

ACPN Working group on: *Culture, Democracy and Governance*

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this essay is to find a nexus between democracy and governance as inspired by cultural values in Africa. It is to find explanations as to how traditional core African values; indigenous knowledge and indigenous institutions have impacted on or can shape political systems and democratic institutions in the continent. It shall be necessary to explore those cultural values especially within a pre-colonial Africa, their relevance to the Afrocentric and Eurocentric definition of democracy and governance and their limitations in contemporary nation-building efforts within the continent. It must be understood that Africa's political governance architecture and democratic perceptions do not spring from a mystical or mythical source. It is arguably the result of a long process of cultural elaboration. It comes from this reality that every people of the world have developed throughout their history, particular forms of social, economic and political organisations as well as particular forms of thought, beliefs, attitudes, symbols, images, etc. It is this set of values which confer on them specificity, an identity and a personality. It can be said that all what constitutes our cultural past and present affect our outlook and condition our political development. Rather than being prescriptive, the conclusion aims at leaving the choice of democratic models with the people. Yet, there is room to strongly affirm that if other countries have developed their governance structure from a cultural imprint, Africa cannot be an exception.

INTRODUCTION

This essay is premised on the fact that there are innate cultural traits that may enhance or inhibit democratic governance. It is incumbent on Africans to aggressively integrate the aspects of African culture and traditions into their democracy and development mainstream.

Here therefore, are some elements in African culture that fostered democratic governance in pre-colonial Africa and which still has all the potentials and ingredients to enhance democracy and governance in the continent.

A) Indigenous Knowledge Approach

Our Indigenous Knowledge System lies on cultural universals or a moral cultural policy that seeks to enhance human values, ensure people's dignity and responsibility and consequently act as a lever for living together and for promoting inclusive people oriented democracy. A sustained moral cultural policy is the basis of the political education which is absolutely necessary for the establishment of a truly democratic system. (Biya,1987:100-101).

Some aspects that reflect our Indigenous Knowledge System include:

- i) **Mbangsuma**: This is a practice in most Cameroonian societies that enables people to pledge never to eat anything without sharing out with the others. (Biya,1987:119). In his book Communalism Liberalism Biya captures this practice in a fishing imagery in which men believe that whatever catch they have as individuals belongs to all fishermen and is shared equitably. It is a form of community spirit that is observed everyday in our towns and villages as a constant answer to the permanent call of the native soil. The psychological basis of this phenomenon is the desire to be together and to share joys and sorrows of the group. The traditional milieu is therefore the crucible for necessary inculcation of the duty of solidarity (Biya,1987:120).
- ii) **Yum**: This is a kind of guild in most Cameroonian traditional societies grouping people desirous of working together under a rotational system jointly agreed upon, for collective prosperity on the basis of individual advancement. It is still this very tradition which teaches that collective fishing does not mean collectivising the catch, but rather giving some of it to the fishermen who had a bad day so that all families can have enough to eat

(Biya,1987:118). Inherent in these first two examples is the duty of solidarity or what anthropologists have termed “the symmetry of social organisation.”

- iii) **Njangi**: In traditional societies and in fact in modern civilisation today the culture of “Njangi” or what can be termed in English as reciprocity is embedded in the notion that people do not idle about so as to unscrupulously enjoy the fruits of other people’s labour without giving anything in return. This culture makes hard work, integrity, dignity and mutual respect sacrosanct to the extent that a basket containing a gift offered by a friend is not returned by the receiver until he has a gift to put in it and reciprocate. It can be argued that the economic theory of trade by barter, loan and thrift is derived from this traditional social paradigm of “Njangi”. It is this culture of “Njangi” that nurtures and unconsciously leads to the positive distribution rather than the negative accumulation of wealth.
- iv) **Ujamaa**: The traditional African family in Tanzania according to Mwalimu Julius Nyerere lived following the basic principles of Ujamaa. The family lived together and worked together because that was how they understood life, and how they reinforced each other against the difficulties they had to contend with. The results of their joint effort were divided unequally between them, but according to well-understood customs. The family members thought of themselves as one and all their language and behaviour emphasised their unity (Nyerere,1968:337). Nyerere further explains that they lived together and they worked together and the result of their joint labour was the property of the family as a whole. Ujamaa, as Nyerere puts it was made possible because of three basic assumptions of traditional life. First there is “**love**” or better still “**respect**”. Here each member of the family recognised the place and the rights of the other members. Second, there is “**property**”. Here all the basic goods were held in common, and shared among all members of the unit. The third principle is “**the obligation to work**”. Here every member of the family and every guest who shared in the right to eat and have shelter had to also join in whatever work had to be done (Nyerere,1963:339).
- v) **Ubuntu**: Ubuntu is an “Nguni” (Bantu dialect) from South Africa whose meaning expresses “I am what I am because of who we all are”. It addresses our interconnectedness, our common humanity and the responsibility to each other flows from our connection. Ubuntu calls us to believe and feel “your pain is my pain”, your wealth is my wealth, and “your salvation is my salvation”. Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it succinctly “A person

