

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIO-POLITICAL IDEALS, DEMOCRATIC VALUES, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN STATES

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ABSTRACT: *The democratic socio-political formation of modern African states can be seen as a bold step in quest for a better human society. However, particular existential problems part of which arises from the composition of these states in Africa pose potent dangers to political stability, peace, well-being of the polity, and development of these states. This paper proposes authentic route out of this unwholesome situation that gets worse by the day notwithstanding immense human and natural resources of African states. It argues that a constructive synthesis “harmonious integration” of African traditional socio-political communitarian ideals with the time-tested-and-proven guiding provisions of democratic values would help solve many socio-political problems of African states and advance their needed sustainable development and flourishing. To this effect, it maintains that mass education using of all avenues of public enlightenment should be upheld therein; it specifically advocates that effective ethical leadership education should be introduced as a course and given emphasis in the curriculum of educational institutions in African states; and then enjoins conscious positive attitudinal change of the citizenry so as to bring about the needed result.*

KEYWORDS: African Traditional Socio-Political Ideals, Democratic Values, Development, Harmonious Integration, Community

INTRODUCTION

Every well-ordered state encourages and promotes good and moral socio-political ideals, values and practices which improve the lives of its citizens. The state upholds them because they engender political stability, development and social progress. Many states in the contemporary world struggle to significantly improve the standard of living of their citizens through creation of positive social conditions for full human flourishing. African states are not left out in this struggle. This concerns good governance and involves resolution of conflicts of interests among the polity which if left unattended to could harm the common good and lead to different forms of life-threatening phenomena in the state. There are African indigenous socio-political ideals that fit into the mosaic of a healthy social order. They are deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the African. We observe that the de-emphasis or disregard of these ideals is perhaps not unconnected with the spate of socio-political instability and crises ravaging the African continent today and loss of faith in the institutions of government; the ripple effect of which continues to widen the gap between the government and the people.

This paper considers, in the light of the existential realities in Africa and especially of the many ethnic nationalities that make up modern African states, what could possibly be achieved through “*harmonious integration*” of African traditional socio-political ideals with democratic values in the quest for the development of African states. It is a search for *that* peaceful coexistence socio-political formation that embodies the way of life and philosophy of the people, which gives ample freedom for individual and national self-actualization through free self-expression and public courageous participation in the life of the state. Such social order

enables human creativity, self-determination, and creates the requisite atmosphere for the rich fullness of human experience and well-being. I shall endeavour in what follows to clearly demonstrate in what way this could be attained in Africa: how upholding of African traditional socio-political communitarian ideals and democratic values can aid the development of African states. For certainly, a pivotal point in the sustainable development of any state, and indeed African states, is the *connectivity* between the state and its citizens (for the state needs to be a symbol of the hopes of all its citizens), the acceptability of a particular system of socio-political organization by the polity and their cooperation in the pursuit of national objectives and goals for their mutual benefit and common good.

Thematic Concepts Clarification

Here, we give a working operational explication of the relevant concepts employed in the discussion of our thematic. We focus our concern specifically on traditional African socio-political ideals, democratic values, and development. “Traditional African socio-political ideals” derive basically from the African people’s cultural dimensions of life; from critical reflections on human being who is rational, moral and social, in view of the well-being of the society. These ideals have deep structures of (social) morality; they are collectivistic in nature and form the normative character of traditional African societies. In other words traditional African society recognizes and holds firmly to certain positive values identified as basic and vital for proper functioning of human society and the welfare of the individuals. Such values as familyhood (Nyerere, 1966: 171; 1968:137), community spirit (we-consciousness), fellow feeling, and cooperative solidarity are notable here. A strong veritable index of traditional African socio-political organization is the altruistic transparent communal promotion of mutual support, pursuit of the common good, well-being, and wholesome flourishing of all the members of the community. Here, the individual is a being in mutual reciprocal service with other members of the community. It is an ideal that helps check the unsociability instinct in man, existential exclusivity and polarization, segregation, and excessive cling to private interest in the traditional set-up.

