experience of governance.

### **The Unique African Experience of Governance**

Good governance has remained a mirage in Africa. The type of governance we have has not succeeded in truly liberating Africa of her predicaments and

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<sup>15</sup> L. O. Bamikole. “Democracy in a Multicultural Society” *Philosophy and Praxis*, 2008, p.4.

<sup>16</sup> I. F. Esikot. *Socio-Political: The Bases and the Issues*, p.160

fostering the development that Africa clearly needs. A number of reasons can be raised as to why this situation is the way it is in Africa.

Achebe has observed that the problem of Nigeria (Africa) is squarely a failure of leadership:

The Trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of **leadership**. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigeria (African) land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian (African) problem is the **unwillingness or inability** of its leaders to rise to the **responsibility**, to the **challenge of personal example** which are the hallmarks of true leadership.<sup>17</sup>

In this insight, Achebe has highlighted five key issues that must be critically examined for proper stocktaking in this direction: (1) failure of leadership (2) unwillingness (3) or inability (4) responsibility (5) challenge of personal example. All these he concluded are the hallmarks of true leadership. I agree with him in all except (3) inability – Nigerian (African) leaders are laddered with a lot of capacity, ability, initiatives, competence in all ramifications in all walks of life. What may be lacking is the will to take decisive steps, the courage to lead by example. All these boil down to the moral fabrics of the society. Moral debasement, moral bankruptcy, moral decay can wreck any system. Any nation is as strong as its moral foundation. It is against this background that Omoregbe has opined that the problem of Nigeria (Africa) is a moral one.<sup>18</sup>

Much as we agree that Nigeria (Africa) has a leadership problem, we must not lose sight of the moral dimension. In this Kant cautioned:

He who has lost a play must be vexed with himself and his folly, but if he is conscious of having cheated at play (although he has gained thereby) he must despise himself as soon as he compares himself with the moral law.<sup>19</sup>

What this entails therefore is that winning must follow the moral standards and foul play eliminated as much as possible. Mahatma Ghandi once said “what will destroy us is, politics without principle, pleasure without

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<sup>17</sup> C. Achebe. *The Trouble with Nigeria*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1983), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Omoregbe, J. I., *Socio-Political Philosophy*, 191.

<sup>19</sup> I. Kant. Critique of Practical Reason, 1788 (transl. Thomas K. Abbot, Wood, A. W. (ed.) *Basic Writings of Kant*, (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 245.

conscience, wealth without work, knowledge without character, business without humanity, worship without sacrifice.”<sup>20</sup>

The African (Nigerian) experience has so far demonstrated there that is a fundamental collapse, in the political system. This collapse is the result of many cracks in many areas from leadership, moral decay, politics without ethics and other forms of moral recklessness. All these must be checked and corrected for politics and governance to deliver its dividends. The way to check and correct this is through the adoption of a peculiar system of government as advocated for in this paper – *Communalis Kratein Dialogic*.

### **The Way Forward**

The way forward requires a total review and overhaul of the system of government as well as participation in governmental and political affairs. There ought to be a review of the ideologies that are necessary for the erection and establishment of both a political culture and governmental system for effective participation in governmental affairs. Africa requires a system of government that is people-centred and people-driven. This system of government is a community-based system since it is the community that welds people together. The community offers a system of government where the people are the real stakeholders who are wielded together by the community. It is obvious to us that the people are not a floating people, lacking a base or point of gravitation. The concept of the people is elusive, deceptive and fluid. The people can easily degenerate and defuse into a mob and create a system of government that can be described as *mobocracy*; the government of the mob. Mobocracy is a mob government, a group of people who lack political consciousness and civil education, a people not driven by any political ideals or ideology, but who follow the crowd and succumb to the political intrigues of politicians. As a result of this they can easily be misled. The problem of mobocracy is the major criticism of democracy, which can very easily turn into *democrise*; the crises of the people and *democrazy*; the madness of the people when and if the people are not enlightened and properly organized. In Africa, this political education and civic enlightenment is grossly lacking.

It is against this background that the paper makes this clarion call for a community-based government. This community-based government is described as the government of the community, for the community and by the community. The people all live in the community and there is no one without

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<sup>20</sup> N. N. Obi. *Our Legacy*, (Jojab Ventures, 1998), xxviii

a community. The community knows her people and their history. The community has a way of calling people to order. No one is bigger or stronger than his community. The community has structures for maintaining peace and security and for checks and balances in the event of excesses. In this age of community-based everything: community-health, community-policing, community this and community that, community-based government offers the best system of government.

The way forward is therefore to redefine governance in Africa using the system of *communalis kratein dialogic*, communal rule through dialogue. It is through dialogue that the people can be talked about, talked to and talked with. Without this process and mechanism of talking – dialogue, the problems and needs of the people cannot be known. Where these problems and needs are not known then government and governance cannot address them. What then would be the essence of governance if not to satisfy the people who are rooted in the community? *Communalis kratein dialogic* – communal rule, through dialogue therefore remains the best governmental system for addressing the myriads of Africa's problems.

## **Conclusion**

Politics is pivotal to any meaningful ordering of the society. Without a good political culture that is rooted in ethics, politics may not satisfy the aspirations of the people. Politics fares better when blended with ethics. For any system of government to align with the needs of the people, it must be rooted in ethics and be driven by an honest desire to satisfy the aspirations of the people and not the pockets of the few elected or appointed representatives.

Any governmental system that relegates or negates the role and place of the people in the process of governance has lost the very essence of its establishment. For politics and democracy to thrive in Africa, they must redefine the system of government. This redefined system of government that will work in Africa is *communalis kratein dialogic* – communal rule through dialogue.

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