The Nemesis of Individualistic Ontology in Globalization and the Practice of Liberal Democracy in Post-Colonial Africa

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Abstract

Globalization is a motor that exports Western ideologies such as liberal democracy, capitalism to Africa, and other parts of the world. Hence, the situation in Africa since the post-colonial era demonstrates a discontent for liberal democracy and its economic option of capitalism. Thus, in this paper, we show that the discontent in Western individualistic ontology is in conflict with traditional African communalistic ontology, and therefore, it is detrimentally hunting the practice of liberal democracy in post-colonial Africa.

Introduction

Liberalism, one of the exports of Western globalization to the rest of the world including Africa, can be defined as "a set of ideas in social and political thought which emphasizes the value of individuals' rights, and individual freedom of choice and freedom from interference"[1]. J. N. Agbo has conceptualized globalization in itself as a "product" exported to Africa with sinister motives[2]. An extreme liberal view of individuals' rights especially in the area of morality is usually expressed as libertarianism. The central theme of libertarianism is the claim that individuals should be free from the interference of others. Personal liberty is the supreme moral good. Hence, one's liberty can justifiably be restricted only if he consents to the restriction. Any other restriction is unjust[3]. We notice, therefore, the place of the individual in liberalism but what of the place of the state? The talk concerning the extent of a state's influence on the individuals, one way or another, interferes with the so-called individuals' liberties. Sometimes, it is the extent of interference and the extent of limitation of a state's influence that dominate such arguments. One thing is certain though, and it is the fact that the individuals' liberties harped by liberalism is in itself not a liberty of the individual to assert. The individual in a state may desire and even demand certain liberties, but it is the state that would assert them. Corroborating this Mautner writes, "The role of the state is primarily to protect these rights. This presupposes the rule of law and legal provisions for freedom of association, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom to travel, freedom to choose a gainful occupation, etc.[4]"

Thus in the event of ensuring these individual liberties, governmental restrictions and certain interferences are inevitable. And the rate of such varies from state to state or more ontologically, from culture to culture. This stimulated campaigners like Charles Taylor and Amy Gutmann[5] to write about different culture based liberalisms. Notably, they talk about models of liberalism that allow the goals of a particular cultural group, such as the French Canadians in Quebec, to be actively supported by government in the name of cultural survival. Similar advocacy can and are being made for the Stone Age people in New Guinea as well as the Chinese Tibets[6].

Issues like the one above create the debate whether liberalism is a universal neutral culture or not. Steven Rockefeller states that many promoters of multicultural theory challenge the idea that liberalism can be neutral with regard to the conceptions of the good life, arguing that it reflects a regional Anglo-American culture and has a homogenizing effect[7]. Generally, multiculturalists reject the view that liberalism is or can be a universal culture[8]. This is the bedrock of our argument in this paper that liberal democracy, for example, is not truly a viable universal political option as the Western intellectual elements have presented it. The crust of our conviction lies in the fact that in Africa, it has been a remarkable failure, to say the least.

Our position does not, of course, preclude the fact that there might be other forms of democracy that would work in Africa. This is because the democratic instinct is generally shared by men although in different forms. A better expression of this view is that "what is universally shared in human nature expresses itself in a great diversity of cultural forms"[9].

On this score, we wish to draw a line that from the liberal democratic point of view individuals have rights to certain liberties on the basis of their universal human identity and potential, not primarily on the basis of ethnic or culture identity[10]. But the multiculturalists are against this yardstick on the ground that the liberal democratic principles are not truly extracted from a universal culture but from the dominant Anglo-American world-view. To them, therefore, there are differences in the political concerns of individuals in different cultures. In Africa for instance, the individual realizes himself in the community[11]. So, the community comes first and is expressed in Igbo maxim as *ohaka* meaning, the community is supreme[12]. Menkiti writes[13] that one obvious conclusion to be drawn from such dictum as *ohaka* is that, as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories, whatever these may be. And the primacy is meant to apply not only ontologically, but also in regard of epistemic accessibility. This means that the individual comes to know himself as a human through the community, and this predicates his identity on the community or culture area rather than the abstract universal acclaim.

