

## DEMOCRACY AND CHALLENGE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

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### **Abstract**

*The paper discusses the challenges of democratization in Africa. It considers the idea of democracy as a universal one, rather than an exclusive preserve of the West. However, it regards the attempt to foist the western liberal type of democracy on Africa as an ideological factor in contemporary African cultural dislocation by the West. It attributes the failure of this democracy in Africa, as manifested in the rampant political instability and bad governance, to the system's neglect of the cultural roots of the African people. It calls for the revival and creative exploitation of valuable assets from the indigenous African democratic culture for the construction of authentic paradigm of democracy relevant to the conditions of Africa in the contemporary world. The paper concludes with the caveat that democracy in Africa may not succeed until such cultural adaptation is done.*

**Keywords:** Democracy, Communalism, Culture, democratization, freedom, ontology, autonomy.

### **Introduction**

The collapse of the Communist Regimes of the former Soviet Union in Europe, precipitated the surging wave of democratization in several parts of the world. In Africa today, the western democracy has gained much publicity, especially through the propaganda machinery of Europe and America. Much resources have been expended in attempts to institutional it in the majority of the Africa's 54 countries. Africa's attraction for western liberal democracy follows its widespread popularity as the most reliably civilized system of governance and "sustainable mode of organizing society for development" (Offor, 120). For this

reason, it is argued that, “Africa could not ignore the global consensus on the value of democracy” (Salim, 5).

However, Africa has the misfortune of remaining practically underdeveloped with bad governance, despite years of experimentation with the western democracy. In fact, it can only be said that Africans are worse off under the so-called “democratic” governments than they were many decades before the democratic hype. The Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World Index*, for instance, classifies the system of governance in Africa as autocratic and hybrid regimes, noting equally that “majority of the sub-Saharan African states are not free as a result of steady decline in basic tenets of democracy” (2018 Report). Today, Africa has become “a home to the world’s largest number of least developed countries... it is the theatre of endless conflicts, and strife, hunger, and gross abuses of human rights” (Igbafen, 74). This explains why African some scholars have argued that “democracy is not only in crises in the continent, but the institutionalization of liberal democracy in Africa...is altogether counter-productive and horrendous” (Oguejiofor, 3).

In the face of this frustrating experience, it makes reflective sense to ask: If democracy is what is needed to secure good political governance in the society, what then is the problem with it in Africa? Why is it not working in Africa? This ‘political conundrum’ has increasingly, raised the concerns of many stakeholders in the African project. Contemporary African scholarship has focused on it and several responses and theoretical options have been proposed. This paper is a philosophical contribution to this debate. For an efficient engagement with this desideratum, the paper seeks to address the following fundamental concerns: Why is the western liberal democracy not working in Africa? Is democracy an exclusive preserve of the West? Must democracy necessary mean western democracy such that it becomes a single model of democracy for every country, regardless of cultural differences? Are there democratic political cultural assets indigenous to Africa that could serve as a guide for the task of social reconstruction and effective democratic process in Africa?

### **Conceptual Clarification of Democracy**

Although there is almost an inexhaustible available literature on the concept of democracy, there appears to be a glaring absence of consensus by scholars on the definition and application of this term. Matters get complicated by the honorific

nature and popularity of the term, as virtually all political systems claim to have something to do with it. Democracy, for this reason, seems to be “a term with many meanings” (Olaitan, 424). However, there exist certain operative elements, often associated with the etymology of the term, and so crucial, without which no society or political system can be considered democratic. Hence, to avoid the conceptual challenges, any attempt at defining this concept must always take into consideration its etymology.

The term “Democracy”, is the product of two agglutinated Greek words, *Demos* meaning, “people”; and *Kratia*, meaning, “rule”; hence, the word democracy, literary means, “the rule of the people, that is, government of then people” (Omogbe, 30). Any conception of the term democracy, cannot be adequately or correctly done without reference to this etymological implication as being “the government of the people” (Owolabi, 131). In other words, the concept of democracy from its classical Greek origin is inseparable from the notion of power or sovereignty in the hands of the people. It makes sense therefore, to identify with the popular definition of the term given by Abraham Lincoln in his famous Gettysburg Address as, “government of the people, by the people and for the people” (qtd. in Salami, 74). As L. Thompson further explains, “democracy connotes a system of political structures in which sovereignty belongs to the people” (Thompson, 3). An outstanding fact here is that democracy is distinguishable from other political systems by the fact that it is not a *personal*, *authoritarian* or *dictatorial* rule. Rather, it is the government of the people, where the people actively participate in governing themselves or determining how they are governed through their chosen representatives.

