

AN ASSESSMENT OF KWASI WIREDU'S DEMOCRACY AND CONSENSUS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL POLITICS: A PLEA FOR A NON PARTY POLITY.

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ABSTRACT

At the onset of democracy in Africa, it was ordinarily a tool by the colonialist to make Africans believe they were free but this was not the actual case obtainable in reality. Hence, the Africa's drive towards democracy during the past years could be said to be the effect of the sustained Western pressure. This paper seeks to examine Wiredu's idea of consensual democracy through the assessment of his claim about common interest and rational discussion for substantive representation. The paper discovers that democracy as practised in Africa is not what democracy is and recommends that for Africa to progress, there may be the need to jettison what we currently practise as democracy but need to adapt, change, and even in some cases abandon some traditional ideas and behaviours. The methods of critical analysis and reflective argumentation were adopted to pursue the aims of this study.

INTRODUCTION

Inter and intra political instability in Africa can be traced to the effect of Western colonization on Africa. Hence, the Africa's drive towards democracy during the past years could be said to be the effect of the sustained Western pressure to adopt the multi-party way of life. Though Africans have gained so-called 'freedom' but this is yet to reflect any substantial influence on the African by building on the strength of the African's indigenous political institutions. To do this, in his paper, Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics: A Plea for a Non-party Polity, Kwasi Wiredu offers a strong defense for a return to what he calls 'consensual democracy' in Africa. Consensual democracy is a political system that dates back to the pre-colonial Africa.

Wiredu traces the roots of consensus to African societies where he finds that 'there is considerable evidence that decision by consensus was often the order of the day in African deliberations and on principle (Wiredu 1995: 53). With this, he places emphasis on the role of consensus in the decision-making process in the Traditional African life and as a result of its utility in the past, pleaded for a return to this consensual democracy or nonparty polity as he called it. For him, the key to effectively address contemporary issues lies in reclaiming and revitalizing indigenous traditions that have been suppressed and degraded in the wake of colonialism.

Wiredu's position has been taken up in various forms by thinkers such as, Dennis Masaka (Masaka 2019: 68-78), Michael Onyebuchi Eze (Eze 2008: 386-399), Emmanuel Ani (Ani 2014:342-365), Bernard Matolino (2016: 36-55) among others. This paper seeks to examine Wiredu's idea of consensus through the assessment of his claim about common interest and rational discussion for substantive representation in his plea for a non-party polity in the modern Africa or the post-colonial Africa viz a viz its practical viability. This will be done with a view to offer some modifications to Wiredu's theory in order to make it more suitable for practice in Africa.

The paper has three sections. The first entails an overview of the traditional accounts of Wiredu on the idea of consensual democracy. The second section highlighted the major issues that has been generated by some scholars given Wiredu's analysis while the last is a re appraisal of Wiredu's argument.

The methods of critical analysis and reflective argumentation were adopted to pursue the aims of this study.

TRADITIONAL CONSENSUS ON WIREDU'S ACCOUNT

African Traditional Political system for Wiredu displayed considerable variety. There were societies with centralised social authority or order as well as societies with less centralised social authority/order. The idea of consensus was basically appreciated according to Wiredu in the context of the second variant where the exercise of authority rested purely on moral and metaphysical prestige. Although it is also practiced in some of the most centralised societies of that era. Wiredu bases his analysis on the Ashanti Political System which is one of the centralised society of that time. The Ashantis are a matrilineal group and the lineage is their basic political unit. (Wiredu 1995: 55)

In Ashanti society, decision was by consensus at all levels but the first point at which consensus first makes itself felt in the Ashantis' political system was at the point which the head of the lineage is elected. The principle of consensus was a premeditated option based on the belief that 'ultimately the interests of all members of the society are the same' (Wiredu 1995: 57), although this belief remains challengeable.

Consensus for Wiredu plays important roles in the Ashantis' traditional life. Evidences in decision-making has been shown as a rule by consensus. Although consensus was not a peculiarly political phenomenon, but it is a manifestation of an immanence (inherent) approach to social interaction (Wiredu 1995: 53). The implication of this is that social interaction or relatedness of everyone to everyone else was inherent in the African traditional set up given the lineage approach. This is because for Wiredu, consensual basis for joint action was taken as axiomatic. (Wiredu 1995: 53). The idea of consensus in the traditional Ashanti's society was of importance to Wiredu because of the bearing it has on democracy. Current forms of democracy are generally systems based on the majority principle which he refer to as majoritarian democracy while those based on consensus as consensual democracy. For Wiredu, both are forms of democracy

because their government was by consent and subject to the control of the people as expressed through their representatives.

