

The State, Nationhood, Ethno-politics and Democracy in Modern Africa: A Philosophical Reflection

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Abstract

Following Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between community and society which could be translated also into the distinction between nation and state, it would be difficult if not impossible for modern African countries to practise democracy as understood in Western countries. If at all there is democracy in Africa it must be peculiar and unique. This is predicated on the fact that most African nations consider the state as something "alien" and contrary to their societal values. The main thrust of this paper therefore, is to demonstrate that the modern African state is the product of colonization and imperialism with capitalism as one of its direct consequences. Nationhood, ethno-politics and tribalism are what actually characterize African public space. Consequently, it foreshadows the basic tenets of Western-like democracy which is the respect for the universal human right. Democracy as conceived by Western countries cannot thrive outside the ambit of the state and this is antithetical to Africa's societal values and politics.

Keywords: State, Nationhood, Ethno-politics, Democracy and Africa.

1. Introduction

It is interesting to note that despite the plethora of literature on the concept of democracy, most scholars are yet to agree on the actual delineation of its nature, meaning and even practice. It is also the case with the concepts of the State, Nation, Society and Community. Following the foregoing, we are nowadays left with a situation whereby each school of thought defines democracy, the State, the Nation, Society and Community according to what it wants to prove, defend or achieve. On this note, Western and African schools of thought are my main concerns in this paper.

For the Western School of thought for instance, genuine democracy is best practiced within the ambit of the state. In other words, democracy and the state go hand in hand. As for the African school of thought, the practice of democracy does not necessarily require the existence of a formal state. In their opinion, which the author of this paper consents to, modern African States are products of colonialization and imperialism with capitalism as one of its direct consequences. More so, traditional Africa was stateless yet democratic.

From the positions of the above schools of thought, the following questions appear unavoidable: What is the nature of the African State? Is there any difference between Western and African democracy? On what grounds should we justify the correlation between democracy and the State? Can stateless democracy be justified?

Reactions to the above questions will help the author address the complex relationship between the State, Nationhood and democracy in modern Africa. In the first instance, I will demonstrate how Ferdinand Tönnies' analysis of the distinction between community and society is very important and original for the modern understanding of democracy in Africa. In the second instance, I will attempt to demonstrate that the concept of the state as understood by modern political thinkers is alien to Africa or against African's societal values and politics. Indeed, in this section, I argue that, traditionally, nationhood, ethnicity and tribalism are what actually characterized African public space. More so, the modern African State is the product of colonization and imperialism with capitalism as one of its direct consequences. In the third and last instance, I argue that if we go by Tönnies' distinction between community and society, which could also be translated into the distinction between State and Nation, it would be difficult if not impossible for modern African countries to practise democracy as understood by the West. Nationhood, ethnicity and tribalism are antithetical to Western-like democracy and vice-versa.

2. On Community, Society, Nation and the State

As mentioned earlier, in this section, I attempt to demonstrate how Ferdinand Tönnies analysis of the distinction between community and society is very important and instructive when it comes to the modern understanding of democracy in Africa.

We are told that it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that Ferdinand Tönnies, a German sociologist, actually systematized with its attendant implications, the clear distinction between community and society (Pojman, 2002:xi). According to Tönnies, the difference between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) is obvious and implicative. Tönnies posits that *Gemeinschaft* refers to the natural, communal ties that urge people to commit themselves to a common cause or way of life. While *Gesellschaft* refers to those features of social organizations constituted by contract and formal rules. According to Tönnies, natural will constitutes the basis of the community while rational will forms that of the society. The community is an informal entity while the society is not. In the community, we talk of covenant rather than contract. Tönnies

alludes to the Old Testament where God Covenants with the people of Israel rather than contracts. In fact, we are told that the very word Testament means Covenant.

History tells us that there was a relationship of personal loyalty, obedience, and trust on the part of the people of Israel that Yahweh will honor by his guidance and protection. But when Israel became a formal State in I Samuel, choosing Saul as their king, the Prophet Samuel deplored the act as a betrayal of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel but permitted it as a concession to human weakness (Pojman, 2002:xii). We can see that while life in the community is characterized by virtue or vice, and loyalty, something informal and deeply rooted in human relationships even sacred to its members, as is a religious heritage or sacred myth, society rather superimposes laws, rights, and contractual obligations.