History has generally witnessed two major approaches by which people expressed their power and will in a democratic system, namely, direct and indirect democracies. Direct democracy was witnessed in the first democratic community in history, the Athenian Greek city-state, where all adult male citizens had the civic right to participate *directly* in the act of governance. Here, male adult citizens, who so wished participated directly in the decision making and day-to-day governance of the state (Held, 6). However, despite its popularity in Athens and other ancient Greek city-states, democracy was highly criticized by the two notable classical Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Plato, for instance, who favoured Aristocracy, regarded democracy as, “the worst of all lawful governments and the best of all lawless governments” (qtd. in Omogbe,

31). For him, democracy breeds anarchy and mediocrity, and is dependent on the citizens' impulses rather than wisdom and reason. He insists that the Philosopher-King is the most suitable person to rule a state by virtue of his vast knowledge and virtues, and declares in his *Republic* that: "the world would have no peace until either philosophers become Kings or Kings become Philosophers" (473d).

Direct democracy could not survive the economic conflicts and cultural differentiations of the modern society. It had to give way to the present-day *indirect* or representative democracy, where people participate in governance through their elected representatives. The indirect democracy received its philosophical impetus from the social contract theories of Thomas Hobbes, Jean Jacque Rousseau and John Locke. It emanated also from the economic conflicts of the nineteenth-century European society (Owolabi, 114). For reason of these influences of its immediate origin, this variant of democracy is also often called western "Liberal Democracy", because apart from embracing representative government, it also emphasizes the issue of right to private property. "The belief that the individual should be free to satisfy his instinct of property acquisition is seriously emphasized by this form of democracy" (Owolabi, 114). Hence the present day western democracy is not only a "political theory" but also an "economic theory". It is the model of democracy in vogue and which is being foisted on Africa today.

As obvious from the above presentation, the basic defining principle of liberal democracy is "freedom". Franklin Roosevelt, former president of the United States, expressed the four basic freedoms that liberal democracy strives at, namely: "freedom of speech and expression; freedom of worship; freedom from want; and freedom from fear" (qtd. in Owolabi, 114). It is the "openness" of the democratic society guaranteed by these "freedoms", that is believed to be capable of making room for the maximization of productivity, which is assumed to be the secret behind democracy's role in economic development of a society. Though the "freedom" and autonomy of the individual is emphasized in liberal democracy, the individual also has the "duty" to obey the freedom of others.

However, it is clear from the foregoing that democracy is not merely a convenient label for whatever political system anyone may personally approve of or prefer; rather, it is ultimately power vested in the people. The tenets of

democracy can be summarized in the following four attributes of democracy identified by Charles Frankel (33): (i) consent of the governed (ii) the ideal of an open society (iii) individual autonomy (iv) the ideal of responsible government. These attributes entail the following precise democratic ideals: constitutional government, respect for human rights, transparency in wielding of power, rule of law and accountability in governance. Bayo Okunade explains these ideals to include the following principles: “free and fair elections, open and accountable government, civil and public liberties” (13). For Robert Dahl, the indispensable condition for any democratic government and theory of democracy is responsiveness:

I assume that a key characteristic of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals...I should like to reserve the term ‘democracy’ for a political system, one of the characteristics of which is the quality of being completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens (15).

On the whole, a genuine democratic process involves the creation of an effective system of governance for the expression of the sovereign power or will of the people. This implies the provision of institutional mechanism for political liberalization and ensuring adequate participation by all interest-groups (ethnic, religious, political parties, professional bodies, etc.) in the national and local community decision-making processes as well as a functional system of maximum accountability. A further implication of this is that a genuine democratic vision encompasses ideals that ensure good and quality human life: liberty, equality before the law (rule of law), human dignity, respect for human life, civic responsibility, security of lives and property, widespread participation in the direction of social affairs, and concern with baking (and not merely the sharing) of the national cake (Thompson, 11). Democracy also presupposes the independence of the judiciary, good leaders and informed followers, who are economically and educationally empowered and capable of holding their leaders accountable. The absence of features in a given society clearly signals the absence of democracy in that society, no matter how many “democratic institutions” it may claim to possess.

### **Crisis of Good Governance in Africa**

Though western democracy seems to thrive especially in most part of Europe and America, the situation in Africa reveals an untoward experience of abysmal failure of the system. The failure is so deep and frustrating that nothing else appears needed now than a new direction in thought and action to redress to halt the slide and to regain of Africa's capacity for "deliberate, self-imitated change" (Oladipo, 107). In fact, there are ample evidence to show that the western liberal democracy has not only further weakened the African capacity for self-determination, but has compounded the African socio-political problems. To begin with, democracy without human freedom is nothing but terminal autocracy and dictatorship. Freedom House's *Freedom in the World Index Report* describes democracy in Africa as being in the state of "dramatic decline" following the "dramatic decline" in freedom in African countries (2018 Report). Despite the claim of being democratic, many African governments are highly repressive and many of the African political rulers treat their countries either as patrimonies or as legitimate booty (Akinola, 28).

