Remembering Democracy: A Reflection on an African Tradition

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Abstract

In this paper, I look at traditional African socio-political system in contrast with the colonial legacy of democracy as a system of governance and prescribe conceptual decolonization as a response to many of the varied challenges of politics in Africa today. I reference authorities in traditional African thought to echo the need for a *critical* return to the past. The view I defend here is that a critical return to the principles of humanism, communa*lity* and consensus *pursuit*, evolved in the traditional African setting by the African herself, would make the practice of democracy better in contemporary Africa given its multi*nation*al character and history of prolonged colonial impact. Adopting both a descriptive and normative approach and the tool of conceptual analysis leading to conceptual innovation, I present a philosophical yet accessible case for reconceptualizing Africa, its peoples, its identities and more emphatically, its politics to give meaning to democracy as 'the-people-centred' rule.

Keywords: democracy, consensus, communality, African, colonial, conceptual decolonization, self-rule, tradition, post-colonial, critical *sankɔfaism*.

Introduction

This paper adopts both a descriptive and normative approach with the aim to first, uncover valuable aspects of traditional African politics which have been jettisoned in contemporary times; second, to discuss the extent to which such worthwhile elements may need to be refined and incorporated into contemporary socio-cultural and political democratic practice. Thus, I argue for a more effective practice of democracy as grounded on a more accurate understanding of democracy as self-rule.

Section one explores traditional Africa's democracies to reveal its humanist, commu*nal* and consensual foundations which this paper argues have been altered chiefly by imperialist impositions. I urge that the depth of this disruption undermines the benefit of evaluating democracies in Africa from an actual *self-evolved* context over a relatively less-interrupted time.

Section two discusses the effects of the colonial legacy to make a case for conceptual decolonization (Wiredu and Oladipo 1995). I argue that the ruinous effects of the long history of colonialism then, and in a lingering revised form now as 'neo-colonialism' and 'colonial mentality', are *still* more pervasive in post-colonial African politics and national life than admitted.

Section three makes a case for a critical return (Gyekye 1997: 241). Unlike the defenders of a wholesale return for everything in the indigenous cultural past of Africa, I maintain, like Gyekye, that the worth of specific cultural products, past or present, indigenous or foreign ought to be tested on normatively independent grounds to determine their value in the life of today. I contend that Africa's self-evolved humanistic, communal, and consensual culture must be given prominence in the politics of Africa today.

Democracy in traditional Africa: Communal, Consensual and Humanistic[23]

Democracy, as a concept and a political practice, has been an aspect of the political and socio-cultural experiences of African traditional societies well before the disruptive colonial invasion and consequent partitioning of Africa. This claim, attested to by both foreign and local scholars writing about Africa, is justifiable if by democracy one refers to self-rule: a government that evolves and is sustained by its *people*, or through their named representatives who wield this political power. The claim cannot be contested if by democracy one refers to the politics receptive to *the peoples'* conception of free expression fostered by *the peoples'* conception of equality of all persons which is itself underlined by *their* understanding of the dignity of the human person. And, if these are given expression in the enduring dependence on dialogue, deliberation and the constant search for consensus, with an accompanying openness to the values of tolerance, cooperation and compromise *and* a fixation on attaining inclusiveness; and, the supremacy, and due process, of *the people's* law regardless of political, economic or religious status (Rattray 1929: 406–7).

Not only have there been such significant elements and institutions of democratic governance in the traditional African setting, but more importantly African traditional democracy is mainly undergirded by the communal, consensual and humanistic ethic (Nyerere 1974: 11). We see the same ethic in the Bantu understanding of the person who cannot be conceived of as an individual (See Myles 2018); as a force that exists by itself and apart from its relationships with other living beings around it (Tempels 1959: 103). The African humanistic ethic therefore seeks to identify the conditions for the development of the person as a whole *and* of all people as a society for the underlying reason that one's being human is inextricably linked to the humanness of others who stand in some form of relation to her. The expressions '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' which seeks to define personhood through relationships with others and the Chewa saying '*kalikokha nikanyama; tuli tuwili nituwanthu*' which translates as 'what is

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[23] I do not suggest an impeccable system of politics in pre-colonial traditional Africa. I only illuminate some significant elements of genuine democratic politics that should be appropriated in contemporary politics. The discussions chiefly focus on the Akan system of Ghana and extrapolate to the African context which, mostly do not differ in significant respects.

one is brute animal, whatever or whoever has a neighbor is a human being' (Menkiti 2004: 324–31) are captured in Mbiti's famous summation of the African conception of the person: 'I am because we are and since we are therefore I am' (1970: 141).