is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think or walk or speak or behave as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human.” (Tutu,2000:40). In general, within the Ubuntu philosophy the importance and value of the human being and the community are pivotal.

- vi) **Muntu:** Muntu according to Ali Mazrui is an indigenous African word meaning person, and sometimes meaning Man in the generic sense of human kind. In a sense it is the theme of humanism in Africa’s philosophical and political experience, involving a major transition in perception across the centuries (Mazrui,1986:295). The Muntu practice can be a practice of emancipation and freedom. This theme of humanism expressed by Ali Mazrui is connected to Mwalimu Julius Nyerere’s democratic choice called socialism. Nyerere argues that the essence of socialism is the practical acceptance of human equality. That is to say every man’s equal right to a decent life before any individual has a surplus above his needs; his equal right to participate in government; and his equal responsibility to work and contribute to the society to the limit of his ability (Nyerere,1968:340). This philosophy of Muntu makes human kind both the creator and creation of his environment. It gives him the responsibility to cater for his fellow ones and to be conscious of the consequences of neglect and failure. In deed the world of MUNTU is a vision of the world whereby man is driven to create societies where the verbs “to be” and “to become” take primary place over the verb “to have” and where everyone’s work, more than simply a means to a financial end, contributes towards building a better more sustainable world for our children(www.muntuworld.org).

B) Cultural Idiosyncrasies as Inspiration to Democratic Governance

If some of the above mentioned cultural practices were used successfully to foster nation building and bind family ties in pre-colonial Africa, then there is a possibility of borrowing some of these in the present democratic architecture. The Mbangsuma is a practice of sharing, one of self-abnegation, altruism, and empathy – elements needed in leadership at all levels. The practice encourages democratic feelings that put people rather than position or power first. The practice inspires a governance mind set of being one another’s keeper. Such solidarity goes against the grain of personality cult and instead enhances the respect for the “ecosystem” rather than the

bloating of the “egosystem”. It is one that rebukes class stratification derived from ill-gotten wealth. Nyerere makes a point in saying that in Tanzania this practice can safeguard and strengthen the democratic practice of the citizens. It is a practice that seeks to correct the glaring income differentials which Africans inherited from colonialism and ensure that the international imbalance between the wages of factory and service workers on the one hand and of agricultural workers on the other is not reproduced within our own nation (Nyerere,1968: 341).

Ujamaa may be regarded as an economic practice that seeks to reactivate the philosophy of cooperation in production, sharing and distribution which was an essential part of traditional African society. It does not condone laziness but condemns greed. It supports self-reliance but abhors self-interest. It offers a challenge for citizens to build a society in which all men can treat with others on terms of complete equality and in a spirit of free cooperation.

Nyerere’s most pronounced socialist philosophy was ujamaa. He summarised his thoughts into the establishment of “Ujamaa villages – cooperative communities in which people lived together and worked together for the good of all (Nyerere,1968:342). The emphasis is the eradication of power structures that are laid on the accumulation of wealth, on nepotism, clientelism and political patronage. The principles of mutual respect, sharing of joint production and work by all embedded in Ujamaa inspire a democratic governance of collective participation in the public affairs, equal opportunities for all human security, human equality and peace between members of a society. Combined with today’s modern techniques of production, ujamaa is definitely a basis of autocratic economic development. Paul Kagame’s endogenous vision of growth and human/infrastructural development is arguably a derivation of the ujamaa principle.