They come to power and maintain their power by their brutal force, and treat the lives of million as their own playgrounds. They readily equate oppositional and dissenting voices against many of their unpopular policies with disloyalty and subversion and respond with all sorts of repressions, including detention without trial, torture, and murder. Francis Offor confirms that, "most of the states in Africa, despite their claim to democracy, still retain either the authoritarianism inherited from the erstwhile colonial rulers or the command structure and authoritarianism of the military with which they have had much contact since independence, by way of military rule" (126). This is what plays out in such Africa "democratic" leaders as Francisco Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, who in 1971, put forth a law that bestowed all powers of the government on him and killed nearly a third of the population during his reign. Again, as soon as he came into power in 1980, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, consolidated it by creating a single party state and employing a North-Korean-trained security force to deal with dissidents and opposition forces to his government. Omar Al-Bashir of Sudan also disbanded all rival political parties. He is said to have created the genocide that occurred in Dafur, and intentionally directing attacks on civilians.

Furthermore, Jose Eduardo Dos Santos of Angola, impoverished his people greatly, by taking over a number of natural resource industries of the state to build his personal wealth and dealing ruthlessly with opposition. Charles Taylor of Liberia, created his own private army to fight opposition, while reducing the size of the Armed Forces of Liberia. And Mobutu Sese Seko of Democratic Republic of Congo, created one party state that concentrated power in his hands. He had a reign of terror and theft. Moreover, the tendency to see all sorts of political problems, especially those related to the issue of national unity, as an occasion abusing of citizens' rights, abridging local autonomy, display of 'federal might' and greater centralization of power at the federal level, has been endemic in African states. Aaron Gana, believes such heavy doses of authoritarianism in African states significantly contribute to the dysfunctional process of democratization in the continent (6).

Another element of liberal democracy which has failed in Africa is that of political liberalization with its competitive party-politics, that is meant to decide who controls state power according to the will of the people. This has been a huge failure in Africa, for as Adebayo Salami captures it, "political parties in Africa are nothing but feuding between classes" (77). Political liberalization in African democracies are only opportunities for autocratic regimes in the continent to create sham democracies by pretending to open up the political space for competition, whereas their aim is to diffuse the opposition in order to remain in power. In nearly all states in Africa, state power is constituted in such a way that apart from hijacking the political process so that the people's votes do not count at elections, the party in power ensures that the opposition parties are either undermined or totally eliminated in the process. And even though they are differently tagged, some of the political parties are created by the states as auxiliary parties to support the party in power.

Often, the parties in power are funded by a few powerful industrialists and entrepreneurs and the government is run according to their wishes rather than the wish of the people. Thus, democracies in Africa are nothing but oligarchies run behind the scene by few industrialists and entrepreneurs. It is no surprise then why hardly any election is free and fair in the continent. Instead, elections are competitions in rigging; as the parties with the highest money to bribe the electorates and which successfully rigs out the others, emerge as "winners". Hence, in Africa, "the majority is not in control of government" (Mayo, 285). In

fact, democracy in Africa is a form of political heaven for the rich and an economic hell for the poor. Godfrey Onah appropriately captures the situation as he describes democracy in Africa as “a government of the parties, by the parties, for the powerful or alternatively, an exploitation of the people, by the powerful, through the parties” (276).

Democracy has failed in Africa; for it is not a government of the people, but a government for the rich and powerful who fund the parties and control them. And the parties have become end in themselves instead of means to an end. Politicians serve and are accountable to their parties rather than the people. In fact, the trend in most African states has been in the direction of seeing only those who have economic power control the state; the parties in power subvert the people’s will by hijacking the entire political process and creating one-party states through systematic elimination of the opposition parties, as well as manipulate the disparate cultural and ethnic entities for power calculations. The latter point here explains why political parties are organized around ethnic and related groupings, and are more or less ethnic organizations arranged against each other in the struggle to capture the state and its resources.

Despite embracing liberal democracy, development is highly impeded by bad governance in Africa. This has resulted in low ranking of the continent in virtually all indices of human development. Mugabe says that, “...Whereas standards of living in other countries have arisen over time, in Africa, present standards of living are no better than they were two decades ago... (qtd. in Igbafen, 74). African countries have constantly made the list of the most corrupt countries in the world by Transparency International. And from the statistics provided by the World Bank Report, the Gross Domestic Product of sub-Saharan-Africa which was about 5.4% in 1965 has over the years divided to 3.2% by 2018 (GDP-Sub-Saharan Africa, 2018). Bad governance in Africa has created an unfortunate economic situation where whole population of people is condemned to conditions of near destitution.

