BETWEEN RECOGNITION AND INCLUSION: RETHINKING MULTICULTURALISM IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC LANDSCAPE

Prof. Ogundare, Z. B.
Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts,
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti.
zacchaeus.ogundare@eksu.edu.ng
&
Dr. (Mrs) Owoyemi, D. O.
Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts,
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti.
owoyemi.deborah@eksu.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

Multicultural democracy often promises political recognition for diverse cultural groups, yet such recognition rarely translates into substantive inclusion within state institutions. Liberal models of multiculturalism, particularly those advanced by Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka, foreground cultural identity and group-differentiated rights, but remain entrenched in normative assumptions that marginalize non-Western epistemologies. In deeply plural societies like Nigeria, the reliance on symbolic recognition such as ethnic balancing, zoning arrangements, and elite-based power-sharing has not addressed the structural exclusion embedded in democratic governance. Rather than fostering political belonging, these measures have entrenched ethno-political divisions and undermined democratic legitimacy. Rethinking multiculturalism in this context demands a shift from liberal recognition to participatory inclusion rooted in indigenous democratic practices. Drawing on indigenous governance mechanisms such as communal deliberation, consensus building, and non-centralized authority, the framework of Indigenous Inclusive Democracy offers an alternative political logic that privileges agency, voice, and belonging over mere representation. Recasting democracy through this lens not only reorients multicultural theory but also challenges the epistemic dominance of liberal paradigms in postcolonial contexts. The Nigerian case illuminates the limits of Eurocentric democratic models and affirms the viability of decolonial frameworks for reimagining inclusive governance.

Keywords: Indigenous Governance, Multicultural Democracy, Nigeria, Political Inclusion, Postcolonial Statehood.

INTRODUCTION

The promise of multicultural democracy lies in its ability to reconcile cultural diversity with civic equality. Yet, in practice, multicultural frameworks have often privileged symbolic gestures of recognition over substantive mechanisms of inclusion. This disconnect is especially pronounced in postcolonial states such as Nigeria, where the liberal architecture of democratic governance fails to account for the plural, indigenous, and often non-Western modes of political participation. In such contexts, the politics of recognition, anchored in the works of Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka offers limited resources for addressing the structural and epistemological exclusions that undermine democratic legitimacy.

Taylor's influential argument that recognition is a 'vital human need' has shaped normative understandings of how multicultural democracies ought to accommodate difference (Taylor, 1994). His emphasis on the dialogical nature of identity formation compels democratic institutions to acknowledge the cultural backgrounds of citizens as a precondition for self-realization. Similarly, Kymlicka (1995) argues that multicultural rights should supplement liberal democracy by ensuring that minority cultures have the group-differentiated rights necessary to sustain their cultural narratives within the broader polity. However, both theorists frame their proposals within a liberal paradigm that assumes the primacy of the state and the individual, often to the detriment of communal and indigenous forms of political agency.

The problem with these liberal multicultural models is not merely their inadequate application in non-Western contexts, but their foundational epistemic assumptions. As Bhikhu Parekh (2000) observes, liberal multiculturalism tends to universalize a particular cultural experience, rooted in Western modernity, and imposes it as a framework for adjudicating difference. It fails to take seriously the idea that different cultures may embody different views of the good life and the good society, which are not reducible to a single liberal template. In deeply plural societies like Nigeria, this failure is not theoretical but material: it manifests in the political marginalization of minority groups, the erosion of traditional governance systems, and the instrumentalization of ethnicity in electoral politics.

Nigeria's democratic landscape reflects the limitations of recognition-based multiculturalism. Since independence, the state has relied on mechanisms such as federal character principles, ethnic balancing, and rotational leadership to manage cultural diversity. These arrangements, while ostensibly designed to ensure equitable representation, have often functioned as elite bargains that reinforce ethnopolitical hierarchies rather than dismantle them. As Osaghae (2006) notes, Nigeria's version of multicultural democracy has produced a 'recognition without empowerment' paradox, wherein cultural groups are acknowledged symbolically but remain excluded from substantive decision-making processes. The consequence is a persistent crisis of legitimacy in which many citizens perceive the state not as a neutral arbiter, but as an arena of ethnic contestation and exclusion.

