

The philosophical foundations of African Democracy are a basis for solving the current crises

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Introduction

During the height of the Indian struggle against British colonial rule, Mahatma Gandhi was asked what he thought of Western civilization. He replied, "I think it would be a very good idea." For many, the idea of African democracy is in a similar situation – it would be a good idea that is yet to exist.

In the following pages, I will explain the philosophical foundations of African 'Communocracy' (the most accurate way to think in African terms about Western democracy), discuss the road blocks to this African form of inclusive democracy and finally, examine potential remedies for the many economic and political crises in Africa.

As the roots of these crises can be traced back to the colonial origin of the African state and the devastating legacy of five centuries of unfair relations, remedies will be sought by reaching back to an indigenous, pre-colonial form of African political philosophy.

The arguments for seeking African solutions to African problems are strong. One only has to consider the many failures of the economic and political systems that were introduced by the colonial nations, and maintained by the succeeding African elites. As the past 50 years of political turmoil demonstrates, the imposed political models have not worked. Indeed, for many Africans, they were not meant to work. They were meant to be tools to sustain colonial dominance and interests long after the Africans got their colourful flags and often boring national anthems. The prove of this statement can be found in the fact that those African leaders attempted to introduce real change paid with economic sabotage (i.e. Cheikou Touré of Guinea Conakry), coups, (Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana) or with their lives, (Patrice Lumumba of Congo).

Five decades of failure prompts an understandable desire to look for a new political model rather than hanging on the old system. The failure of foreign political systems suggests reasonably that the place to look for solutions is within Africa. Clinging to exhausted versions of copy-communism, copy-capitalism, klepto-capitalism or half-baked socialism is no longer tenable.

The post-Apartheid African renaissance should also serve as a trigger to look within the tenets of Africa's indigenous political philosophies for a new model for inclusive democracy. Such a democracy would be rooted in the local reality and experience. It would resonate with African people's needs and would open up political space for the realization of their development aspirations.

In this context the southern African community philosophy of Ubuntu is worthy of examination. Simply defined, Ubuntu describes the essence of being human through other human beings. According to Dr Ntate Koka:

It is a universal concept that embraces all humanity within the circle of the human race. It is a philosophy that transcends ethnic and racial boundaries, religious affiliations, ideological and political limits.¹

Since the demise of Apartheid, South Africans have been revisiting Ubuntu to find ways toward reconciliation and reconstruction.

In Rwanda, the government and people are using the Gacca community court process to deal with the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. In neighbouring Burundi, the people are reviving a citizen mediation and community system called Bashingantahe to heal the wounds of decades of bloody conflicts between the Hutu and Tutsi. Gacca and Bashingantahe are community management tools for dealing with conflicts and involved processes such as conflict resolution, mediation and reconciliation.

Communocracy

As with other basic human needs for social belonging and individual autonomy, the desire to participate is universal to all human societies. As a social mammal, participation is a basic need, without which human life is meaningless. In terms of politics, participation can either be direct or through representatives. In traditional African society, political participation was ensured through the representatives of the various age sets, secret societies, guilds or trades, clan and family elders. Because the diverse ethnic groups, political organisation was much decentralised, resulting in high level of autonomy. This provided a fertile ground for the development of communocracy. Communocracy is a concept, introduced by South African philosophers, who perceive it to be more encompassing. According to Dr. Koka:

Communocracy is a socio-political concept that is, in essence and application, deeper than the Greek version of democracy. It is a concept of today and tomorrow's global village. It contains the elements of universality and inclusiveness in its scope and operation.²

According to the Ubuntu principle, all human beings are united in their humanity, being part of the greater universe, our original point of departure and final destination. As part of such greater being, human beings share the same basic needs, human characteristics and potentials and capacity for doing the best and/or the worst.

¹ Koka Nt, 2001, Ubuntu/Botho: Recipe for a new world order, Johannesburg, page 11.

² ibid

The foundation of African communocracy

The philosophical foundation of Africa is grounded on the one hand in the principle of unity in life, and human-ness, and diversity in culture, beliefs and practices on the other. Ubuntu argues, as we have seen, that all humans are united in being part of the greater universe, part of one human race with its common and divergent features, needs, rights and potentials. This unity does not deny the diversity in human cultures, languages, habitat, socio-political, economic and production systems. Where such diversity is acknowledged and accepted, interdependent relations tend to be seen as necessary. Traditional African societies were generally organised in a cluster system of small, autonomous, yet interdependent communities. Each community was autonomous and independent concerning its beliefs, values and production systems. This acceptance of diversity, could explain the fact that Africans generally are less allergic to religious and linguistic differences. For example, Senegal with its 95% Muslim majority was ruled for 20 years from 1960 to 1980 by a catholic president. On the eve of his voluntary retirement from the presidency in the early, Amadou Ahijo of Cameroon handed over the leadership of the country to the Christian Paul Bya. The same happened in Tanzania when Mualimu Nyerere was succeeded by the Muslim Ali Mowny. It is in fact common to find religious diversity within an African family.

