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# Democratization options in post-colonial Africa

## A case study of Nigeria

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The task of democratizing Africa has become one of the least tenable projects of the contemporary era. Often, African democratization has been marked by bloody electoral contests, bloody coups d'état, brazen abuse of power and other unimaginable magnitude of ills. In view of such obstacles to democracy, one may wonder what positive results can be expected of this type of democracy in Africa. In spite of this, the West has not relented in forcing one form of the Western democratic model or another on African peoples.

In the process of decolonization, independence movements were confronted with demands made by French and British colonizers that a parliamentary democracy, following the Gaullist and Westminster model respectively, be instituted as a prerequisite for independence.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the current stand of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank is to make the acceptance of the Western-style 'multi-party democracy' a prerequisite for economic aid to African countries. Both are on this basis said to have become 'extremely interested in doing what they can to promote democratization.'<sup>2</sup> This situation has been referred to as 'a continuing neo-colonialism from a perspective of total fiscal dependency.'<sup>3</sup> Though critical of the imperialistic character of democratization, Wim van Binsbergen asserted that

in the contemporary global discourse, 'democracy' has come to occupy an important place. It often carries deep emotional significance. It has acquired great mobilizing power. In the course of the twentieth century, many thousands of people have been prepared to die in struggles legitimated by reference to this symbol; many more people have admired others making such sacrifices in the name of democracy and spurred them on. Democracy has become a major export item of the USA and the NATO.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, in all these instances, the Western multi-party democracy is treated as the only alternative model and enormous efforts are made to force it to work. In this article, therefore, I will focus on the plight of this brand of democracy in Africa. This will be followed by a reflection on the tenets of African consensus democracy. Finally, the task of democracy in contemporary Africa will be highlighted with a view to making suggestions on how to enhance the democratization process in Africa. It will be shown that neither the Western nor the African model alone can sufficiently address the contemporary problems in Africa. On the contrary, relevant elements of both models can be utilized to construct a democratic model which is capable of

solving the present problems. Certainly, such a model would be the best democratization option in contemporary Africa.

### **The plight of Western democratic models in Africa**

The problems of the Western models of democracy in Africa are often ignored or taken less seriously when democracy in general is compared with military dictatorship. As people like Chuba Okadigbo would put it 'we are trying to maintain the reign of the ballot, so as to obviate the tyranny of the bullet.'<sup>5</sup> Under such a frame of mind, no amount of blood which flows in the process of democratization arouses the question of 'Why?' Especially in Africa, it is unclear whether the bullet or the ballot has claimed more lives. In April 1994, in a matter of two weeks, over 100,000 people were reported killed in Rwanda.<sup>6</sup> South Africa keeps on losing lives with the least possibility of ever enthroning a viable democracy. But how many lives have been lost in the process of democratization or under the military regimes is not the subject to be treated in this paper. The present concern is to examine the suitability of Western democratic models in contemporary Africa. Why has this type of democratization led to so many inter-groups clashes all over Africa? Why has it been so bloody, and with so little hope of abating?

Another issue is what has been referred to as the Western, 'most standard' definition of democracy itself, according to which democracy is a system based on competitive parties, in which the governing majority respects the rights of minorities. Discussion on the democratic system accordingly focuses on the concepts of representation, majority rule, opposition, competition, alternative government, control and the like, but hardly ever on the notion of self-governing principles.<sup>7</sup> Western models of democracy clearly reflect a form of structural opposition, which may be less suitable for Africa. What, actually, is wrong with the notion of 'self-governing principles'? In other words why is intrinsic opposition necessary? How compatible are these features of Western democracy with the contemporary multi-ethnic African countries?

In an attempt to answer the above questions, it is important to assert that the analysis is limited mainly to the multi-party system which has become the most popular of the partisan models of democracy. It has been noted that 'in the more recent literature there are very few instances of authors propagating a return to a single-party or no-party system on the grounds of ethnic arguments.'<sup>8</sup>

Several African countries have continually, but with little or no success, tried to make different forms of Western partisan majority rule democracy to work. Nigeria already experimented with different types of multi-party democracy, to which several modifications or changes have been made.

