
INDIGENOUS DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND VALUES OF PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA: LESSONS FOR CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

Timbee Akuul
Department of Political Science
Benue State University, Makurdi
e-mail: timbeeakuul@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper examines indigenous democratic norms and values of pre-colonial African societies. It has been established that contrary to the western notion that democratic practice in Africa and indeed Nigeria is derived from western orientation, it is true that democratic norms and values were part and parcel of African indigenous socio-political systems long before the advent of colonialism. These democratic values such as popular will, popular participation, consultation/consensus, checks and balances, fair representation and accountability are democratic values that existed and were practised in pre-colonial African societies before they were undermined by colonialism. In order to sustain our present democratic system in Nigeria, these values and norms should be adopted and applied in order to strengthen democratic practice in the country.

Key words: Indigenous, Democracy, Values, Norms.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of democracy has become a household word because it is something that everybody wants to associate with. Indeed all nations of the world want to be described as democratic. In Africa today virtually every country is in a hurry to democratize (except Morocco, Libya, Niger etc, which are still struggling with either monarchical regimes or military dictatorship). The world was to witness democratic revolution in the wake of ideological struggle between the United State of America and Soviet Union. During this era of Cold War, the Western allies led to the United States of America stormed the world with liberal democratic tenets in a push to contain the spread of communism. Africa became a laboratory for experiment. Thus according to western political thought, democratic practice was there and then introduced in Africa – “a hitherto enclave replete with despotic, autocratic, authoritarian and repressive regimes”.

However, the fact remains that, while it is indisputable to assert that contemporary democratic project in Africa is derivable from Western orientation, it is equally incontestable that democratic values and norms were part and parcel of African indigenous socio-political systems long before European contact with the black race (Otite, 2008, Dong’aroga, 1999). Most of the pre-colonial African systems were therefore inherently democratic. Nevertheless, these principles were unfortunately undermined by the colonialists in order to advance imperial gains (Rodney, 1972; Habtension 2009, Nwauwa, 2010).

This paper anchors on two broad objectives. First, to explore democratic values and practice typical in pre-colonial Africa thus giving credence to the assertion that democracy in Africa

predate colonialism. The second is to examine the possible lessons that can be learnt from the pre-colonial African indigenous democratic values so as to build an inclusive, virile and sustainable democracy in contemporary Nigeria. To know your today presupposes understanding the past. It is only when Nigerians come to grip with the cherished democratic values of yester years in the 'original'. Africa and indeed Nigeria that they can better appreciate where we are today and the challenges that lie ahead to evolve a workable democracy. The paper will proceed by making a painstaking analysis into democratic values and practices in pre-colonial Africa. It shall consider two case studies namely the Tiv and Kikuyu pre-colonial political systems. But let's first comprehend the concept of democracy which is very vital in this discourse.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

DEMOCRACY: The term democracy which has become a relative concept changing with time, space and culture is originally coined from the Greek words "demos" meaning the people, and "kratia" which entails to rule. Theoretically therefore, democracy is rule by the people and for the people. Held (1987) identifies three basic variants of democracy since the concept was popularised. These strands are:

- a. **Direct or participatory democracy:** This is the 'original' type of democracy as used by ancient Athens and others. In principles, it involved all citizens in decision making about public affairs.
- b. **Liberal or representative democracy:** This is the modern western style and involves elected officials who undertake to represent the interest of citizens within specific territories. This has come to be the dominant model in the modern world.
- c. **One party democracy:** This is also framed as representative democracy. However, this strand loathes multiparty competition. It is more or less socialist inclined as in China and Cuba.

Democracy in the words of Amir Idris in Habtension (2009) therefore should not only be defined in terms of election and vote. Preferably, it should be conceived as a system that the society is able to hold their government accountable; participate in policy formulation and control government implementation of its mandates.

The beauty of democracy today can be appreciated from its application. While there are universal elements of democracy such as rule of law, periodic renewal of mandates, representation and so forth, certain principles are added to the universally acceptable ones in order to address the peculiarities of practising states with differing cultural heritage and socio-economic background. Little wonder that rotational system or 'eat and give to your brother' as well as collectivism are values and norms that have found a space in African democracy.

AFRICAN INDIGENOUS DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND VALUES

As already alluded to in the preamble, democracy is not alien to Africa as Western school of thought would want us to believe. Their postulation is tantamount to gross misrepresentation and distortion of history; a slap in the face of a refined race with long standing impeccable values and principles. The task before this segment of the paper is to highlight indigenous democratic values in African socio-political systems even before the coming of the white man. We shall also consider particular case studies in brief.