For the purpose of this work, Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (Community) and *Gesellschaft* (Society) could also be translated into the distinction between Nation and the State. According to Louis P. Pojman: "the State is an association that includes such formal ideas as a legislative body with an executive and judicial component"(xi). The State, he further contends, is the ultimate authority, a sovereign entity, having sole comprehensive authority over a geographical domain. A nation, on the other hand, is a group of people who are tied together through common sources of meaning and identity, through ethnic similarity, language, literature, history, myth, religion, and other cultural phenomena"(xi). Although the distinction between the State and nation is sometimes vague(xi) they remain nonetheless two different entities. Not only Pojman agrees with Tönnies' distinction between community and society he further draws the similarity between the State and society and the nation and community. In his own words: "the State, as a formal society, typically emerges from the nation or community when a formal structure of rules and a separation of powers are desired"(xii) The State as well as the society is impartial while the nation or community is not. According to Pojman: "spontaneous acts of beneficence, as well as a notion of reciprocity, characterized the morality of the community, but it lacks the impartiality and consistent application of behaviour" (xii). Rather, 'the state or society goes beyond such "natural morality" and formalizes rules of law, enforcing them impartially with sanctions".

Louis P. Pojman summarizes the distinction between the State and Nation as follows:(xii-xiii) When we refer to a state, we mean a large anonymous entity [the members need not know each other personally] that creates and enforces laws over a geographical area or over a group of people who, usually, reside in the geographical area. A nation, on the other hand, refers to the societal aspects, to the culture, and to the myths and history of the group. Pojman maintains that States, as artificial institutions, are invented whereas nations are neither created by our will nor chosen, but are natural, primitive givens, based on shared history, beliefs, love and loyalty, constituting a vital part of our self identity. Nations, as communities, grow like trees, whereas States, as associations, are constructed like buildings.

In the community or nation, particular loyalties are the dominant motif. We have a special obligation to specific people, to a common identifiable tradition; whereas the society takes on a more universal aspect, characterized by a constitution, laws, and set of requirements for membership. The society or the state constructs rational principles, which have a universal aspect, and so applies impartially without respect for class or status. The state is formal, abstract and legalistic. Whoever meets the abstract requirements is a citizen, a member of the society. Whoever breaches the law suffers the penalty. The nation, not the state provides our roots, our sense of belonging, our identity, our solidarity with others. So deep is this sense of communal covenant that many will risk their lives for the nation and even kill for it. A nation represents the communal, voluntary aspects of social life, stressing the particular over the universal. Whereas membership in the State is a matter of legal status, membership in a nation is a matter of passion or emotion, of personal commitment which evokes the sentiment of patriotism. (xiii)

3. Modern Africa and the Origin of the State

In this section, I will attempt to demonstrate that the concept of the State as understood by modern political thinkers is alien to Africa or against African's societal values and politics. Indeed, I will argue that, traditionally, nationhood, ethnicity and tribalism are what actually characterized African public space. More so, the modern African State is the product of colonization and imperialism with capitalism as one of its direct consequences.

3.1 Kinship, ethnicity and Nationality

Before independence which triggered off the emergence of the so-called modern African states, the political and economic institutions were based on the intimate relationships of the members, and their group consciousness. Traditional African political systems developed in the context of communities as understood by Tönnies which were families or extensions of families, or ethnic groups. In the traditional, pre-colonial African societies, the clan represented the basic unit of social and political organisation. It was the clan as a social and political unit that constituted the traditional politics which later gave rise to the various empires and kingdoms that dominated the continent before the advent of the colonialists. (Onwuejeogwu, 1975)

Kinship was and to a large extent still is, the bond of union, this has not excluded the bond of territory,

but the territory is still the place associated with kin than with territory (B. Andah, 1988). The whole community is kept going by the responsibilities and obligations accepted by each on the basis of his membership of the kinship group. The descent groups, such as lineages, instead became knot of collective legal responsibility, vis-à-vis higher judicial authority. The exercise of power and authority was vested in elders who have attained certain age and status in society. In pre-colonial Africa, words such as territory, clan, ethny, nation and tribe were rampant. It is after independence that we started hearing more of the state. What actually happened?

3.2 Imperialism, Neo-colonialism and the African State

As mentioned above, the modern African State is the product of colonization and imperialism with capitalism as one of its direct consequences.

According to Kwame Nkrumah (1965), the greatest danger at present facing Africa is neo-colonialism and its major instrument, balkanization. In his own words, neo-colonialism is the sum total of these modern attempts to perpetuate colonialism while at the same time talking about freedom. So, in place of colonialism as the main instrument of imperialism we have today neo-colonialism. According to Nkrumah, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, colonies had been regarded as a source of wealth which could be used to mitigate the class conflicts in the capitalist states. Indeed, neo-colonialism, like colonialism, is an attempt to export the social conflicts of the capitalist countries.