In Wiredu's analysis, the Ashantis prize rational discussion as an avenue for reaching consensus among adults with the capacity for elegant and persuasive discourse. The idea of persuasive discussion however needs re-examination. I shall return to this later. The pursuit of consensus was a deliberate effort to go beyond decision by majority opinion (Wiredu 1995: 57) which he regards as majoritarian democracy.

In order to attain peoples' consent, Wiredu holds that there are various ways but one is the most admirable way and it is when the representative has direct approval of the people and is closely connected with their aspirations. In view of this, Wiredu argues that working towards the attainment of consensus is a better form of democracy compared to majoritarianism. This is because in consensual democracy, (1) the political players seek each other in their efforts to reach a consensual position whereas in majoritarian politics, the losers become the opposition and may oppose just for the sake of opposing. Hence, competition for power increases and positions are not reached because of might and (2) it offers substantive representation over and above formal representation. His emphasis on substantive representation is due to the fact that one of the major political challenges facing democracy in Africa is the lack of adequate representation and participation of citizens in democratic processes and institutions. This is highly manifested in the way in which power is vested in some sectional group within the African society to the exclusion of others within the same society. In respect of this, Wiredu emphasises the incompatibility of majoritarian democracy as a means of decision making and governance with consensual democracy in the African traditional life.

Wiredu further distinguishes his idea of non-party from the idea of one-party. For him, one-party does not have any ancestry in the African consensual democracy and any attempt to compare the two yields an illusory analogy. Given the title of Wiredu's paper however, it seems there is a little contradiction. This is because, in the broad sense of the term, Wiredu acknowledges the existence of parties in the traditional system wherein his consensual democracy. There is the need for a clarification about the strict or broad sense in his title.

ISSUES GENERATED BY WIREDU'S PLEA

Wiredu's ideology has been severally challenged by scholars. In what follows this paper briefly identifies some of these several issues. On the issue of consensus, Emmanuel Eze disagrees with Kwasi Wiredu over what was responsible for arriving at consensual positions. For the workability of consensus in the Ashanti traditional setting, Wiredu holds that rational persuasion was responsible for converting people from their contrary view to a consensual view. Eze holds a contrary view. For him, reason alone could not have been responsible for the conversion of people. There are other factors besides reason and these other factors must be taken into consideration as influencing decision-

making processes that would lead to consensus (Eze 1997: 317). Another issue Eze has with Wiredu's position is that Eze does not believe that the factors that worked well in the traditional society would still be able to work well in this modern society and therefore there is the need to discard them and invent new ones unlike Wiredu's position that we should return to them (Eze 1997:318). In respect of the above, Eze is of the opinion that consensus should not be seen as easily workable as Wiredu suggests. Although I do not intend to follow Eze's line of argument in addressing the idea of consensual democracy but I think Eze actually misinterpreted Wiredu's idea by his use of 'reason alone'.

In line with Eze, Paul Hountondji on the other hand suggests that Africans must make a 'clean break' with the premodern past in order to address the most urgent demands of the present. Modernization, for him, requires a mental; orientation commensurate with the problems of the present, not an attempt to resurrect ideas from societies of the distant past (Hountondji 1996: 48).

Although Emmanuel Ani also raised objection against Wiredu in Support of Eze but from an addition as well as different angle. From an additional perspective, he shares same position as Eze by expressing his doubt on the possibility of purely rational deliberation leading to consensus; and from a different perspective, he examined Wiredu's account of traditional African consensual practices by examining the issues of immanence, pure rationality and their implications for deliberative theory (Ani 2014:345). Due to his interpretation of Wiredu, he rejects Wiredu's suggestion of the immanence of consensus to Africans and argues that immanence should be seen as a human feature as opposed to a peculiarly African characteristic. Ani proposes Aristotle's three components of persuasion as more appropriate in influencing the acceptability of a position. Bernard Matolino however read misinterpretation into Ani's understanding of Wiredu by identifying a kind of relationship between the words of Wiredu viz: 'immanence' and 'axiomatic' (Matolino 2016 : 39-40) as well as by using Joe Teffo's set up description on communocracy (Joe Teffo 2004:446). Matolino further Wiredu's outline on decisional influence as not so much at odds with what Ani is suggesting (Matolino 2016 : 44)

Olanipekun among others also raised a critique on Wiredu's idea on consensus (Olanipekun 2020). Using the tool of analyses, he juxtapose consensual democracy with its majoritarian democracy counterpart as identified by Wiredu, Olanipekun argues that the two are not mutually exclusive. For him the implications and challenges of majoritarian democracy identified by Wiredu do not necessarily undermine majoritarian democracy, neither do they make Wiredu suggested decision by consensus a workable decision making process in the contemporary African society. He concludes that at certain level of discussion, Wiredu's idea of consensual democracy has some similarities and also faces similar challenges to those that majoritarian democracy faces.

