

AN APPRAISAL OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN POLITICAL AND DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

As a social and political animal, man is drawn towards the 'order' inherent in the organization of himself alongside the 'other' in coming into an understanding or agreement with set activities that focuses on governmental or civil affairs of the state. By that, politics refers simply to influencing the actions and policies of government and acquiring and keeping power in the state through a democratic process. There were clusters of political associations and philosophies by different inhabitants of the African nation states before the invasion of the colonialists. However, the political orientation (democracy) bequeathed to Africans after independence was Western in outlook which was not culturally construed to meeting the unique needs and challenges of Africa and its member states. This is why this paper critically appraises the Western notion of politics especially in its democratic leaning with a view to stripping it of its colonial grip on current African political experience thereby filling up the missing link and offering new insights that will be beneficial to providing the much desired political stability and progress to African member states.

Keywords: Decolonization, Politics, Culture, Democracy, Stability, State, Progress.

Introduction

Politics as it is known and practiced in the world today is premised on

democratic ideals and principles. Democracy has been adjudged the best form of government because of its emphasis on majority rule through the ballots, thus giving power to the people. Political power then is not just gotten by undemocratic means but by the collective will of the people through the ballot. One of the attractions of democracy is that it is founded on the freedom of the electorates to choose their preferred candidates through the ballot. From its etymology *democratia* that is, *demos* (people) and *kratos* (“rule”), the Greek city state of Athens bequeathed democracy to the world. To this end, democracy is understood as a government in which the supreme power is vested on the people and exercised by them either directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections.

As sophisticated and globally acceptable as democracy is, it still has a lot of unresolved problems around it. One of the major areas of its failings is that it does not fit into the narratives of many cultures of the world especially in Africa. Some cultures have operated a monarchical government for a long time which has brought peace, stability, and progress to the people. Others practice socialism, fascism, theocracy, oligarchy, totalitarianism and so on. Richard Wike *et al* note that:

Anger at political elites, economic dissatisfaction and anxiety about rapid social changes has fueled political upheaval in regions around the world in recent years. Anti-establishment leaders, parties and movements have emerged on both the right and left of the political spectrum, in some cases challenging fundamental norms and institutions of liberal democracy.¹

The discontent that is being expressed about liberal democracy is hinged on concerns about the economy, individual rights and out-of-touch elites. This suggests that democracy itself is not free from issues that bother on

¹. Richard Wike, *et al*. “Many Across the Globe are Dissatisfied with how Democracy is working,” *International Political Values Report*, 2019, 1. <https://www.pewresearch.org>. Accessed 20/04/2023

its workings, rules and principles. It can be argued however that it is still the best form of government despite its many shortcomings because of its premium emphasis on individual rights and freedom. This has led to the question of whether democracy is progressing or regressing and so right to say that the “centralization of power in the executive, politicization of the judiciary, attacks on independent media, the use of public office for private gain-the signs of democratic regression are well known.”²

In the face of all the challenges associated with the political practice of democracy, one would wonder if traditional Africa never had its own indigenous political processes in the organizational activities of government whether at the family or community level with the sole aim of ensuring justice, freedom and fairness to all. That democracy is Western and an instrument of colonialism is not in doubt. This is why this paper's aim is to delineate ways through which contemporary African politics through democracy can be decolonized in order to bring political progress in African states.

Problems and Challenges of Democratic Politics in Africa

Democracy clearly has been abused by its practitioners because of its internal mechanism and workings whose outcome is the majority bearing rule. For example, there is what is called separation of power and the independence of the executive, legislature and judiciary in the democratic equation. In Africa, all the powers seem to be vested on the executive which decide how the legislature and judiciary should operate. The occupants of these offices often become too powerful that their actions become subtly tyrannical. Bolarinwa and Osuji hold that:

The problem we have had to grapple with here is that the threats and challenges political elitism throws on citizenship, and governance, which have multiplier effects on nation building. One of the perplexing questions in political philosophy is “who should rule”. The question of political

². Gideon. Rose. (Editor) “Is Democracy Dying?” *Foreign Affairs*. May/June Issue (2018). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>. Accessed 10/04/2023.