To emphasize the humanist ethic of traditional African thought, Gyekye explains the Akan proverb, 'it is the human being that counts; I call upon gold, it answers not; I call upon cloth, it answers not; it is the human being that counts' in the following manner: that gold and riches may be valuable and may therefore drive many to morally unacceptable extents, but for the Akan, and many African nations as a matter of fact, what ought to be given uttermost moral consideration is the worth of human beingness for its own sake (1997: 259). The same ethic is expressed in Kaunda's assertion cited by Gyekye, 'To a certain extent, we in Africa have always had a gift for enjoying Man for himself. It is the heart of our traditional culture'. Such enjoyment of 'Man for himself', for Gyekye, only means demonstrating compassion, generosity and hospitality towards a person just because he is human; being open to the interests and welfare of others and feeling a moral duty to offer help where it is needed only by virtue of our common humanness (Kaunda 1996: 32). Against the background of such a conception of African humanistic ethic, then, one could extract positive elements that would make valuable contribution to democracy in post-colonial African politics. In what follows, I discuss some salient features of traditional African democratic politics in some detail.

The basic idea of democracy in traditional Africa, namely, 'the rule of the people' is attested to by scholars like Dugald Campbell, a Briton who lived in central Africa and Zambia for close to three decades around late nineteenth century. The following observation he makes should speak for itself:

> *All government is by the will of the people, whether it be the choice and coronation of a king; the selection of a man to fill a new chieftainship; the framing, proclamation, and promulgation of a new law; the removal of the village from one site to another; the declaration of war or the acceptance of terms of peace: everything must be put to the poll and come out stamped with the imprimatur of the people's will (Campbell 1922: 42).*

Eminent British anthropologists also note on African stateship that, 'The structure of an African state implies that kings and chiefs rule by consent. A ruler's subjects … make him discharge these duties' (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940: 12). Speaking about the people of Central Africa, the French scholar Adolphe Cureau states: 'over the free citizens, the Chief's authority is valid only insofar as it is the mouthpiece of the majority interest, lacking which character it falls to the ground' (1915: 279). These scholarly observations should establish the centrality of the will of *the people* in the institution of political authority *and* the day to day administering of political power whether the government is a centralized type or not (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940: 5).

The authority of the chief or king was derived from the people even if in most cases the right to rule was hereditary. For, in most of the states, royalty was recognized and accepted by the people themselves based on what they considered to be their history and custom. The people may not have been *directly* involved in the election of the most acceptable candidate from the royal lineage because that was the sole prerogative of the kingmakers, who were themselves

chosen in accordance with the customs and traditions of *the people* anyway, but it was required that the choice proposed by the kingmakers was suitable enough to be endorsed by the generality of *the people* or else the proposed chief could be rejected by *the people* and replaced with their preferred choice. Thus, the people's *self*-rule, central to democracy anywhere, could not be said to have been undermined.[24]

Therefore, traditional African political thought disapproves of the act of imposing a king on the nationals. The kingmakers, in consultation with the people, further have the constitutional mandate of an oversight responsibility over the king and his conduct privately and publicly. The Asante king of Ghana, for instance appeared absolute, yet he was required to seek the consent of chiefs in the Asante confederation to embark on group action; the Zulu king was not allowed to make important national decisions without the *ibandla*, the highest council of state; the Swazi king, *ngwenyama,* chosen by the *ndovukazi* (queen mother) was checked by the *liqoqo* (inner council) and the *libandla* (general council) (Olivier, 1969). The king only represents the people's unity and could therefore be removed if he failed in his duties based on already held and clearly communicated grounds of removal (Abraham 1962: 77). The Asante, for instance, de-stooled three kings for, among other reasons, extravagance and excessively taxing the people (Owusu-Ansah & McFarland 1995: 121).

For the Akan, according to Abraham (1962), the political aspects of a king's rule is to be the symbol of the unity of his kingdom and attend to ceremonial functions. That did not include dictating to the ruling council by virtue of his divine positioning. Contrary to what appears to be the case, the personal word of the chief is never the law, but his official word which represents the consensus of his council, is the law (Wiredu 1995). Thus, any announcement made by the linguist and chief's spokesperson in Akan tradition is preceded by the statement, 'Thus says the chief *and* his council…' (Gyekye 1997: 123) which supports the Akan saying that 'there are no bad kings, only bad councilors' (Wiredu 1996: 185–6).