In the Nigerian first republic, which lasted from independence in 1960 until the first military take-over in 1966, political parties were formed *de facto*

on regional basis. Nigeria, in those days, was divided into three regions, the North, the East and the West. Each of the three regions was the home of one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, while the three major political parties likewise each dominated a region: the Hausa/Fulani NPC in the North, Igbo NCNC in the East, and Yoruba AG in the West. However, during the colonial era, the British had structured these regions in such a way that the Northern Region controlled a comfortable majority. This was also reflected in the mode of allocation of seats in the parliament, which was a reproduction of the Western concept of an 'absolute majority'. In these circumstances, given the per capita principle of democracy which was adopted in Nigeria, the NPC only had to secure the 174 seats allocated to the Northern region in a 320-member House of Representatives, to perpetually rule at the centre. This was facilitated by the cabinet system of government - which regarded the party with most seats as the ruling party - which was operated at the time. The greatest threat to the stability and survival of the Nigerian federation was the preponderance of the old Northern Region, both in size and population.<sup>9</sup> As a result of this structural imbalance, this form of Western democracy collapsed in Nigeria, ending in the first military coup d'état, which the plotters claimed was meant to restore sanity to the country. A second coup followed, and a bloody Civil War (1967-1970) followed, in which the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region tried to secede from the Nigerian federation and establish a new republic under the name of Biafra.

In order to remedy the above problems, the military government reviewed the geo-political structure of the country. Initially, twelve different states were created out of the former three regions, while additional structural changes increased the number to nineteen. The change from the Westminster parliamentary democracy to the American presidential democracy was major. Despite that, the structural imbalance remained. Hence, the Second Republic democracy suffered from the same problems as the First. Again, three major political parties dominated the political scene. The National Party of Nigeria (NPN) had its base in the North, the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) in the East, and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) in the West. Next to these operated two minor political parties. Each of these five parties presented a presidential candidate. During the first elections held in the new system, the northern based NPN won a greater number of votes than any of the other parties, but a constitutional crisis arose over whether or not the declared figures of the election were decisive. The leading candidate won 33.76% of the votes cast and also obtained one-quarter of the votes in 12 states.<sup>10</sup> However, the constitution required a winning candidate to cover at least two-third of the 19 states which was 12.66. There would have been little or no problem if the winner had managed to secure thirteen states, but now the other political parties (which together controlled 66.24% of the votes cast) maintained that no winner had emerged. Their protest was ignored. This incident did not help to lessen the tension between the major ethnic groups.

Consequently, partisan factors became very prominent in the performance of the controversial president. This was evident in his appointment of

ministers and it was noted that the composition of the cabinet revealed a 'disturbing inability or sheer unwillingness to expand the scope of search for responsible and useful Nigerians other than those who took him into office and propped him there.'<sup>11</sup> By the second round of elections a lot of damage had already been done and the Nigerian second multi-party democracy vanished into another period of military rule. Clearly, in Nigeria the multi-party democratic system has failed to generate enough solidarity among the component groups to function.

The Babangida military government made further structural adjustments, increasing the number of states to the present thirty. Also, a new form of democracy was introduced; instead of the multi-party option, a two-party form of Western democracy was imposed on Nigeria. This Third Republic also woefully failed even before it was fully established. The results of the June 1993 presidential elections were annulled by the military government and instead of the president elect, an interim administration was mandated to run the affairs of the country. When the interim president announced his resignation, another military regime seized power.

The defunct republic of Biafra, which was essentially Igbo, remains a lasting evidence of how formidable an ethnic group can be. Its living example is the independence of Eritrea. Just as Eritrea and Ethiopia merged at a certain time, northern and southern Nigeria became one political entity only in 1914. Just as Eritrea has broken away, the Igbo or the south is still trying to do the same.