elites tends to present the ultimate question of what ought to be the ultimate question of what ought to be the ultimate justification of the existence of any form of government with political organizations.³

Democratic system of government is run by humans who have freedom of choice and expression and a rational faculty of reason with good conscience. Some have argued that even the best form of government will fail if its operators are not men and women of proven character and integrity. Is it any wonder why many African states are evidently confronted by socio-political instability, high degree of corruption, mass hostility to the public good and poor macroeconomic management, which are the attributes of states in crisis? Consequently, “successive governments in Nigeria, like in many African states, lack the political will to initiate or sustain policy or structural transformation or to embark on sound economic reform to reposition the state for greatness.”⁴

The state actors in politics in Africa seem to be the greatest beneficiaries of the dividends of democracy. It will not be an exaggeration to make the claim that democracy in Africa has become the bane of good governance and has entrenched a new wave of corruption amongst those who swore to abide by its tenets. This is why the so called dividends of democracy seems absent in most parts of the African continent where poverty is at an all time high. In fact, the principal actors of democracy or the elites have used the state power and resources at their disposal to perpetuate all sorts of heinous crimes that are inimical to the spirit and letter of democracy. Stephen Ellis notes that “Nigeria is a Federal Republic that has held three democratic elections since 1999, and is governed by reference to a constitution and a written law code. Yet, older institutions continue to play an important unofficial role in politics, including by the use of their

³. Oluwasegunota F. Bolarinwa. and Uchenna C. Osuji “Political Elitism in Nigeria: Challenges, Threats and the Future of Citizenship” *Open Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 12, 2022, 105-122.

⁴. Adewale Dhikou Yagboyaju and Adeoye O. Akinola. “Nigerian State and the crisis of Governance: A Critical Exposition,” *Sage Open Journal of Philosophy*, 2019, 1-10.

supposed powers to inflict death or to enhance life.”⁵

Democracy in contemporary Africa is practiced amidst weak institutions that can be easily manipulated for the interest of the powerful state actors or elites. The dire situation of poverty the electorates find themselves makes it easier for them to be easily swayed to sell their votes and conscience for peanuts. Thus, the political elite in Africa have weaponized poverty and made it an instrument of control and manipulation of their masses for the parochial and selfish political interest. This scenario can be explained as the making of the state actors so that they can easily have their way in holding on to power even in the face of rejection and unpopularity. All of these have contributed to democracy not growing leading to a lot of persons not being interested in participating in the democratic processes. This clearly shows that either something is fundamentally wrong with democracy or with the African people. Either way, democracy as a Western legacy to Africans should be examined *strictu sensu* in order to be able to ascertain if it has really helped Africa.

Again, going by the data available, Africa has not fared any better democratically. This calls to question, the present democratic experience as well as the need to decolonize contemporary African politics driven by democracy. Emeka Isife gives a basis for this when he avers that the post independence states in Africa are a continuation of colonial governance. So, “the major change was the replacement of expatriates with indigenous politicians. And these replacements were even manipulated and imposed on the people paving the way for subsequent culture of imposing political candidates on the masses”⁶

Contemporary African Politics

Democratic politics is one area that Africa has suffered numerous

⁵. Stephen Ellis. “The Okija Shrine: Death and Life in Nigerian Politics,” *Journal of African History*, 49, 2008, 445.

⁶. Evaristus Emeka Isife. “Political Instability in Nigeria: Causes, Inputs and Philosophic Solution” *Amamihe: Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 8(6), 2020, 1.

setbacks. In fact, in the history of African philosophy, philosophy was focused on producing ideas that will lead to the independence of every individual member of African countries. The colonialists were politicians with an agenda that will benefit their home countries. Before the advent of the colonialists, Africa had its systems of governance and its political processes. As the member states in Africa started gaining independence, primarily in the 1950s and 1960s, policy makers and scholars alike emphasized the importance of the states as drivers of development in the new African countries. Underscoring the relationship between philosophical thinking and politics, Ike Odimegwu asserts that:

Philosophy and politics are related to each other. In this relationship, philosophy is foundational to politics. This foundation is in the sense of fundamental presuppositions that determine political theory and praxis. It is in the sense of analysis and criticism wherewith philosophy clarifies the grounds, terms and concepts of politics. It is in the sense of reasons, evidence and arguments by which philosophy justifies political beliefs, theories, positions, actions and structures. It is also in the sense of the values which look back to in order to evaluate as well as look forward to in order to configure the fundamental beliefs in constituting the various ends of the state.⁷

To reflect on the very nature of political theory, the centre of it will be the discipline of political philosophy. This may be problematic in the African context because it leads to the problem obtainable in African philosophy which arises directly from a way of thinking about the nature of philosophy in Africa profoundly affected by the impact of colonial experience. Manuel Gil observes that “it is evident to most observers now that dichotomies created by colonial discourses in Africa profoundly shaped both the academic study of the continent and its

⁷. Ike Odimegwu. *Philosophic Foundations of Politics*, (Awka: Lumos Publishers, 2008), ix.

political landscape well into the postcolonial period.”⁸ In the first decades of the twentieth century's, about the time of the birth of African philosophy, the colonial system appeared invincible and its discourse was hegemonic. Few intellectuals then tried not to get entangled in this discourse. Colonialism determined that African politics had to take the form of an opposition movement that operates within the colonial system. Opposition politics led to a restatement of African ambitions with African intellectuals spearheading the process.

Contemporary African Political Thought

The best known forms of African political thought were Negritude, African socialism and revolutionary theory and they seem obligatory because their proponents were also founding fathers of the emerging new nations such as Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, Julius Nyerere, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Kenneth Kaunda who were also trained in Western education. What happened that they forgot about traditional political processes so soon? It is expected that political philosophy ought to be concerned with the investigation of how best to organize a society so as to provide man with what he needs to be able to develop himself and live a happy life. Political philosophers on the other hand are theoreticians who propound theories of what a political society should look like. Political philosophers are products of the socio-political situations of their time and place and this is so true of the political philosophers who theorized on certain political ideologies. For example, Elijah Okon John notes that:

Clearly then, the political ideas that is prevalent in Africa today were borne out of the West. Nkrumah advocated for the emancipation of African continent from the clutches of foreign ideologies. In order to achieve this aim, Nkrumah hopes that there must be a social revolution which will ensure the restoration of the egalitarianism of human environment and articulate the real humanistic principles embedded in

⁸. Manuel Manrique Gil, “Ideology and the Possibility of African Political Theory: African Socialism and Ubuntu Compared,” *Discursos Postcoloniales Entorno A Africa* No.17, 2010,.2.

African society. According to Nkrumah, any attempt to ignore the import of African well-coordinated thought for the social resolution and a cryptic consideration of the elevated ideas underlying African thoughts will be of no value to the African society.⁹

Humans everywhere have been involved in politics and greatly inclined towards it. As long as there is a society of humans, there will be politics and this has nothing to do with primitive people or modern humans. But the Europeans always seem to be at the forefront of issues that have foundational underpinnings. For instance, C. L. Wayper opines that “political thought as we know it in the West, was the invention of the Greeks. Before the Greeks, government and subjects had of course existed, but hardly politics as we understand them.”¹⁰ The point being made here is that the Europeans early culture of writing afforded them the advantage of reflecting upon foundational matters of human existence in documented writing. That is not to say that humans everywhere, including pre-colonial Africans, have not been organizing themselves into political groups.

Since political philosophy probes into the meaning of political concepts and the justification of theories about nature and the purpose of government, it becomes germane for African thinkers to theorize about how Africans can upscale of the limitations of development through the right form of government. It seeks to provide understanding regarding such questions as to why one should obey the laws of the state. Questions such as how the state should be constituted, what is the justification of the state, what are the principal functions of the state, should the state be a national or an international entity, should the nation-state be sovereign; or should a cosmopolitan government transcend nationalism are important to understanding the best form of government for a people.

⁹. Elijah Okon John, “Nkrumah's Consciencism”, *Times and Thoughts of African Political Thinkers*, edited by Godfrey Ozumba and Elijah O. John, (Uyo: El Johns Publishers, 2012), .21.