In support of Wiredu's consensual democracy, Barry Hallen further gives substantive grounds for revisiting Wiredu's **proposal of consensual governance in Africa. In his**

article, 'Reconsidering the Case for Consensual Governance in Africa', Hallen argues for the necessity of revisiting the conversations around consensual democracy in African States given the serious political instabilities being experienced in liberal democratic experimentation on post-colonial Africa, despite its dismissal as unrealistic. For Hallen, consensus is the 'intentional, negotiated, rational exchange that are taken as a conventional part of everyday life' (Hallen 2019:5).

To corroborate Wiredu's point, Barry Hallen further observes that interpersonal relationship in African societies have always been generally on any level a prioritized consensus, that is, interpersonal relationships in Africa Society is primarily consensus oriented. This is because Hallen further supports Wiredu's conception that traditional African societies were essentially communalistic in form and operation with interactive communication which involved a sense of belonging, connectivity and sharing at its base. According to Hallen, the beauty of the consensual process is that the voice of the minority is heard and incorporated during decision making process. Hallen attempts the negation of the authoritarian change against the political structure of the pre-colonial African Society through his introduction of the term 'palaver'. He argues that palaver 'has the positive sense of organised and open debate on various issues in which everybody, regardless of age or sex is encouraged to participate with a view to reaching consensus and keeping the community closely linked'(Hallen 2019: 16).

In order to drive home his points, Hallen further shows the relevance of concensus to postcolonial African societies even if multicultural or multi-ethnic on the grounds that it is a non-party system which promotes and sustains effective participation of the citizens in governance using John Rawls' idea of overlapping consensus in reaching political agreement about justice and the principles of social organisation among plurality of ideas that cut across different individuals' belief systems such as religion, ethics and aesthetics(Hallen 2019: 18)

Aside the above mentioned issues, the arguments of Wiredu and some other scholars have actually degenerated beyond the examination of the terms and concepts entailed in the argument into a major issue. The major discuss is between the cultural revivalist and that of the cultural rejectionist as an argument on tradition and modernity; which is however beyond the scope of this paper but which can be a subject for further examination.

ASSESSMENT OF WIREDU CONSENSUAL DEMOCRACY

Given some of the issues generated by Wiredu's plea raised in the above section, this paper does not seek a repetition of the above listed arguments, rather it seeks to critique Wiredu's idea of consensus through the assessment of his claim about common interest and rational discussion for substantive representation in his plea for a non-party polity in the modern Africa.

To begin with, Wiredu's attempt to look inward into the indigenous past of the African society to solve the problem of Africa itself is a worthwhile attempt. It even substantiate his arguments being an African himself, as he is arguing from a point of view which is not strange to him. It is actually generating a democratization process not externally generated but that which takes full cognizance of the internal cultural dynamics of the society in which the changes are being introduced; as well as that which is hospitable to the consensual values of the society (Walama 2004 : 440)

Although it may be argued that Wiredu presented consensual democracy as if it is free of problems hence his call for return to it. Consensual democracy has contemporary problems that come with it, hence a complete return to it may not be too healthy for contemporary Africa. Rather, a return to it while rejecting the errors within it will be better. Although he acknowledge that consensus does not imply that 'it was always attained as nowhere was African society a realm of unbroken harmony (Wiredu 1995: 53) and this may be taken that he did not over exaggerate his idea of consensus.

The assertion that democracy is centred upon consensus in the Ashanti society by Wiredu has its root on the claim that all humans have common interest. This is why he holds 'yes, human beings have the ability eventually to cut through their differences to the rock bottom identity of interest' (Wiredu 1995: 57). But is the claim true? If, it is, then Wiredu's call for a return to consensual democracy may be acceptable even for the entire human race and possibly not Africa alone, but I think otherwise. Hence, a need for another suggestion or revision of the suggested.