If we conceive liberalism as the upholding of the individual rights and liberties, and conceive democracy as the system of government which thrives on the people's freedom to decide how they are governed, then, liberal democracy can be conceived as that people-oriented system where the individual's rights to choose, freedom to decide and all forms of liberties are respected, protected and never restricted. This gives room for the individual in a liberal democratic system to live the sort of life that could be described as ideal. This implies references to the political, economic, social and moral dimensions of life. Little wonder John Dewey conceives liberal democracy as a social strategy for enabling individuals to live the good life[14]. Our contentions however are, 1. Africa has its own democratic variant before the colonial times, and 2. Liberal democracy with its Western structured ontology of abstract individualism has been a failure in Africa where communalist ontology subsists. These two points shall form the thrust of our discussion in this paper.

Democracy in Pre-Colonial Africa

There are democratic elements in the traditional Africa. Only that in most cases, these are not similar to those in Western liberal democracy. In chapter eight of his work *Igbo Philosophy,* T. U. Nwala discusses the political system of the Igbo-Africans. He suggests that most traditional political order in Africa had serious democratic elements that can only be said to vary from the ones in Western-styled democracy. The reason is not far-fetched; as the Igbo are communitarian with the word Igbo itself said to mean "a community of people"[15].

He posits that democratic spirit (which puts in check the apparent or possible excesses of seniority, status and achievement) is further strengthened by the Igbo principle of equality and equivalence that according to him, Afigbo says is the root of Igbo democracy. He further quotes Afigbo as saying that "all who are morally worthy are basically equal, difference in wealth notwithstanding".[16] Nwala, therefore, likens this to the unanimity principle in an Igbo-African version of democracy. In his words "*Unanimity* and all the rigorous processes and compromises (igba izu – period of consultation) 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'."[17] Thus for Nwala, unanimity becomes indispensable in Igbo traditional democracy since they conceive of politics and government not as means whereby the stronger or the many impose their will on the rest but as 'the process of regulating normal life among brothers'. This same system that Nwala presents is also found in many African societies, notably the Ashanti of Ghana.

Corroborating Nwala's position, Kwasi Wiredu in his work, "Democracy and Consensus: A Plea for a Non-Party Polity"[18], bemoans the failure of liberal democracy in Africa and blames it on the incompatibility of the system with the native political order and orientation in Africa. This is because the multi-party system based on majority rule does not produce a reasonable system of democracy anywhere in the world, much less so in an African political order characterized by multi-ethnicity. Little wonder he recommends that we build an alternative democratic system for Africa resting on the democratic potentials of the traditional African political order, and such potentials he says include the consensus principle and all-inclusive decision making processes.

Kwame Gyekye also states that there was a functional democratic order in pre-colonial Africa prior to colonialism whose basic orientation is couched in community spirit and consensus principle. For him, therefore, the Western democratic system has not been much of a success in Africa because its principles (such as majority rule) do not rhyme with the basic understanding of political leadership in traditional Africa. The traditional African system features a democratic order where dependence on dialogue and effective consultation were means of decision-making.[19] According to K. A. Busia, "so strong was the value of solidarity that the chief aim of the counselors was to reach unanimity, and they talked until this was achieved." A viable democratic alternative for Africa therefore must be constructed on these traditional democratic principles that have worked for Africa for ages.

Also, Edward Wilmot Blyden in his book, *African Life and Customs* (1908) articulates the idea of a communistic ethos or philosophy as the basis of African societies before Western colonialism. This position is further corroborated in some modern literary works, for example, the novelist Ayi Kwei Armah in his book, *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), similarly articulates the same vision that the communalistic ethos lies at the heart of traditional African life-world.