These deficiencies call for a fundamental rethinking of multiculturalism, one that moves beyond recognition to structurally embedded forms of political inclusion. Inclusion here is not reducible to numerical representation or the mere presence of cultural elites within state institutions. It entails the creation of democratic spaces in which diverse communities can actively participate in shaping the rules, values, and priorities that govern collective life. This shift requires not only institutional reforms but also epistemic humility: a willingness to engage indigenous political systems not as relics of pre-modernity, but as viable sources of democratic insight.

In this regard, Indigenous Inclusive Democracy emerges as a critical framework for re-conceptualizing multicultural inclusion. Rooted in African communal traditions of deliberation, consensus-building, and non-centralized authority, this model challenges the statist and individualistic assumptions of liberal democratic theory. Rather than viewing inclusion as an extension of state benevolence, Indigenous Inclusive Democracy understands political participation as a communal responsibility embedded in cultural practices. As Wiredu (1996) contends, "consensual democracy as practiced in traditional Africa was not based on numerical majorities, but on inclusive dialogue aimed at accommodating divergent views." This model aligns with the normative demands of democratic inclusion while also respecting the ontological diversity of political communities.

By situating Nigeria as a critical case, this paper challenges the universality of liberal multiculturalism and demonstrates the need for alternative democratic paradigms in postcolonial settings. It argues that the persistent failures of multicultural democracy in Nigeria are not anomalies, but symptoms of a deeper theoretical inadequacy. Liberal multiculturalism, even at its most sophisticated, cannot deliver meaningful inclusion without confronting the historical and structural conditions that define postcolonial statehood. As Santos (2014) puts it, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice; and cognitive justice, in turn, requires that democratic theory be open to multiple epistemologies of inclusion.

FROM RECOGNITION TO INCLUSION: RETHINKING THE MULTICULTURAL PARADIGM

Multiculturalism emerged as a normative response to the cultural homogenization implicit in the liberal nation-state. It promised to recognize and protect the identities of cultural minorities without sacrificing the egalitarian values of liberal democracy. Foundational to this project are the works of Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka, both of whom argued that democratic legitimacy in plural societies requires a principled accommodation of cultural diversity. Yet, despite their moral appeal, these theories often fail to achieve meaningful political inclusion, particularly in postcolonial states like Nigeria. As Owoyemi (2025) observes, the recognition-based model presumes a liberal context that is often absent or unstable in postcolonial polities, where cultural identity intersects with histories of subjugation and state fragility.

Charles Taylor's notion of the politics of recognition offers a moral foundation for multicultural citizenship. In his view, modern identity is dialogical: individuals form their sense of self through relations of mutual recognition with others (Taylor, 1994). In this light, failing to recognize a culture is not merely a political oversight but a form of misrecognition that impairs personal and collective self-esteem. Taylor thus argues for the inclusion of minority cultures in public discourse, education, and national narratives. However, this recognition remains largely symbolic and discursive. It seldom translates into institutional power or collective agency. As Parekh (2000) submits, "recognition without redistribution can reinforce rather than dismantle existing power hierarchies."

Will Kymlicka takes a more juridical approach. He defends group-differentiated rights within liberal democracies, arguing that national minorities and indigenous peoples require distinct legal protections to preserve their cultural integrity (Kymlicka, 1995). His emphasis on external protections and self-government rights for minority cultures marks an important shift from abstract tolerance to legal recognition. However, like Taylor, Kymlicka's model remains nested within liberal assumptions: the sovereignty of the state, the primacy of individual autonomy, and the neutrality of public institutions. These assumptions are often alien to the socio-political realities of postcolonial states, where traditional governance structures and communal identities play vital roles in political life.