Arising from the above, human beings in general can share some core common interest such as the need for food but given the human natural nature, there will always remain some complex or peculiar individual interest unshared. For instance, in every society, there will be the rich, who will always want to maintain their wealth as well as the poor who will also want a more equitable distribution of resources. There will always be interest that are directly opposing to those of others. This is similar to what Eze implies when he countered Wiredu's analogy of the Ashanti's Art Motif of the two headed Crocodile. According to Eze, the two headed crocodile may fully know that the food is heading for a shared stomach and yet, one may still wish to experience the sheer joy of chewing and eating while depriving the other head of this masticatory experience (Eze. E.C: 1997). The implication of this is that Wiredu's claim that consensus has its root on the common interest of humans does not hold and likewise, the subsequent claim that human beings have the eventual ability to cut through their differences to the rock bottom identity of interests.

But, the question that arise from this is that when consensus is not reached such as he acknowledge that 'certain situations do indeed precipitate exhaustive disjunctions which no dialogic accommodations can mediate (Wiredu 1995: 54), what approach then becomes useful? And will Wiredu be willing to accept that approach over and above his earlier plea? Wiredu suggests 'willing suspension of disbelief in the prevailing option on the part of the residual minority' as a tenable solution. This is one of the ways I think

his theory or analysis becomes contradictory to his substantive representation in the Ashanti political system.

Substantive representation in the Ashantis' society is faced with some fundamental problem in itself. First, it is still regarded as representation, even at its very best, hence the interest of the represented may not be fully 'represented'. This is because a leader who is representing may either deliberately or otherwise present his own interest as that of the 'represented' and there has been such examples even in the African traditional past. In a situation where this occur will it still be termed as consensual or not?

Another argument against Wiredu here is that substantive does not equate to total representation and so what becomes of the few left out, if only a substantive aspect is taken care of. What becomes of the minority left? Are they not the ones the so-called substantive in Wiredu's argument supposed to take care of? Subsequently, will substantive representation not indirectly equate to majoritarianism which Wiredu rejected in the end and thereby leads Wiredu's argument into a *reductio ad absurdum*. This is similar to what Olanipekun argues in his paper. For Olanipekun 2020, Wiredu's idea of consensual democracy shares at certain level of discussion, some similarities and also faces similar challenges with majoritarian democracy. This is why Olanipekun concludes that democracy and consensus are not logically speaking, mutually exclusive. The argument here therefore is that if consensual democracy and majoritarian democracy are both be-deviled, then, why should Wiredu argue that one should be preferred to the other?

Even if we agree for the purpose of argument that there is a common interest/good of the people, the idea is inconsistent with a pluralistic society like ours. Now, I think Wiredu might argue that if we return to a non-party system like he suggested, then, it will or may become useful like it did in the past. This will lead me to another argument against Wiredu. He portrayed the African tradition system as that which is a non-party system, but in the real sense of it, it is not actually the case that there were no classes in then African society. We have the rich as well as the poor, only that according to Nkrumah, the rich then were not in the position to oppress the less privileged. As a matter of fact, there were classes and this indicates that there were parties. This is because the dominant classes will operate on consensus at their class levels while the dominated classes will also have theirs at their own level.

In the light of the above, this paper suggests the development of a political institution that move away from authoritarian rule (which is peculiar to modernization through colonialism), toward forms of government that enhance the liberty and welfare of all citizens, rather than a selected few. This is what Jay A. Ciaffa refers to as the 'modernity of democratization' (Ciaffa 2008: 122). Although the idea of over emphasizing the successes that come with science and modern technology (through colonialism) over and above that of the political, moral/social, and religious (through our tradition) is not what can be called real development. For there to be progress in any society, there may be the need to adapt, change, and even in some cases abandon some traditional ideas

and behaviours. Not only this, it may also involve borrowing and adapting ideas from other cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined Wiredu's idea of consensus through the assessment of his claim about common interest and rational discussion for substantive representation in his plea for a non-party polity in the modern Africa or the post-colonial Africa. This paper argued that although human beings in general can share some core common interest but given the human natural nature, there will always remain some complex or peculiar individual interest unshared. Hence, as a root for consensual democracy, common interest as argued by Wiredu may not hold. Also, this paper argued that substantive representation which Wiredu used as justification for consensual democracy also indirectly equate to majoritarianism which Wiredu rejected. This hereby leads Wiredu's argument into a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Without totally agreeing with Wiredu on his 'return call' but with some modifications to Wiredu's theory, this paper suggested, buttressing it the previous works of some scholars, a way to make it more suitable for practice in Africa given the issues entailed in today's Africa.

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