African Political Philosophy: Theories of Power, Justice, and Governance

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Abstract— African political philosophy encompasses various conceptions of power, morality, justice, and governance, often prioritising communal harmony, balance, and reciprocity over individual interests. African political philosophy also addresses the legacies of colonialism and slavery, informing perspectives on justice, governance, and development. The study employed the critical analysis method. The study critically analyses African political discourses, including identity and unity, development, liberation, democracy, nation-building, and sovereignty. The study posits that cultural diversity, which acknowledges the blending of cultures, languages, and values, must serve as the foundation for African identity and unity. The article also critiques the modernisation model of development, advocating for a balanced approach that incorporates government intervention and control. The study concludes that African perspectives on justice, governance, and development are shaped by a thorough analysis of historical injustices. Africa needs to find a middle ground between embracing liberalism and implementing a controlled market economy in order to move forward. The continent must embrace the appropriate methodology, implement the correct economic ideology, and allow for necessary political interventions.

Keywords: Colonialism, Slavery, Development, Identity, and Unity.

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INTRODUCTION

The field of study known as African Political Philosophy encompasses many diverse conceptions of power, justice, and governance (Wiredu, 1996). This field of study is both rich and varied. According to Gyekye (1997), the goal of African political philosophy is to gain an understanding of the intricacies embedded within African nations as well as the ethical principles that guide human behavior. According to Hountondji (1996), African political philosophy presents a more complex view of power dynamics, justice, and community. This is because it challenges mainstream Western ideas on governance and politics. The study employed the critical analysis method. This article, which analyses the works of African philosophers and scholars (Diop, 1954; Kwame, 1995), displays the variety and richness of African political philosophy, from ancient Egyptian philosophers to modern scholars. This article illustrates the diversity and richness of African political philosophy. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of diverse perspectives in the field of political philosophy, African political philosophy remains a marginalised and under-represented subject of study. Because of this lack of representation, there is a limited grasp of African viewpoints on power, justice, and governance. This lack of representation has also contributed to the continuation of dominant Western ideologies. The above motivated me to carry out this research.

AFRICAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Research disciplines such as metaphysics, anthropology, theology, sociology, and economics sometimes overshadow the topic of African political philosophy (Táíwo 2004, 243; Boele van Hensbroeck s.d., 9). Many persons confine this area of research to the ideas of prominent African historical personalities such as Nkrumah, Senghor, and Nyerere. Certain individuals oversimplify this ideology by only concentrating on the difficulties and uncertainties of African politics, seeing it as a straightforward account of the achievements and shortcomings of African countries. These two methodologies twist the fundamental principles of this philosophy and fail to acknowledge the logical endeavours of the African people to mould their social and political structure.

When considering the polis, African political philosophy focusses on the intricacies of people's daily lives, their experiences with alliances and collective actions (Benson & Williams, 2023). This reality forms the foundation and vital essence. When discussing the concept of the "common world," it is helpful to refer to Arendt's expression (Arendt 1994; Benson, 2020). This concept describes the political sphere as a realm where individuals can openly express themselves as equals, and where they can actively work towards creating a community that promotes human dignity. The foundation of political philosophy in the mutual reality is unavoidable and essential in the current day, as it enables this philosophy to delineate its emphasis and establish its uniqueness. At the core of African political philosophy lie three essential issues: the well-being of African individuals, the exertion of power, and the suitable framework for social and political structure (Udoh, 2013; Okide, 2020). The welfare of individuals is a recurrent topic in the field of political philosophy. From Socrates up to today, no one can ignore

this subject, even though every philosopher approaches it with their own unique perspective and outlines various ways to understand and explore it. Among the many obstacles that African political philosophers must overcome in this area are issues of democracy, gender, poverty, human rights, and African liberation.

African political philosophy also explores the nature and justification of power. There is often a lively debate surrounding the question of who should govern the polis. What principles does he/she use to fulfil this duty? What are the modalities and purposes that govern his/her rule? The search for a suitable model of social and political structure in Africa has reduced to two main contenders: socialism and capitalism. Because it was consistent with African cultural norms and ideals, socialism was seen by many leaders as the best option. Considerable weight has been affixed to this decision by Senghor, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Sekou Touré, and Mboya. Capitalism was the guiding principle for many other leaders. Among these people are Mobutu from Congo/Zaire, Ahidjo from Cameroon, Eyadema from Togo, and Bongo from Gabon. Regardless of their chosen ideology, all of these governments ultimately succumbed to the influence and policies of foreign powers, particularly those from the West. Additionally, they adopted a philosophy of governance centred around the principle of single-party rule.