The unique agency and dignity of every human person is given expression in the representation given to all members in decision-making from the very basic political unit called *abusua* (family/clan) to the governing body – the council – through the culture of consensual decision-making. Wiredu avers that the advantage of such a consensual approach to governance over majoritarian democracies is that it does not only guarantee a *formal* representation of chosen representatives in council but it also ensures the *substantive* representation of the people's will in the decision-making process (Wiredu 1997: 303–12). That approach thus engenders cooperation and good-will from all participants whereas today's liberal majoritarianism only seeks to consolidate the power of the majority and therefore has a tendency of generating antagonism and disaffection. The tradition of pursuing consensus would then ensure respect for 'the right of any well-defined unit of political organization to selfgovernment, the right of all to have a say … and to participate in the shaping of governmental policies, the right of all to freedom of thought and expression…' (Wiredu 1996: 169).

For certain pertinent issues, members of the community may be assembled at the community square or the forecourt of the chief's palace for *dwabɔ* – a market place of competing ideas –

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[24] See a refutation of Simiyu's denial of democracy to traditional African political systems based on claims of hierarchical, nonegalitarian, gerontocratic and sexist features of the African sociopolitical structure (Gyekye 1997: 118–20).

to openly discuss the issue(s) and allow for as many perspectives as possible. The term *Adwabɔ* as the very expression for a market and a meeting-place in council is, in the words of Rattray, an 'extraordinarily significant fact' (1929: 407). Here, 'anyone, even the most ordinary youth, will offer his opinion or make a suggestion with an equal chance of its being favorably entertained as if it proceeded from the most experienced sage' (Cruickshank 1854: 251).

Busia (1967: 28) maintains that arguments are made, criticized, revised, jettisoned and finally agreed on mostly in the spirit of cooperation, tolerance, compromise and fellow-feeling more easily offered by the sense of communality and common interest which are stronger at this level because of the stronger sense of shared values and goals which derives from the strong belief, real or fictive, that all members in the decision-making process are knit together and affected by common ties of kinship. Against the background of the ethos of humanism, it is further easier for one to seek the interests of the other(s) whose wellbeing is believed to be tied to one's.

Admittedly, at no time has any society been a realm of constant unbroken harmony. Africa could not be an exception. Conflicts within, between and among the several nation-communities, ethnic-groups and lineages would therefore not have been infrequent in pre-colonial traditional Africa. But Wiredu's view is that the culture of consensus *pursuit*, both in principle and in practice, aided the discharge of joint actions which would not have been necessarily based on agreed notions (Wiredu 1995: 53–64). Kaunda maintains: 'In our original societies we operated by consensus. An issue was talked out in solemn conclave until such time as agreement could be achieved'. Nyerere adds, 'in African society the traditional method of conducting affairs is by free discussion', and quotes Guy Clutton-Brock, 'The elders sit under the big trees, and talk until they agree' (Mutiso and Rohio 1975: 476, 478). Sithole (1959: 86) also observes 'the African people are democratic… council allows the free expression of all shades of opinions. Any man has full right to express his mind on public questions …'.

As such, even in the face of mortal conflicts which would be rampant in a multi-*nation*al context like Africa, the principle of consensus serves as a better mediation tool for the settlement of disputes and the attainment of reconciliation. Like Wiredu, I contend that the structural divisions of traditional Africa's socio-cultural and political systems would have been more effectively tempered by its communal and consensual ethical outlook than the imposed Western model. Not only is there no act of formal voting in the traditional setting, there also is no 'winner' (and therefore no 'loser'). By implication every 'party' is a governing power and the underlying principle of governance is the quest to reconcile varied and competing social interests, not the rule of the majority party. This way, the system is a non-partisan one (Wiredu 1997: 303–12). Such a system is better able to evade the evident problems of both the one-party dictatorship system and the multi-party, winner-takes-all, adversarial politics inherited from or imposed by the colonialist which, 'has produced superficial forms of political/electoral choice-making by subjects that deepen pre-existing ethnic and primordial cleavages' (Ani 2013: 207).