At the same time, the various cluster communities depended on one another as complementary economic supporters. Among the cultural tools, Africans use to maintain an amicable relation is the cross cousinage system, also know as joking relations. In the Fulani community of West Africa there are four categories of the joking relations, all aimed at keeping peace and encouraging cooperation within and between communities. They comprise relations between children of brothers and sisters, clan (family) names for example between Ba and Diallo, Dia and Sow, between geographical regions of the upper, middle and lower valley of the Senegal river and finally between the Serer of Senegal and the Fulani people. According to these cultural norms, it is a strict taboo to harm, fight or ignore one's cross cousins. Up to this day, people can tease, laugh at and make dirty jokes about their cross cousins without generating bad feelings. It is an effective cultural tool to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts in the area.

Starting on the wrong foot

What prevented African leaders from building their postcolonial nation states on the existing African communocracy? As Basil Davidson notes:

It is fairly easy to understand that new nation-states, emerging from imperial or colonial oppression, have to modernize their institutions, their modes of government, and their political and economic structures. But why then adopt

models from the very countries or systems that have oppressed and despised you? Why not modernize from the models of your own history, or invent new models?³

It is not possible to say definitively why post independence leaders failed to find and develop new models from their societies' political heritage. However it is a fact that many of postcolonial African leaders had been uprooted from and become ignorant of their cultural roots and philosophy. Many were exposed from a young age to colonial education systems and political propaganda that held that Africa had no history, no social systems and no political heritage to build on. Further, these future leaders were impressed by a western political system that appeared, on the surface at least, to offer an effective path to power and wealth and that this system was universal, timeless and applicable everywhere.

On this basis, the aim of independence, it appears, was not to do away with the system, but to replace the white governors with black presidents. This was the main reason for keeping the system, the colonial language and the colonial borders intact. In these artificial borders they could build perverted images of their colonial system. There was no attempt to adapt the political organisation to the African reality and needs. The result has been chronic political instability, coups and counter-coups, pervasive corruption and underdevelopment, which has led in some cases to brutal internal conflicts and sometimes to genocide.

Most postcolonial African wars seem to be pointless and even stupid because they are not motivated by deep value conflicts, be they about religion (apart from Southern Sudan), political ideologies or control of territory. These wars are mostly about gaining access to power and thus the key to the so-called national cake for the individuals and groups whose communities have been excluded. These conflicts have claimed the lives of more than 10 million Africans during the past decade alone, yet only one (Sudan) has involved a clash over a core issue such as religion or land or ideology.

The Basis of African democracy

As already touched upon, the idea of African democracy or communocracy is founded on:

- The belief in and acceptance of unity in diversity. This is evident in having thousands of languages and many religions living side by side in general harmony.
- The absence of a universalistic and monotheistic religion, holy books or ideology, which can be used as a vehicle for imperialist missions. Perhaps this is why Africans have hardly ever had the urge to conquer or colonise. Even in powerful African empires such as Egypt, Ghana,

³ Davidson B, 1992, *Black Man's Burden*, James Curry, UK, page 19.

Mali, Zimbabwe, Kuba and Benin there was never an attempt to force the various communities into using one religion, one language and follow one prophet.

- The belief in the eternity of life and necessity of coexistence between the spiritual and material, the visible and invisible, "good" and "evil". Thus killing a person does not make her disappear, as her/his spirit could come back and haunt you.
- The recognition that the decentralised organisation of African society enhances local self rule, independence and interdependence, exchange and the need to build bridges.
- A system of social organisation according to which society comprises the living, the living dead and those to be born. Thus the concept of sustainability takes into account not only the needs of the present generation, but also the past and the future generations. As a Ghanaian chief explained not long ago, the land belongs to many members of the community, some of whom have passed away; a few are present members of the community and countless members of future generations.
- The sense of community and the belief in putting the interest of the collective before that of the individual.
- The high value placed on individual responsibility to one's family, relatives, the community and humanity as a whole.
- The participatory nature of African cultural and social life. African social gatherings are inclusive across generations, gender and divergent points of view.
- Linking age and leadership. Older people are believed to be less selfish and more responsible towards the community.