We have a situation where the enormous wealth and the unbridled luxury of the privileged few in the corridors of power stand in violent and offensive contrast to the mass poverty of the vast majority. And over 70% of the populations of African countries are illiterates. In the words of Joseph Omoregbe, “African countries are suffering from illiteracy, abject poverty and corruption. Over 70%

of the populations of these countries are illiterates, over 80% of them live in abject poverty, while corruption permeates every aspect of life” (22). The continent further boasts of the largest refugee population in the world (Igbafen, 74). Furthermore, it is the theatre of endless conflicts, civil strife, and gross human rights abuse. Besides, in almost all African countries, the judiciary that is supposed to be independent in a democracy is under the heavy control the executive arm of government, which manipulates and makes a sport of the judiciary. The Electoral Commissions, put together by the ruling party, are there to protect the political interest of the party.

Another damaging setback to the western liberal democratic process in Africa is that, it is too expensive for the already impoverished continent to operate with all its structures. David Potter says that the system is for “people of plenty” (qtd. in Mayo, 292). It is not for the third world African countries with markedly poor and underdeveloped economies largely attributable to the forces of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Karl Lowenstein agrees indirectly with this line of thought as he states that, “America is only able to sustain democracy because of her abundant wealth” (qtd. in Mayo, 285). Claude Ake says that liberal democracy can thrive in the West because of the availability of such enabling socio-economic historical background, which is absent in Africa: “the generalization of commodity production and exchange (and hence a market economy), social atomization and organic solidarity and... a developed system of capitalist production” (4).

The foregoing simply demonstrates that liberal democracy is not working in Africa. It also shows that there is a clear need for a new direction in thought and action to redress this sad situation. It has not been able to emancipate the continent from the shackles of under-development, authoritarianism, insecurity and political instability. However, the intention here is not just to catalogue the swarming indices of failure of liberal democracy in Africa, but also to clearly demonstrate the fact that its present western-frame constitutes a serious barrier to its workability in Africa: It is not an authentic expression of the African political culture. Francis Offor maintains, in support of this view, that the failure of liberal democracy in Africa is attributable to its lack of direct bearing with the historical and socio-cultural experience of the African people (128). Omoregbe also attributes this failure to the fact that it is being forced on African countries by the western world, especially their former colonial masters (43). Besides, the

Western aid donors' increasing insistence on liberal democracy as a condition for granting aids to African countries, has greatly shown the Western desperation to force this alien system down the throats of African countries, irrespective of Africa's socio-cultural differences.

Be that as it may, it is time to recognize the ultimate mission of western liberal democracy in Africa: It is a western ideological factor in contemporary African cultural dislocation, shot with imperialistic ethos under the disguise of universalism and civilization. It cannot, therefore, lay claim to ideological innocence. In fact, Thirey Verheslt reveals, what Western democracy does is that, it brings cultural imperialism and assassination of the civilizations of other countries for the sake of Western civilization. Hence, rather than bring development to the third world countries, "the alien culture of Western democracy will bring under-development" (18-19). In other words, the western liberal democracy in Africa is a *Trajan* horse of Western imperialism for African disempowerment. It is time for African to initiate Africa's cultural revitalization and embrace Kwasi Wiredu's call for "conceptual decolonization" (15). It is time to boldly walk away from this "culture of dependency" (Obadina, 35), which has crippled the African capacity for self-reliance and sustainable development. It is time to *domesticate* our democracy by drawing valuable assets from the indigenous practice of democracy in Africa to construct authentic paradigm of democracy relevant to the conditions of Africa in the contemporary world.

For the fact that democracy is essentially about good governance, which reflects the rule and will of the people, it cannot be said to be the preserve of the West. It cannot also be universalized in its western liberal mold to every culture, without regard socio-cultural variations. Verheslt says, "in each culture, there is a system of government which is traditional to the culture" (18-19). In fact, according to Kolawole Owolabi, "A regime can lay claim to being democratic, if and only if the regime allows for maximum participation of the people and give maximum accountability to them" (*The Quest for Democracy...*, 10). The idea of democracy is, thus, a universal one; but "since cultural organisms differ from each other (often in very significant ways), democratic systems may naturally also differ in the particular ways in which they concretize the concept of 'people' and in the particular mechanisms by which 'the people' express its power or will" (Thompson, 4). As Sophia Oluwole further explains, "a true democracy transcends specific historical forms. It has to do with certain defining values,

principles, rules and precepts, according to which a good government... must be run" (420).

The imperative of the moment for Africans, therefore, is not a total abandonment of the idea of democracy, but to emphasize a kind of democracy beyond western encrustations, which takes into consideration African values and traditions, suitable for the existential conditions of contemporary Africa. African cultural heritage is rich in ideas, precepts and values that define good governance. These indigenous values and precepts must be revived and adopted into our democratic systems of governance, if we must achieve sustainable and successful democratization process and good governance in the continent. Indeed, as Verhelst rightly consents, "indigenous cultures contain within them the seeds necessary to give birth to societies which differ from the standardized and devitalized model that has spread over the world" (24). We are firmly resolved that, if democracy is to succeed in Africa, it must fully adapt to the African culture. The constant instability of the African states, can without doubt be traced to the conflicts that exist in the mind of the individual between the foreign values that the African modern societies strive at, and the traditional values which have been transmitted to the people by their ancestors.