The Nigerian experiments with Western democracy have been characterized as a 'vicious circle of a collapsing democracy.'<sup>12</sup> Democracy likewise collapsed in other African countries. In the Ethiopian democratic experiment, ethnic groups were given the names of political parties. The reason why the formation of political parties along ethnic lines was permitted in Ethiopia must have been to encourage equal participation of these ethnic groups in the decision-making process. Not long after it became very obvious that the arrangement was incapable of leading to the promised land. It was mere freedom of association and individual voting equality. Thus the Ethiopian multi-party democracy collapsed. That the Ethiopian multi-party democracy ended in a fiasco,<sup>13</sup> is as understandable as the collapse of democracy in Nigeria since, in essence, both situations are significantly comparable (although in the Ethiopian case it was explicitly intended that the political parties were ethnically based, while in Nigeria this intention was absent). In fact, Western multi-party democracy is such that the more multiple the parties, the more problematic the model becomes. Many African and even European countries often have to grapple with this problem. In the Netherlands, at a certain time there were about seventy political parties. Reference can also be made to Gabon or Zaire where at a certain moment more than a hundred political parties existed.<sup>14</sup> What happened in Gabon or Zaire may be 'tragi-comical' but also one of the logical results of the Western multi-party democracy in a multi-national polity.

Another phenomenon of Western democracy which ought to be stressed is that of institutionalized or structural opposition. To be in government tends to be a guarantee of a good life which could be totally lost as a member of the opposition. The problems arising from structural opposition were long identified but ignored. It is not surprising that in Benin losing parties were ready to disappear into the party in power, rather than accept the fate of an opposition party.

Just a few years after independence, the first and only Prime Minister of Nigeria, Sir Abubaka Tafewa Balewa, asserted as follows: 'In Nigeria, no party can agree to be in opposition for long.'<sup>15</sup> As Emeka Anyaoku put it: 'I do not know of any African language whose political lexicon includes the concept of a "leader of the loyal opposition"'. Instead there is a clear concept of a political enemy.'<sup>16</sup> Shortly after Balewa made the above remarks he was killed in a process which culminated in the Nigerian civil war. One question asked by Balewa remains very vital: 'democracy, democracy - what is it? There is American democracy, British democracy - why not Nigerian democracy?'<sup>17</sup> Strangely enough, like many African countries Nigeria has limited its democratization process to the copying of one alien brand of democracy or the other. Many argue that copying might not be the problem. I.B. Bello-Imam, for example, observed that

whereas the cabinet system of government is still flourishing in Britain it had failed in Nigeria. In the same manner, whereas the presidential system is vibrating and developing with time in America, its operation in Nigeria was being greeted with scepticism. The logical conclusion therefore is that the type of government is not the problem. The problem is with the operators of the system. It has nothing to do with colour, education and race. It has to do with the attitude of mind.<sup>18</sup>

This type of conclusion has its own far-reaching implications. It assumes that the Western brand of democracy might be or is perfectly alright everywhere. However, in my opinion, the type of government might be the main problem in Africa, and Bello-Imam's conclusion is largely questionable.

Those who tend to consider Western democracy the best alternative form of democracy, often argue that the failure of Western democracy in Africa must be due to the level of development of the respective African countries. This concerns certain aspects of both the level of material and human development. Recently, for example, Marie P. Eboh asserted that 'there cannot be political stability without economic stability.'<sup>19</sup> Likewise Founou-Tchuigoua was said to have argued that 'economic growth always precedes the development of democracy, and that there is no other viable sequence.'<sup>20</sup> This is the type of view which people like G. M. Carew rightly devote much time to refute.<sup>21</sup> According to Buijtenhuis et al, 'more and more statistical analyses are becoming available that demonstrate that there is no direct relation between the type of regime and economic growth.'<sup>22</sup>

Undeniably, however, economic growth requires a certain favourable condition. In Nigeria, the present political instability and lack of accountability are unfavourable for the required economic progress. Therefore, if economic crisis must be arrested before democracy can be established, then a solution to the huge debt burden cannot come from within the country. In my opinion, economic crisis calls for the establishment of an *appropriate* democratic tradition which guarantees the political stability necessary for economic growth or recovery. The view that there must be economic growth prior to the institutionalization of democracy arises essentially from a dependency philosophy. The theoretical and practical validity of such a position seems highly doubtful. It is a lazy man's call for economic aids, and a trap by the money lender for an opportunity to cut 'a pound of flesh'. However, experience has shown that as long as socio-political crisis under such Western democratic models continues, economic instability deepens and borrowing becomes more urgent. Despite the present economic crisis, a country like Nigeria, endowed with such an abundance of human and material resources does not need to borrow a *kobo* ('cent').