In terms of governance, it quickly comes to mind that one of the most cherished values in African traditional socio-political organization is *the high premium it placed on effective leadership and moral integrity in the administration of public trust* which engenders accountability and credibility from public office holders. Effective leadership is a value shared, urged by all the community members rather than something invested in one person or something left to the whims and caprices of some public officials. In handling the struggles and overcoming the challenges of societal life, African people depend and build on the gift and services of various members of the community to achieve particular goals of the community. Our ancestors equally made concerted effort to entrench social justice in community affairs seen as very necessary for peaceful coexistence; they encouraged due cooperative relations between social groups as something that transcends particular interests in view of the common good.

We now look at “democratic values”. These are the intrinsic principles that underpin democracy as a system of government in which political control is shared by all the people, either directly or by representatives whom they elect. Generally, democratic values encompass popular power or self-government (“the government of the people, by the people, for the people”), religious liberty, freedom of speech and opinion which extends not only to the political sphere but also to the economic and social spheres. When we talk of democratic values, we mean the positive principles and provisions of democracy as a system of government

that would supposedly lead to the goal of the well-being of the citizens of a state. These values were crafted to benefit the entire polity. For instance, the rule of law, which is the hallmark of democracy, ensures equality of all citizens before the law with no regard for “nobility of birth” or high social status; it recognizes no “sacred cows” and maintains that no citizen is above the law (Omogbe, 2007: 39). In democracy, human dignity is enhanced through the respect for and protection of the inalienable rights of human beings, especially the rights to freedom and equality. People elect their leaders and representatives in government. To live the democratic values is to live in accordance with the moral standards and principles inherent in a democratic political system of government. These values make democracy appealing and desirable as socio-political engineering machinery. They include:

- (1) Sovereignty belongs to the people. Thus, democracy has an in-built resistance against oppression and tyranny (Owolabi, 1999: 11).
- (2) In democratic governance, it is the will of the people (which Roseau calls, “*the General Will*”) that prevails.
- (3) The principle of functional rule of law is a very important aspect of democracy; it is upheld as the hallmark of democracy.
- (4) Periodic political election of representatives into various political offices in the state.
- (5) Free and fair election by the electorate or citizens of the state.
- (6) An administration that allows for maximum participation of the people and gives full and concrete participation either directly or through representation as well as maximum accountability to them. This indispensable category of good governance gives a sense of fulfillment to the people.
- (7) Human dignity is enhanced in a democratic society through the respect for and protection of the fundamental and inalienable rights of human beings, especially the rights to freedom and equality. For example freedom of expression, freedom of opinion, freedom of the press, freedom of movement, freedom of association, and freedom of religion (and worship) are given free expressions in democracy without fear of arrest or punishment. The government is freely criticized by the citizenry whenever it derails from its duty or does something that is against the provisions of the law.
- (8) All citizens have equal opportunities to develop their talents and actualize their potentials. With this value of equal opportunity, citizens develop their respective talents and use them to serve their countries and humanity. The society at large thus benefits from the developed talents of its members.

In democracy, government makes effort to foster economic growth and human development, to eradicate poverty, disease, and corruption. In praise of democracy, MacIver (1956: 52) rightly asserts that:

“Democracy liberates human nature. It confers...those rights that, when men know how to use them, assure them the integrity and liberty of heart and mind in which they can advance toward new horizon. In this sense democracy humanizes society...Democracy sets itself out progressively to break the extrinsic and irrelevant barriers that cramp the potential work of man”.

The point here is that the socio-political values which democracy foster when really and vigorously implemented in a state can bring about significant transformation and development of such a state.

Now, what do we mean by “development” of a state? Development should be understood here as the process of advancing towards better richer and fuller existence. Development of a state rightly understood is something that focuses on the *people*, leading to a decent standard of living of the citizens of such state. In so far as man as an individual interacts with other individuals to make social life feasible for the sake of the common good, he ought to be the main beneficiary of developmental efforts. Ake (1996: 125), rightly notes that:

“Development is not a project but a process. [Genuine] development is the process by which people create and recreate themselves and their life circumstances to realize higher levels of civilization in accordance with their own choices and values. Development is something that people must do for themselves, although it can be facilitated by the help of others. If people are the end of development, as is the case, they are also necessarily its agent and its means”.

