

HOW CAN DEMOCRACY BE AFRICAN?

Cyril Udebunu PhD

Department of Philosophy

Pope John Paul II Seminary, Awka

Abstract

This paper critically examines the applicability of Western liberal democracy within the African, particularly Nigerian, context. Drawing from personal observations of well-structured democratic practices in Europe and contrasting them with the struggles of democratic implementation in Africa, the study questions whether democracy, as conceived and practiced in the West, can be effectively transplanted into African societies. It situates this inquiry within a broader philosophical discourse, referencing classical and modern critiques of democracy, including those of Plato, Karl Popper, and Bertrand Russell, to highlight the historical tensions surrounding democratic ideals. Furthermore, this paper engages African philosophical perspectives, especially the works of J. Oguejiofor, to demonstrate how Western intellectual traditions have often excluded or misrepresented African realities. It argues that Western democratic systems are deeply rooted in specific cultural and historical experiences, which may not align with African socio-political structures and values. Consequently, the study contends that the challenges faced by democracy in Africa stem partly from this misalignment. It concludes by raising the need to rethink and possibly reconstruct democratic models in a way that genuinely reflects African identity, culture, and socio-political experiences.

Keywords: Africa, Nigeria, Democracy, identity, culture, and Representativeness.

Introduction

After some years of studies in Europe where I witnessed a concept of democracy, developed to the point that even the 'skin-heads' know the limit beyond which their rascality in such ordered society must stop if they hope to receive their social benefits at the end of the month, I came back to Nigeria with great hopes that democracy in my country is not a distant dream. I have written a number of articles on this subject showing how we can change our society if we put in place certain ideologies and structures of democracy as lived in Europe. But after seeing the crippled efforts of our African leaders in this attempt at western democracy, I have gradually come to give up the hope and to ask myself whether there is no other alternative or can democracy not be lived differently? The above attitude shows some form of despondency but it

is certainly not irrational in outlook, if we know that on its journey through cultures and times democracy has caused great turmoil and sometimes utter dismay to those who had bade it welcome. In its early days in Greece, it was ostensibly an unbridled system that Plato who had once participated in government with the hope that reason and practice of governance would one day embrace, had to take a flight from it to construct an alternative ideology, which did not attune itself with Greek culture in particular. No, Plato aimed rather at the universal nature, something permanent in nature of man as a springboard to a constitution suitable to man.ⁱ Karl Popper attacked him, devoting two volumes of his book on how Plato and his allies have been democracy, or the so-called 'free-societies'.ⁱⁱ He accused him of inventing another polity instead of correcting the errors of democracy. But this was only Popper's defence of his own political ideology or at least his personal disposition towards democracy. That was how Bertrand Russell described Popper's enterprise, 'a rigorous and profound defence of democracy.'ⁱⁱⁱ

A similar trend seems to run in the life of Prof. J. Oguejiofor in his flight and devotion towards African Philosophy. After his years of studies in Europe in which he thoroughly soaked himself in the European philosophy, showing in his masters dissertation how Bertrand Russell utterly failed to give a definitive solution to the problem of perception^{iv}, and in his doctorate thesis how the soul's immortality had been articulated in certain epoch of European philosophy,^v one had expected that on his return that he would cage himself in this thought mainstream (trying to correct what is wrong in it and praising what is noble therein). Instead, he has taken a flight from the European philosophical categories and invested himself more into examining among other things, how he can correct their philosophies in relation to their image about Africa and thus give a stamp to African Philosophy.