Owoyemi (2025) offers a synthesis of Taylor and Kymlicka's contributions while highlighting their shared limitations. She argues that both theorists assume that the state is already a fair arbiter of cultural claims. In postcolonial contexts like Nigeria which is marked by ethnic patronage, colonial legacies, and deep institutional mistrust, this assumption cannot be sustained. The liberal state itself often perpetuates exclusion and fails to provide the structural basis for multicultural justice.

This critique aligns with the growing body of scholarship questioning the universal applicability of liberal multiculturalism. Scholars such as Bhikhu Parekh (2000), Iris Marion Young (1990), and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) have challenged the liberal emphasis on procedural fairness and individual rights, arguing instead for models that reflect the ontological diversity of political life. Santos, in particular, calls for an "epistemology of the South," one that takes seriously the knowledges, practices, and institutional forms excluded by Western political theory (Santos, 2014).

A core issue at stake here is the distinction between recognition and inclusion. Recognition affirms identity but often stops short of empowering communities to participate meaningfully in political decision-making. Inclusion, by contrast, demands structural changes in how democratic systems are conceived and operated. Inclusion implies access, voice, and agency, not just the acknowledgement of cultural distinctiveness but the reconfiguration of the state to accommodate alternative political ontologies.

The Nigerian case illustrates this problem vividly. As discussed by Osaghae (2006), Nigeria's federal character principle was designed to reflect ethnic diversity in public appointments. Yet it has largely served as a quota system manipulated by elites, failing to democratize access to political decision-making. Symbolic recognition has neither curbed ethnic tension nor ensured equitable participation. Owoyemi (2025) terms this the 'recognition-without-empowerment paradox,' wherein the politics of symbolic inclusion conceals deeper mechanisms of exclusion that reproduce colonial-era asymmetries of power.

To move beyond these limitations, the discourse must turn toward alternative frameworks of democratic inclusion. This entails rejecting the presumption that Western liberalism exhausts the possibilities of democratic life. As Wiredu (1996) argues in his reflections on traditional African polities, inclusive deliberation in non-Western settings is often based not on adversarial majority rule but on consensus and communal reasoning. Such models offer not only a political alternative but an epistemic challenge to the dominance of liberal assumptions.

The need, then, is not for more recognition in the liberal sense, but for the integration of indigenous forms of inclusion into the political architecture of multicultural states. Indigenous Inclusive Democracy, as articulated by Owoyemi (2025), redefines inclusion not as state-managed representation, but as culturally grounded participation shaped by local political logics. This framework foregrounds communal dialogue, traditional authority, and participatory agency as mechanisms for democratic legitimacy beyond liberal institutionalism.

MULTICULTURALISM AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

A. Cultural Pluralism and the Postcolonial State

Nigeria's political trajectory is deeply shaped by its colonial legacy, which not only imposed artificial boundaries on diverse ethnic groups but also instituted Western democratic frameworks disconnected from indigenous political traditions. The result is a complex multicultural polity marked by competing group identities, uneven development, and fragile institutional cohesion. As Osaghae (2006) notes, the Nigerian state has long functioned as an arena of contestation between cultural groups who view political power as a zero-sum resource for survival and domination. This reality has consistently undermined attempts to foster a cohesive national identity.

In the post-independence era, successive constitutions have attempted to accommodate Nigeria's diversity through federalism and consociational mechanisms. The federal character principle, for example, was designed to ensure ethnic representation in appointments and distribution of public goods. Yet these mechanisms often operate more as symbolic recognitions than instruments of equitable inclusion. According to Owoyemi (2025), multicultural governance in Nigeria has largely focused on visibility rather than participation, acknowledging difference without enabling shared decision-making. This paradox reflects the failure of liberal multicultural models, which presuppose state neutrality and institutional trust, conditions that are largely absent in Nigeria's fragmented polity.

B. The Failures of Recognition-Based Governance

The politics of recognition in Nigeria often manifests through ethnic balancing in political appointments, rotational presidency, and regional zoning arrangements. These measures aim to reflect Nigeria's ethno-regional diversity in state structures. However, such recognitions remain elite-driven and do little to address broader patterns of exclusion. As Suberu (2001) argues, federalism in Nigeria has been "more about distributing patronage than deepening democratic engagement". The distributive ethos of the Nigerian state thus reinforces a logic of ethnic competition rather than institutional inclusion.