This manifests even in the way Africans embraced and practiced foreign religions. Rudolph T. Ware in his book *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (2014) describe the life of West African Moslems before early modern European contact and modern European invasion of Africa as one driven by community spirit. He discusses the importance of Qur'anic schools for West African Muslim communities**.** It is these schools that helped spread Islam in the region without rift, and became a great symbol of identity for Moslems. These schools in places like Senegambia eventually became means of resistance for Africa against slave trade and subsequently colonization. However it was J. G. Donders who establishes the connection between foreign religions and African peoples. For him, it was the lure of community life that initially attracted Africans to foreign religions. This is because these religions offered in interestingly new way the promise of community living probably bigger and better than what was(1985, 32). This comparative study of other indigenous or traditional African worldviews has larger implication for political theory (democratic theory) in Africa. It therefore, connects well with our study of Igbo-African philosophy that engages Western liberal democracy with its traditional Igbo alternative.

   Our view, therefore, is that the traditional pre-colonial Africa had a political order that was to some extent democratic. The difference is that instead of say majority principle, the traditional Africa operated with consensus and unanimity principles. This creates an orientation of all-inclusion. It then means that to obtain a viable democratic alternative that would work in Africa some restructuring needs be done on the current Western-styled liberal democracy by adapting and modernizing Africa's traditional democratic system. Writing in support of this position, Olusegun Oladipo states that:

   The goal…is to show that a currently viable adoption and transformation of the African democratic heritage could help to consolidate Africa's multicultural societies. A central task in this process lies in the reconciliation of democracy and justice via the establishment of a consensus-oriented dialogue for decision-making, a constitutional legitimation of the rule of ethnic groups, and a de-centralization of political power, so that local and regional autonomy becomes possible.[20]

On the issue of reconciling democracy and justice, it has been mooted that this is one of the stumbling blocks of Western-styled liberal democracy in Africa. As a result of the principle of majority rule, Africa's political class takes undue advantage of others, an alibi that was not present in Africa's traditional political system. Expressing this correctly, Mahmood Mamdani echoes that the Western-styled liberal democracy practiced in Africa today has created a scenario in which "the minority fears democracy; the majority fears justice".[21] This issue is central to all the crises in Africa's democracies today.

Explaining further, it has been argued that the tension between democracy and justice has arisen, partly because the dominant conception of democracy in Africa today is the majoritarian one. This conception, in practice, creates a situation, in which some people are consistently in the minority,[22] others consistently in the majority. This was the kind of situation Africa's traditional consensual model prevented. Thus, the Western-styled democracy has not been of much success and is not likely going to be in Africa because its basic operating principles, like the majority principle and multi-party system, run amok to some of the ideas of traditional political systems that worked in the pre-colonial Africa.

It should be noted that one of the factors that have derailed the Western-styled democracy in Africa is the entrenchment of ethnic/clan consciousness in most African societies.[23] In a colonial era where different clans/ethnic groups were pulled together to form nations, bonds of ethnic loyalty were naturally created and empowered some against others. It therefore, seems that what is required in the present circumstance is not the obliteration of this consciousness, which has been the goal of Western inspired democratic/political order, or even to pretend that it is not important. For Oladipo[24], what ought to be done is the construction of an alternative political system that could be homegrown democracy within which this aspect of our social experience can be accommodated in a manner that does not threaten social cohesion. He therefore submits that "the consensual non-party model of democracy and a structure of political power, which guarantees considerable autonomy to the nationalities in Africa's multi-ethnic states, seem to be the best in the present circumstance"[25].

The significance of ethnic and majoritarian factors in today's Africa is further highlighted by C. S. Momoh as well as Eskor Toyo. When the table is turned around from ethic lines to that of the ruling class and the ruled, Momoh sees Western-styled democracy as "ultimately the tyranny of the vociferous and noisy minority over the quiet, silent majority". Despite these anomalies, "still the democratic wheel moves on inexorably on its course and the noisy minority continues to lord it over the silent majority".[26]

For Eskor Toyo, liberal democracy has not and cannot work in Africa. It is a system that encourages irreconcilable contradictions like majority/minority imbroglio. Party system also makes it possible for a select few, which can be autocratic, tyrannical or dictatorial, to take advantage of the election system to run the affairs of all as it pleases them. Where such a system creates some paradoxes in mono-cultural societies, worse can simply be expected in a multi-cultural continent like Africa. As a result the practice of democracy in Africa has metamorphosed into what he calls electo-plutocracies[27] where the 'people' as democracy emphasizes are the relatively poor who are dominated and the rulers are the rich who dominate. He recommends unanimity or a modernization of Africa's village democracy, a traditional African brand of democracy such that is practiced among the Igbo, Idoma, Tiv, Ashanti, etc., to be a better substitute.