¹⁰. C. L. Wayper, *Political Thought*, (London: English Universities Press, 1973), 1.

The answers provided to such questions can be quite impactful in shaping the political landscape of the people.

African Political Needs and Sustenance

Can a people who do not think alongside the line of politics and governance from a democratic point of view, be said to have knowledge of politics or government? This question is very important for the reason that traditional Africa was not that cosmopolitan in size. At best, what was obtainable back then was clans or what can be called family units. But even if it were a large community, was it necessary to think of politics from these academic paradigms? Was Greek politics in its early form what it is today after it underwent series of evolution? This paper is not in any way undermining the understanding of these issues by way of seeking for answers as it will advance people's knowledge of series of secondary concepts and theories, including the nature and value of justice, liberty, equality, political obligation, moral perfectionism, nationalism, globalism and sovereignty which all inform the ingredients of politics and governance.

Political philosophy, unlike political science, is primarily descriptive as it is concerned with an explanation of why government exists the way it does. It is prescriptive or normative dealing with how political institutions ought to function and the setting forth of arguments and justifications for the best or most morally justified ways of organizing society. African political philosophy should also undertake such roles especially in the present 21st century. One may ask: are there no unique African political theories that Africans can use to solving her existential problems since there is no African country that is not run by the Western form of government known as a democracy. As beautiful as the democratic ideals are, they do not seem to fit into the needs of Africa as a continent and people. To this end, Boel Hensbroek observes that:

The central concerns for intellectuals in Africa have been socialism and development, for at least three decades. Today, new crucial issues take precedence on the agenda, such as democracy, civil society, a reorientation towards indigenous

political forms and the question of the nation-state on the other hand, there seems to be a remarkable consensus about political ideals; practically everybody values democracy, for instance.¹¹

African political and democratic practices need to be decolonized. By that, it means that certain of its features must be taken to fit into the culturally existential lived situation of the Africans. It is not in doubt that politics in its present form with democracy as its driver in Africa is not helping the continent. The whole world might have embraced democracy as the ideal form of government, but Africa must look at its own uniqueness or say, peculiar challenges and modify democracy if possible or jettison it for its own traditional system in order to be able to address the many political problems the continent is currently grappling with as seen from Libya, to Ethiopia, to Tanzania, Nigeria, DRC and so on.

Evaluating Politics in Africa and the Way forward

Politics as derived from the Greek root word *polis* meaning city, through *politics* meaning citizen, to *politikos* meaning 'of the city or of the citizen',¹² is very peculiar to a people who have their own unique culture and worldviews. There are several agitations today all over Africa and the rallying point of this is the dissatisfaction of the masses on the way and manner that the politics of democracy is presently being operated. Politics in Africa, especially from the Western prism of democracy as adopted and practiced is not producing the expected results. For example, in Nigeria as it were, a country governed by democratic ideals, it has been discovered that there are marginalization of some ethnic groups because of the faulty 1999 constitution of the country as amended. This has led to agitations, widespread insecurity, armed banditry, terrorism and other vices. The case of Nigeria is not different from those obtainable in other African countries supposedly operating a democracy.

^{11.} Boele van Hensbroek P. *African Political Philosophy, 1860- 1995: An Inquiry into Families of Discourse* (Groningen: Centre for Development Studies, 1998), .9.

^{12.} Ike Odimegwu, *Philosophic Foundations of Politics*, 48.

These issues are symptoms of one thing which is that politics as played out in Africa is a borrowed commodity of the West therefore, there is an urgent need for African political thinkers to begin to ask salient questions about how the African forebears conducted their political affairs and the answers will bother around the ideals of traditional Africa which navigates around communalism or family-hood. By the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, every African is a brother to the other, tongues and tribe notwithstanding. That colonialism came into the picture to disrupt this reality does not mean that the situation is irredeemable. Joseph Omoregbe affirms that philosophy is a universal human activity. Thus, "the tendency to reflect on such fundamental philosophic questions is part of human nature; it is rooted in men's natural instinct of curiosity, the instinct to know. Human nature and human experience are basically the same all over the world and the tendency to philosophize is part of human nature."¹³