Man is not born free

As a social being, a person is somebody only to the extent of his/her relations with others. Thus we have the Ubuntu saying:

You are somebody only through others. I am because, we are. We are therefore I am.

This places the rights of an individual after those of society. The whole is more important than its components. Having a good community leads to having good individual members. As Okot p'Bitek asserts:

Man is not born free. At birth he is firmly tied to his mother through the umbilical cord. He is physically cut free from her. But this cutting free is not merely a biological act. It is symbolic and most significant... he is an individual, who through upbringing is prepared to play his full role as a member of society... Man has a bundle of rights and privileges that society owes him. In African belief, even death does not free him. If he had been an important member of society while he lived, his ghost continues to

be revered and fed: and he in turn is expected to guide and protect the living. ... Should he die a shameful death, his haunting ghost has to be laid.⁴

Land as the means of livelihood

As Anta Diop tells us, the land in Africa does not belong to the conquerors; the mind of the nobles is not concerned with the possession of great estates to be cultivated by serfs bound to the soil; in this sense there was no feudal system in Africa...⁵. This is because the "spirit of the earth" has entrusted the land to the representative of the first inhabitants of the plot. Besides, land was and is still considered by many Africans as something sacred and belongs to the community. In his groundbreaking poem, *We always knew*, By Backson M. C. Sibanda refers to Africa as a mother

As I look down the green beautiful valleys
of Mother Africa wake up from
A long slumber they call underdevelopment
Lord I thank you, for you delayed,
The coming of the motor car, and smoke puffing industrial complexes
You delayed civilization and thy children starve...⁶

This construction has the effect of limiting the greed of rulers and conquerors. Contemporary African governments could reactivate this time-tested land tenure system to ward off WTO rules that seek to confiscate basic community-based services that manage water, land, health, energy and education, in favour of corporate monopolies.

Traditional African checks and balances

According to the late Senegalese Egyptologist, Cheikh Anta Diop, the royal function was

regulated by a ritual so exacting that at times, ...the king's fate was not enviable at all... the act of physically putting the king to death after he had reigned for a certain number of years (eight, in general), ...persisted, here and there, throughout time and space, in pre-colonial Black Africa.⁷

Perhaps, the tradition of not allowing the rulers to overstay their tenure could be stipulated in African constitutions.

⁴ Okot, P, 1998, *The Sociality of Self in African philosophy*, Blackwell Publisher , page 70-72

⁵ Diop, A, 1987, *Precolonial Africa*, Présence Africaine, Paris France, page 11,.

⁶ Sibanda, B, 1999, *We Always*, Food for Thought, Zed Books, page 163-4

⁷ Diop, A, 1981, *Civilisation or Barbarism*, Présence Africaine, Paris, France, page 165-166.

The road blocks toward African democracy

After nearly 500 years of direct and indirect foreign exploitation and domination, the postcolonial project of building successful nation states in the image of the West (out of the multitude of African communities) is still far from complete. Indeed it can be said to have failed. Observing the experience in Sudan, the DR Congo, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Somalia one can conclude that such a project appear to be mission impossible. The unitary, centralised western system of government does not fit the cluster culture of African communities. Among the many road blocks to African democracy that arise from this mismatch, among the most lethal are:

- The origin and nature of the modern African state as a continuation of the colonial system
- The lack of reconciliation between the past and the present, between the African heritage and lessons from the colonial experience
- Lack of sense of national identity as a result of divisive and widespread political nepotism
- Continued foreign control and direction of the political process
- Maintaining the most effective tools of colonial oppression - the artificial borders, the education system, the language, the political structure and economic system
- African people's lack of faith in and respect for the post-colonial system, including those who benefit from it. Corruption is therefore not conceived as immoral
- Competition and conflict between multiple ethnic groups forced to share a country without their consent.
- Starting on the wrong foot, which makes Africa unable to fit in or join the race for the rewards of development, effectively the survival of the fastest
- The splitting of pre-colonial unified nations into various new countries, where historically different and often rival nations were forced together into highly centralised and rigid unitary forms of government with autocratic rulers, and often with one ethnic group at the helm
- The local culture and value systems were seen as irrelevant and unfit for modern political and economic modes of development.

I believe we can safely conclude that founding African states on the systems that were designed to oppress them has been failure. The system was never designed to serve Africans. It was designed to serve the colonial interest. This is why African people rightly disrespect the state and its agents. Such widespread disbelief in the state encourages corruption, irresponsibility and lack of commitment to government institutions. People are not even ashamed of boasting of their corruption, because vis-à-vis the state either you exploit it or it exploits you.