A very subtle aspect of the above controversy over whether there must be development before democracy or vice versa concerns the existence of ethnic groups in most African countries. The idea of development has come to include the need to transform Africans into something modern, European or Western. In the words of Ben Naanen, 'A common liberal perspective is to view ethnicity as an anachronism, a kind of primordial hangover which was obstructionist to the ideals of a modern state.'<sup>23</sup> As Carew put it, 'The basis of liberalism's hostility towards ethnopolitical identities can be found in the liberal ontology which treats attributes and qualities as properties of individuals, not groups. It conceives groups as simple aggregates of individuals with their respective properties; a group is thus ultimately reducible to individuals.'<sup>24</sup> Efforts were accordingly made to see that ethnicity would eventually be superseded by modern forms of social relations based on economic or political ties. This project appears to have woefully failed. Instead, the reality of the ethnic groups has become more undeniable. In fact, a world wide 'identity explosion' has led to demands from ethnic groups for greater participation in decision-making processes, especially in developing countries. Therefore, any demand for the multi-party system clearly brings the ethnic question to the fore.<sup>25</sup> In certain ways, these facts seem to have convinced the West that such groups have basic rights.<sup>26</sup> However, despite such an awareness, the democratic criteria as well as the erected structures have not yet been accordingly reviewed. The choice of political leaders is still based on the quantitative one person one vote game of numbers. Similarly, decisions are still based on the partisan forms of majority rule democracy. All the structures of domination and oppression are thereby still left intact.

The fear of domination is very real under the Western multi-party democratic models. Carew tried to solve this problem by the introduction of his 'fairness principle'. But the fairness principle cannot remove the fear of

domination and oppression either. It does not give the minority any legal or constitutional but mere moral protection. This is grossly inadequate in contemporary Africa. In his opinion, 'the majority rule principle need not be the automatic choice as a decision rule for every democratic community.'<sup>27</sup> Still, it is a mere call on the majority not to use the structures of domination and oppression at its disposal but to be fair or just and it leaves the minority at the mercy of the majority. Certainly such an appeal can achieve only very little. People who perpetuate injustice do so hardly out of ignorance but with full knowledge. The need to apply the majority rule principle must be decided only by consensus. The contrary is an absurdity. This is why it is ridiculous to leave it at the disposal of the government to decide when a referendum has become necessary. As a matter of fact, in hardly any community should the majority rule principle be the automatic choice as a decision rule on every issue every time. Under the multi-party democracy such a principle can or does allow the minority or the opposition unrestricted freedom of speech but with little or no influence. In fact, as has been shown it can also leave a larger segment of the community powerless since a certain form of majority rule under the multi-party system can be less than 40% of the entire adult population.

Peoples of Africa have had a long experience of the implications of the above state of affairs. Events have clearly shown that they find it highly intolerable. Since it is a grave risk to be or to remain in opposition, it is no surprise that political parties are not only seen to be, but are actually mainly concerned with winning votes.<sup>28</sup> This is the dominant character of their debates even in the parliament. Hardly any space is left for the parties to deal seriously with issues affecting the various segments of the society. On account of such a phenomenon the indispensability of pressure groups which are popularly referred to as 'civil societies' has become unquestionable.<sup>29</sup> World wide such groups often take to the streets to force the governments to wake up to their responsibilities. Kimmerle quite correctly remarked that 'Liberal democracy is weakening under the struggles of diverse pressure groups.'<sup>30</sup> Why must there be a governmental arrangement which requires to be so pressurized? How effective could the pressure groups be? Very often they are on the streets protesting either over completed governmental actions, or over actions which a government has got the parliament to give a legal protection to, or over actions which a government is certain the parliament must endorse. No amount of mass mobilization can make such governmental actions illegal or unconstitutional. Ultimately, therefore, the civil societies or pressure groups, the opposition party or parties, and the citizens at large must wait for the next round of elections to see if they can remove such a government. All these problems can help to understand the plight of Western democracy in Africa. They will also help to see why Africans have started to examine their own traditional forms of democracy.