AFRICAN CONCEPTION OF MORALITY
Our exploration of different African cultures reveals that there is a noticeable absence of a native term for ethics or morality in African languages. Instead, ethics emerges as a result of the everyday customs and behaviours of African communities (Udo & Inua, 2020; Udoh & Udo, 2022). Therefore, it is customary to utilise specific native terms that are equivalent to qualities to refer to the principles or values of the community. As an illustration, the term for character in the Ijaw language in southern Nigeria is *iyerin Bara.* A good character refers as *ebi iyerin bara* while a bad character is refered to as *sei iyerin bara.* For the Igbo language, it is agwa. In the Igbo thought system, the phrase "Onwe ghi ezi agwa" refers to someone who lacks morals. In Ghana, the character representing the Twi dialect of Akan is referred to as suban. In the Akan language, the term "Onni suban" refers to an individual who is morally deficient or exhibits immoral behaviour. "Hali" is the Hausa term used to refer to character in the northern region of Nigeria. One often used phrase among the populace is "mugun hali a gare shi," which denotes an individual with a bad disposition or deficiency in moral integrity (Momoh, 2000). It is important to note that the concept of character-ethics, where ethics or morality is focused on one's character, is not exclusive to African philosophy. For instance, Aristotle, taking roots from the Ancient Greek language, defines ethics as the examination or scientific study of character, referred to as "ethike" in Greek (Aristotle, 1955).

In a similar vein, moral philosophy in Islamic tradition, particularly during the Mediaeval period, embraces the concept of Akhlaq, which refers to character and ethics. A distinguishing feature of African character-ethics is that discussions or expressions

regarding morality ultimately revolve around the concept of character. Character is the inherent goodness of an individual, revealed through their actions that can be categorised as either positive or negative. It consists of characteristics, specifically a collection of enduring qualities (virtues) that reside within and shape one's outward behaviour. Moral virtues, often known as excellences of character, refer to the intrinsic traits and central aspects of an individual's characters.

This set of virtues includes a broad spectrum of attributes, including but not limited to honesty, courage, diligence, compassion, sympathy, humility, justice, temperance, and others (Uloma, et al., 2019). Additional virtues, specific to each community and aligned with their aspirations, encompass various aspects such as abstinence before marriage, reverence for elders, effective communication skills, linguistic proficiency, and the utilisation of proverbs, among other qualities (Essien, 1992; Okon, 2003a, Okon, 2003b; Okon & Akpan, 2003). The previous statement suggests that displaying virtues consistently is what defines a person as moral or a good individual, while lacking virtues is seen as being immoral or a bad person (Omoregbe, 1993). From the vast realm of philosophy, character serves as the gateway to comprehending the essence and inherent qualities of humanity, as demonstrated through actions that shape moral principles. Put simply, one's character reflects their essence. Thus, character is of utmost importance in both the survival and ethical integrity of people (Abimbola, 1975). For instance, in the ancient community beliefs of the Akan and Yorùbá cultures, possessing a respectable character is intricately linked to one's personal identity, referred to as "oye onipa" in Akan and "o s'eniyan" in Yorùbá. Kii s'eniyan, as described by Idowu (1962), is seen as a derogatory representation of an individual within Yorùbá culture. Hence, morality is inherently interconnected with an individual's being or perception of oneself. The philosophical domain including the notion of being, being, spirit, life-force, and mind is referred to as philosophy of mind or metaphysics. Within the domain of metaphysics, the fundamental nature of existence, spirit, or life-force resides in its inherent connection with the broader universe (Dagobert, 1971). The link between potentiality, destiny, and moral qualities is intricately fused with the actuality of being. Each biological organism harbours ambitions and follows a predestined trajectory. Hence, the manner in which an individual interacts with other beings/forces/spirits in actuality is influenced by the developmental process of potentialities during one's lifetime. This, in turn, determines the moral principles and virtues that guide one's actions.