The rotational presidency, often presented as a stabilizing mechanism, illustrates the pitfalls of symbolic multiculturalism. Although intended to ensure fair distribution of power among Nigeria's major ethnic blocs, the practice has largely operated along a North–South binary, marginalizing minority groups in the Middle Belt and South-South regions. The 2011 elections, for example, ignited widespread violence in parts of the North following the perceived breach of zoning arrangements, reflecting how informal power-sharing can deepen rather than resolve ethnic tensions (Suberu, 2013).

More recently, in May 2025, the House of Representatives explicitly rejected a constitutional amendment that sought to enshrine rotation of the presidency and vice-presidency among Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. This decision underscores the institutional resistance to transforming symbolic zoning into binding national policy, reinforcing the fragility of recognition without structural inclusion (AllAfrica/Daily Trust, 2025). Furthermore, states like Benue, Taraba, and Plateau, despite their ethno-linguistic diversity remain politically peripheral in national discourse and severely underrepresented in the federal cabinet. These exclusions demonstrate that recognition-based mechanisms such as zoning or ethnic balancing may acknowledge the existence of groups but fail to institutionalize their political agency. As Owoyemi (2025) emphasizes, "without mechanisms that empower minority voices to shape policy, multicultural recognition merely reinforces elite patronage and regional hierarchies."

This instrumental approach to multiculturalism has produced what Owoyemi (2025) calls a 'recognition-without-redistribution syndrome,' where cultural groups are formally acknowledged but denied substantive access to political power and economic resources. Marginalized communities, particularly those outside dominant ethno-political blocs, remain excluded from policymaking and development planning. The over-politicization of ethnicity has weakened the capacity of the state to function as a unifying force. Political elites routinely mobilize ethnic sentiment to consolidate power, manipulate electoral outcomes, and undermine institutional impartiality. As Ayoade (1986) observed decades ago, Nigeria's multiculturalism is 'practiced more in the breach than in observance,' leading to cyclical conflicts, secessionist

agitations, and legitimacy crises. The challenge, then, is not merely the absence of recognition but the failure to convert recognition into democratic inclusion.

C. The Need for Structural Inclusion in a Fragmented Democracy

Nigeria's democratic project reveals the limits of multiculturalism conceived solely as cultural visibility or ethnic balancing. What is absent is a theory of structural inclusion, one that would enable marginalized communities not merely to be represented, but to participate meaningfully in the political process. Inclusion in this sense is not synonymous with tokenism or elite incorporation. It requires reforms that alter the architecture of governance to reflect indigenous values of participation, justice, and accountability.

This shift is being articulated through the introduction of the concept of Indigenous Inclusive Democracy, which emphasizes bottom-up political engagement rooted in traditional African models of deliberation and communalism. These indigenous systems, far from being antithetical to modernity, offer normative resources for democratizing state institutions. In many traditional African societies, decision-making is not majoritarian but consensus-oriented; leadership is not domination but stewardship. Wiredu (1996) captures this well when he argues that traditional African political systems are more participatory in substance than their liberal counterparts.

Indigenous political institutions in Nigeria offer important insights into inclusive governance that liberal democracy often neglects. In Yoruba traditional settings, the Àgbà council involves deliberation among elders, where decisions are reached through broad consensus rather than adversarial voting. Among the Igbo, the Àmà-Ala council which is a village assembly composed of elders and titleholders, functions as an open forum for communal participation. Even in the largely hierarchical Tiv system, the Tor Tiv remains subject to consultation with clan heads and elders before critical decisions are made. These mechanisms, while varied, are unified by their emphasis on communal deliberation, accessibility, and social accountability. Yet, contemporary Nigerian governance does little to incorporate these models into formal institutions. As Owoyemi (2025) observes, "the state's preference for Western legal-rational bureaucracy has rendered indigenous systems politically irrelevant despite their deep legitimacy among the people." Bridging this gap is not merely about cultural preservation. It is essential for reconstructing a democratic model that reflects Nigeria's social realities.