One of his most prominent works in this understanding which has made some profound impact on me is: 'The enlightenment Gaze: Africans in the Minds of Western Philosophy', published in "Philosophia Africana" (March 2007). One reading this article one gets the impression that we may not actually assume everything about Europe as true and therefore good for us (Africans) or must be copied entirely. This is because, apart from the fact that their system has been set along some history of European culture. "die Kultur Europas", which Pope Benedict XVI articulated as arising "ausder Begegnung zwischendem Gottglaubens Israels der philosophischen Vernunft der Griechen und dem Rechtsdenken Romserstanden"^{vi} (arose from the meeting between Israel's belief in God, the philosophical reasoning of the Greeks and the Roman civilization), it is also clear, reading Prof. J. Oguejiofor that the system was certainly formulated by its philosophers with certain bias and exclusion of Africa's possible participation in it or in the order of public reasoning.

Here, Prof. Oguejiofor examined how philosophy and its lovers had occupied a privileged place in human society and deemed to be the brain behind most suitable social and political systems. He pointed out how that 'exalted self-understanding is not limited to the ancient Greeks but extends to the Egyptians, given that the Egyptians were also prominent in such enlightenment

activity in those early days philosophy stood for the generality of organized human knowledge in Greece. However, European philosophers have attempted to deny Africa such privilege based on their interpretation of African experience. He pointed at Hegel's ideas as representing this general misconception at the time, who maintained That Egyptians could not be Africans since they shared the same form of enlightenment as found among the Greeks in the early days of philosophy. What was seen in the Egyptians could not belong to the African spirit. 'Esistnichtdem Afrikanischen Geistzugehörig'. Thus, Egypt was expunged from Africa insisting that the "real" Africa (eigentliche Afrika) is the highlands and the narrow stretches of the coast. What this implies is that they not only denied Africans the mind to entertain lucid ideas, they probably also excluded them as possible players on the enlightened system they were formulating. If they did include them, then that system did not take proper assessment of the African spirit and culture and so cannot be applied expressly to Africa without proper alignment.

Given the backup of the stunted and inhibitive journey of Western democracy in African soil, it has become necessary to ask whether democracy is really 'African' or properly put 'to what extent can the western liberal democracy be applied to Africa?' Does democracy as lived in the West take account of the foreign cultures and exigencies?

Western Liberal Democracy and African Efforts

Of the world's tested polities democracy stands more acceptable, thanks also to its recent victory over communism. But this does not mean it has satisfied the yearnings of the masses with respect to good governance. Plato argued that democracy in spite of its scenarios is inferior to forms of polities like monarchy and aristocracy. For him, it is the worst of all good governments but best of all bad polities (Republic, Book VI).

Modern readers of the *Republic* often summarize its author's discussion as an argument against democracy. But it can also be seen as what would have to be the case for a genuine democracy to function. For the major point of Plato's discussion of knowledge, education and democracy is the contention that democracy will not work—will not be a true democracy—unless its citizens are sufficiently prepared for it. This is a point that many modern democrats also share. James Madison, one of its founding fathers in America had maintained "a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both." vii

Democracy is said to be good because the authority is vested upon the rulers by the subjects through free elections. But the danger here says Plato, is that those who are expert in winning elections and nothing else often dominate democratic polities. Democracy therefore tends to emphasize this expertise at the expense of the expertise that is necessary to properly governed societies. Hence, the state is guided by very poorly worked out ideas that experts in manipulation

and mass appeal use to help themselves win office. Hobbes maintained the same argument in showing that democracy has deleterious effects on subjects and politicians and consequently on the quality of the outcomes of collective decision making.^{viii} But, this is not the only lethal issue with elections in democracy; its major problem in Africa and in many parts of the world is that it fraught mistrust and violence. This is what has constituted western democracy's Waterloo in Africa.

Elections are meant to guarantee free choices, but it does not appear to be the best and only possible medium adaptable to all nations and continents for a peaceful system that assures the welfare of its citizens? Kenya for instance, is a country in Africa challenged by its attempt to govern its people under a western liberal style of democracy. Despite Kenya's strong economy, the botched elections that recently took place has put it beautiful country on the list of "Failed States" with other African nations aping this style of democracy in election of leaders. Other members of failed states include: Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic and Cote d'Ivoire.