One of the arguments that has garnered attention is the inquiry into the foundation, basis, and origin of morality in African society. Scholars have raised questions about the concept of morality in African society and its roots. There have been numerous arguments that have been carefully examined to support different perspectives on the source of morality in the African thought system. Wiredu (1998:92) argues that the presence of a medium of morality is crucial for the survival of any society. This implies that Africa, as a society, has managed to endure because it possesses such an instrument of morality. So, the question arises: what forms the

foundation of this morality? What forms the foundation of African morality? And this is one of the goals of ethics, to explore the foundation of morality. When discussing concepts related to ethical ideas, the main focus often revolves around the ability or desire to address the question of why it is important to be moral. In order to accomplish the objective of this research, it is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of the concept of morality and its significance within the African thought system. The concept explored in this work pertains to the unique thought system of the African people, encompassing their distinct way of thinking.

Prominent thinkers such as Bolaji Idowu (1962) and John Mbiti (1969) argue that African morality is intricately connected to their interpretation and convictions in religion. Both concepts revolve on the significance of human existence, with theists contending for an indissoluble link between morality and religion. There are varying viewpoints regarding the foundation of morality in Africa. While there are others who dispute the significant significance of 'religion', others maintain that African morality is based on values such as humanity, communality, and logic, among other foundations. Esteemed scholars in this domain include Wiredu (1992), Oluwole (1985), and Balogun (2018), among other notable figures. They question the religious basis of morality in the African cultures they studied and suggest other elements as the origin of morality in these groups. Udisi(2016), contends that the moral foundation of the Ijaws and by inference most African traditions are socially constructive in nature. As Wiredu (1998:23) explains, "The Akan moral outlook stands on its own, separate from religion." Due to the varying perspectives of these scholars, there is no definitive consensus on the moral foundations of African society.

AFRICAN CONCEPTION OF JUSTICE

Justice in African philosophy places a strong emphasis on maintaining communal harmony, balance, and reciprocity. The common good takes precedence over individual interests, as highlighted by Menkiti (1984). This perspective questions the Western perspective on justice, which tends to focus solely on individualism and rights (Wiredu, 1996). In the realm of African Political Philosophy, justice is commonly perceived as a collective notion, placing great emphasis on the significance of social balance and harmony (Ramose, 1999). This perspective is based on the belief that individuals are not separate from one another, but rather interconnected members of a community (Gyekye, 1997). Therefore, the concept of justice goes beyond just protecting individual rights and focusses on the overall well-being and harmony of the community (Menkiti, 1984). A central concept in African theories of justice revolves around the notion of "ubuntu," which emphasises the interconnectedness of individuals and communities (Ramose, 1999). A philosophy rooted in the values of community and mutual support is highlighted as crucial for achieving justice and promoting the common good (Mbiti, 1969). This perspective questions the traditional Western understanding of justice, which tends to prioritise individualism and competition. Instead, it highlights the significance of cooperation and reciprocity (Wiredu, 1996). Justice is that which

promotes communal existence and enhances the heirachy of beings in the African ontology.

African Political Philosophy also delves into the exploration of tradition and culture in shaping conceptions of justice (Gyekye, 1997). In traditional African societies, justice systems placed a strong emphasis on restorative justice and reconciliation, prioritising these over punishment and retribution (Menkiti, 1984). These systems were frequently based on cultural and spiritual practices that highlighted the significance of community and social harmony (Mbiti, 1969). In addition, African Political Philosophy delves into the enduring effects of colonialism and slavery on African societies and political systems (Mazrui, 1986). A deep analysis of past injustices shapes the way African thinkers view concepts such as justice, governance, and development (Mkandawire, 2001).

DISCOURSES OF AFRICAN POLITICAL THOUGHTS

The political ideologies of every political system or practice are manifested in its political rhetoric. Discussions on African political discourses revolve around the exploration of political ideas, contexts, and strategies for governing, managing, and enhancing political situations within African political systems or society as a whole. According to Van Dijk, political discourse involves the exchange of ideas and perspectives on political matters, which are conveyed and perpetuated through various forms of communication (2006:734). He maintains that political ideologies are clearly reflected in political discourses. "… discourses reveal ideologies by allowing them to be openly expressed and articulated" (2006:732). Political discourses refer to theoretical endeavours aimed at elucidating and explicating political philosophical and ideological concepts.