In Nkrumah's words (1963): "as the nationalist struggle deepens in the colonial territories and independence appears on the horizon, the imperialist powers, fishing in the muddy waters of communalism, tribalism and sectional interests, endeavour to create fissions in the national front, in order to achieve fragmentation. So, neo-colonialism is based upon the principle of breaking up former large united colonial territories into a number of small non-viable states which are incapable of independent development and must rely upon the former imperial power for defence and even internal security".

This policy of balkanization is the new imperialism and its main objective is to transform former colonies into "client states". According to Nkrumah, a state can be said to be a neo-colonialist or client state if it is independent *de jure* and dependent *de facto*. It is a state where political power lies in the conservative forces of the former colony and where economic power remains under the control of international finance capital.

Nkrumah (1963), maintains that the creation of several weak and unstable states of this kind in Africa is to ensure the continued dependence on the former colonial power and thereby impede African unity. To achieve their objective, Westerners employ many tactics such as the military, corruption, sabotage, blackmail, propaganda etc. In one of their psychological weapon of propaganda, they attempt to convince Africans that the "Carve-up agreed upon by the imperialists during the colonial period is fair and sacred, that it would be unthinkable even to attempt to liberate areas in terms of their common cultural and historical links, that the only acceptable version of 'liberation' must apply to the artificial units designed by the imperialists, and hurriedly labelled 'nations' inspite of the fact that they are neither culturally unified nor economically self-sufficient". Nkrumah (1968) is insistent that imperialism has done its utmost to brainwash Africans in to thinking that they need the strait-jackets of colonialism and neo-colonialism if they are to be saved from their retrogressive instincts. Neo-colonialists say to themselves: we must save them a new; Africa needs to be recolonized. This is what justifies the creation of the so-called modern states in Africa which are antithetical to Africa societal values and politics.

4. Western democracy, Nationhood, ethnicity and modern Africa

As mentioned earlier, in this section I argue that if we go by Tönnies distinction between Community and Society, which could be translated also into the distinction between State and Nation, it would be difficult if not impossible for modern African countries to practise democracy as understood by the West. Nationhood, ethnicity and tribalism are antithetical to Western-like democracy and vice-versa.

4.1 Western democracy and Modern Africa

According to the Western school of thought, to be democratic is to be civilized and politically decent. This idea has pushed many African states to waste a lot of resources on democratisation processes in the Western manner. It is common knowledge to note that today "democracy has become a global hype and the Western-like democratic wind of change has swept like a hurricane across the length and breadth of Africa. In fact, more than seventy percent of African states have embraced or claim to be democratic, because according to the West, their own brand of democracy is the only viable and sustainable mode of organising society for development.

However, despite the well tailored advertisement for democracy by the West, the fact still remains that what is being witnessed in many modern African states for the past three decades such as Tunisia, Egypt, Burundi, Rwanda, Ivory Coast, Mali and Nigeria just to mention a few, are anarchy, wars and genocide. So despite the massive embrace of Western democracy by modern African states, there has been no significant improvement in the socio-economic situation or human condition of most of their citizens. What could be the

problem?

The problem as I argue, is that of the fundamental difference between the socio-political organisation of the West and Africa. There is this erroneous view by the West that democracy, as a form of government can be imported wholesale from one society to another, regardless of socio-cultural differences. As I argue, for the Western school of thought, genuine democracy is best practiced within the ambit of the State. In other words, democracy and the State go hand in hand. And the State, as understood and accepted by modern political thinkers is alien to Africa or against African's societal values and politics. As I mentioned above, before independence which triggered off the emergence of the so-called modern African states, the political and economic institutions were based on the intimate relationships of the members, and their group consciousness. Traditional African political systems developed in the context of communities which were families or extensions of families, or ethnic groups. More so, traditional Africa was stateless yet democratic as we shall see later.

Even though two types of democracy have evolved overtime, that is, direct and indirect democracy, it is a fact that today the model of democracy that is in vogue and which is being foisted on Africa is liberal democracy (Offor, 2011:123). According to Offor: "this form of democracy has been described as 'a historic product, ideally constituted as a political correlate of advanced capitalism and its salient characteristics'" (123).

