

The Place of Indigenous Methods of Governance in Post-colonial Africa

Introduction

In this article, I seek to foster the quest for indigenous social, political and economic solutions to African social and political thinking. I argue that such solutions in the form of democracy and governance approaches that are germane to the African existential reality are more acceptable than alien forms of democracy and governance. I also seek to propose some indigenous models of democracy and governance for post-colonial Africa that are capable of accommodating and promoting intra-Africa and global conversations in these areas. If African indigenous models of democracy and governance are properly understood and implemented, they could help solving current social, political and economic problems facing the post-independent African state. These indigenous models of democracy and governance focus, and put strong emphasis on African values, traditions, insights and belief-systems that have often been neglected, suppressed and excluded, all of which can help foster Africa's development and democratic culture.

A Justification for Indigenous Models of Governance

The quest for indigenous methods of governance is based primarily

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on the supposition that knowledge in Africa ought not to be taken as a menu prepared from the outside and served in Africa. Generally, non-indigenous and non-African models of democracy and governance, such as liberal democracy, have often been taken as the measure for good governance and political accountability in Africa. Yet, western liberal democracy has actually exposed the inherently traditional African communitarian democracies to various liberalist philosophies that are alien to African traditions of governance.

Colonialism has had an impact on the suppression of African traditional models of democracy and governance. After the Berlin conference in 1884-5, colonial white settler governments invaded Africa and imposed their alien culture and systems of democracy and governance there. Because of this sad reality, Africa has neglected its own models of governance and democracy based on non-party consensual democracy and communitarian social arrangement, and in turn, the continent has

adopted non-indigenous models.

Even now, there is a general misconception that traditional pre-colonial African societies were not democratic because of the exposure to Western style democracy and governance that continues to characterise post-colonial Africa.

On the contrary, we ought to consider the social, political, economic, scientific and architectural work and developments at Mapungubwe in the Limpopo province of South Africa. In addition, the Great Zimbabwe empire in Masvingo province of Zimbabwe and the educational legacies of ancient Egyptian civilisation and Timbuktu in Mali are all testimony to the traditional models of democracy and governance through non-party and communitarian social and political arrangements. In view of these developments, one begins to wonder if African indigenous wisdom could be ignored in the quest for non-African models of western democracy and *good*² governance.

Also, the discourse of African models of democracy and governance have often been predicated mainly by the debate between Eurocentric and Afro-centric thinking on the contribution that social and political African epistemology and wisdom could make towards human civilisation.

This kind of skepticism with reference to African indigenous models of democracy and governance is only a political narrative that is perpetrated in Africa in order to justify the post-colonial African state under Western liberal democracy and governance. Consequently, indigenous models of democracy and governance in Africa fall victim to the *ego cogito* view that is characteristic of Western Eurocentric thinking and its attitude towards African wisdom. This kind of attitude has often led to the *universalist fallacy* and approach to knowledge in general and social and political thinking at large. This is the fallacy that Western 'civilization' and approaches are the only gateways to knowledge and reality.

African Indigenous Models of Democracy and Governance in Perspective

African indigenous models of democracy and governance ought to be understood as the kind of social and political systems that must be identified within certain social, cultural, traditional and political contexts. Such indigenous models of democracy and governance ought to be mainly based on the need to map out human social, political and economic salvation in light of methods and solutions that originate from and are relevant to the African existential context. As philosopher Dismas Alois Masolo stated, "there appears to be little disagreement that there is knowledge that is indigenous to Africa – that is, knowledge that is unique, traditional, or local, knowledge that exists within and develops around the specific conditions of the experiences of African peoples" (Masolo 2010:51-2). Similarly, social and political knowledge in Africa

must also be understood within an African context and not necessarily rely on non-African models that originate from and are relevant to the Western world.

The quest for African indigenous models of democracy and governance should *not* be understood as an appeal to anachronism. Rather, the appeal to the indigenous models of democracy should be understood as being based on the use of knowledge that speaks to African challenges and concerns. Frances Owusu-Ansah and Gubela Mji argue, "knowledge or science, and its methods of investigation, cannot be divorced from a people's history, cultural context and worldview" (Owusu-Ansah and Mji 2013: 01). Similarly, methods of democracy, good governance and conflict resolution that are alien to Africa cannot meaningfully speak to the African context. This is why African indigenous methods of governance become relevant post-colonial African condition.

The quest for African indigenous models of democracy and governance is an Afrocentric project that seeks to revise African social and political value systems. In Western liberal democracy, the aspect of multi-party liberal democracy has, and continues to perpetrate political intolerance among political leaders and individuals belonging to different political parties and ideologies in Africa. Such political intolerance has often been characterised by smear campaigns and even violent political clashes between politicians and individuals belonging to different political party formations, and in some instances military overthrows of sitting governments in post-colonial Africa (see Mazrui 2016).

Such social and political problems, I argue, could be confronted through

the need to revisit the African traditional political heritage in the form of African communitarian, non-party and consensual democracy. Some of the defining features of traditional models of democracy and governance are the emphasis on *rule of the community, by the community and for the community* as opposed to the Western-Lincolnian and liberalist view of democracy as rule of the people, by the people, and for the people. In the former understanding of democracy, there is a strong emphasis on the community which becomes the guarantor of various liberties of human persons. In the latter view, emphasis has, and continues to be on safeguarding individual human liberties, yet the emphasis is on the people. Also, traditional African models of democracy, through communal consensus, guarantees the participation of individuals in decision-making through various communal structures aimed at soliciting communitarian decisions, compromise and consensus on fundamental issues affecting the community.

Conclusion

If post-colonial Africa is to realise the dream of African renaissance as espoused by South African Statesman and former president (1999-2008), Thabo Mbeki, it should take the opportunity to revive and revitalise indigenous social and political value-systems that are found in African indigenous political thinking. Although it is clear that most of the African traditional frameworks that provided the basis for traditional systems of governance no longer exist today, it is not too late to reconsider indigenous models of democracy like those found in pre-colonial African traditional political heritage without neces-



sarily being anachronistic. Unless the post-colonial African state reverts to its indigenous traditional systems of governance, it will continue to experience the kind of problems that have characterised it in the period after the attainment of political independence. Some of these problems include, but are not limited to poverty, corruption, bad governance, dictatorships, election competition, multi-partyism and majoritarianism, disputed elections, vote-rigging, military governments, anarchy, wars, genocide and *coup d'états*. Although there may be some imperfections, the appeal to traditional systems of governance could be the starting point on which post-colonial Afri-

ca's quest for non-Western systems of governance could be built.

Notes

1. Munamato Chemhuru teaches Philosophy at Great Zimbabwe University. This paper was written during the time he was on sabbatical, pursuing a post-doctoral research fellowship with the University of Johannesburg's Department of Philosophy.
2. I have deliberately italicised this word in order to emphasise the irony with which I wish it to convey.

References

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