### **African Indigenous Democratic Values**

African societies cannot be expected to become carbon copies of Western democracies, because the values and priorities of African societies differ greatly from those of the West. The present situation in Africa where political engineering is being carried out without a proper grasp of the cultural roots of the people, is the explanation for the political instability, which is very rampant in Africa. To drive this very functional point home, for a successful and well-entrenched democratization process in Africa, there is the need to integrate it within the context of the African cultural values. Cultural values and beliefs have a way of getting into the consciousness of the people.

According to V. Simiyu, who made a historical study of the political structures in many pre-colonial African societies, "there are some democratic structures in the African traditional political systems, which could be adopted to enhance the course of democratization in modern day Africa" (51). Simiyu reveals that though there was no homogeneity in their political structures as values embedded in those societies vary and depended on cultural differences of those

societies yet, values of justice, liberty, openness, accountability, communal governance and a sense of belonging necessary for the maintenance of social cohesion, were not absent from pre-colonial African societies. Those values were the underlying principles of governance in most traditional African Societies. African pre-colonial societies, therefore, had not only histories but also viable traditional institutions which enabled them to survive through the centuries before colonization. Asante, Songhai, Oyo, Great Zimbabwe and Benin Kingdoms were empires they built before colonization.

On the whole, there were two main political systems in pre-colonial Africa. First, were the constitutional monarchies headed by Kings of varying statue and importance depending on the size and population of the kingdom. However, whether big or small, participation in governance was the key word, because “the kingdoms were governed in accordance with constitutional usages under which the monarchs shared their powers with representatives of groups and interests within their domain” (Akinola, 20). The traditional societies, by its arrangements also encouraged, as Richard Dagger refers to it, “active, public spirited citizenship” (6). In all these traditional constitutional monarchies, participation was the operational definition of societal membership, because the rulers (monarchs) never arrogated to themselves the power to take decisions that affected their communities, as we see in many modern African “democratic” states. The rulers only had the autonomy to pronounce decisions taken and policies made in conjunction with their chiefs and representative of their people within their domain.

But in many modern African societies that claim to be democratic, the executive rulers have become so powerful, authoritarian and larger-than-life despots that control the decisions of the entire government apparatus. African traditional constitutional monarchies were more democratic than the present-day democratic states in Africa. Basic institutions were provided for a fair measure of self-rule and representation at all levels of governance. Thus, such groupings like clans, lineage or families were represented by their heads at the councils of the Kings as well as those of the provincial, district or village chiefs. Power was clearly decentralized, unlike the all-pervasive power of the modern democratic states in Africa, where power is concentrated at the central government and where local autonomy is abridged. In the traditional constitutional monarchies, “there was the substantial autonomy at the lower levels where the subordinate

chiefs and their councils could manage their own affairs without undue interferences from the centre” (Akinola, 21). There was striking balance between power, service and accountability; and government operated based on consultations and consensus, with leaders guided by the fact that the essence of power is for service delivery to the people.

The decentralize system of governance with these positive implications was destroyed during the colonial era by the colonial conquerors who not only lumped together various people and territories for administrative convenience, but also devised centralized systems of governance with enormous powers that constitute the basis of liberal democracy in Africa. With the centralized structure of liberal democracy in Africa, power is taken away from the people in their communities and with it is gone that traditional sense of participation in governance and active, public spirited citizenship. That traditional sense of belonging, which was essential for the maintenance of social cohesion is equally gone. There is a systemic disconnect between the government and the people; governance is far away from the people, who neither know those who claim to represent them nor is their interest of any importance to their representatives. This explains in precise terms, why this kind of democracy is not working in Africa.

Of importance too to the element of participation in governance and representation in traditional African governance was the existence of a number of associations through which the average commoner could play a role in public affairs. A member of one age-association for instance, could take part in police duty, public works, defense, as a young man. And on attaining the status of an elder one could become a member one organization or another that undertook important judiciary functions (such as the Ogboni in Yorubaland). Besides, the title-associations which cut-across lineages or families enabled distinguished men and women to be appointed to responsible positions in the community, thereby accommodating all lineages or families in the governance of the community. Power truly vested in the people in this traditional government, unlike the modern day democracy in Africa, which embodies periodic elections to choose among competing professional politicians whose appearance as candidates in determined largely by undemocratic means, especially where wealth now functions as a de facto prerequisite for the right to appear as candidate. Hence, the unacceptable emphasis today that is often placed on

“political efficiency to the exclusion of any notion of social dimension of democracy” (Lipset, 50). Therefore, however worthy the ideals of liberty and legal equality may be as foundations of western liberal democracy, conspicuously absent in its practice in Africa are the notions of civil responsibility or of widespread political participation of the people in governance. In whatever culture it operates, democracy is a system of open government and public decision making by majority will or the consent of the majority, without prejudice to the rights of the minority or minorities.