Since human nature and experiences are the same, then every human can look for a unique platform upon which they can solve their peculiar problems. Oftentimes, using a particular platform, say Western democracy to solve African problems may not work out fine because of other considerations unique to the Africans like their cultural way of life. This is why some countries have modified democracy such as democratic socialism in order to be able to expand the scope of democracy by introducing socialism. But this is a problem because the two terms are foreign and might not work out as expected in the African context though Nkrumah attempted what he called African Socialism. This is not to say that African traditional political system was perfect before the West came to disrupt it with their system of governance. In fact, if one probes deeper, one will be able to realize that there are a lot of imbalance and flaws in it; but the point is that, just as every other thing in life, problems or challenges will always arise which of course is not a setback but an opportunity for innovation and re-modification.

¹³. Joseph Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy* (Lagos: Joja Publishers, 1990),.6.

African political thinking has the full capacity to redirect politics in Africa today by engaging in research that can reposition how politics is done in the African space. But it must itself, be decolonized from the strong grip of Western hegemony. It is good to study Western political theorists such as Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, and the likes and to study modern African political theorists too who were influenced by Western education. But the direction of African political researchers should now be focused on indigenous African political theories. The rationale behind this is that, our forebears were wise enough to know how to solve problems amongst citizens in their domain. That is what politics is all about; the ability to know how to govern the people and distribute equitably, the resources of the community. This was not absent in the days before the coming of the colonialists. African political philosophers should revisit those days through research especially using the interview method to get these information from the living sages or those with this information.

It is quite cheering to know that contemporary African political philosophers, in the likes of Oduma Oduma, Innocent Asouzu, Obi Oguejiofor, Ike Odimegwu, Jonathan Chimakonam, Udo Etuk and so on, are blazing the trail in order to reposition African political philosophy. Though they are trained in Western philosophy, but they have gone a step further to propounding unique traditional African theories using information from the past to be able to attempt solutions to the myriads of problems that bedeviled the African present political space. These efforts are quite commendable because every philosophy must first benefit those for whom it was propounded. Joseph Omorogbe asserts that:

...in view of the prime importance of the human person, authentic development in any nation can only mean primarily the development of the human person, and this consists mainly in the development of his mind and will. The training of the mind to see things critically and to seek the meaning and intelligibility of things is an important aspect of the development of the human person. This is part of the

contribution of philosophy to the development of the human person.¹⁴

African political philosophers should also look at this aspect of properly situating man in the right context so that his political, economic, social, spiritual (religious), educational, infrastructural needs can be adequately met. It is true that politics has as its goal, the controlling of state's resources for the benefit of all through the majority will. So far, that aspect is yet to find fruition in the continent of Africa. This is because both the regional blocs and African Union are not seen to be doing enough in terms of understanding the needs of the citizens as well as using the right ideas to resolving them. Hassan Mudane notes that “most countries in Africa were experiencing a decline in growth rates, an erosion of per capita income, and an increase in external debt. A World Bank investigation into the economic crisis laid the blame squarely on the interventionist politics adopted by African governments.”¹⁵ The World Bank is a subtle instrument of Western tool of control and oppression as can be found in the huge debt profile of most African countries as well as devaluation of their currencies because of the unfair policies which has left most African countries impoverished.

Tony Momoh is of the view that the present state of Western philosophy is such that the discipline suffers from four ailments: stagnation, isolation, imitation and deception.¹⁶ The reason he advanced for this is that, the ailment of stagnation has rendered philosophy unprogressive as modern philosophers no longer create worldviews or doctrines to take account and confront the exigencies and problems of their times, experiences and cultures. African philosophers according to him seem to be the greatest culprits in that respect because they are always content to take their cue from the West whose own philosophers are largely content

¹⁴. Joseph Omeregbe, 197.