Possible way forward

The fact that Africans have more or less remained sane in the face of five centuries of foreign plunder, corrupting colonialism, cold war proxy wars, Bretton Woods destructive structural adjustment programmes, suggests a powerful resilience at work. Perhaps it is time for Africans to revisit the principle of Ubuntu as a model for a new home-grown political system.

The above does not ignore the recent return to the scramble for African resources as a repeat of the 19 century excess. This time though China and India are new contenders. The US is rapidly digging along the Sahel zone from West to East Africa to counter alleged Islamic threats from the Middle East via North and East Africa. The US is also positioning itself across the new oil fields in the Gulf of Guinea. China is focusing particularly on Sudan and Angola. In terms of peace and stability, many African countries are still in state of civil war. These include Cote d'Ivoire, Somalia, Sudan, Congo, Chad and Eritrea-Ethiopia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I maintain that the means to lead Africa out of her past trauma and current political and economic crises need to be sought and found within the continent itself. Foreign imposition and aping have not worked. Nor have foreign political advice or IMF/World Bank dictate worked. Capitalism, communism and copy socialism have failed. In terms of building coherent nation states, many African countries are less united today than when the project started in the wake of formal independence. Some of the countries have ceased to have even a nominal common government. Somalia, Sudan, and Cote D'Ivoire have split into conflicting regions and ethnic groups. With the return of the 19th century style scramble for African raw materials and strategic bases, the centre of conflict could shift from the Middle East to an already downtrodden Africa. The so-called global war on terror has already been seized upon by opportunist African regimes to do away with their political opponents.

So it is time to concentrate on seeking African solutions to the many African problems. This will be in the general interest of humanity, because the alternative, a vacuum created by collapsing and failing states across the continent will imperil the international community. It should be possible to build on the concept of Ubuntu, the Gacca and community-based cultural practices to serve as guiding principles for peaceful and cooperative coexistence. In terms of unity, Africans need to learn from the empty projects where unity has been imposed from above, such the OAU and current AU elite clubs. True unity in Africa can be achieved by letting ordinary people continue their age-old practices of crisscrossing artificial borders for social interaction, building families, trading, grazing and networking. The first and cheapest step

is just to follow on the footsteps of the Masai and become border blind. The next step is for the authorities to encourage and reward cross-border projects, institutions and interactions. This means no border controls, no tariffs and customs or police harassment. The media can be used to support this. Gradually, common educational institutions using common African cross-border languages can be established. For example, Wolof is a common regional language in the area between Senegal and Gambia; Soninke is spoken in the triangle between Mauritania, Senegal and Mali. Fulani is common throughout the Savannah belt from Senegal on the Atlantic coast through Mali, Guinea, Burkina, Niger, Nigeria, and Cameroon to Darfur in western Sudan. Hausa should be easy to formalise as common language in Northern Nigeria and Niger. Kiswahili is already being used as the official language in both Tanzania and Kenya. Others could join this pair. In this regard, Professor Kwesi Prah of the Cape Town-based Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society is merging variants of Southern African and other African languages with common roots into one formal language. Similar centres could be set up in other parts of the continent to foster the creation of regional and cross-border civil society organisations and businesses.

Finally, the most effective tools for colonising the African mind have been the imposition of Western languages, culture and political philosophies. Africans need to re-educate themselves out of old colonial habits. The younger generations need to reconnect with and use their valuable cultural heritage and traditional languages while respecting and dealing with other fellow humans according to Ubuntu principle of human one-ness. Through the spirit of Ubuntu, a uniquely African contribution to the concept of the global village will be more visible and recognised.

As Dr. Koka of South Africa, explains, "global village" is an aspired-for concept where the World is viewed as a "One-ness of coexistence": a close-knitted phenomenon, with interdependence of communities in socio-economic and political arenas." Dr. Koka, continues:

Residents of the Global Village are people living in various continents, countries, cities and rural villages – connected together by modern telecommunication systems and information technology apparatus. They live in diverse ethnic groupings, cultural systems, ethical norms, traditions, religious faiths and practices, ideological convictions, etc. The only thing they have in common... is the feeling of common-ness of origin and a feeling for the need to come together.... – citizens and members of the "Circle of the Human Race." The awareness and spread of the Ubuntu philosophy will facilitate the actualization of the concept within the (global) village.⁸

⁸ Koka, Nt, 2001, Ubuntu/Botho: Recipe for new world order; today is tomorrow, Kara Heritage Institute, Johannesburg,, page 72-73.