The second major traditional political system in Africa had minimal institutionalized political authorities. Examples of this system were found among the Maasai, the Nuers, the Tiv and the Igbos. Lacking centralized institutions, these communities normally managed their corporate affairs through the elders of their communities. Decisions affecting the communities were reached on popular assemblies by consensus. Occasionally, individuals were vested with power on an adhoc basis, as in times of war. Leadership thus depended on personal ability, except in cases where religious dignitaries, diviners or rainmakers exercised some kind of initial power. Traditionally, popular participation was encouraged using a process of consultation that allowed African leaders to reinvigorate their rule with community imputes. The Botswana pre-colonial society, for instance, had a strong element of democracy based on this arrangement. The traditional democracy of this society rested on the political structure called, *Kgotta* (Owolabi, 121).

In the Botswana political culture, *Kgotta* was an institution where adult males considered very important issues about governance; they made laws and found communal solutions to the problems at hand. Participation and deliberations in the *Kgotta* was free and open, and according to Mogobe Ramose, “any decision arrived at was seen not as triumph of one group over another, but as achievement of all concerned parties” (63). This democratic political structure was made the foundation of the modern Botswana political arrangement. And as Molutsi and Holm argue, the Botswana post-colonial society succeeded because of its roots in the indigenous culture” (324). This element of consensus in the Botswana “*Kgotta*”, is also heavily reflected in the traditional mode of governance among the Chewa people of Central Africa (Dicher, 78), as well as the Gikuyu people of Kenya (Kenyatta, 164). This experience provides us with evidence of an alternative path to the painful struggle and experimentation with

the liberal democracy in Africa. Political organization process in Africa cannot neglect the values and beliefs of the indigenous African societies.

It is clear from the foregoing, that the ethos of governance during the traditional time was guided by certain humanistic principles of living in harmony with man and nature. The first principle is that there was a striking balance between authority and power and service and accountability (Ayttey, 22). Leaders were guided by the fact that the essence of power is for service delivery to the people. The second principle is that government operated based on consultation and consensus of the people (Ayttey, 22). Rulers were required to take into consideration the opinions of the people with the understanding that failure to respect the views of the people could lead to crisis and overthrow of the leaders. Another basic fact is that the organization of political governance followed the essentially *communal* nature of the African culture and worldview. Governance was rooted in the communalistic virtues such as wholesome human relations among people, collective responsibility, reciprocity, respect for others, communal feeling, consensus, organicity and hospitality (Sofola, 4). It was governance organized along the idea of extended family setting, kinsmen and brotherhood, because, communal life constitutes the essence of the African existential life; and this value, remains an indispensable plank for the success for any political system in the continent.

As Sekou Toure rightly asserts, "Africa is fundamentally, 'communocratic'" (qtd. in Oyeshile, 110). That is, by tradition and cultural orientation, "the African society puts more stress on the group than on the individual, and more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy" (Oyeshile, 110). This is demonstrated in the collective life and social solidarity of Africans. This does not mean the total absorption of the of the individual to the community, in such a way that his rights and initiatives do not count in social development nor a denial of his freedom to choose or even a repudiation of the notion of human rights as inconsequential. Rather, it is a clear expression of the realization that without the community, the individual's capacity for self-fulfillment would be fundamentally circumscribed. Hence, in the traditional African life, the individual can only say, in the words of J. S. Mbiti, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (108).

This typical African *norm*, according to O. Otite, “runs counter to the liberal democracy stress on individual liberty, this African norm being ‘cooperative, not egoistic and or individualistic’” (9). Central to this communitarian framework of traditional African form of socio-political organization was an ethic of responsibility, which emphasized the need for the individual to be sensitive to the well-being of other members of the society in his own conducts, so that he does not pursue his personal goals or desires in such a way that may jeopardize the welfare of the community. Behind this was thus, a sense of cooperate responsibility, fair play and the need to avoid the havoc individualism, greed and other egoistic tendencies could inflict on the society.

The decentralized political structure, consensus process of decision making and political participation or “active, public spirited citizenship” that characterized African traditional political culture, were the natural outcome of this African “community society”. These values, which are what we seriously need today, are patently lacking in modern African democratic societies, due to the ectopic engagement with the alien and essentially individualistic western liberal democracy. This system has generally precipitated the horrendous wave of abuse of political power by the political rulers, who, motivated by its individualistic ethos, have grown into powerful oligarchs, whose main business in government is to loot the public treasury with reckless abandon, revel in unbridled luxury, repress dissents with maximum force, are accountable to no one, and manipulate the government machinery in favour of their litany of selfish interest and that of their cronies. But as indicated above communalism is a distinguishing feature that defines the Africanness in all respect, including political governance. It is rooted in African *unitary* ontology, which reflects interrelatedness of beings. Take it aware from any system of life in Africa (as is the present case with liberal democracy), and the structure collapses inexorably like a pack of cards, with all the dire political consequences as we face today.

