

African Origin Of Democracy And The Role Of Women In Its Development: A Case Study Of Two African Pre- Colonial Political Systems

Enyimba, Maduka (Ph.D), Ncha, Gabriel Bubu(Ph.D)

Lecturers Department Of Philosophy, University Of Calabar, Calabar

ABSTRACT

Democracy is popularly conceived as a western concept or idea originating from Greece. As a result, it is seen as a mode of government in which every citizen of the Greek city states participated in the governing process due to the smallness of the population. Democracy has become a household name in modern politics and administration, America for instance, is believed to be the doyen of democracy (though this is debatable), such that most developing countries of which Nigeria is among tend to pattern their democratic government after the American model. Consequently, this paper debunks the above view and traces the origin of democracy back to Africa. It argues that before the advent of colonialism in the African soil, most city states and empires were operating a highly developed democratic government in which the women played important role. It is further argued that a critical study of the pre-colonial social, political and judiciary system of ancient Africa will show that democracy forms its basic nature..The paper thus calls for a radical return to our indigenous democratic heritage as part of the decolonization process .To attain its goal, the paper first clarifies the concepts employed in this work namely, African, democracy and development. It tries to answer the questions: what makes a thing African, democratic, developed or developing? Second, it attempts to substantiate the thesis of this paper that the idea of democracy is of African origin and the need to return back to our root. Here the pre-colonial political systems of two selected African states were used as case study. Thirdly, the paper examines the role of women in the development of African democratic government and argues that women played important role as against what is obtainable today.

AFRICAN

As a noun African is used to connote an indigenous inhabitant of the continent of Africa. Hence, as a matter of nativity, anyone who is from any country in Africa can be rightly identified as an African. On the other hand, African can be used to denote an idea, concept, world view or mode of doing things that emanates from Africa and is about Africa for the benefits of Africans. It is in this sense that the term African is employed in this essay. Thus, *African* therefore refers to anything that comes from and is committed to Africa and the interests of Africans.

DEMOCRACY

A government is said to be democratic if it operates a government in which all adult citizens share through their elected representatives, and the rights of citizenship such as freedom of speech, religion, opinion and association, the assertion of rule of law, majority rule, respect for the rights of minorities, are encouraged and allowed. Ozumba defines democracy as "the rule of the people unaffected by Low birth, low income and low status, where equal participation is ensured in line with each according to his ability for the benefit of all and sundry through a majority consent" (36). The above definitions show what democracy is and what conditions make a government democratic. Thus, a democratic state refers to a situation in which the community as a whole possesses sovereign authority and maintains ultimate control over affairs to a large extent. Otite was therefore right when he states that democracy is essentially a process. As a process, "it is a theory of government and governance which sanctions the equality of individuals and of structural units in participating freely in the decisions which affect the lives of the individual and collectivity, and in the determination of the values and fortunes of society", (16).

DEVELOPMENT

The process or condition in which there is a qualitative, sequential and directional growth or expansion is known as development. The term development is used to connote a gradual or steady movement from an unsteady and not too good a condition to a relatively

stable and better condition. Etuk Udo's conception of development seems to corroborate the above definition of development. He is quoted thus; "when development is used today, especially in political and economic discourses, it generally signals a change from less desirable to a more desirable condition (Uduigwomen and Ozumba, 91). Thus, in this work, we employ the term development to connote the gradual or steady movement of an idea from the period of its inception to the period when it becomes more matured in its operation and functioning.

AFRICAN ORIGIN OF DEMOCRACY

Most Western scholars have claimed that it was the western colonialists who brought to Africa and Africans civilization in all aspects of human endeavor - intellectual, political, social, economical, and religious. Such scholars believe that Africa and anything African is not only primitive and illogical, but also fetish, inferior and must be discarded without delay. Hence, any good thing or idea that comes from Africa even in modern times is believed to have been as a result of the influence and innovations of the western colonialists and not original to Africa. Obviously, the above claims are fundamentally erroneous and misleading. African philosophers and scholars alike are beginning to prove the contrary by exposing the intellectual dexterity of Africans and the originality of not only things that are African but also the African origin of most of the things or ideas hitherto conceived as western.