There is a long list of rigged elections and post-election violence which destroys mile-stones arrived in many nations' long history of development, a situation that continues to point at the improbability of achieving a functional form of democracy. The recent post-election violence in countries like Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon and even Burkina Faso have made many reconsider the effectiveness of liberal democracy in facilitating development in Africa. Some people believe that this form of democracy will work someday. After all, it has worked in another country like Botswana. Professor Stephen John Stedman writes, "...Botswana stands out as an example of economic development, functioning governance, and multiparty, liberal democracy"^{ix}. He compares Botswana with Switzerland to enlighten the public of the hopes Botswana holds for the rest of Africa: "[Botswana] is... a country akin to Switzerland, an exception that confounds generalizations, but whose very exceptionality prompts analysts to see it as a hopeful model for other societies"^x. Stedman forgets that Botswana with a total population slightly above 2 million is almost a homogenous people. The ethnic groups include Tswana (or Setswana) 79%, Kalanga 11%, Basarwa 3%, others 7%.^{xi} With 71% Christians and 20% non-believers one sees that neither by religion nor the percentages of ethnic divide constitute any significant damage to the polity in terms of power struggle.

Recently Nigeria had her elections and since then has not come out from her post-election violence in various disguises, especially the threat of Boko Haram, a Muslim sect hostile to democracy. Thousands of lives have been lost and properties in billions of naira have been destroyed, yet the end is not in sight. The results of the election even depict a more polarized nation with a vast majority of the North voting for their regional candidate Mr. Mohammed Buhari and the South voting overwhelmingly for Mr. Goodluck Jonathan. This shows how ethnic affiliation is a great impediment to western electoral democracy. The president-elect has now the daunting task of reconciling the South with an especially angry North. He must answer to

previously marginalized groups in the South without alienating the voices of those in the North, and many other tribes. The cases of Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe are not different and they go to show how liberal democracy in Africa is confronted by a number of important inhibitors; inter-ethnic tensions and power struggle as well as faith differences. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 is not dissociated with elections and ethnic divides.

These notwithstanding, Francis Fukuyama lauds liberal democracy in his work *The End of History and the Last Man* as the model of democratic government practicable anywhere and in fact the most desirable to embrace. He argues that industrial development necessarily follows a universal pattern – that is set by the leading capitalist economies of the West – a process which will “guarantee” an “increasing homogenization of all human societies, regardless of their historical origins or cultural inheritances”.^{xii} Thus, “all countries undergoing economic modernization must increasingly resemble one another: they must unify nationally on the basis of centralized state, urbanize, replace traditional forms of social organization (like tribe, sect and family) with economically rational ones based on function and efficiency, and provide for universal education [democracy] of the citizens”.^{xiii}

Because Western liberal democracy has triumphed over other contesting democratic and economic alternatives. Fukuyama takes this triumphalism beyond any modest hopes, rubbishing even the sphere of human anthropology by suggesting obliteration of historical origins and cultural inheritance. African states for instance, must all adopt Western liberal democracy with its entire correlate because it is most viable, desirable and imperative for addressing the challenges of development in third-world nations. While democracy could have some universal features applicable to all nations of human family, this presentation of liberal democracy as the political messiah to rescue Africa out of her multifarious proclivities cannot but be seen as an integral part of the cordiality package of neocolonialism. Indeed, Jacques Derrida has signaled some caution on this type of outlandish hopes when he reminded Fukuyama that 'no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth as with the universalization of Western liberal democracy, 'never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity'.^{xiv} For Derrida, Fukuyama's celebration of liberal hegemony was nothing but one symptom of anxiety to ensure the death of Marx'.