Hence, the failure of liberal democracy in Africa can largely be attributed to absence of the African “communocratic” norm and its positive implications in political governance in the system. Nowadays, we contend with personalized nature of rule, use of brutal means to get to power and to retain power by all means, abuse of human rights, political alienation of people, political apathy, extreme centralization of power in the hands of a few people and abridgement of local autonomy in favour of the central government. But there is no escaping the

fact that popular participation and communal initiative are crucial for any effective democratization process and good governance. Of course, good governance entails the efficiency and effective reciprocity between rulers and the ruled, and with it incumbent upon government to be responsive through the accountability of leadership to the electorate. It must be noted here, in line with this, that liberal democracy fails in Africa also because of the states' control of the economy which has made politics the most lucrative business, intensifying thereby the problem of corruption ethnicity, nepotism and site-tight syndrome in power.

The importance of popular participation in building democratic society was underscored in the African Charter for popular participation in Development and Transformation thus: "The significance of ordinary people having power is important in any society moving toward democracy" (National Research Council, 12). To ensure this, government needs be brought nearer to the people at the grassroots through decentralization of power in line with the African traditional political culture, discussed above. For this reason, it more than ever, necessary to recognize ethnic groups as important units of the multi-ethnic modern African states and to grant them autonomy as a means of encouraging participation of people in governance and resolving inter-ethnic tensions. A state's greatness is not necessarily a factor of how highly centralized it is. But it resides more in how power is decentralized to the constituent units, wherein governance can truly be in the hands of the people or their own elected representatives, who are responsible and are accountable to them.

Again, in any society, holding citizens responsible for their actions in politic service and the private sector is significant to ensure some level of accountability. The lack of accountability of modern African leaders has led to gross misuse of public resources. This also shows a clear failure of liberal democracy in Africa. However, elements of traditional African political thought besides participation, consensus, communal spirit were accountability, tolerance and respect for human rights. Accountability was not only characteristic of traditional governance, but as John Ekei observes, "it was a duty done on behalf of the ancestors and the human community" (454). The traditional African societies have had several ways not only to ensure accountability of their rulers but also to set a limit to what their rulers could do in office, to avoid any form of abuse of power. For example, as a principle of accountability and checks and balances, the

Kings were, as a matter of rule, required to consult the community elders, councilors or representatives of the people before taking or implementing any vital decisions. Kwame Gyekye says, “acting without the advice and full concurrence of his council was a legitimate cause of a King’s deposition” (11). Chiefs and Kings were therefore, held accountable at all times and removed from office for dereliction of duty” (Ayittey, iv).

In fact, there were societies in pre-colonial times, where Kings who exceeded their powers were, as a rule, or failed in accountability were obliged to commit suicide. For instance, the *Oyomesi* (council of elders) in the pre-colonial Yoruba society were in the position to make sure the values and traditions of the society were respected by the Alaafin of Oyo (the King). History has it that the *Oyomesi* could authorize Bashorun (Prime Minister) to send to the Alaafin an empty calabash, symbolizing rejection by the people, whenever the King actual unconstitutionally failed to be responsive, accountable or exceeded his powers. The Alaafin had no option than to commit suicide (Dibie, 139). This shows the non-absolute, but constitutional nature of the African traditional monarchies and the multiple sources of political legitimacy that enforced accountability. Unfortunately, these indigenous democratic values and institutions were destroyed by colonialism without building any stable replacements. African politicians were presented at independence with ready-made states in Western liberal democratic mold, depositing enormous powers without any virile institutions that could check the abuse of those powers.

Today, African leaders and “democratic” governments can hardly be said to be accountable to the people. And since politics has become a lucrative business today, the politicians have elevated their party allegiance and ethnicity factor in politics to the point that any public criticisms against them is represented as indirect attacks either on their political parties or to their ethnic extractions, which must be quelled ruthlessly with the use of state force. This also explains why African leaders today seek to perpetuate themselves in office by manipulating ethnic and religious groups against one another with a view to forestalling resistance, criticism, and rejection by the people.

### **Contextualizing Democracy in Africa**

An essential reflective point from our discussion above is that, for democracy to work in Africa, it must be contextualized in Africa, that is, it must be redefined in

local terms or more precisely, built with local cultural materials from the bottom up – to suit the African cultural context. The way to handle this is to reinvent the African sense of communalism in governance by revisiting the power sharing formula. It is time to restructure, and to give the African system its cultural communitarian orientation, for effective governance and a successful democratic process. This is no more time for the African rulers to manipulate the disparate cultural entities for their selfish and ephemeral power calculations. It is no time for the government to desire greater centralization of power at federal level by seeing every ethnic demand for political inclusion as a threat to national unity, which be visited with maximum use of ‘federal might’. It is no time for the government to rudely proscribe credible ethnic-based socio-cultural organizations for their noble aspirations and quests for political relevance. It is the highhandedness of the federal governments, quest for power centralization and wrong managements of this ethnicity factor that are responsible for turning the African continent into a theatre of conflicts, wars and bloodshed.