A closer look at some pre-colonial African states will show that this is the case with African politics and political system. For instance, the pre-colonial Igbo socio-political system and the pre-colonial Wolof (Senegal) political system were deeply democratic in nature and functions.

DEMOCRACY AND THE PRE-COLONIAL IBO POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Ibos have existed for more than 6000 years. The evidence to support this claim is found in the age of their language. It is believed by scholars that the Ibos began to live in the Ibo land about 2,500 B.C (Omelewa 81). The obvious implication of this singular account is that before the inception of the colonialists in Nigeria as in other African states, the Ibos

were already in existence with a given system of government, Following this, L. M. Okafor holds that "two types of socio-political organization existed in Ibo land before the coming of the Europeans, these were the kingship or monarchical system and the village democracy or village republican system" (196). However, it should be noted that the monarchs were few in number and existed in few areas in Ibo land. The major form of political organization in Ibo land was the village republican system. It was the most common and universal throughout Ibo land. For Okafor, 'Village republics were autonomous communities which managed their affairs independent of one another, thus they were usually small in size and had their population" (197).

Given Nwala's assertion that "the notions a people have about the universe, man, state, government; law etc and the ends they seek in their political life, need not be expressed in any definite form. They are implied in the life, activities and institutions of the people" (165); an examination of the structures, institution and organization of Ibo political system will be ideal. The Ibos had four main levels of government outside family organization namely the minimal lineage group, the major lineage group, the maximal lineage group and the village group (Omolewa 82; Okafor 197).

The minimal lineage group (the Umunna) was made up of a number of nuclear families which descended from the same father. The eldest male member of this group, the Okpara presided over its meetings. He usually kept the group's "*ofo*" - symbol of truth and justice. His authority rested on the fact that he was regarded as the intermediary between his lineage group and the ancestors. All adult male members were free to participate in the group's meetings where all matters affecting the lineage were discussed.

At the level of major lineage group, the eldest of the heads of minimal lineage groups presided over its meetings, The meetings were mainly concerned with offences against the group religion and any public issue likely to break up the solidarity of the group, Membership was open to all adult males and they could contribute freely to the discussions and decisions of the meetings.

The maximal lineage group on the other hand was the meeting point of people at the village level. All adult males had a right to attend this village assembly though heads of the various lower lineage groups dominated the meeting. The most senior of the major lineage

usually presided over the meeting which in most cases was an adhoc general assembly. Finally, the village group assembly were usually representatives of the village group assembly who usually discuss disputes between villages and the issues of war and peace with other village groups.

In all these, one can see a political structure in which the majority is allowed to participate directly and indirectly through their representatives in governance and decision making. It reveals a government by consensus. Moreover, the Ibo constitution did not provide for courts to try cases on judiciary matters. Like in other ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Ibo constitution had no written laws. What existed were customs, traditions, conventions which were very familiar to all adults transmitting them to the young ones from generation to generation. The highest court of appeal outside the arbitrators of cases is the oracle whose decision is usually accepted by both sides of the dispute.

Again, the Ibo-socio-political organization had no provision for the executive arm of government but some people carried out executive duties. The executive function of government was taken up by age grade organizations which also carried out other activities. It is at this level that the women folk performed vital roles in the development and efficient functioning of democratic system of government in Ibo pre-colonial political system. This shall engage our attention in subsequent section.

Meanwhile, as Tosin, Bayo, Nwolise, Gaya and Tony rightly observed "Policy making or legislation was undertaken by democratic egalitarian council of Elders of the various villages usually meeting as the need arose to solve specific village problems" (51-52), Thus, we agree with Rodney Walter when he quotes Hayford Casely an African Nationalist thus: "before even the British came into relations with our people we were a developed people, having our own institutions, having our own ideas of government" (40). Hayford could not have been less correct especially in the realm of politics, in that Africa indeed had well developed political institutions which were greatly democratic in nature, structure and function.