The practice of Ubuntu philosophy with regard to humanity, care, sharing teamwork spirit, compassion, dignity, consensus, and decision-making approach can all be positive dividends of contemporary democracy. Group solidarity is an important African characteristic. Its essence in a multiethnic society such as Africa is that it effectively neutralises feelings of marginalisation and neglect among minority ethnic groups, as every group becomes the master of its own destiny (Obijiofor,2004:135). Botswana, the one country which has since half a century of African Independence attempted to use the democratic aspects of ubuntu has comparatively outshone all other countries that labelled democracy as unAfrican. Botswana has succeeded by borrowing from

ubuntu, yum, ujamaa and mbangsuma practices of popular participation in decision making, consensus-seeking, governing in the interest of the widest number of the population and leadership accountability. Not surprisingly Botswana has done better both in terms of democracy and development than most African countries (Gumede,2016:2).

Finally, politics is about the Muntu (humankind). It is about how citizens can participate in building their society to enhance development. The building of such a society is predicated on the respect of and adherence to the family. The family as a social unit is highly valued in Africa because it provides the platform on which members receive or offer assistance, encouragement and advice.). In fact Aimé Césaire was right in saying that a civilisation that does not solve its social problems or affirms its people's human dignity is not only a failure and a lie, but also a rotten decadent affair. Needless to say this goes against the grain of progress and human development. While it is expedient for African states to embark on infrastructural development, it must always consider human capital as the precursor to democratic entitlement and sustainable development. The Arusha Declaration crafted in the main by Julius Nyerere, is based on the assumption of human equality, on the belief that it is wrong for one man to dominate or to exploit another, and on the knowledge that every individual hopes to live in society as a free man able to lead a decent life in conditions of peace with his neighbours. The document s in other words, muntu-centred (Nyerere,1967:315). Inherent in the Arusha Declaration therefore is a commitment to the belief that there are more important things in life than the amassing of riches, and that if the pursuit of wealth clashes with things like human dignity and social equality, then the latter will be given priority. Julius Nyerere was quick to accept that the purpose of all social, economic and political activity must be man – the citizens and all the citizens, of a country. The creation of wealth is a good thing and something which needs to be increased. But it will cease to be good the moment wealth ceases to serve man and begins to be served by man (Nyerere,1967:316).

C) Cultural Idiosyncrasies as Democratic Violation

The trouble with integrating cultural or traditional practices within mainstream democracy has been the interpretation or sometimes debate between indigenous and modern visions of democratic governance.

Most African leaders have resorted to cherry picking these practices to suit their self interest rather than collective survival. African culture is not inimical to democracy. The South Korean Development Economist Ha-Joon Chang rightly argues that it depends on how people interpret their culture and tradition. “Which aspects they choose to highlight and which interpretation wins in political and ideological battles”, will ultimately determine whether an African country builds democracy (Gumede,2016:3). While it has been argued that colonial governments essentially rewrote African culture and African post-independence leaders swallowed these distorted culture without debate, it is also clear that when the second wind of democracy started blowing in Africa in the 80s the leaders rejected democracy as “foreign”, “un African”, Western or against African culture. The leaders disclaimed the ingredients of *mbangsuma* and *yum* which emphasise sharing and solidarity to establish a cabal of power mongers perpetuating nepotism and self-interest. The very South Africa that is the cradle of *ubuntu* has had a leadership under President Jacob Zuma excelling in corruption and embezzlement. President Zuma says that he needs to be judged by African “culture” while building an R280M private home with tax payers’ money and while his supporters live and die in grinding poverty. The erstwhile “Panafricanist” leader of former Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo) regarded periodic elections as going against the African culture of feudalism. Feudalism believed in an appointed traditional chief (*inkhosi*) who ruled as long as he wanted. The chief had absolute power over his subjects who swarm around the chief with servile sycophancy like courtiers in the old palaces found in kingdoms. It was not therefore strange to find Bokassa of “Central African Empire” crowning himself an Emperor or Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, even with some of his positive economic recuperation still glorified, assuming the role of an absolute monarch within a republic. Many of Africa’s ruling dynasties have been established on the back of powerful and often long-serving presidents passing power down through the family (Collins, 2018:37). From Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Togo, Kenya, Botswana to Democratic Republic of Congo family dynasties are fast becoming the stock in trade of in our political spaces. The argument of some of these monarchy and dynastic Presidents in Africa must have been “there was only one African chief and he ruled for life or passed it to his lineage”. In the post-independence period, many African leaders and governments have highlighted or emphasised only the more autocratic, subservient and anti-developmental aspects of African culture and tradition. They have done so in many cases to reinforce their own control over their populations. Others like former President Sese Seko Mobutu invented new African cultures claiming these to be authentic