An inclusive approach to governance that reflects the traditional political culture of community governance is, thus, recommended here, rather than the quests for dominance of one ethnic group above the other or the present all-pervasive power of the central government. What needs to be reinvented and re-introduced to energize our democracy is that African traditional community system of governance, whereby in the present situation, power is decentralized or devolved to the major and minor ethnic groups that make up the modern African states. There would be no need to maintain a bicameral legislature at the federal level since the legislative power would be based mostly on the ethnic communities. Only a few legislators, who must be lawyers of good standing, representing each state of the federation would constitute the federal legislative body, which would legislate only on three major areas: national defense, currency and foreign affairs. The power of the president at the federal level would be limited to this exclusive list; and the judiciary at this level would address issues only as they relate to these with the necessary facility of independence.

Next in this arrangement would be the regional level, administering over the major ethnic groups in the society. The legislators constituting the regional parliaments, and representing the sub-ethnic groups in the regions, would have broader of areas to legislate about on as it concerns the affairs of the people in the

region such as, education, culture, regional security, land, taxation, economy, etc. They must be people of character, chosen by their sub-ethnic groups and capable of holding the regional Heads (executive) accountable. Decisions would be taken based on consultations and consensus. And the regional judiciary would address issues only as they relate to the regional laws and without interference from the federal government. There would be no need to replicate these arms of government at the sub-ethnic groups level of governance to save cost and to encourage an even greater participation of people in governance.

At this grassroots level led by a traditional ruler, governance would be directed by elders or chiefs representing each village, making up the sub-groups. Decisions would be taken also based on consultations and consensus. However, the judiciary mechanism would be devised to handle issues at this level, based on the cultural norms of the people and in line with the civil law. And the judiciary would be separate and not under the influence of the traditional ruler or of the ruling council of elders. It would include for its membership sound custodians of the laws and traditions of the people of the areas. Their duty would include serving justice to the people and checking the excesses of the traditional rulers and the ruling council.

This arrangement would be replicated at the village level, where the village Heads, together with representatives of families, would direct governance in the village in line with cultural norms and regional laws. The village council would be broad enough to accommodate all groupings and organizational interests in the village, without excluding anyone. Here also, decisions must be taken only based on consultations and consensus. The judiciary, which would primarily check the excesses of the village Heads and his council members, would be made up of the village lawyers and other people of noble standing. Membership would be few and exclusive of those in the ruling village council or their relations.

This political template will not only bring government closer to the people and make them have a sense of belonging by owning their government, but will also ensure a striking balance between power, service and accountability, as was the case before. This will also enhance the level of political engagements and effective participation of the people in governance, as well as promote a sense of responsible representation and accountability in governance. It will ensure that government is based on consultation and consensus of the people, rather than

misdirected whim and impulses of individuals or mercantile political parties. This will also create a climate of true freedom in a democracy (which is presently lacking in Africa), in which the people would be free not only to choose those who govern them; who would also be able to make effective demands on them; one in which in which the whims and caprice of the rulers would be effectively moderated by the rule of law, and the chaos and misery of bad governance would be replaced by a socio-political order guided by collective life and social solidarity.

### **Conclusion**

Africans do not necessarily need the entire western liberal democracy structures of to ensure good governance. Democracy is not the exclusive preserve of the West; for like other political beings, Africans appreciate the essence of people-oriented government and good governance, which is what democracy is all about. The present situation of experimentation with western liberal type of democracy in Africa, without adaptations to the cultural roots of the people, is the explanation for the rampant political instability and bad governance in Africa today. But for effectiveness and efficiency of democracy in Africa, the system must receive imputes from the African traditional political culture of communal life with its positive implications. As revealed in this work, the African cultural heritage is sufficiently rich with democratic values for effective participation in governance and responsible leadership for good governance in a democracy.

The African traditional *communal* society, where governance was guided by the altruistic principles, where there was a balance between power, service and accountability, and where government operated based on consultation and consensus of the people, presents us with the needed political orientation and indigenous African values to draw from for a successful democratic process in Africa. This is the way to go as we strive to build modern economies and political institutions through the democratic process that suits the African culture. Such an approach at building our democracy with “local materials”, from bottom up is imperative for ensuring effective democratization in the continent for good governance. Democracy in Africa may not succeed until such adaptation is done, which will enable the people at the grassroots to understand and participate in it while at the same time ensuring effective representation and accountability in governance. We must therefore seek to redefine democracy in local terms to

solve our problems, rather than rely on borrowed western ideals alien to our culture.

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