Eze, however, is skeptical about Wiredu's consensus politics as a 'democratic' solution to dealing with the problems of Africa's politics since to him the principle is likely to be used undemocratically by central authorities under the label of a purported converging will of the

people. Arguing that 'the interests of some members or a member of a society may be to dominate the rest, for the sheer morbid enjoyment of power' (Eze 1997: 313–23), Eze questions the supposition that interests are the same for all members of society and challenges the truth of the claim that 'human beings have the [rational] ability eventually to cut through their differences to the rock bottom of identity of interests' (Wiredu 1995: 57). Ani (2014) also cautions against the use of the procedural instrument of unanimous action without unanimity on what *ought* to be done. Ani urges that not all group decisions are value-neutral, as Wiredu opines, and therefore entertaining differences in values would be a better option than sweeping them under the carpet in the name of pursuing consensus. But he nonetheless agrees that there must be some common interest underlying such confrontation of values anyway and that Wiredu's call for consensual democracy should be seen as equally driven by the concern for justification which arises from deliberation (Ani 2013: 211).

In objection however, Matolino (2009) maintains that consensual democracy may have more appeal than Eze is prepared to concede. He argues in agreement with Wiredu that the essential source of legitimization of political authority need not be divine or ancestral as insisted by Eze in his analysis of Wiredu's presentation of the origins of Ashanti political authority which for Eze is not workable in Africa's largely 'secular' and 'religiously pluralistic' states today. Matolino contends that the king's ceremonial function of leading religious celebrations, receiving guest chiefs or leading clan ceremonies may be ancestral or sacred but that cannot constitute the *essential* in legitimizing the chief's functional authority. Rather, he argues, that the substantive and real power of a chief lies in his ability to logically persuade, adjudicate over competing arguments in search of a position agree*able* to all parties, and articulate positions adopted by the competing parties. These qualities in a person, for Matolino, are what legitimizes the authority and substantive function of a chief, not a recourse to religious or other beliefs.

On the claim that consensus is attainable because all members' interests are identical at the 'rock bottom' although not realized by them because of misperception, Matolino agrees with Eze that Wiredu is mistaken. However, he maintains that consensus is possible even if it is admitted that interests are not necessarily identical for all, as some may seek to dominate others (Eze 1997: 318). He insists that consensus, as advocated by Wiredu, is possible and attainable if it is centered on dialogue which only aims at uncovering and understanding the various underlying interests of the debating parties and seeks to bridge them by finding a 'negotiated tolerable co-existence' but not to deny the existence of such difference in interests. The consensual approach, for Matolino, should therefore lead members to the realization that for one to be successful in one's pursuits, one would have to give due regard to the interests of others.

Matolino further proposes two institutional requirements: free expression of the will of participants and good faith that, as he sees it, would strengthen the process of dialogue integral to the consensus method to ensure that the system remains a democracy. This way, consensus does not merely search for, or perhaps impose, an underlying 'rock bottom identity of interests' as presumed by Wiredu but rather is a system that addresses the inevitable myriad of differences in human socio-political interests rightly pointed out by Eze. Further, Matolino

believes that the advantage of consensual democracy over other political systems is that it asks the crucial action question of the best way to proceed when faced with competing desires and differences, and answers thus, 'We shall sit and dialogue until we reach a consensus on the best conceivable way to proceed' (Matolino 2009: 42). The aim then is not to deny competition but to engage dialogue to reach an agree*able* position for *all* participants, unlike the majoritarianism that underlies today's multi-partism. Going by consensual democracy, the people's wishes and expectations would be given actual meaning, and that evokes in the nationals a sense of personal commitment to the fortunes of the nation-community. It also gives the impetus for full involvement and makes for the much-cherished all-inclusiveness and real active participation in community and governance affairs which democracy today everywhere undeniably yearns for. These features, in turn, deepen the values of cohesion, fellow-feeling and solidarity necessary for tolerance, cooperation, compromise and the pursuit of the common good.

But if the foregoing account is largely representative of traditional African society and its politics, then the gloomy picture of many contemporary post-colonial African democracies would, as I see it, lie largely, even if not solely, in the ever-trailing legacy of colonialism. Thus, the proposal is to work urgently towards conceptual decolonization of Africa, its peoples and its democracy.

The Urgent Need for re-conceptualizing post-colonial African democracies

This section advocates for conceptual decolonization of contemporary African democracy as one of the prime, if not the prime, remedies to the rooted mutilations of Africa's contemporary national life and democratic governance. This concern being re-echoed here must be taken seriously if democracy is to thrive at all in multi-national African states today.