In his words "Unanimity is government by the unanimous decision of all households or representatives of all the units that constitute the population. In the so-called 'village democracy' characteristic of traditional classless societies,…democracy differs from unanimity in that what it requires is not unanimous but majority decision."[28]

Thus the preponderance of ethnic division, class segregation, individualism and majority power or lordship derails liberal democracy in Africa. There is also the nagging absence of what the Igbo call igba-izu[29] or consultation that ensures in traditional Igbo-African democracy that no one is left disgruntled. On the whole, we note that there are democratic elements in the traditional or pre-colonial Africa, although, these have significant differences when compared to the Western-styled democracy practiced in Africa today. The large-scale failure of this new and strange system clearly necessitates a revisit to traditional Africa and a modernization of what used to work successfully for her traditional societies.

Individualistic Ontology and Liberal Democracy in Post-Colonial Africa

Heidegger sets off investigating the question of 'being', its structure, meaning and authenticity. His springboard was a critic of Plato who left the tradition in metaphysics that ignored *Dasien* and focused on more privileged concepts such as God, Spirit, the Forms, the Transcendental self, etc. This Platonian limitation he calls 'forgetfulness of being'[30]. For Heidegger, therefore, to understand the world and every other thing in it, it is primary to have full grasp of *Dasien*. This speaks of how being is in the world and its relation to the entities in it.

Heidegger notes that the Cartesian theory of *res cogitans* (the thinking thing) is limited because Descartes never probed the thing any further. That thinking thing he calls *Dasien* has a different sort of existence from other things that have ordinary existence. These other things are determinate and have distinctive properties, but *Dasien* is a particular and unique way of existence. It is an individual that manifests in a range of possible ways. "I define the individual I become by projecting myself into those possibilities which I choose, or which I allow to be chosen for me"[31]. *Dasien* is the 'I', the 'individual' in whose power it is to decide his fate in the world and who owes himself this duty. Should he neglect this duty and allow his life to be determined for him either by other people or social convention, he leads an inauthentic life. As Heidegger puts it:

> We understand ourselves daily, as we can formulate it terminologically, *not authentically* in the strict sense, not constantly in terms of the ownmost and most extreme possibilities of our own existence, but *inauthentically*, our selves indeed, but as we are *not our own*, rather as we have lost ourselves in the everydayness of existing among things and people. "Not authentically" means: not as we *can* at bottom be our own to ourselves. Being lost, however, has no negative, derogatory significance, but means something positive, something belonging to *Dasein* itself.[32]

Authenticity, therefore, in its formal sense refers to that authentic mode of existence, in which *Dasein* stands in a directly first-person relation to itself, in contrast to the second- and third person relations in which it stands to others, and which it can adopt with respect to itself, at least up to a point.[33] Thus when individuals face the world with the knowledge of their mortality engendered by the indefinite future time that is limited by death, they are said to live authentic lives. This is because they lead lives that are in keeping with their ontological nature, genuinely self-determining and self-revising.[34]

Heidegger's conception of authentic existence as individualistic is in keeping with Western thought that elevates the individual above humanity and above his community. This idea is replete in Western ontology and everywhere including in Christianity, where salvation is treated as an individual thing, and also, in liberal democracy, where political authority is vested on the individual with rights. Transplanted to Africa, liberal democracy, which harps on the individualistic basis of political authority and rights, has been a failure. This is because, in African thought, the community is most important, not the individual.