What is certain we should understand from the above exposition is that the primary focus of authentic development in the state is the people and that development is contingent on the effort and hard work of the people through the nurturing of good social, political, and economic structures and institutions. Generally, development connotes having a highly organized economic and political system. Therefore, development of the state in this context means a situation whereby the state begins to make good and positive progress in the different spheres of its life; a condition in which such a state gets to have highly organized and advanced systematic socio-politico-economic order which would bring about sustained well-being and flourishing of the citizens of the state.

Democratization Process and African States

In principle, democratization means the empowerment of the people in the political, economic, and social spheres. In practice, however, it involves the cultivation of positive attitudes of mind and heart, the nurturing of institutions, adherence to its principles, and the attendant promotion of forms of positive social action. Democratization requires that governance policies formulation and leadership at all levels be subjected to mechanisms of popular participation and representation, as well as a rejection of the practice of having political power concentrated in few hands. It specifically entails the creation of good and enabling atmosphere for democracy to sprout and thrive. Hence, it is hardly possible to have a genuine democratic culture where there is no freedom, active full participation of the citizenry, tolerance, perseverance, and discipline. In democratic governance, respect for due process of the law is upheld, which sometimes takes time, and therefore calls for patience on the part of the parties concerned. Similarly, in such a social order where there is freedom of speech and association, every individual citizen has the right to hold and propagate his/her beliefs or opinions, subject only to the rule of law. Disagreements over policies and ideologies have therefore to be expected, tolerated, and not to be interpreted as working against social progress, to be suppressed by force if necessary; they rather, in a way, help to reveal the best option to be taken among various available alternatives.

Again, since democratization process requires a free and virile press, a courageous judiciary, an alert electorate, a responsible effective leadership, an enlightened civil society, and healthy economy, etc., all these societal institutions have to be carefully nurtured. For instance, without provisions of a free press, it will be impossible to propagate ideas and programmes or inform and educate the populace on issues of national concern. It will equally be difficult to expose excesses of the government or of individuals in political offices; such exposure is necessary for transparency and proper accountability in governance. In democratic governance, social justice and equality, consent of the governed in political matters, separation of powers of the legislature, executive, and the judiciary are maintained in order to avoid absolutism and despotism. These principles ought to be vigorously and firmly established in a democratic state, for without them democratic governance becomes impracticable. For instance, since the principle of rule of law, ensures that both political office holders and the masses are all subject to the laws of the state, it means that no one is above the law, and no one can be deprived of his civil liberties except in accordance with the provisions of the law. Checks and balances ensure independence and non-interference of the different arms of government on the functions of another arm; and so no functionary of an arm of government goes scot free with any misconduct or vice. Similarly, the principle of social equality ensures that the government provides basic amenities of life for all and that the citizenry are given equal opportunities in education, health-care, employment, etc., based on our common humanity.

Democratization involves the promotion of certain expected forms of positive social behaviour and attitudes, such as dialogue, negotiations, diplomacy and consensus as means of resolving disagreements over public policy or the commonwealth. Similarly, reason and logical persuasion, rather than the threat or use of force or violence is used in canvassing one's point of view. Even civil disobedience but in a non-violent manner, when and where necessary is taken recourse to, to draw government's attention to address particular issues of concern in the polity. Again, no one is allowed to take laws into his/her own hands, though this is limited by the needs of self-defense; it is achieved by ensuring that fairness and justice results from following the due process of the law (Bello, 2005: 46-48).

The question then is: are these democratic values and processes evident in modern African states we know today? Evidently, democratic practice and way of life is far from being fully realized in these states. Many African states since their political independence have had ugly history of governance and political upheavals even when they profess to practice real democracy. At certain points in their history, some African states were for too long misgoverned, subjected under the bondage of military rule and dictatorship characterized by such features as abuse of human rights and dignity, corruption, pauperization of the people at the grass roots, mismanagement of the country's economy and natural resources/wealth. In fact, during this period, as was the case for instance in Nigeria and in some other African states, there was total disregard for constitutional provisions, deterioration of educational, health and social facilities and infrastructures in the state. This period saw unscrupulous looting of the national treasury by some self-serving officials and elites especially in the military in these countries. The activities of the military during this period exacerbated the tensed thorny issue of ethnic marginalization in these countries respectively.