On the capitalistic front, it is even arguable that the economic successes of democracy have guaranteed the end of human history, if we factor the present volatility of the Western economy- its threatening recession and social insecurity. The current economic crunch plaguing the western democratic states shows actually that we are not yet at the end of human intelligence and that diverse nations have right to construct different conceptions of democracy that respond to their religious, social and economic needs. It is with reason then, that many African philosophers

insist that the Western democratic system which is primarily a mode of politics must not be exactly the case for Africa, "democratization has to be considered as a process of struggle to win, defend and protect rights of people and individuals against one-sidedness ...and not necessarily right of participation in the state process".^{xv}

The failure of democracy in many parts of Africa is because these nations have continued to imitate the western liberal system without reasonable consideration of the local conditions. Kwasi Wiredu makes it clear for instance, that Africa's political salvation cannot come from the presently known model of majoritarian democracy. In many contemporary African states, certain ethnic groups and political parties have found themselves perpetually in the minority, consistently staged outside the corridor of power. Not only this, their fundamental human rights of decisional representation are permanently denied with impunity. This violation of the right to be well represented, Wiredu argues, is one of the most persistent causes of political instability in Africa.^{xvi}

The problem with the practice of democracy in Africa therefore, stems from a fundamental misconception that democracy as a form of government can be imported wholesale from one society to another, regardless of cultural differences, an idea which Fukuyama advocates. It is this refusal to accept that democracy varies from one society to another and by reason of this elasticity needs not be practiced in strict adherence to those attributes that define it in its western conception that Africans must take account of. If we do not consider indigenous cultural values, multiparty electoral politics will continue to degenerate into ethnic or communal conflicts.^{xvii} According to Ofori, democracy is desirable and can be made to work in Africa, but only if the indigenous continents of the democratic heritage is explored, and those ideas that define good governance are brought to bear in evolving a kind of democracy best suited for resolving Africa's peculiar problems.^{xviii}

The Value of Democracy and Elements of African Democratic Order

To underscore the value of democracy, one may ask: why is it that despite the miscarriages of democracy people generally endorse it, and is indeed the rage in the world today including Africa? The expansion of democracy across the globe is not in doubt. Diderot, the great French encyclopaedist of the 18th century, once said that "every age has its dominant idea" and according to him, "that of our age seems to be Liberty". Our dominant idea on the eve of the millennium is liberty which is the prime element in democracy. Since 18th century democracy had to contend with some ideological rivals, and since the collapse of communism which was the greatest competitor, democracy has blazed without any credible opponent in sight. Democracy's attachment to the value of human liberty makes it esteemed by majority of the societies and this is also the main point in the case of classical Athens: the freedom which it offered in the face of the rampart threat of slavery. It and it alone, enabled the citizens of Athens to live as they

collectively and individually chose for themselves. Among other tenets include according to D. Held: "the centrality in principle of an 'impersonal structure of public power. of a constitution to help and safeguard rights, and a diversity of power centers within and outside the state, including the institutional fora to promote open discussion and deliberation among alternative viewpoints and programmes".

Democracy encourages public discussion. No wonder Sir Winston Churchill once said that the best way of governing states is by talking, which is indeed one of the many definitions of democracy on offer. This particular trait belongs to the features of the African democratic order - reliance on dialogue and consultation as means of decision-making. K.A. Busia in his work *Africa in Search of Democracy* states that "When a Council, each member of which was the representative of a lineage, met to discuss matters affecting the whole community, it had always to grapple with the problem of representing sectional and common interests." In order to do this, the members had to talk things over: they had to listen to all different points of view. So strong was the value of solidarity that the chief aim of the councilors was to reach unanimity, and they talked until this was achieved. T.U. Nwalia conveys the same idea of dialogue with reference to the Igbo of Southern Nigeria. According to him, "unanimity and all the rigorous processes and compromises... that lead to it are all efforts made to contain the wishes of the majority as well as those of the minority. In short, they are designed to arrive at what may be abstractly called "the general will of the people of the community."

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes how as a young boy he was impressed by the democratic nature of the proceedings of the tribal meetings that were held in the regent's house in Mqhekezweni: Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and laborer. The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens. These meetings demonstrate the democracy customary in Thembuland and here consensus was emphasized.