POPULAR WILL: In any democratic environment, the will of the majority is the determining factor in decision making especially on major public affairs. In most of the pre-colonial states in Africa, major decisions were taken based on popular consent of the subjects. Suffice it to note that while some societies were stateless, others exhibited the character of state. Whatever it was, in most of the societies irrespective of their status, there were mechanisms, for the voice of the people to be heard. (This should not be misconstrued that there existed liberal regimes side by side with oligarchy). Historical antecedents and anthropological evidence indicate that the stateless Ibo society in Nigeria allowed for popular will or public opinions in decision making (Kenworthy, 2010).

PARTICIPATION: Participation is a reference to taking part in the art of governance in any capacity. In contemporary politics, participation ranges from voting, contesting for elective positions, holding appointed offices, attending campaigns and rallies etc. Most societies in pre-colonial Africa inculcate the spirit of full and active participation in governance (Ake, 1996). Taking Ibo society as a microcosm, the youth could participate via age grade activities. Projects like road construction, clearing market squares, enforcing council orders, fighting wars etc by the youth were counted as participatory activities in government. Citizens were equally free to participate in debates without let or hindrance.

CONSULTATION/CONSENSUS: There is a popular adage among Africans that two heads are better than one-even if they are coconut heads. This goes to show that the native Africans believed in wider consultation before arriving at crucial decisions. For example, in the Tiv pre-colonial society where 'Tsav' and 'Akombo' powers were highly respected, it was possible for a man who possessed the mystical supernatural power (Ormbatsav) to kill his offspring, kith or kin for ritual purposes. However, this was only possible following wide consultation and approval by concerned persons in the spiritual realm both from the victim's patrilineal and matrilineal lineages (Bur, 1993). Whoever that acted unilaterally was condemned to "gba iar" (violate the norms) and sanctioned accordingly. Bur (1993) further explicate that in this segmented society authority was dispersed and the administration of the land was carried out in village councils, and decisions were by wider consultation and consensus of the elders who consulted the councils. He therefore posits that with this kind of disposition, it is clear that whoever, wants to lead the Tiv people must be humane, benevolent, appealing persuasive and democratic

CHECKS AND BALANCES: The essence of checks and balances is to avoid excesses in power game. Power, they say corrupt and absolute power corrupt absolutely. The existence of multiple government institutions as in the state of Buganda was to prevent absolutism and tyrannical decisions by a despot. In the Buganda kingdom of Uganda, Nwauwa (2010) explains that the powers of the “absolute king” were checked by parliament. While the Kabaka (the king) was in principle supreme, he ruled the kingdom in conjunction with his prime minister (Katikkior) and a parliament (Lukiiko). Members of parliament were made up of the chiefs of all districts that comprised the kingdom. Although in theory the Kabaka was not bound to take the advice of the Prime Minister (Katikiro) and the parliament (Lukiiko), in practice he could not risk to ignore them. Although the political system of Buganda was based on Kingship, it was apparently a representative monarchy in which parliament and prime minister not only ensured representation according to the concept of modern democracy but also limited the powers of the king to avoid tyranny

REPRESENTATION: some pre-colonial indigenous African political systems exhibited representative values of the modern democracy. For example, in the Oyo empire, the Oyomesi served as representative council of the state consisting of seven members from each of the seven wards that make up the empire (Nwauwa, 2010). There were laid down rules and regulations governing the choice of nominees. A member to be nominated must therefore fulfil the stipulated conditions to the satisfaction of the people and was neither imposed nor self serving.

ACCOUNTABILITY: Typical in some traditional African societies was the principle of accountability. The leaders could be held accountable for poor harvest, calamities or misfortunes. In the pre-colonial Jukun society for example, the ‘Aku’ (King) was to blame for poor harvest, incessant deaths among others. He must be seen to be a source of blessing for the state or risk his usefulness.

ROTATION: The task of nation-building is not the responsibility of one person or group of persons. Some pre-colonial African kingdoms detested hegemonic leadership and prefer power to go round. For example, a social formation is evidently divided into subgroups. The different political divides were to have a feel of leadership. Among the Tiv of central Nigeria, this practice was christened as ‘ya na anbian’ interpreted as ‘eat and give your brother’. The formula for the power shift depended on the society in question (Michael, 2008).

DECENTRALIZATION: There was no concentration of power in one person or group of persons in some African societies. The Tiv, Ibo, Yoruba among others exhibited this democratic principle. In Oyo Empire for instance, there were basically three arms of government distinct in functions and personnel in conformity with the principle of separation of power. At the head of the Oyo empire was the Alafin (emperor) who was the most important person in the political system. The Alafin was vested with executive powers. Although in theory, the Alafin’s power was absolute, in practice another organ, the Oyomesi limited his powers as it was vested with what is akin to legislative functions. In addition, the Oyomesi doubled as kingmakers and commanded the imperial army with Bashorun, one of its

members as the commander-in-chief. Better yet, another body, the 'Ogboni made up of free men of integrity, age and experience and appointed by the Alafin with the Oyomesi's approval in turn regulated the authority of Oyemesi.