when indeed this was a ploy to elongate his power tenure, shield him from criticism (with the argument that criticism was disloyalty) and shore political support from the uninformed population. Mobutu is quoted to have declared “democracy is not for Africa. There was only one African chief and here in Zaire we must make unity.” Other African heads of state have used this same argument to truncate and tinker with the country’s constitution to create a Republic of Presidents for life.

As shall be seen in the next chapter, there is not one single version of democracy. Yet there exist universal canons that make the presence of democracy felt in any society. While there is a case for an organic link between any model of democracy and the historical context of the society, there is also a clear line between genuine democracy and hoaxed democracy no matter its historical background.

D) The Case of Traditional Models of Governance and (Conflict Management)

Decisions about the welfare of the citizenry emanate from a consensus. Africa’s “palaver theory” philosophy is inspired by the fact that it is only by sitting down under a tree or an open market square can people talk sincerely, listen actively, confront creatively before building an agreement. Gacaca tradition used as a method of restorative justice in the post-genocide period in Rwanda was inspired by “under the tree” discussion. Trees may not be fashionable today as spaces for moonlight discussions. They have been replaced by halls called in most of Southern Africa “indaba” in Lesotho “Kgotla” and in some East African countries “mbuza”. These are all indigenous expressions of modern community parliaments where debates about the state and future of society are determined. These spaces are heated in debates that are group-centred. Group centeredness can safeguard people from unhealthy competitiveness and divisiveness of individualism and selfishness. By experiencing the thrill of group dynamics people can be empowered and inspired to act cooperatively and collectively (Malan,1997:32). What this traditional “indaba” approach seeks is a more inclusive and integrative type of dialogue. Periodic “indabas” help in rethinking, monitoring and evaluating the state of affairs of a nation. In modern terms they are a form of a national conference where frank dialogue or “talking it out” instead of “shooting it out” helps to restore sanity in a fragmented society and charts a way forward for its development and growth. So the context (soil conditions) and the content (universal canons) need

to find some sympathy if democracy must become a way of life of the African. The culture of a society shapes the informal rules which, far more than the formal rules determine both how institutions operate internally and how they relate to the wider social context (Jenkins,2006:130).

Another traditional approach to governance is what Ali Mazrui calls “our short memory of hate”. It is an ingrained trait that discourages an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”. It is a custom that negates the western style democracy of the vote with the “winner take all” outcome. It is a custom that reminds us that our constant duty should be to maintain the integrity of each while finding a balanced design for all (Deng,1996:225). It is a cultural resource that emphasises forgiveness and magnanimity. The first President of Independent Kenya, the late Jomo Kenyatta published a book titled “Suffering without bitterness” which pointed in the direction of Nelson Mandela’s vision of forgiving and even being generous to the former white tormentors. This resource could be cultivated and utilised between those who are seen as opponents of the governance structure (opposition) and those in charge of governance (ruling or incumbent). Africans are a very spiritual people and their spiritual values could be used as a mechanism of social control and of promoting non-violence and tolerance (Kokole,1996:138). Whether it is through spirituality of our elder tradition as in the kingdom of Swaziland or the orthodox Christian tradition of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, spiritual values serve as a restraining and moderating influence on volatile enraged citizens. Again the spiritual value enables the person to see himself as a product of a whole (society) and his persecution in any form should not rock the governance boat of society. When Goodluck Jonathan lost Presidential elections in Nigeria in 2015 and Joseph N. Boakai lost the run-off Presidential elections in Liberia in 2018, they both vowed that they would go with the verdict of the polls to save any human blood from spilling. Most of these approaches have been abandoned, but it was time they were reincarnated and implemented within the new democratic dispensations.