Political deliberations are consensual. Everyone has something to say and everyone's opinion matters. No one is left disgruntled. Even after such deliberations, a stance is taken which may rival other opinions expressed during the discussions; such a position is taken by all. This is what K. A. Busia portrays in the following terms:

> 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 counselors was to reach unanimity, and they talked until this was achieved.[35]

Thus we see the heavy dependence on dialogue and consultation[36] as indices in African democratic process. And these seek to eschew all symptoms of individualism and sectarianism by enthroning not the principle of majoritarian rule but that of consensus and unanimity. Edward Wamala, citing an example from the Buganda people of Africa, makes further argument concerning the centrality of consensus principle as well as the primacy of the community in African democratic order. As he puts it:

> But seeking consensus in traditional Ganda society seems to have been more than simply a political expedient to avoid legitimation crises; it seems to have been at the heart of social and political organization and the ethos of the people of Buganda. The dedication to consensus seems to have been rooted in the firm epistemological belief that knowledge is ultimately dialogical or social, and in the ethical belief in the collective responsibility of all for the welfare of the community.[37]

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Ajume Wingo[38] in his "Fellowship Associations as a Foundation for Liberal Democracy in Africa" talks of African traditional democracy as resting on fellowship association. Also George Carew[39] in his "Economic Globalism, Deliberative Democracy, and the State in Africa" describes African traditional democracy as a deliberative system. These two variously corroborate the position of Edward Wamala as captured above, that in African traditional political order, the people as a community is primary. In this connection Joe Teffo advocates for what he calls "domesticated democracy" for post-colonial Africa patterned after Africa's traditional democratic system. Such a system he describes as follows:

> Third, and most importantly, consensus-seeking is the hallmark of traditional political decision-making in many African communities. Any system that gives such priority to consensus is quite clearly democratic in a far deeper sense than any system in which decision-making proceeds on the principle that the majority carries the day. …The system…might be called a communocracy, insofar as it is a type of governance based on general community involvement and participation. Communocracy, then, might be said to be a form of democracy characteristic of many traditional African societies. One might mention in this connection the Zulu of South Africa, the Bugandans of Uganda, and the Akans of Ghana.[40]

From the above, our contention is that the individualistic orientation of liberal democracy transplanted to Africa is unfit for the African socio-political and cultural terrain. J. N. Agbo further stressed[41] that the reason for the obvious failure of liberal democratic experiments in Africa should not be sought in politics, economy or democratic institutions. For him, it is to be located within the domain of ontology. Because if democracy would succeed in Africa, our contention is that it is not the liberal variant that would. This is because liberalism arose from a particular conceptual scheme, and the wholesale attempt to export its political version (democracy) to Africa has met with failures because of the very entities that make up the liberal ontology - individuals.

The native African terrain we have amply shown to be communal rather than individualistic. The orientation of Western ontology, especially the one championed by Martin Heidegger where "to be" means to be self-determinate and self-revising, is abominable in Africa. "To be", in African ontology means to be in mutual complementation or mutual integration. These two theories are interpreted in Igbo as *Ibuanyidanda*[42] and *Njikoka*[43] respectively and have been shown to be equivalent by Jonathan Chimakonam[44]. The primacy of community in African ontology is also supported by Panteleon Iroegbu's *Uwa Ontology*[45], which theorizes that to be is essentially to be in *Uwa,* a sort of community, thus belongingness features prominently in his theory.

Iroegbu further explains that the primacy of the community in Igbo-African ontology does not annihilate the place of the individual but only states that the community necessitates the individual and not the other way round as in Western ontology. This is the source of liberal democracy's failure in Africa, which orchestrates conflicts through the elevation of ontology of individualism. The natural place of the community in African traditional polity may have inspired John Mbiti to declare that in Africa, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am".[46] This thesis therefore rejects individualistic ontology as a veritable basis for a functional democracy in Africa.

Conclusion

The fusion of the individual-oriented capitalism and democracy transported to Africa through the motor of globalization has created strange economic and political systems inimical to the post-colonial Africa. The African society is now being run by a few individuals who exploit and lord it over the rest in both economic and political terms. Ever since the Second World War, modern societies have tilted toward capitalist and social systems. These are two economic systems that also, inexorably, determine different political options. While capitalism determines capitalist democracy or what has come to be known as liberal democracy, socialism determines socialist or the so-called people's democracy. Presently, capitalism is in a dominant position with socialism barely struggling to catch up, and the capitalist bloc are fighting with everything at their disposal, which includes money, propaganda, falsehood, intellect and guns, in order to rake away the last crater of socialism[47]. Analysts have argued that the beginning of this deplorable and steep fall for socialism is not unconnected with the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of Soviet Union in 1989[48]. Capitalism has since been on a constant journey of survival through some socialist evolutions; unfortunately, the ideals of democracy itself could no longer be improved upon[49].