The democratic values and norms in pre-colonial Africa depicted above is no means exhaustive. But suffice it here to consider some case studies for more analysis. Although briefly, this will go a long way driving home the point succinctly and aptly. To this end, we consider the Tiv and Kikuyu nations.

THE TIV INDIGENOUS DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND VALUES

Michael (2008:23) posits that the foundation of the Tiv political society was based on the principle of justice, welfare, freedom, equity, fairness and egalitarianism. It was as a result of these values that individual members could have a say on the policies that were to be implemented in the society.

The segmented Tiv traditional society was anchored on blood relation (consanguinity). The kinship structure, continued Michael, revolved from the smallest to the largest units namely: The 'ya' unit (compound), 'Ityo' unit (clan) and the 'Tar' unit (all clans put together). Each of these units was headed by the most elderly person who naturally emerged as a result of age.

From this organic structure stated above, it is crystal clear that the socio-political system was such that there was no centralised authority with decision making revolving around consultation, consensus and, popular will.

Martin (2004) reiterates this position when he asserts that one's authority is exercised only on those who were organically bound, through the kinship factor. The Tiv political society consists of a hierarchy of seniority. Authority in Tivland rested on the natural emergence of an elder. Seniority was based on age and it therefore served as the basis for leadership. This leadership is however, ably assisted by members of the elders council from the "ya" and "Ityo" units all of which are elders of their respective units and together they formed the government.

The decision making process involves several levels of discussion starting from the family, compound to the extended family level (Ityo). One unique feature of this system is that it allowed all members of the society to participate directly or indirectly in decision making and consensus is reached by popular acclamation. The head of the 'tar' 'ityo' or 'ya' had no right to impose his will on the council of elders or members of compound. However, where the express will of the head must prevail against all odds, it was done in a passionate appeal via the belief that 'kon tamen gba kighir u kiriki' literally interpreted as a mighty tree falls on top of smaller ones. Generally therefore, the Tiv segmented pre-colonial society was characterised by democratic values and principles.

THE KIKUYU INDIGENOUS DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND VALUES

The pre-colonial political structure of the Kikuyu of modern Kenya represents another example of pre-colonial African state with democratic values. Among the Kikuyu people as elaborated by Nwauwa (2010:10) there was no sole (paramount) ruler. Eligible adults constituted the legislative assembly. Erstwhile Kenyan leader Jomo Kenyatta asserts that "in the eyes of the Kikuyu people, the submission to a despotic rule of any particular man or group, black or white is the greatest humiliation to mankind". The origins of Kikuyu democracy are embodied in their historical – political legend. According to this legend, a despotic monarch who was ultimately overthrown by the people initially ruled Kikuyu land. After his overthrow, the government of the country was at once changed from despotism to democracy which was in keeping with the wishes of the majority of the people. Understandably, therefore, the pre-colonial Kikuyu nation loathed the notion of one-man dictatorship.

Government among the Kikuyu units (villages) was vested in elders of one generation or age set known as *riika*. Usually the accession to power of a new generation takes place at recurring intervals inaugurated by the handing over ceremony known as '*Ituiko*'. The determination of the period of a generation was contingent on the composition of society at the time. However, generally, once most of the first born grandsons of the ruling generation are circumcised, the generation prepares to relinquish power to the next generation. Normally, the gap between two official generations is much the same as the gap between the average age of a man and his first born son. Essentially circumcision was the only qualification and it conferred recognition of manhood and full rights of citizenship. Legislative duties were reposed in the senior rank of the elder lodge representing the various constituent villages. The body empowered to legislate for a whole village is in theory the elders of the ruling set, but in practice only in liaison with members of the other age set. Consultation, representation and consensus were the main features of Kikuyu indigenous political system. It was the voice of the people or public opinion that ruled the country.

THE RELEVANCE OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS VALUES TO DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

The dominant values of contemporary western style democracy such as multiparty competition, voting, periodic renewal of mandate, rule of law were conspicuously absent in the pre-colonial democratic practice in Africa. However, as can be deduced from the foregoing analysis, other essential ingredients of democracy were not only identifiable in the pre-colonial system but upheld for system growth and sustainability. While these values were badly tampered with and undermined by colonial lords, the need arise for such norms and principles to be revisited in our modern democracy. Nigeria has much to learn from this past history in order to join the community of advance democracies not only in theory but also importantly in practical application.