By conceptual decolonization of African politics, I refer to two things. First, I mean a commitment to halting and reversing, through a critical conceptual *self*-awareness, the unexamined wholesale adoption and absorption of conceptual frameworks embedded in foreign political categories and traditions superimposed unto contemporary African political thought and practice through colonialism in its various forms (Wiredu & Oladipo 1995). Second, I refer to an unfailing commitment to 'critical *sankɔfaism*': exploiting as much as is judicious, the resources of Africa's *self-evolved* indigenous conceptual frameworks for contemporary national life and democratic practice. The greater urgency to be attached to this call should equal, and even exceed, the subtle and pervasive means employed in superimposing this legacy on the evolving African democracy then, and in a revised duplicitous form now.

To understand the context of the preceding remarks, it is pertinent that one comes to terms with the depth of the affliction imposed by the colonialist project on Africa, its peoples, and politics. For, if identity is 'a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental characteristics as a human being' which is 'partly shaped by recognition or its absence' and 'nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false,

distorted, and reduced mode of being' (Taylor 1994: 25), then the colonial legacy is a disordered confusion of the self-understanding of the African – a conceptual identity crisis stemming from what has been called 'colonial mentality' (Gyekye 1997: 27), *and* a translation of this crisis unto already unstable and flickering imposed political institutions and structures. Thus, the impairment from colonialism is twofold: to the individual self-identities of the African peoples as well as to the collective self-understandings of their socio-political systems and the African must feel obligated 'to purge [herself] of this imposed and destructive identity' (Taylor 1994: 25) as a matter of dignity.

Not only was the inherited colonialist 'democracy' full of anti-democratic syndromes because it had not yet been fully weaned of its traits of feudalism and its monarchical and aristocratic posture, but its foreign underlying tenets have also invaded an otherwise largely communal culture nurtured in the spirit of cooperation and accommodation and in the belief in an impartial regard for the interests of others including even the physical environment (Abudu 2012: 1046). Its virus of moneycracy and the attendant over-reliance on foreign donors to finance most elections and the financial demands of sustained civic education and coordination of the centralized arms of government have implications that need not be mentioned. Participants of this transmitted 'democracy' are left as perpetual mutual adversaries seeking constantly to outwit and prey on each other (Ibid) 'even if it means killing perceived and real opponents' (Mapuva 2013: 89), to ensure that they secure numerical majority just to propagate party business (Molomo 2004). Young (1998: 114–5) suggests that this phenomenon is one negative aspect of the colonial state bequest to independent Africa. As such, debates and deliberations on public issues are unfortunately mostly focused on how incumbents can grip unto power indefinitely, or how the non-incumbent would attain power at all cost (Melber 2002: 18).

The result of such extreme competitive and inherently divisive characteristic of the superficial 'democracy' imposed is a survival of the fittest or winner-takes-all posture that makes politics tenaciously adversarial in ethnically heterogenous post-colonial Africa (Abudu 2012: 1049). If left on its own, the inevitable consequences would continue to be civil strife and military interventions as evidenced throughout Africa and recently in Mali and Guinea (Adekoya 2021).

I contend that the bleak image painted is chiefly because, these institutions did not evolve as part of the culture of the people themselves and are therefore tainted with the slave-master mentality that created them in the first place. Obviously, there must be good reason why no nation in Europe or America today would give up its *own evolved* version of 'democracy' for that of another. It is important to note that '…democracy is not a set of constitutional arrangements to be taken off the peg for immediate use…. The conditions under which parliamentary democracy evolved in the West were entirely different from those in Africa today' (Austin 1993: 204). Yet, an acquaintance with the general traditional African political setting, earlier referred to, would reveal values of free expression, rule by consent, government by popular will, constitutional limit on political authority, due process of the law and equality before the law as enshrined in the beliefs, precepts and customs of the African peoples themselves.