THE PRE-COLONIAL SOCIO-POLITICAL SYSTEM OF THE WOLOF (JOLOF) OF SENEGAL

According to history, the Wolof people form about thirty five percent of the population of modern Senegal, and they are closely related to the serer who comprises a further sixteen percent of the country's people. It is believed that about eighty percent of the Senegalese speak the Wolof language and to be Senegalese is to be Wolof. Thus, the Wolof tradition of origin claims that the Wolof state was formed by the voluntary association of a number of small independent units (Stride and Ifeka 21).

The Wolof system of government has a democratic undertone. For instance, an important feature of Wolof government or political system was the strong position of nobility. Neither the Burba Jolof (a type of president) nor the rulers of other Wolof states (*governors*) held office by hereditary right alone. Ifeka and Stride state that "although each had to be descended from the founder of his state in the male line of succession, and be born of a noble woman, actual appointment was by elections conducted by the great nobility" (25). Once elected, the ruler is made to undergo an elaborate religious rituals to be furnished with the nature of his duties such as leading his people to victory and bringing them prosperity. If he failed in these key functions, he will face deposition by the people. Thus, the strength of this form of socio-political setup as in modern democracy is that it reposed authority in the hands of men equipped to maintain it. But whether they succeed in maintaining it or not remains a different issue. The remarkable role of Wolof women in this form of government was very significant and will be discussed later in the course of this discourse.

What is noteworthy at this point is that, Udo Edet could not have been less correct to assert that "the British invaders concluded that the Ibibio {and indeed indigenous African societies) had no political and legal systems which were worth preserving; hence, they grafted their own political and legal systems upon the indigenous Ibibio (African) systems" (115). Thus, if democracy is conceived as the form of government which encourages a wide spread representation covering people of different shades of opinion, station, persuasion and privilege, then one would agree that the pre-colonial political systems of the Ibos of Nigeria and the Wolof of Senegal are deeply democratic in both structure and functions.

The point we wish to make by the outlay of the pre-colonial political systems of some indigenous African states above is that, though they may not have been practiced in the exact

manner in which modern democracy is practiced, it is nevertheless highly democratic. It remains to be said that; the reason why most African states in spite of their mad rush and embrace of modern democracy still encounter many political and leadership problem is that they have grossly neglected the original African model of democracy and exert great effort and resources in patterning their democratic government after the western model. Francis Offor seems to amplify this view when he opines that:

The problem with democratic practice in Africa stems from a fundamental misconception that democracy as a form of government can be imported wholesale from one society to another, regardless of cultural differences. Looking at some governmental arrangements in traditional African societies which exemplify, the qualities that are today regarded as the hall marks of successful democracies, democracy seen as a set of basic principles according to which a good government must be run can be made to work in African if the continent's democratic heritage is explored and those ideas and concepts that define good governance are brought to bear in evolving a kind of democracy best suited for resolving Africa's own kind of peculiar problems. (131).

Thus, "democracy must be contextualized. It must take account of the historical experiences of the people and especially their social structure" (Otite 17). It is this approach or understanding of democracy that we emphasize in this paper as being in existence in pre-colonial African society long before the Greek and indeed western conception and practice of democracy. Otite's articulation in this respect lends great support to the thesis of this paper—that what is known as western democracy is not alien to Africa but actually originated in Africa before the coming of the Europeans. Thus according, to Otite:

Democracy as a set of ideals and a system of governance is not strange to Nigerians (and Africans in general). It does not belong to the ways of life of only Europeans and Americans. Indeed, in history of social thought the ideals and seeds of democracy were taken (I will not say stolen legacy) from ancient Egypt to Greece and then to Rome and the Western World (19).