E) Indigenous Institutions as precursors of Modern Governance Structures

George Ayittey demonstrates that indigenous African governments were not completely dictatorial. Citizens could express their opinions openly and freely. The Chief or councillors did not jail dissidents or those with different viewpoints. Nor did the Chief loot the tribal treasury and deposit the booty in foreign banks (Ayittey,1992 :pp.41-42). Professor Eme Awa wrote “I do not

agree that the idea of democracy is alien in African because we had democracy of the total type—the type we had in the city-states where everybody came out in the market square and expressed their views, either by raising their hands or something like that”. The pre-colonial Africa was vested with both indigenous political institutions and an indigenous economic system. According to George Ayittey, there were as many as four basic units of government in African societies that governed themselves. The first was the Chief who was the central authority. The African Chiefs foremost responsibility was the survival of their people. An African Chief generally did not make policy or take decisions by himself. He only executed the will of the people (Ayittey,1992:p 42). The second was the inner or Privy Council which advised the Chief. The role of the inner or privy council was not only to keep the chief in touch with happenings in the tribe but also to keep a check on the chief’s behaviour. It was more or less the judiciary. Known in Ghanaian society as stools and skins, the privy or traditional council was largely included in the scheme of local government. The Chief would privately and informally discuss with the inner council all matters relating to the administration of the tribe. The third institution was the council of elders. The council of elders had two functions viz: to advise and assist the chief in the administration of the tribe as well as to prevent the chief from abusing his power. It was more or less the representative body of the commoners. In matters of serious consequence the chief had to summon all the members of the council of elders. Oliver (1969) noted that the council of elders voiced its dissatisfactions, criticised the chief and kept him “under the necessary control.” The fourth traditional institution was the village assembly. Freedom of expression was an important element of village assemblies. Anyone – even those who were not members of the tribe – could express his views freely. Dissent was open and free. Dissidents were not harassed arrested and jailed. At village meetings, the majority opinion ruled if a consensus could not be reached. This was a cardinal issue on freedom of opinion. Although the chief was in strict theory able to override the wishes of his people, in practice he rarely ventured to do so, because he knew the cooperation of the villages was essential for the successful government of the tribe (Ayittey,1992:38). Therefore real power lay with the people.

What therefore comes out of this indigenous political culture is that democracy was relatively effective. No single person was responsible for all decision making, there were checks and balances to trim the excesses of central authority and there was the practice of cooperative and inclusive governance (Ayittey,1992:39). Such democratic entitlement and governance was

enhanced by the conception that power was distributive not accumulative; the society rested on the seminal concept that the corporate group was above the individual with all the ingredients of economic sharing, collective security, fellow-feeling and ideological tolerance. Therefore if according to Walter Rodney, democracy is a sense of oneness that emerges from social groups trying to control their environment and to defend their gains against competing groups; then African democracy had already gained ground in the African cultural soil (Rodney,1972:242).

F) Which Way Forward? Democracy in Content or Democracy in Context?