If democracy is truly a government founded on the principles of liberty and equality[50], which makes it seemingly more prosperous than its alternatives[51], and capitalism is the economic demonstration of these principles, why are there so many injustices in capitalist democracies? Of course, promoters of democracy as the only viable political option would argue that the defect was not due to democracy itself but to the human agent. Francis Fukuyama argues famously that:

> That is, while earlier forms of government were characterized by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse, liberal democracy was arguably free from such fundamental internal contradictions. This was not to say that today's stable democracies, like the United States, France, or Switzerland, were not without injustice or serious social problems. But these problems were ones of incomplete implementation of the twin principles of liberty and equality on which modern democracy is founded, rather than of flaws in the principles themselves.[52]

In Africa, neither capitalism nor democracy has fared any better. Capitalism promotes principles such as class segregation and individualism, which rival the pervading socio-economic and political order in Africa. As Chinwe Nwoye notes, the order in Igboland, for example, "…encourages equality, communalism and egalitarianism at all levels".[53] These are not coveted principles in capitalism – a dog-eat-dog kind of practice. Democratic practice on the other hand buoyed by its principle of majority rule is susceptible to abuse and corruption. In Africa, the Aristocratic class has seized this loophole to lord it over the masses such that Aristocracies and even semi-dictatorships like those in Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, Malawi under Rupia Banda, Uganda under Yuweri Museveni, etc., now masquerade as democracies. What is needed after all is occasional sprinkling of election where voting process is manipulated to award majority figure to the in-sitting dictator and his cabals.

In the traditional Africa where consensus principle rather than the majoritarian principle characterized democratic practices, it is hard to see how such Aristocrats and Dictators and the corruption that enabled them to emerge would thrive. The practice of liberal democracy in Africa has left the masses disgruntled. Basic meanings to certain terms have been altered. The concept of "majority", for example, is now understood to mean the ethnic group with numeric advantage or simply the ethnic group in power. The concept of "the people" is now interpreted in two ways at least. In practice it means the ruling cabals, and in theory where class segregation is implied, it means the down trodden, the poor masses and the ruled. So, the masses are now referred to as the people in quite a different sense from those in the ruling class.

The weaknesses of liberal democracy in Africa has led to the so-called democracies evolving into autocracies where the concept of "the people" now means, according to Eskor Toyo, those that are ruled by the autocrats. Where it evolves to plutocracy, "the people" means the poor majority. In a capitalist society "the people" means everyone except the capitalists and their collaborators on top.[54] He goes on to observe that the concept of "the people" with two different senses emerges and makes sense only in a class divided society. Capitalist democracies as are now practiced in Africa have, to say the least, divided up the African societies into rich and poor, exploiter and exploited, privileged and underprivileged, powerful and powerless, and ruler and ruled with different and often opposed interests.[55] Perhaps the most troubling effect of liberal democracy in Africa is that every section of the society has some serious worries. The aristocrats, plutocrats, dictators and the autocrats are threatened by the number of poor masses. The groups feel threatened by one another. The minority ethnic groups are afraid of the majority ethnic groups. The individual is abused by the state, and the state is suspicious of the individual. Mahmood Mamdani[56] recaps this when he observes that the majority (in terms of number or power) is afraid of justice while the minority (in terms of number or power) is afraid of democracy in Africa.

This is because, whereas a just society with functional institutions would bring down the power and autocracy of the majority with which they lord over the rest, capitalist democracy in its evolutions in Africa promotes and enhances injustice, marginalization and class segregation. This is in contradistinction with the structure of democracy in traditional Africa with its dependence on consultation, deliberation, consensus and or unanimity.

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