¹⁵. Hassan Mudane, “African Political Thought in a Nutshell”, *Encyclopedia of Political Science*, edited by George Thomas Kurian (London: Routledge, 2018)..2

¹⁶. C. S. Momoh, *Philosophy of a new Past and an Old Future* (Auchi: African Philosophy Projects Publications, 1991),viii.

repeating, explicating and defending existing Western worldviews for other than philosophical purposes.¹⁷

This point lays credence to the call for the decolonization of African political philosophy and politics especially as it is framed after Western ideals. African political philosophy must reflect and capture its experience, times and culture. This is because experiencing events and actions as they occur in one's space, time and culture are the raw ingredients, materials and stuff for philosophizing. African political discourses as it were today generally do not have or have little home grown philosophical theories that inform them. In fact, African political discourses should be texts and talks about African political ideas, contexts and situations on how to govern African political societies with these discourses bothering on development, identity and unity, liberation, nation building and sovereignty. Arising from these, Wilfred Lajul is of the opinion that:

Africa still needs to identify and articulate political philosophies that unify these different political discourses. The hypothesis is that, the African political philosophy that unifies these African political discourses, can be derived from African metaphysics, which is characteristically holistic, teleological and transcendent,...the mystical should not be substituted with the machine, cooperation with competition; and community with individuality, all in the name of liberation, identity, development and democracy.¹⁸

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the world today is cosmopolitan and it would be an effort in futility to jettison borrowed ideology from other cultures. However, there is the need to critically appraise the borrowed ideology in order to determine if it will fit into the cultural narrative of where it will

¹⁷. C.S. Momoh *Ibid*, p.viii

¹⁸. Wilfred Lajul, "A Critical Analysis of Political Philosophy in African Political Discourses", *Arts and Humanities Open Access Journal* Vol.4(5),2020,176

be applied. It has been observed that democracy as a Western and colonial heritage has its own many shortcomings especially in its application in Africa because of Africa's many beliefs. These shortcomings cannot be exempted from the internal makeup of democracy itself which has made its users to find ways of manipulating its provisions for parochial purposes. It would then be essential to take a look into some pre-colonial forms of association or government that tends to capture the unique culture of Africans especially as it hinges on familyhood or communalism as against individuality of the West. Ikechukwu Kanu propounded the political theory of "Igwebuike." According to him:

Igwebuike is not a philosophy that is limited to the Igbo world, it is a universal philosophy that is the incarnation and confirmation of the universal relevance of solidarity and complementarity. Although, a philosophy captured in an Igbo world, it has a universal taste and obvious in universal experience. Igwebuike emphasis as the complementary nature of reality was at the heart of the rediscovery of the Ionian philosophers who observed that there was permanence in the midst of change, and also that there was unity in the midst of plurality of reality.¹⁹

Igwebuike as a philosophy captures the totality of the African life without exception with politics inclusive. The lacuna created by the insatiable cravings of Africa to have strong and virile political institutions calls for a new kind of thinking that will incorporate the old in the new. This point is captured succinctly by Jonathan Chimakonam who asserts that "Africa is in dire need of a viable social philosophy. As massive institutionalization characterizes modernity to which the colonialists roughly led the Africans into with neither their consent nor adequate preparation; it is imperative that Africa develops strong and

¹⁹. Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu. "On the Origin and principles of Igwebuike Philosophy" *Journal of Religion and Human Relations*. 11(1), 2019, 159-176.

viable institutions.”²⁰ African philosophy can spearhead this mix or shift in the right direction if it focuses on unearthing Africa's rich culture and mode of association, galvanizing them for the betterment of the African continent and Nigeria specifically. As African countries are progressively transmitting power from one regime to another, they can get it right (leadership-wise) if thinkers can set the agenda with issue-based discourses as has been attempted here. Granted that African countries still practices democratic politics, one way of bringing about the desired change that Africans so crave for is to make allusion to those aspects of existence that is common to all, tribe, ethnicity and religion notwithstanding. This is the legacy that pre-colonial Africa bequeaths and it can be harnessed as a guide to how politics ought to be played in contemporary Africa in order to bring about political stability and progress that is currently eluding so many African states.

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²⁰. Jonathan O. Chimakonam, “Interrogatory Theory: Patterns of Social Deconstruction, Reconstruction and the Conversational Order in African Philosophy” *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*. 3(1), 2014, 1-25.

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