However, as false and unfounded as the misconceptions and assumptions about statehood in pre-colonial African politics are, they have, regrettably, served to negatively impact the general

African psyche to create a mindset, akin to that of the colonialist, that regards everything branded in non-African labels as superior, more valuable and preferable to a corresponding object with African origin. From values to cultural habits, institutions and structures, the conclusion is often drawn *prior to* critical examination or rational normative evaluation that, 'if it is from the West, then it is best'. The consequence of such spurious perception is a blind glorification of almost *everything* Western or European. That in turn fuels an indiscriminate absorption of Western cultural elements or products even if its functional application to the African context is wobbly. Bemoaning the unfortunate consequences of 'colonial mentality' Gyekye writes,

> *It seems that the most enduring effect of the colonial experience on the African people relates to their self-perceptions, to skewed perceptions of their own values– some of which [values] can, on normative grounds, be said to be appropriate for life in the modern world (1997: 27).*

As I see it, such thinking betrays an underlying difficulty of coming to terms with the bare fact that people everywhere, including Africa, are *capable* of nurturing their *own* borrowed, adapted, appropriated or self-evolved 'home grown' conceptual frameworks, systems and structures for socio-political organization situated within their own local circumstances or experiences. Therefore, the colonialist democracy and its statist systems, is as dispensable as any cultural product – native or exotic, past or present – which, by critical examination, proves less worthwhile in the contemporary life of a people anywhere. Neither should this claim be understood to mean that cultures are insulated from contact with other cultures and therefore, impervious to change resulting from appropriation. Such an intuition would contradict the historical fact of cultural exchanges and resultant hybridity of most human cultures.

Again, neither should this claim preclude the possibility of universal categories of democratic understanding to the extent that these universal meanings are borne out of critical and rational examination which can be reasonably assumed for all human cultures. The emphasis here is that granted that all rational deliberation assumes the *form* of an independent, or culture-neutral, grounds of thought, it does not take from a particularist understanding of the *content* of this thought for, *meaningful* and effective expression of the *form* would have to be in reference to particular contexts. The way to go then is this: 'we give due acknowledgement only to what is universally present–everyone has an identity–through recognizing what is peculiar to each. The universal demand powers an acknowledgment of specificity' (Taylor 1994: 39).

A call for a critical return

Even though the causes of Africa's current socio-economic and political predicament may be legion, one root cause of its current woes which this study stresses is the neglect, denigration or subversion of some important aspects of its traditional cultural values, systems and institutions in the life of today. Some have however denied the relevance of past traditions in the life of today. This section maintains that there is a fundamental failure in each extreme position since both do not acknowledge the basic truth that every human culture at any point

in time would always have both positive and negative elements which will continue to undergo change.

Therefore, neither a wholesale glorification nor a wholesale condemnation of Africa's, and any other region's for that matter, cultural past is defensible. The view defended here rather is that a value, practice or institution of a cultural past should be resuscitated and *adapted* by later generations only on rational and normative grounds to determine its usefulness to the present generation. And, for the politics of today's post-colonial Africa, the case I make here is that the positive atavistic values of humanism *and* consensual democracy built on a self-evolved *communal* framework, stressed by the seasoned African scholars discussed so far, ought to be revived in earnest, reworked and given a significant place.

Dzobo advocates for 'a necessary journey into the past of our indigenous culture, so that we can march into the future with confidence and with a sense of commitment to our cultural heritage' (1981: 32–5). Such advocacy for an unqualified return to Africa's cultural past obviously evokes opposing and disdainful sentiments in others who view a great part, if not the entire, indigenous cultural past as inadmissible in the life of today (Irele 1995: 281, 284; Hountondji 1983: 53). Yet, even the critic refers to a return to Africa's tradition of 'internal pluralism and to its essential openness' (Hountondji 1983: 166).

The point of critical importance then is that the past has some elegant aspects useful for the life of today while some others are not. One may cite the 'intensely and pervasively religious' cultural heritage and some aspects of the inheritance systems as non-beneficial and as such must remain buried in the past (Mbiti 1970: 1; Gyekye 1997: 253). But the worthwhile elements of humanism, communalism, *and* consensus method remain positive features of Africa's heritage which ought to be refined and adapted in the life of today mainly because of their normative weight and relevance to the circumstances of today's post-colonial Africa, its culture, and its politics.