Rodney Walter seems to agree with the above view by stating that "Africa being the original home of man was obviously a major participant in the processes in which human groups displayed an ever increasing capacity to extract a living from the natural (social) environment. Indeed, in the early period, Africa was the focus of the physical and political development of man as such, as distinct from other living beings" (11). Continuing, he avers that in pre-colonial centuries of contact with Europe, African armies were in existence with all the socio-political implications which attach to an armed sector in society. For instance,

'neither the Ibo people of Nigeria nor the Kukuya of Kenya ever produced large centralized governments in their traditional setting. But both had sophisticated democratic systems of political rule based on clans and (in the case of the Ibo) on religious oracles and secret society" (Rodney 56).

Before we conclude this paper we will discuss the role of women in the development of the African form of democracy using the Ibos of Nigeria and Wolof of Senegal as case study. Effort will be made to show that the important role and contributions of women towards the development of the political process as evident in pre-colonial periods is greatly reduced. Women are no longer given pride of place in modern political process.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ITS DEVELOPMENT

As stated earlier, the executive function of the pre-colonial Igbo political system was left in the hands of the Age grade. An Age grade represents a group of people born in the village within the same range of months in Ibo land, and are not organized on family basis. It is on this platform that the women through their age grade participated fully and exercised tremendous influence on the various levels of ruler ship in the society. The women through their age grades alongside other age grades implement the council of elder's decisions and perform the general executive duties of the village government, thus, contributing to the welfare and development of the community and particularly the political system. The sort of development which the women contributed to was what Rodney described as "an increase in the ability to guard the independence of the social group and indeed, in infringe upon the freedom of others-something that came about irrespective of the will of the persons within the societies involved" (9).

Some functions as the following were performed by the women (The Umuada) in the socio-political set up of the pre-colonial Ibo society; (a) They worked together in community services in collecting levies, (b) The leaders of the age grades were given positions in the council of elders thereby enabling them to participate both directly and indirectly as representative of their age grades in decision making in government. The recognition of this particular role and privilege granted the leaders of women age grades as in other age grades, must have informed Qmolewa's assertion that "the Igbo political system gave room for the display of talents and competition. The councils were also a forum for discussion. Capable youths were rewarded and brought in to- the council" (84). This is indeed an essential attribute of a democratic government. It is to be recognized that some of the conditions necessary for democracy to be successful in any society which are found in Igbo society is that, democracy must be recognized as government by discussion and consent; and the appreciation of the value of each person through concerted effort to bring out the best in

them, (c) The women (Umuada) age grade also served as a means of guiding public morality through the censorship of member's behavior.

Similarly, the Wolof women of Senegal occupied a strategic place in the development of the indigenous democratic system of then society. According to Stride and Ifeka, "women played an important role in Wolof government and society. The linger or Queen mother was the head of all Wolof women and was influential in the state" (26). It is believed that, to maintain her dignity she owned a number of dependent villages which cultivated her farms and paid her tribute. There were other female chiefs whose main task was to judge cases involving women, Infact, "in the state of Walo, a woman could aspire to the officer of Bur and rule the state" (Stride and Ifeka 26). The point to be noted here is that the office of the Bur is like the office of the governor of a state and is highly competitive during elections. Thus, by occupying this strategic position the women contributed immensely towards the growth and development of democratic governance in the Wolof society and indeed the overall welfare of the state.

However, in modern times, this privileged position and role of the women folk in governance and democratization process is no longer the case as such. The women have been relegated to the background in almost all aspect of the political system. Hardly do we see women contest for elective offices and when they do rarely are they "allowed" to win without fear or favor. The reason for this unpleasant development is not necessarily that of inadequate enlightenment or empowerment, but mainly as a result of gender discrimination. This must have led Uhegbu to declare that "this undesirable political situation has made the men to dominate the political arena, leading to the relegation of even the politically ambitious women to positions of apathy and non-chalance" (77), The issue here is that, a careful look at the political world of today's African states shows that women's (both rural and urban) involvement in politics is one sided and peripheral. Unlike the pre-colonial period, their participation is not effective in that they only register to elect men into offices during elections. Effective political participation goes beyond the casting of vote in Wolof government and society. The linger or Queen mother was the head of all Wolof women and was influential in the state" (26). It is believed that, to maintain her dignity she owned a number of dependent villages which cultivated her farms and paid her tribute. There were other female chiefs whose main task was to judge cases involving women. Infact, "in the state of Walo, a woman could aspire to the officer of Bur and rule the state" (Stride and Ifeka 26). The point to be noted here is that the office of the Bur is like the office of the governor of a state and is highly competitive during elections. Thus, by occupying this strategic position the women contributed immensely towards the growth and development of democratic governance in the Wolof society and indeed the overall welfare of the state.