The situation is not very much different from what obtains in most democratically-run African states in this twenty-first century. It is evidently the case that many contemporary African states are still grappling with numerous socio-politico-economic problems. Perhaps it is because democratic governance in these countries is still relatively young and has not yet permeated

every fabric of the society. Nevertheless, many well-meaning intellectuals in Africa have expressed their optimism that these societal problems would gradually be solved, that the future is bright for African states, taken cognizance of the fact that democratization is a gradual process of educationally willing and committed citizenry. However, for democratic values, practices, institutions and expected right attitudes to blossom in African states, there must be a general condition of economic and social well-being: the citizens must have a considerably improved standard of living in the areas of healthcare and infrastructural facilities, in addition to the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter. A state in which an overwhelming majority of the people lack civil liberty, basic necessities of life/infrastructures, and are in a state of hunger, abject poverty, and disease, and neglected by its government, can hardly be said to be a healthy democratic state. A conscious attempt therefore has to be made to improve the standard of living of the people and promote their economic and social well-being in accordance with the dictates of the common good of all.

Positive Attitudinal Change as Crucial for Development Of African States

Many philosophers, socio-political scientists, and other intellectuals have tried to find out why many modern states in Africa have not made much progress in terms of development since after their respective political independence. Very often, this situation is mainly traced to corruption (Omeregbe, 2007: 26), greed, embezzlement of public funds, social injustice, and unethical (ineffective) leadership in Africa, including the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility and challenge of personal example, which is the hallmark of true leadership (Achebe, 1983: 1). Tony Blair's Africa Commission identifies that major fundamental reason behind Africa's social and economic problems is "...the weakness of governance and the absence of an effective state...the inability of government and the public services to create the right economic, social and legal framework, which will encourage economic growth and allow people to participate in it" (Commission for Africa, 2005: 28). It points out that on the whole this is what underlies other socio-political problems like poverty, unstable economy and illiteracy in Africa. But compared with other continents of the world, nothing is basically wrong with the geographical and climatic nature of Africa. African states can change for the better if she discovers leaders who have the will, the ability and the vision to make Africa prosper by harnessing properly the many human and natural resources in their respective states; it is the duty of enlightened citizens to help lead the way to their discovery and create an atmosphere conducive for their emergence.

We really need to reflect on why since African states gained their independence in the 1960's of the twentieth century, peace and political stability have continued to elude most of them. Although in African tribal days there were public discussion of social issues and problems, and consensus-building with regard to solution to them, it has been argued that "if we look at the African past, we could see that the democratic system of government [*per se*] is alien to the African traditional system of government" (Omeregbe, 2007: 42), and so is unrealistic to think, as America and other Western countries do, that democracy alone as a form of government is the best system for all societies and is sufficient to handle all the social political problems of the different countries of the world irrespective of the differences in the educational, economic, and moral conditions in African countries; for different countries in the world have different problems, and each problem requires its appropriate solution (25-26).

Now, our main line of argument is that the solution to the issue of development of African states is to complement democratic values with African traditional socio-political communitarian ideals which are already part and parcel of life-orientation of the African