A return to a humanistic ethic and a consensual democracy

One fundamental and pervasive concept notably visible in Africa's indigenous past which undoubtedly yearns for a restoration in the life of today to give deeper meaning to the African's socio-political life is its humanist value (Gyekye 1995: 143–6). Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, expresses this thought in the statement that the African leader's aim, 'is to reconsider African society in such a manner that the humanism of traditional African life reasserts itself in a modern technical community' (Nkrumah 2009: 77). For such thinking, the concern for the well-being of other humans, regardless of their antecedents, remains a cherished value for, 'it is the human being that counts…' (Gyekye 1997: 259). If the ethic that humans are 'wrapped up together in this bundle of life and therefore a bond already exists between myself and a stranger before we open our mouths to talk' (Kaunda 1966: 32) is revitalized in modern African politics, then Nyerere's presentation of traditional African society as 'an extension of the basic family' (1974: 12) where the community was taken care of by us and we also took care of the community would be the expected outcome. This ethic would not only deepen sensitivity to the needs of others and strengthen the relational ties all humans necessarily have with each other but would consequently lead to a reversal of the character of today's politicking where most people and societies continue to subvert or abandon the intrinsic

worth of humanity and pursue economic and technological wealth even at the expense of the health and continuous survival of other human beings like themselves.

A humanist ethical orientation, therefore, would spawn an almost seamless continuity of Africa's civil life with its political life. The same would undergird the search for cooperation and compromise and consequently a consensual approach to decision-making in politics. Such consensus *search* even where perspectives on an issue differ is what has been undermined in today's politics and needs to be revitalized. Organically evolved from the indigenous culture of the African peoples, whether of the statal or non-statal type, and therefore not alien to the *being* of most part of its populations, consensual politics would constitute a fundamental, most indispensable principle for harmonization. Against its typically *communal* background, Africa's humanist ethos would enjoin its peoples to think in terms of what *we* can gain from *me* in order that all can benefit and not what *I* can gain from *them*. It is such a sense of attachment to the collective whole, typical of ethnic groups, and a commitment to its welfare that needs to be engendered not demanded of citizens who are now more interested in what their rights, interests and specific benefits are than what their responsibility and obligations towards the whole is.

Returning for a consensual system adaptable to today's Africa would also reduce the many tensions of multiparty democracy and its ballot-box selection of political leaders. In effect, *the people's* involvement in affairs of the nation-state, which established a close relation between the government and the governed then would be restored to make members see their being as part of the whole. This way, the people's sense of ownership of governance which has been overturned by the colonialist state, its institutions and authorities since they are significantly detached from the cultural traditions and institutions of the people would be restored. Such a rule then would constitute self-rule understood as *our rule of my self*. Compromise, which is integral to the search for consensus in political decision-making would take center-stage again as the member would think more in terms of the collective self as 'us' and *our* welfare than the individual self as 'me' and *my* interest. Not only would a humanistic *and* consensual democracy be better able to curtail the situation with multi-party majoritarian 'democracies' where when a party wins and gets into power, other parties, their ideas and policies, by constitutional default agreement of sorts, also lose and get out of power or stay out of it but deliberate obstruction by opposition party to undermine government policy would also be minimized, if not expunged.

Thus, even if Ghana, and for that matter multi*national* Africa, cannot return *wholly* to the elements of its traditional cultural past because most of it hinged on a perception of communality derived from a sense of 'natural' kinship linkages which is not the case in present times, it is in the interest of contemporary African politics to recognize and make substantial room for such valuable traditional institutions and conceptions reworked in the context of the modern state system with relevant modifications where needed. That *sense* of natural-belonging, in the traditional setting, plays a significant role in nurturing a characteristic of human relation in which peoples' rights, obligations, reciprocity and security emanate from sympathy and solidarity towards other humans they consider to be members of their collective 'self'. Not only is such sense of security easily lost in Africa's relatively individualized urbanized cities today, with negative consequences for peoples' psyches and society's

collective welfare, but the communal sense of 'self' as also *necessarily* relational to others which evinced habits of sensitivity to the interests of others has been lost with it. Therefore, a conscious effort towards evolving a sense of nationhood; a genuine sense of belonging together, even if not natural, is what the tradition of humanism and consensual democracy, if revived, would bring to post-colonial African politics.

Conclusion

This article aimed at highlighting aspects of traditional African socio-political systems that are viable and ideal for governance in Africa today in contrast with the colonial legacy to make a case for conceptual decolonization as a fundamental response to many of the varied challenges of Africa's politics today, and to defend a *critical* return to Africa's cultural past or traditions. The defended view is that a *critical* return to the past would make the practice of democracy(self-rule) better in contemporary Africa and give meaning to 'the-people-centeredness' of democracy(self-rule). I conclude with a call for a more meaningful and effective practice of democracy as grounded in a reconceptualized Africa, its peoples, its identities, and more emphatically, its politics.

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