Another feature of African democratic order has been expressed by Meyer Forts and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, the great African anthropologists who argued in their classic book *African Political Systems* that "the structure of an African state implies that kings and chiefs rule by consent". There might have been some over-generalization in this, as some critics have cited hereditary passage of power in African setting, but it is less in doubt that the chiefs hold their power on trust from the people who can in turn depose them. In many African societies, this maxim was impressed upon the chief in the process of his installation and was in addition to the various mechanisms in place to ensure that the chief walked in line with the wishes of his people. Writing in the case of Akans of Ghana, William Abraham maintained that though the king's power was hereditary, he could be removed on a number of grounds, and this includes among others: self-opinionating, oppression and arbitrariness in governance; corruption; neglect of state

affairs, etc. These conditions are said to be clearly written in the charter of leadership that defined the contract between the king and his subjects. It was one way in which traditional African governments founded sovereignty in the people and ensured the relevance of accountability.

From the fore-going, it could be seen that Africans had some elements of democracy indeed or had their own democratic order; the problem comes when it is narrowly linked to direct democracy of public balloting as practiced in the Western nations. This is specifically a western idea which began in Athens with Cleisthenes's pioneering move who as "the father of Athenian democracy" introduced public balloting around 506 BC to give more power to the poor. But, the importance of public reasoning as connected to democracy is not something peculiar to the west. Athens was extremely distinguished in encouraging public discussion but the Greeks were not unique in this respect; there is an extensive history of the cultivation of tolerance, pluralism and public deliberation in other societies as well. The established literature on the history of democracy is full of well-known contrasts between Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Locke etc. This is quite acceptable, but the danger there is that often the large intellectual heritages of the Middle East, Asian and African continents are almost entirely neglected in showing the spread of the ideal of public reasoning, the spread of the power of democratic ideas as linked to public deliberation.

Democracy and Responsiveness to African Conditions

Nobody doubts the importance of democracy, so much as Africa's disposition towards it is unquestionable. The only question that needs to be settled is how to consolidate democracy and make it durable in African countries. This was a question the Commonwealth leaders addressed at their Harare Meeting of October 1991. The Meeting was clear on the merits of democracy as a system of government. It was equally clear that democracy could not take a standard or uniform format in all the member countries of the Commonwealth. In other words, it would have to take different forms in different countries to reflect national circumstances. But, they also accepted that whatever the national variations may be, a true democracy would be judged by the presence of a number of essential universal ingredients, viz, respect for the rule of law, freedom of expression, independence of the judiciary, transparency and governmental accountability.^{xix}

Two years later, the Members of the Africa Faith and Justice Network faced the same challenge at their annual meeting in Washington, D.C., in October 1993. At the end they adopted among others, the following principles regarding democracy in Africa:

- "Africans need to define for themselves the meaning of democracy in their own historical and cultural contexts, drawing on their participatory traditions and the experience of democratic societies elsewhere."
- "Free-market capitalism and multi-party systems are not synonymous with democracy."

- "Grassroots popular movements offer new hope for truly democratic structures in Africa."^{xx}

Indeed, no ideology or set of institutions alone can claim to secure freedom and make democracy possible without reference to local conditions. Every function democracy is in a sense a successful marriage between the universal ingredients of democracy on the one hand and local conditions, culture and history on the other. This is what gives the democracy of any nation its peculiarities and imbues it with stability. The challenge for African countries is to bring their various traditional cultures into a meaningful working relationship with democracy. That Japanese democracy for instance, is stable is because it has come to terms with Japanese culture and history. Democracy in African countries will neither be resilient nor vibrant unless it comes to terms with the cultures of its various communities.