people, in the governance of African states. This flows logically from what I call *the realistic democratic domestication socio-political formation principle* which states that: *a democratic system of government can be really effective and bring about genuine development of the state if and only if it integratively harmonizes totally its values with the people's cherished socio-political ideals and positive way of life.* We however identify that a requisite crucial condition for the *workability* of the abovementioned systematic scheme is positive attitudinal change of the citizenry. The word "attitude" means "state of mind, behaviour, or conduct, as indicating one's feelings, opinion, or purpose" (Landau, 1999: 46). "Attitudinal change" therefore means to positively alter one's feelings, conduct, opinion or way of thinking about somebody/something or behaving towards somebody/something. Thus, we can talk about change of one's attitude as well as change in public attitude with regard to something or towards a particular course of social action. We have to recognize that human being is dynamic and so constituted that not all kinds of behaviour or actions promote his general well-being. Whereas certain kinds of actions befit his nature, promote his general well-being and lead to his self-actualization, other kinds of actions are antithetical to his nature and militate against his general well-being, happiness, self-fulfillment and development. The nature of man, in other words, is such that he has to behave in certain ways and refrain from behaving in certain other ways in order to attain internal harmony, happiness and self-fulfillment. This is why to live a moral life is the law of man's own very nature and to throw this law to the winds and behave any how can never, in the final analysis, be for the good of man. For it can never be in the interest of any being to act against the law of its own very nature. Such a behaviour is foolish, short-sighted and self-destructive (Omogbe, 1993: ix). This guiding principle of life is also applicable to human society and the state as a whole. For numerous obstacles militate against the development of the state such as immorality, unethical (ineffective) political leadership, bribery and corruption, dishonesty, fraud, embezzlement of public funds, selfishness etc. These are real draw back cogs in the social progress wheel of the state. Citizens of a state that practice these social vices need serious positive change of attitude if such a state is to overcome these obstacles and make any meaningful progress in national development.

So, positive attitudinal change on the one hand entails positive re-orientation and configuration of the people's mentality and behaviour towards doing good, acting rightly as befits human nature; and living lives characterized by justice, honesty and other social virtues. On the other hand, it entails consciously working against social vices such as corruption, greed, indiscipline, dishonesty, fraud, embezzlement of public funds, selfishness, violence, trivialization and rigging of elections which constitutes one of the core problems of democracy in Africa today (1993: 76), etc. Although effective leadership and good "transformatory" government policies are desiderata for continued progress of African states, positive attitudinal change of the citizens of African states is very crucial and important too, because no matter what system of government a state operates, it is still human beings who would *accept and implement* government policies and directives for the common good of the entire state. It is still human beings who make critical decisions either for good or bad at different moments in the life of the state. Positive attitudinal change of the citizenry facilitates continued national development and progress. Citizens of African states really need positive change of attitude not only as a morally reasonable injunction but also as a civic obligation for the sake of the common good of their respective states.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has endeavoured to re-evaluate African people's socio-political formation and life via the background of African traditional socio-political ideals, and democratic values, in a bid to see how best to move contemporary African states forward. Sense of community is identified as an essential African socio-political value; for in Africa, the human person is a communal being. African communitarian ideals are based on the philosophy that human societal existence should be seen as family. With these values, the individual citizens of the state are reckoned not as abstract impersonal entities or mere numbers in the polity but as brothers and sisters. This thus inspires we-consciousness, fellow-feeling, brotherhood, togetherness and familyhood which engenders mutual accommodation and peaceful coexistence in the state. We hold that complementation of African traditional socio-political communitarian ideals with democratic values in the practical governance directives in contemporary African states is definitely necessitous for their development. How can this be achieved? It can be achieved by making sure that these ideals/values are part and parcel of the Constitution of the state, by government's emphasis on these ideals/values on a national scale and most especially consciously imbuing all government policies with them.

We reiterate that as a system of government, democracy presupposes a certain level of moral integrity, honesty and accountability on all the citizens of the state, and most especially on those that occupy political leadership positions. Democratic governance is not simply putting up of structures or following of social political routine rituals; it is most importantly conscious commitment to a modality of conduct and mutual relations/interactions, as well as positive social values to be internalized. Ultimately, it is a means of societal empowerment. And with such a complex compositional nature, democratic governance is not a one sided static phenomenon to be grafted into a society. It is a dynamic process that is enriched with conscious cultivation of good habits by the citizenry, and upholding and promotion of positive societal values.

Citizens of African states and, African political leaders in particular, need positive attitudinal change in their social life. This is because the present situation in Africa is overcharged with intolerance and self-centeredness such that success of leadership is wrongly measured by the ability of a leader to serve his private interest, the interest of his family, his clan, his political party, his local government, some committee of friends etc. (Asouzu, 2003: 104). Positive attitudinal change would churn out African statesmen with adequate moral stamina and charisma to tackle the menace of corruption, and engineer the course of national transformation through economic and technological progress which would then impact positively on and improve more the standard of living of the citizenry. Since effective leadership and good governance are veritable instruments for the coordination and enhancement of the socio-political and economic well-being of the citizenry, we reason that unless there is a remarkable positive change in the attitude and political practices of those charged with responsibility of governance in African states, especially our African political elites, the chances of the future of democracy and national development in Africa would remain slim.