Addressing this gap requires rethinking multicultural democracy beyond liberal frameworks. Inclusion must be re-conceptualized not just as procedural fairness or legal access, but as cultural alignment; the integration of local norms, institutions, and epistemologies into national governance structures. As Santos (2014) insists, democracy cannot be reduced to the formats of Western modernity; it must also reflect the grammars of the people it claims to represent. Nigeria's future as a democratic polity may well depend on its ability to move from recognition to structural inclusion, anchored in both normative justice and historical reality.

INDIGENOUS INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY: A VIABLE FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSION

A. Beyond the Liberal Paradigm

Efforts to institutionalize multicultural democracy in postcolonial contexts like Nigeria have long been constrained by the assumptions of Western liberalism. These include an

overemphasis on individual rights, procedural neutrality, and bureaucratic rationality, often at the expense of cultural embeddedness, historical justice, and participatory equity. Liberal multiculturalism, as theorized by Kymlicka and Taylor, offers recognition and legal protections but does not adequately address the deeper question of how democratic legitimacy is constructed in culturally diverse societies marked by colonial histories and fragile institutions.

In response to this inadequacy, Indigenous Inclusive Democracy serves as a framework for reconceptualizing democratic inclusion. This model seeks to transcend the liberal emphasis on symbolic recognition by rethinking democracy from within indigenous African traditions of governance and participatory decision-making. It emphasizes that the challenge in multicultural democracies is not merely about accommodating difference, but about redistributing political agency and reconstructing the institutional architecture to reflect plural political ontologies. This proposal resonates with decolonial theorists such as Santos (2014), who argue for 'pluriversal democracy', which is a system that recognizes the co-existence of multiple political rationalities beyond the liberal-modern canon.

B. Philosophical Foundations of Indigenous Inclusion

At its core, Indigenous Inclusive Democracy is rooted in a communitarian ontology. Unlike liberal democracy, which prioritizes autonomous individuals and abstract rights, African traditional political systems are oriented toward communal responsibility, moral interdependence, and dialogical consensus. As Gyekye (1997) observes, the individual in African thought is not an isolated bearer of rights but a 'person-in-community,' whose moral identity is formed and fulfilled in relationship with others.

This philosophical orientation manifests politically in the primacy of deliberative assemblies, rotational leadership, and accountable authority in many precolonial African societies. For instance, the Yoruba Àgbà council, the Igbo Àmà-Ala, and the Tiv Ipaven are not merely customary relics but embodiments of inclusive political logic. They stress negotiation over coercion, consensus over majority rule, and legitimacy through communal validation. Wiredu (1996) describes such systems as 'non-party consensual democracies' where governance is deliberative rather than adversarial. These traditions offer a normative resource for building democratic systems that are locally legitimate and socially embedded.

Owoyemi's (2025) model builds on this foundation to advocate for an inclusive democracy that is contextual, pluralistic, and historically situated. It is contextual in that it begins from lived political realities rather than imposed constitutional models. It is pluralistic in recognizing the coexistence of multiple governance systems (state-based and indigenous). And it is historically situated in acknowledging that colonial state formation disrupted existing mechanisms of inclusion, replacing them with extractive and exclusionary structures.

C. Institutional Principles of Indigenous Inclusive Democracy

For Indigenous Inclusive Democracy to be more than a philosophical ideal, it must offer institutional principles capable of reconfiguring governance structures in multicultural states. Owoyemi (2025) identifies three key pillars: participatory federalism, cultural subsidiarity, and integrated legal pluralism.

1. Participatory Federalism involves decentralizing power not merely along administrative lines but according to cultural communities. This enables grassroots groups to

participate in agenda-setting, development planning, and conflict resolution. Unlike conventional federalism, which prioritizes geographic divisions, participatory federalism emphasizes identity-responsive governance.