Democracy is neither the preserve for a few nor a luxury of the many. It is an ingredient that will continue to determine progress and development in Africa. Indeed, the fate of Africa will depend on how deep the seeds of popular participation are sown in the fertile African soil and how well they are nourished and nurtured by the African people in tandem with their leaders (Ngwane,2003:29). In this regard, the people and their leaders would have to at best either borrow from their culture, those practices that enhance democracy or at worst abandon their cultural characteristics to imbibe other models of democracy. Whatever choice they make there would need to be a fusion of democracy in content and democracy in context. For this to prevail, the leadership in Africa would have to rethink how neatly this fusion can bring about human development and democratic dividends. According to King Moshoeshoe, an emerging political consciousness is in need of a culturally derived and defined African political and economic ideology which can be culturally understood by Africans and so seen as dynamically relevant to their everyday problems and their own way of doing things. Moshoeshoe continues by affirming that any successful democracy capable of mobilising the people and of obtaining their cooperation, consent and active participation on the difficult road to African recovery should be related to its own established – though now fragmented – cultural definition of African society (Moshoeshoe,1992:10). What this means therefore is that Africa's pre-colonial governance perception of a chief as a central authority which has now been converted to an autocratic, authoritarian and deified political ruler must be abandoned. This means Africa's pre-colonial governance structure of an inner or Privy Council that served as an advisory body but which in today's African political systems is synonymous to a small sycophantic coterie of hand clappers and praise singers called Ministers in government should be reviewed. This means Africa's pre-colonial governance structure which placed out of respect and wisdom emphasis on a Council of Elders that holds the chief's excesses in check but

which today has become a judiciary with a gerocratic metaphor of 'democracy by the aged, of the aged and by the aged' must be eradicated. Today's democratic governance must place emphasis on youth and women participation. This means Africa's pre-colonial governance structure of a vibrant village assembly of debate and even dissent which has now become a rubber-stamp impotent and even fossilised Upper and Lower Houses of Assembly must be re-examined.

Democracy is not un-African. It is a choice of governance by the people. That choice could either be a conventional/conservative choice or an innovative/home grown choice. Any of these choices would emanate from a broad-based national inclusive consultation or "indaba", "kgotla" or "mbuza". Some of the models arising from the conventional/conservative choice have been said to be Liberal or Western. They include multiparty democracy which is based on competition between or among political parties with elections being the cornerstone. Over the years multiparty democracy has had different gains in some African countries from state paralysis, state authoritarianism, state failure and in rare cases to state cohesion (Ngwane,2003: pp. 32-33). Some of the models arising from an innovative/home grown choice have been said to be organic and culturally-driven. They include an umbrella democracy in which the state distances itself from party politics (often limited to a two horse race) and basically serves as an umpire. This model is predicated on the premise that there are only two schools of thought in Africa's democratic discourse (change or continuity). Another model is the no party democracy which involves the banning or restriction of party politics in favour of individual ideologies. There are two main emphases in this no party democracy viz – the existence of citizens to run for election on their individual merit rather than under party canopies and the effective decentralisation of the decision-making process to grassroots structures. This model is inspired by Africa's cultural perception of the whole nation being considered as a "village assembly." Yoweri Museveni tried this in Uganda in 1986 and Thomas Sankara introduced it in Burkina Faso between 1983 – 1987. Another model is consociation democracy. This term applies to a canton-based constitutional structure as in Ethiopia and in Switzerland. It is inspired by the fact that through proportional representation all ethnic groups (common in Africa) enjoy the same dividends of democracy and economic development. Burgsdoff argues that this model not only enhances the community's ability to run their own affairs, it also minimises the risk of inter-ethnic conflicts as each group is in charge of its own political cultural and economic spheres (Burgsdoff, 1992:62).

CONCLUSION

The challenge for Africa after close to sixty years of nominal independence is to formulate a cultural imprint that speaks to the democratic aspirations and governance expectations of the masses. Some countries are already charting such democratic visions that are derived from Africa's rich indigenous cultural background. Others have completely turned their backs on the cultural context that can inform decision making and endogenous development. Rather than being prescriptive, this essay has analysed the merits and demerits of using culture as a substrate for democracy and leverage for governance. It has endeavoured to show that other countries (South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, etc) have successfully drawn inspiration from their good cultural practices to pursue appropriate and advanced development goals. What is good for the goose may also be good for the gander; bearing in mind of course that "no one size-fits all". As the African people continue to show frustrations and even rebellion against the much anticipated fruits of independence and post-apartheid, it was time "indabas", "kgotlas" and "mbuzas" or national dialogues were established so that the people can fashion new constitutions and institutions that hopefully should mainstream some of the best practices of indigenous African culture.

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