CONCLUSION

What we have attempted to do in the foregoing pages is to trace the origin of democracy as a form of government to Africa using the pre-colonial political systems of the Ibos of Nigeria and the Wolof of Senegal as a case study. The point was made that, against common belief, democracy is not alien to African culture and socio-political organization, but is a fundamental heritage of its socio-cultural settings long before their contact with the Europeans. The women were shown to constitute a major factor in political and national development, whether they are the elites or petty bourgeois, the rural or urban and the literate or non-literate women.

However, it was shown that the political instability prevalent in most African states in spite of their total embrace of democracy is due to influence of western civilization and the desire by African states to pattern their political system after the western democratic model to the utter neglect of their indigenous political system which is in consonance with their social; cultural and historical setting. Thus, unless African states begin to recognize and utilize to advantage their indigenous political heritage as against colonial heritage, they many continue to grope in the dark with incessant political crisis due to the spirit of "copycats", and they will continue to be victims of neo-colonialism. At this point, Daniel Offiong's outcry against the negative impact of "western civilization" becomes very instructive. According to him:

The impact of western colonial imperialism (civilization) is everywhere in Africa and wherever else it spreads its tentacles and will be felt for generations yet to come. In pre-colonial Africa; Africans had their own institutions (political and otherwise) that adequately took care of their daily needs. All this was to change at the onset of western colonial imperialism. Colonialism took over from where slave trade stopped (57).

Therefore, to check the negative effects of colonial imperialism and to place Africa on the path of authentic decolonization, there must be a return back to our roots, back to our cultural and indigenous heritage.

WORKS CITED

Daniel Qffiong A. *Globalization: Post-Neo Dependency and Poverty in Africa*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 2001.

Francis Qffor "Democracy as an Issue in African Philosophy" *Core Issues in African Philosophy*. Ed. OJusegun Gladipo. Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2006.

Nwala, Uzodjmma. T, *Igho Philosophy*. Lagos: Lantern Books, 1985.

- Okafor, L M. *History for Senior Secondary Schools, Books, 1 & 2*. Lagos: Jet Publishers, 1985
- Omolewa, Michael. *Certificate History of Nigeria*. London: Longman Group, 1986.
- Qtite, Onigu.. *Managing Nigeria's Ethnic Pluralism in a Democratic Environment*, Calabar: Clear Lines Publications, 2002.
- Qzumba, G. O. "The Concepts of "Democracy", "Sovereignty" and "Separation of Powers"* Revisited" *Nigeria: Government and Politics*. Ed. Qzumba, G. O- Aba: AAU Industries, 1997.
- Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-Louventure Publications, 1972.
- Stride, G. T. and Ifeka Caroline. *Peoples and Empires of West Africa: West Africa in History 1000-1800*. Edinburgh: Nefson House, 1971.
- Tosin Coker, Bayo Qkunade, Nwolise O, B. C, Gaya Mohammed, Tony Ejiofor. *Government for Senior Secondary Schools; Book Two*. Lagos: Nelson Publishers, 1992.
- Udo, Edet A. *Who are the Ibibio?* Awka: African Publishers, 1983.
- Uduigwomen, A, F, and Qzumba, G. O, *Women and National Development: The Nigerian Experience*. *Sophia: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Index Book Publishers, 2004.
- Uhegbu, A. N, "Gender Empowerment: Information and Participatory Democracy of Rural Women in Nigeria" *Abia Journal of the Humanities and The Social Sciences*. Vol. 1, No. 1, Abfa State University Press, March, 2004.