Unlike the African traditional values, which are based on the spirit of communal life, ethnicity and nationhood as understood and described by Tönnies, liberal democracy presupposes a government whose organising principles are formal freedom, formal equality, respect for private property, the rule of law, periodic elections and government by consent. This is why in Offor's own words:

Today, as the world celebrates the triumphant march to democracy in every part of the globe, Africa, despite her speedy rate of democratisation, still relishes in various crises, thus warranting the conclusion that democracy is not only in crisis on the continent, but that the institution of liberal democracy in Africa and its adoption by most African states is altogether counterproductive and 'horrendous'. (Pp. 123 – 124)

There is no doubt that Westerners have succeeded in making liberal democracy very popular in modern Africa, but the fact still remains that this system of government has not worked well on the continent of Africa. Western and African political spheres are quite different and therefore, require different approaches. For instance, Western democracy is capitalistic and also operates within the ambit of the State which is formal, abstract and legalistic while African democracy is "communocratic" in Tönnies' sense of the word.

According to F. Offor, "going by several critical indicators, the average African is worse off today under democratic governments, that he or she was many years ago before the advent of 'democratic regimes in Africa'" (125) It is on record that for the past three decades of the so-called Western democracy, the continent of Africa has developed retrogressively. This is due to the fact that apart from the problems of poverty and corruption which have dire implications for the practice of democracy in Africa, more importantly the peculiar and unique nature of institutions in Africa as mentioned above also makes them unresponsive to Western type democracy. The crux of liberal democracy is about electoral competition involving multi-party elections. However, due to the peculiar nature of the socio-political organisation of traditional Africa, State power is constituted in such a way that renders this aspect of democracy unrewarding.

In his justification for the reason why liberal democracy is counterproductive and cannot work well in Africa, Claude Ake (1994) also compares the historical conditions specific to liberal democracy as they developed in the West, with what obtains in Africa. According to him, the following are the salient conditions: the generalisation of commodity production and exchange (and hence a market economy) the social atomisation and organic solidarity and a developed system of capitalist production. According to Ake, these conditions are societal characteristics whose development in Africa is at best still rudimentary. This is why given the absence of these historical conditions in Africa, the attempt to put African states on the tarmac of liberal democracy is tantamount on failure. As mentioned earlier, liberal Western-like democracy cannot thrive in Africa because it has no direct bearing on the historical and socio-cultural experience of the African people. Western-like democracy is antithetical to African societal values and politics and therefore, should be discarded or re-adapted.

4.2 Nationhood, Ethnicity and African Democracy

My main business in this sub-section is to argue that if we go by Tönnies distinction between community and society, which could be translated also into the distinction between Nation and State, it would be difficult if not impossible for modern African countries to practise democracy as understood in the West. More so, Nationhood, ethnicity and tribalism are what actually characterize African public space. If at all there is democracy in Africa it must be peculiar and unique.

As mentioned above, despite the plethora of literature on the concept of democracy, most scholars are yet to agree on the actual delineation of its nature, meaning and even practice. This is why today we are left with a situation whereby each school of thought defines democracy according to what it wants to prove, defend or

achieve. There is no doubt that traditional Africa was democratic as we shall see later. The point here is that based on the organisational structures which characterized African public space such as the clan, ethny, the tribe, kinship and nationality, democracy in the Western way cannot be authentic on African soil. Compared to the West, authentic African democracy is peculiar and unique. I argue that the present effort by the West to make democracy amenable to the vagaries of the African condition will never yield positive result unless such a quest draws on the valuable assets in the indigenous practice of democracy in pre-colonial African societies.

It is on record that African cultural heritage is rich in ideas, precepts and values that define good governance and that to lay the foundation for sustainable democratic politics and culture, these indigenous values and precepts must be taken into serious consideration. According to Mogobe B. Ramose (1992) without such a move “the praxis of politics in Africa will remain misguided and unsuccessful precisely because it will be unauthentic, a veritable expression of mimetic philosophy” (63)

Contrary to what the West wants people to believe, the fact still remains that Africa has nothing to learn from them as far as the genuine practice of democracy is concerned. Western style democracy is the symbol of alien culture, which has been imposed upon the indigenous people of Africa. So, it is not an authentic expression of the political structures of Africa. It is on record that pre-colonial African systems of government were hospitable to all the values and principles that are today the hallmarks of successful democracies. The puzzle therefore, according to Francis Offor (2011) is that: “instead of exploring these indigenous resources in devising creatively new institutional forms and practices that will be appropriate to our peculiar circumstances, African states adopted the Western style democracy, and in their characteristic manner, attempted to reproduce in the continent, those familiar institutions associated with this form of government in the West” (128)

According to Sophie B. Oluwole, a true democracy, irrespective of the school of thought, transcends specific historical institutional forms. It has to do with certain defining values, principles, rules and precepts, according to which a good government, whatever its institutional form, must be run (2004:42). And, as mentioned above, some of these values, such as participation, accountability, tolerance and human rights were the underlying principles of governance in most traditional African societies.

In Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye’s minds, there is no doubt that pre-colonial Africa thrived on attitudes and practices, all of which are today considered very essential to democratic practice. Both of them explain that in traditional Akan system of governance for instance, decision making was as a rule, by consensus. In Gyekye’s own words, consensus means: Taking into account, individual person’s views and opinions before all important decisions are made; the esteem and promotion of mutual tolerance and patience and an attitude of compromise (1993:78)

Still in line with the analysis of the democratic spirit in pre-colonial Africa, Mogobe Ramose also studied the Shona language group of Zimbabwe. According to him, participation and deliberation in the ‘Kgotla’ was free and open, and that any decision arrived at is seen, not as the triumph of one group over another, but as the achievement of all concerned parties. A ‘Kgotla’ we are told, is a traditional parliament or forum for free and serious discussion aimed at making laws and finding communal solutions to the problems at hand. The Chewa of Central Africa and the Gikuyu of Kenya are also known to have seriously used consensus in their mode of governance. According to Didier N. Kaphagawani (1993), consensus was so pronounced among the Chewa people to the extent that the following proverb became common knowledge in the community: ‘*Mutu umodzi susenza denga*’ that is, ‘one head never carries or lifts a roof’. (104)

The Bini, Igbo and Yoruba of pre-colonial Nigeria are not an exception. They are all known to have placed great importance on participation and consensus as principles of social organisation. For instance, the Bini are known for their popular saying: ‘*Aghakugbe, Uduehiri Seaghae*’ which means ‘with cooperation and compromise, the ant can be properly dissected and its heart shared among the people. This simply means that in pre-colonial Africa, it was common knowledge that the individual mind is limited, and therefore, any public decision or action should pass through consultation and consensus.

Even the Igbo who are known as a cephalous or non-centralised communities, it is on record that issues of social and political significance were discussed in several meetings involving citizens and decisions reached by consensus. As for the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria, emphasis was more on human freedom and social responsibility. According to Sophie. B. Oluwole (2004), in traditional Yoruba society, the biological mother of the Oba, in conjunction with some chiefs, are said to constitute a team, which act not only as advisers, executive members, but also as opposition group which may disagree with the Oba and check his excesses (422-423).

More so, the principles of accountability, tolerance and the respect for human rights are other fundamental elements of traditional African constitutional thought. According to John Ekei (2004). Accountability marked traditional governance. It was a duty done on behalf of the ancestors and the human community (454). Referring to the traditional Akan people, Gyekye (1987) also explains that the chief never acted without the advice and full concurrence of his councillors and representatives of the people, to whom he is accountable. Acting without the concurrence and advice of his council was a legitimate cause for his deposition (11).

From the above examples, it is clear that although stateless, pre-colonial Africa was democratic especially if we go by Adam Przeworski definition of democracy as involving “the provision of means to pursue the representation of diverse interests, and the institutionalisation of mechanisms to hold rulers accountable to the public” (1988:61-62)

5. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have tried to argue that Western-like democracy cannot work well on African soil because their democratic system of governance is not only capitalistic, but it also goes hand in hand with the State. This is predicated on the fact that most African nations consider the State as something alien and contrary to their societal values. The modern African state is nothing other than the product of colonialism and imperialism with capitalism as one of its direct consequences. The State viewed from Tönnies and Pojman’s angle, is formal, abstract and legalistic and therefore, contradicts Africa’s original structural organization.

The society or state, is invented, it constructs rational principles, which have a universal aspect, and so applies impartially without respect for class or status, whereas African communities or nations are neither created by our will nor chosen, but are natural, primitive givens, based on shared history, beliefs, love and loyalty. The community or nation provides our roots, our sense of belonging, our identity, our solidarity with others. The original African democracy is “communocratic” and therefore, distances itself from that of the West.

Although the Western type democracy is a symbol of an alien culture, we can no longer pretend that this alien culture is not part and parcel of the contemporary way of life in Africa. My submission however, is that for modern Africa to practise genuine democracy, a return to African tradition should be a *Sine qua non* condition. Modern Africans need to fall back on their pre-colonial social organization based on kinship, ethnicity and nationality if they genuinely want to be democratic. And, this is what the present work stands for.

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