Generally, any African nation is by constitution a multi-ethnic nation. That people in Africa belong to different ethnic groups or tribes is a fact of life. It plays out in politics not only for genuine reasons but now also as a blunt instrument exploited by politicians in their quest for power. It is what has made the western liberal democracy a hard nut to crack on African soil, and unless such historical and cultural alignments are given proper attention, liberal democracy will continue to experience difficulties in Africa. Some people have suggested instituting state principles that proscribe ethnic politics, but this is seemingly idealistic because ethnic consciousness is deeply rooted in African societies. To try to uproot it or pretend that it is not important is to live in a fool's paradise. What is required is a construction of political systems within which this feature of our social experience can be accommodated in a way that does not threaten social cohesion. One of these ways has been suggested by O. Oladipo: "a kind of political arrangement in which power is sufficiently decentralised to allow for a significant degree of regional and local autonomy in African multi-ethnic states. This kind of arrangement would allow for political representation to be structured along lines that would allow each ethnic group to develop according to its values, culture, historical experience and aspirations. Also, it would prevent a situation in which some people see themselves as 'permanent outsiders to the state'".^{xxi}

It must be clear to everyone that liberal democracy which favors multi-party system and majority rule is problematic in Africa because Africans vote according to tribal affiliations and those who belong to minor tribes perpetually see themselves as minor players or permanent outsiders in the political life of their nation. And this causes social unrest to the point that people cast doubt, said Wiredu, 'whether this system can meet the democratic aspirations of the people or generate those conditions in which the unhappy conflicts that have bedeviled African life into our times can be resolved.'^{xxii} Wiredu's conviction is that liberal democracy based on majority rule does not secure a reasonable system of representation anywhere, at least not in African multi-ethnic states.

Actually, the challenge which liberal democracy has in Africa is how to reconcile itself with the issue of justice; the claim of majority rule and the claim of justice? How fair is the system that renders me perpetually a non-player on account of my social group? This is the challenge of democracy in the face of Africa's multi-ethnic configurations and which is at the core of many conflicts tearing many African states apart. How do we overcome the challenge in which according to M. Mamdani, "the minority fears democracy; the majority fears justice".^{xxiii} The plausible solutions must affect the concept of democracy as practiced in the west; it must be adjusted and some scholars like Wiredu have recommended a consensual model of democracy in which we do not vote to determine rulers but discuss and arrive at some consensual arrangement in which people's social and political experiences can be accommodated -an African oriented democracy.

Conclusion

In his article "Democracy and Regional Ontologies". Oliver Iwuchukwu claimed that any meaningful search for an African theory of democracy must begin with a radical rejection of liberal democracy.^{xxiv} This is not what this essay upholds, for even mere analysis of liberal democracy reveals most of those universal ingredients we have considered present in African democratic order, or at least that greatest offer of liberty which has made democracy universally acceptable. This is not what African theory of democracy must throw overboard. What we emphasize is that democracy in Africa can only be viable if it takes account of Africa's cultural origins and historical antecedents. In other words, it must avoid certain elements of liberal democracy which are not sensitive to the socio-cultural and ontological realities of African constellations. Democracy in African countries must take care of the cultures of its various communities. Only then will the genius of Africa be in a position to make its own original contribution to the practice of democracy.

Given the multi-ethnic configuration of African nations, majoritarian rule can never sail without facing the challenge of justice and social conflicts. Tribal coalitions and religious groupings are serious problems in Africa and these cannot be wished away through legal proscriptions. We must therefore seek a democratic system that favors devolution of power which allows according to Oladipo, 'a significant degree of regional and local autonomy in African multi-ethnic states'^{xxv} such that each ethnic group can develop in relation to their cultures, historical experiences and aspiration and thus make them feel active participators in the political programs that shape their destiny. This is an arrangement we can agree upon through discussions and consensus that accommodates both interests of the majority and the minority. Another solution may have to deal with constitutional provision for power-sharing arrangement in such a way that no particular

ethnic group can feel permanently excluded from government-- solutions which show how important it is that democracy in Africa pay attention to African realities.

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