The first lesson that can be learnt from the past is allowing the popular will of the people to take pre-eminence. In those days, the collective decisions of the people prevailed on all public matters. In contemporary democratic Nigeria, the mechanism to measure the will of the people is the ballot apart for public opinion or opinion polls as well as referendum. For

Nigeria's democracy to nurture and flourish to enviable height the will of the people expressed mostly through the ballot must not be truncated. The sharp practice where votes do not count and results of elections doctored in favour of unpopular candidates is not only inimical and precarious for Nigeria but responsible for bad governance and general political apathy. Let every vote count, let results be upheld, let riggings in all ramifications stop and above all let the will of the majority be respected as was typical in the pre-colonial era-after all the mantra in democracy is that, majority carries the vote.

Another good lesson to be learnt from the past is the issue of full and free participation in governance without let or hindrance. In those days political participation was not restricted on any ground. Ayittey (2006) illustrated the position more forcefully when he aptly states that:

In traditional African political arrangement none was locked out of decision making process. One did not have to belong to one political party or family to participate in the process of decision making. Even foreigners were allowed to participate.

Nigerians should understand that free participation is the sine qua non for democracy. It is down right abuse to harass, intimidate or outrightly assassinate aspirants of political positions. This incredible, unfortunate scenario is happening in the glare view of everybody. Nigeria must learn lessons from the past where participation was not curtailed on the basis of sex, colour, creed or ideology. Nomination papers should be made available for all intending contestants instead of being hijacked and hidden by party executive officials as is commonly done to day. Democracy only makes meaning where mass participation is advocated.

In similar vein, the pre-colonial African democracy was anchored on wider consultation in concluding political deals. Individual opinions and views were articulated and aggregated in a push to reach a compromise. Nigeria can not afford to sweep this principle under the carpet especially giving its desire to be among the twenty developed states in the world as expressed in vision 20-20-20. Major political decisions such as revenue sharing formula, state creation, constitutional amendment, party system, zoning, minimum wage, to mention but a few should be based on wider consultation. As we prepare for the 2011 elections, government and indeed power brokers should refrain from imposing unpopular candidates on the masses during elections. This action is capable of heating the polity and eventually collapse of the democratic project. The situation where traditional chiefs or rulers are appointed on political ground and foisted on the subjects as in the era of indirect rule should stop. Most of them are alienated from the culture and tradition of the people they purport to rule. Nigeria should learn that only decisions reached through wider consultation are poised to be supported by the ruled.

The principle of checks and balances which serves as a watchdog device to forestall tyranny and abuse of power was manifested in some pre-colonial African socio-political systems. The existing organs more or less curtailed despotic tendencies of one another thus ensuring peace, order and good governance of such states. The executive, legislative and judicial branches of the Nigerian government exist for such purposes and functions. No organ

should expect financial inducement before it takes action. The legislators should not wait for "Ghana must go" before they could pass bills or approve nominees for appointment, into political offices. The judiciary should not wait for 'Nigeria Factor' to make judicial pronouncements especially on electoral petitions. The three arms of government should remain true functional and interdependent for Nigeria's democracy to thrive.

Lastly, Nigeria has much lesson to learn from pre-colonial African society from the stand point of accountability and representation as democratic values. In the past most African leaders were accountable to their subjects. Not that they must necessarily give account of their stewardship but were liable for the failure of their states. They were also known to be true representatives rendering selfless services to the people. The practice where Nigerian leaders consider themselves as sacred cows and demy gods to be served and not to serve is not ideal. Most of these leaders consider their states or constituencies as personal estates to be run at will. The resources accruing to their domains is treated as personal cakes – baked and eaten with family members, friends and acquaintances. The residue is siphoned into foreign accounts for their children's children. Nigerian leaders should learn from history and imbibe the value of servant-leadership as championed by late president Umaru Musa Yar'Adua. They should see themselves as people's representatives but not self representatives. They should know that they are there on people's heritage and therefore should appropriate to the people all that rightly belong to them.

CONCLUSION

For avoidance of doubt, Africa was democratic from the beginning of human civilization. The in-built democratic values in the African indigenous political structure did not nullify the conception of autocratic and authoritarian elements equally in-built in the systems. Among the democratic values and norms inherent in the pre-colonial African states or societies were: popular will, representation, consultation, consensus, participation, checks and balances, accountability rotation, decentralization and so forth. The argument at stake is that since these democratic values were in practice in pre-colonial Africa and by implication helped in state building projects, such values and norms can be emulated, adopted and institutionalised in the contemporary Nigerian democratic experiment. Democracy in Nigeria should be seen to be practiced in tune with Nigerian culture and values as opposed to alien tradition and culture of the west.

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