To build a democratic polity where certain democratic values and principles, institutions, certain attitudes/conducts and forms of social action will prevail or predominate is a collective responsibility of the citizens of the state. It is such conscious arrangement that creates the conducive atmosphere necessary for human flourishing in a healthy state. Achebe (1983: 12), rightly avers that: "...civilization does not fall down from the sky; it has always been the result of people's toil and sweat, the fruit of their long search for order and justice under brave and

enlightened leaders”. In order to achieve national well-being and development we long for in African states, there is need to first of all have constitutional and legal reforms. For example, civil liberties must be enshrined in the Constitution of the state; these include freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom to form political parties without any preconditions or restrictions, in accordance with the law. There is also need for an active civil society, consisting of pressure groups or non-governmental organizations which will serve as alternative watchdogs to the excesses of government. These organizations may include trade or labour unions, peasants’ or students’ groups, fraternities or sororities, professional associations and civil rights groups.

Genuine development in any state is normally a coordinated gradual process. Since this involves as we have stressed above African socio-political ideals to be internalized, democratic principles to be learnt, practices to be nurtured, institutions to be built and positive attitudes to be cultivated, there is need for a vigorous programme of education in order to shape the thought process of the citizens of African states towards the goal of continued human development. Since education is the most important function of sustainable development, we advocate conscious revival and revitalization of our cultural positive socio-political ideals via education as an appropriate tool to teach our people our African traditional socio-political communitarian ideals, and also values contained in democracy. Education would help the African people to internalize these ideals and values and help effect the needed positive attitudinal change in the polity. The kind of education we recommend here includes civic education with critical content, such that can enable us to develop our Africa of today; one that:

“...gives one sufficient exposure beyond his African horizon while at the same time prepares him to appreciate cherished African values. The recipient of this education becomes authentically African while at the same time open to and appreciates other cultures. The beneficiary appreciates African values such as [familyhood, cooperative] solidarity, hospitality, communalism, and respect for elders” (Nnoruka, 1988: 245).

In fact, it is such education “...that gradually enables the recipient to systematically assimilate cherished [communitarian] African values” (1988: 247) of mutual dependence and interdependence and complementary relationship, devoid of undue ethnocentric commitment. Such education that has a clear definite focus would help emancipate totally the colonial distorted African identity, and help us recognize who we are and where we are historically heading to. It would then enable Africans to cope with the existential realities of the African world and produce well-rounded personality congenial to peaceful coexistence of the different ethnic nationalities in contemporary African states. All sections of the society must be involved in this enterprise, and all avenues of public enlightenment—primary and secondary schools, polytechnics, colleges of education, universities, electronics and print media, Churches and mosques—must be utilized. If education is the main pillar on which every person can be developed, in the Platonic sense of not mere intellectual attainment but also the formation of character, it follows then that when individuals are properly formed then the state is sure to have put itself on the right path of development, and as a result the development of physical structures can follow as a natural process. In line with Temple (2011), we specifically recommend that there should be provision for effective ethical leadership education in the school system in African states. It should be given emphasis as an important subject in the curriculum of educational institutions in Africa, for it will help our children to develop moral consciousness in leadership (62). Here, they are carefully taught the right concepts and

standards of moral leadership. In the final analysis, we are strongly of the view that conscious “*harmonious integration*” of African socio-political communitarian ideals with democratic values, as well as conscious positive attitudinal change of the citizens of African states themselves would bring a new lease of life in the socio-political formation, governance, and developmental process of modern African states. The African Union (AU) should make serious effort to encourage this in its conscious policy operations in Africa. One thing is certain here: when properly done, the outcome of this systematic scheme would create a new *unique* course of socio-political progress in African states, and surely would as well positively recreate the image of Africa in the eyes of the world.

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