2. Cultural Subsidiarity extends the principle of subsidiarity beyond technical efficiency to cultural relevance. It asserts that governance tasks should be devolved to the smallest and most culturally competent units. This supports indigenous institutions, such as village councils or traditional courts, as primary sites of democratic participation, with the state playing a facilitative rather than dominating role.

3. Integrated Legal Pluralism rejects the colonial dichotomy between "modern" and "customary" law. Instead, it encourages institutional synergy between formal and indigenous legal systems, allowing for context-sensitive dispute resolution and more inclusive justice delivery.

Together, these principles provide a model for reimagining democratic governance in ways that are both locally grounded and normatively robust. They challenge the epistemic privilege of liberal legalism and open space for alternative traditions of rights, justice, and participation.

D. Advantages and Challenges of the Model

The merits of Indigenous Inclusive Democracy are both ethical and practical. Ethically, it respects cultural diversity not just as a symbolic value but as a foundational principle of democratic legitimacy. It recognizes that no single political logic is universally valid and that local traditions of governance can offer meaningful alternatives to state-centric liberalism. Practically, it addresses persistent deficits in trust, participation, and institutional relevance that plague many postcolonial states. By integrating indigenous systems, governance becomes more responsive, more accessible, and more reflective of the people it serves.

Nonetheless, the model faces significant challenges. One is the risk of elite capture, where traditional authorities are co-opted into corrupt political structures. Another is gender exclusion, as many indigenous systems historically marginalized women in decision-making processes. Addressing these requires both internal reform of customary institutions and critical engagement with democratic norms. The goal, as Owoyemi (2025) acknowledges, is not to romanticize the past, but to reconstruct democratic futures that are historically conscious and socially just. Moreover, implementing Indigenous Inclusive Democracy demands a recalibration of state authority, legal codes, and civic education. This is not a quick institutional fix but a transformative political project, one that calls for the decolonization of governance and the democratization of state-society relations.

CONCLUSION

Multiculturalism in postcolonial democracies like Nigeria reveals a profound tension between symbolic recognition and structural exclusion. While liberal democratic frameworks have offered tools for acknowledging cultural diversity, they have too often failed to institutionalize meaningful inclusion. Recognition, when detached from political agency, reinforces hierarchies rather than dismantling them. As this paper has shown, Nigeria's experience with ethnic balancing, federal character, and zoning exemplifies the limits of recognition-based governance in deeply divided societies.

The shift toward Indigenous Inclusive Democracy provides an innovative framework for responding to these limits. Grounded in African philosophical traditions and institutional practices, this model prioritizes participation, cultural legitimacy, and epistemic justice. It calls for a reorientation of democratic theory and practice, away from imposed liberal templates and toward historically rooted, community-driven institutions of governance. This shift does not require the rejection of modern democratic principles, but their reconfiguration through indigenous logics of deliberation, accountability, and inclusion.

Crucially, Indigenous Inclusive Democracy offers more than conceptual critique; it sets forth institutional principles, such as participatory federalism, cultural subsidiarity and legal pluralism that can be adapted into policy frameworks. For instance, reforming Nigeria's federal structure to give greater legislative and administrative authority to culturally cohesive units could enhance citizen participation and reduce conflict. Integrating indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms within formal legal systems may also improve access to justice, particularly in rural or marginalized communities. Policymakers, therefore, must go beyond symbolic inclusion and invest in frameworks that align democratic governance with indigenous political realities.

At the international level, this model adds to the growing call for pluriversal democracy, one that recognizes the legitimacy of multiple pathways to political inclusion. As global democratic theory continues to grapple with the failures of liberal multiculturalism, the Nigerian experience, understood through the lens of Indigenous Inclusive Democracy, offers valuable lessons on the intersection of culture, legitimacy, and justice. Future research may further explore how this model can inform democratic transitions in other postcolonial or culturally plural societies.

Ultimately, democracy must be measured not only by its formal procedures but by its capacity to foster belonging, empowerment, and equitable participation. In this regard, Indigenous Inclusive Democracy is not merely a theoretical alternative; it is a necessary step toward building democratic futures grounded in both plural identities and shared political agency.

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