The exploration of political ideas is conducted via political discourses. Political concepts or theories may also be examined by means of philosophical political discourses. A clear difference between political philosophy and political ideology is acknowledged in this work. African political philosophy refers to the study of the political ideas and value systems that form the foundation of the African political system. However, African political ideologies serve as belief systems that aim to implement these political theories into action (Van Dirk 2011; Billig 1982; Zizek 1994). This work will subsequently explore two political themes that have been prominent in African political discourses. They are focused on the conception of African identity and unity, as well as African development. When exploring these discourses, we will delve into various African political philosophies and ideologies. An essential objective of African political philosophy should be to provide the requisite theoretical rationales and value systems for understanding these political discourses. Further, it should strive to provide enhanced theories and ideologies for the successful implementation of these African political concepts. Our analysis will comprehensively scrutinise some of these political discourses.

THE CONCEPTION OF AFRICAN IDENTITY AND UNITY

In his analysis of the "Discourse on African identity and unity," Hensbroek emphasises the following aspects. The core theme of identity discourse is on the idea of authenticity, and the fundamental philosophy that underpins this idea is existentialism. A fundamental element of identity discourse is the establishment of a sharp differentiation between the native and the non-native, resulting in a split. The global order it advocates is a cultural order characterised by the predominant presence of cultural components, where by persons are structured according to their cultural associations. The main obligation of its advocates is to safeguard and expose the deeply culturally embedded indigenous identity. The prominent motif is on the notion of "roots," shown by the African familial and communal assemblies. Cultural studies, with a theoretical emphasis on identity and a philosophical bent towards holism and essentialism, is the area of concentration (Hensbroek, 1998). Hensbroek raises concerns about the potential issues surrounding political discourse that revolves around cultural belongingness, the division between the indigenous and the foreign, and the ongoing battle to protect and express cultural identities. He argues that the boundary being drawn is overly conditioned, assuming that racial, cultural, continental, and linguistic boundaries align perfectly. It is commonly believed that the human world is divided into a finite number of distinct units, each with its own boundaries and unique characteristics that cannot be disregarded. This perspective on the world being divided into distinct cultural regions prompts contemplation on the concepts of difference, value, and the idea of relativity (Hensbroek, 1998).

The work generally agrees with Hensbroek, it is however crucial to acknowledge the fundamental parameters that contribute to the persistent longing for national or tribal identities and cohesion in Africa. This work focusses on metaphysical ontology, which pertains to the aspiration for oneness among persons, their ancestors, and their deities. Such oneness is considered essential for the welfare, survival, and prosperity of humanity. Furthermore, the absence of a robust self-identity renders meaningful inter-cultural communication and consensus unattainable. When different cultures come together, it is important for them to establish a common foundation for their collaboration. This applies regardless of whether the culture is African or from another country.

Furthermore, this paper firmly asserts that in the present day, it is misguided to assume that a clear separation can be made between the native and the foreign. A contemporary African identity must acknowledge and embrace the complexities of cultural diversity, encompassing linguistic, axiological, tribal, and racial dimensions. The society in Africa today is made up of individuals from various cultural backgrounds, each with their own unique value systems and belonging to different races and tribes. It is misguided for Africa to strive for unity in seclusion rather than embracing unity amidst diversity. Today, cultural diversity is a prominent feature in Africa, as various linguistic, value, and political ideas have intertwined. The rapid changes in Africa have been driven by intermarriages, globalisation, migrations,

politico-social dynamics, and the blending of diverse cultures. This paper argues that as the world becomes more interconnected, individuals are increasingly marginalised and their social and political identities are eroded. There is a growing desire among individuals and minority groups in larger communities to seek security and connection to their cultural heritage, both linguistically and politically. This is a recent trend that is emerging worldwide. As globalisation increases, it seems that individuals are becoming more inclined towards racism and tribalism. This goes against the previous predictions made by social scientists, who believed that as the world became more interconnected, people would become less focused on their tribal or racial identities (Erickson, 2010). Africa is not exempt from this paradigm, which is why the African identity and unity face challenges due to the growing global influence that threatens cultural and tribal communities within African states, leading to desires for autonomy in both cultural and political spheres.

Evidently, the pursuit of a collective national identity and unity stems from a deep cultural awareness and a sense of shared heritage. African communal identity underscores the significance of cultural identification, sub-nationalism, and a collective patrimony resulting from the pursuit of core virtues, values, and the common good of particular communities. This encompasses the safeguarding of life for both individuals and members of a community (Olasunkanmi, 2011). Undoubtedly, people within African communities really seek a collective African identity and solidarity. They believe that by combining their unique and diverse efforts, they can create a powerful community. This unity extends not only to their ultimate goals, but also to the methods they employ, such as collaborating to meet their needs, standing together to defend their social values, and seeking blessings from the divine and their ancestors. Exploring this desire requires a thorough examination from African political thinkers, in order to bring to fruition the vision of a unified African community.

AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

While analysing the African development discourse, Hensbroek contends that many African intellectuals have prioritised the continent's enormous development disparity above cultural issues. The development agenda prioritises solving the real challenge, which is how to close the global economic and technology gap (Hensbroek, 1998). He then goes on to describe the modernisation model, the defining features of African development rhetoric. Development, Claude Ake (2023) in this context is opaquely viewed as merely an aggregation of projects and objectives informed by international dictates and models. The basic concept is pragmatist, and development is the main goal. The distinction between the developed and the underdeveloped, or primitive, worlds is central to the important points. Everywhere you look, people are making strides towards a worldwide modernity as one cohesive human civilisation. The goal of universal development should be to make substantial progress. 'Take off' is the tagline or comparison, and modern Western culture is the main example. Technology and economics are the areas of concentration, whereas modernity is the overarching

theoretical notion. Universalism and voluntarism are philosophical tendencies that are prevalent in many different nations and cultures (Hensbroek, 1998). Hensbroek uses Horton, Casely Hayford, and Azikiwe as exemplars of this paradigm for development, suggesting that he is profoundly interested in it. Horton, Casely Hayford, and Azikiwe were immersed in cultural variety from an early age, according to him. According to Pieter Boele van Hensbroek (1998), these African-American modernists were not motivated by rage against the wrongs of colonialism or racism but by a pragmatic ambition for achievement.

As Africa progresses towards modern nation states, there are significant political challenges that hinder the growth of democracy and economy in African nations. This paper aligns with the perspective of Okenna Ndubuisi (2013), who argues that African identity emphasises a sense of communal existence rather than Western individualism. Furthermore, the African sense of self is deeply connected to the concept of communal bonds. So, African ontology places a strong emphasis on the importance of human beings. Any development paradigm that is truly thoughtful must consider human beings as both the starting point and the ultimate goal. It should be focused on the people, addressing their needs and aspirations" (Okenna, 2013).

The issue with African development lies in the uncritical adoption of Adam Smith's economic framework. However, upon careful analysis of this paradigm, it becomes apparent that the proponents suggest that Africa's development hinges on the acceptance of Adam Smith's free market economic theory and policies. In his paper on "Market economy and its role in poverty in Africa: myths and realities," Lajul emphasises the need for more than just a free market economy for economic development to occur (Lajul, 2016). Lajul argues that in order to promote global economic growth, it is essential for both individuals and institutions, whether economic or political, to cultivate a spirit of collaboration when appropriate and a spirit of competition when appropriate. In addition to implementing the appropriate methodology, utilising the correct economic ideology, and allowing necessary political interventions, these factors have served as the foundation for economic growth in developed and rapidly advancing Asian economies (Lajul, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, African political philosophy presents a wide range of viewpoints on power, justice, and governance. African thinkers, spanning from ancient Egyptian philosophers to modern scholars, have dedicated their intellectual pursuits to exploring profound enquiries regarding human nature, morality, and the common good. This field of study presents alternative perspectives to prevailing Western ideologies and introduces fresh approaches to political theory and practice. African moral conceptions place a strong emphasis on the development of one's character, fostering a sense of community, and recognising the interconnectedness of all human beings. African theories of justice emphasise communal harmony and balance over individual interests, highlighting the concept of "ubuntu" or interconnectedness. African political philosophy delves into the

influence of tradition and culture on ideas of justice and governance. In traditional African societies, justice was approached in a distinct manner, prioritising restorative justice and reconciliation rather than punishment and retribution. In addition, African political philosophy delves into the lasting effects of colonialism and slavery on African societies and political systems. African perspectives on justice, governance, and development are shaped by a thorough analysis of historical injustices. Africa needs to find a middle ground between embracing liberalism and implementing a controlled market economy in order to move forward. The continent must embrace the appropriate methodology, implement the correct economic ideology, and allow for necessary political interventions. This will greatly contribute to the economic growth and development in Africa.

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