As has already been noted, a political party or a coalition which controls the required majority can form the government and pursue its own

programmes without any reference to the rest of the political parties. Yet those political parties could have a following of about 60% of the entire adult population. A Nigerian civilian president in 1979 won the election with only 33.76% of the votes cast. Thus there is an urgent need for Africans to look inward in order to see if something better can be found there.

### **Tenets of pre-colonial African democracy**

A question which may be asked is: What is African democracy? Is there indeed any African democracy? If there is, how does it function? Questions such as the above tend to reveal a certain amount of doubt about the subject under discussion. Conceptually or linguistically they seem to lead to some scepticism. Democracy is etymologically Greek in origin. Multi-party democracy which is largely different from the Greek practice arguably derives from it. Both are all the same Western. Could there have been a traditional or pre-colonial African democracy? Is there any indigenous term or word by which it was known? Such lines of thought have led some people to treat every pre-colonial African political arrangement as anything but democratic. V.G. Simiyu, for example, asserted that 'In Black Africa, whether the political system was that of the highly centralized states or the amorphous non-centralized communities, it did not belong to a democratic tradition. They were rudiments of democratic principles and practices ... but it would be dangerous to equate those practices with advanced forms of democracy.'<sup>31</sup> By an advanced form of democracy Simiyu meant nothing but the problematic Western multi-party majority rule democracy. If democracy is nothing but the Western partisan political organization, then, there would be no point in talking of African democracy at all. However, the attraction which democracy has for Africans is that its philosophical meaning agrees largely with certain forms of African pre-colonial political organization. It is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Several authors have stressed the fact that in pre-colonial Africa, decisions were taken on the basis of consensus. This has become widely referred to as African consensus democracy. Various forms of consensus democracy have emerged as being typical of pre-colonial Africa. In the words of K. A. Busia, 'When a council, each member of which was the representative of a lineage, met to discuss matters affecting the whole community, it had always to grapple with the problem of reconciling sectional and common interests. In order to do this, the members had to talk things over: they had to listen to all the different points of view. So strong was the value of solidarity that the chief aim of the councillors was to reach unanimity, and they talked till this was achieved. Some have singled out this feature of talking till unanimity was reached as the cardinal principle of African democracy.'<sup>32</sup> In fact, only very little doubts might still exist regarding the reality of African democracy. Even the concept of 'parliamentary democracy' is not new to Africans. Mokwugo

Okoye has noted that 'it is merely tribal government formalized by modern conventions.'<sup>33</sup> He added that 'there is nothing new in the idea of representation, or of mandate to govern entrusted by the community to the rulers, even in the idea of removal of inept or evil government by conventional means.'<sup>34</sup> However, what is new in contemporary parliamentary government in Africa, is the system of party government based on votes. It is essentially the structural and institutionalized opposition that is new in Africa. The old tribal democracy was based on rotational representation and division of labour, on consensus and a rational coordination of community interests and views; in this way, it avoided the monopoly and frustration inherent in the Western two-party or multi-party system in which the winner takes all.<sup>35</sup>

One of the models of African consensus democracy is the Igbo model. Among the Igbo decision by consensus applies both to the meetings of the council of elders and to the general assembly of the village. It has to be stressed that Igbo form of consensus democracy is not very unique in Africa. Notwithstanding its local peculiarities, it is based on the same principle which obtains among many other African peoples and it shares the common characteristics of African democracy in terms of the concepts of communalism, solidarity, consensus, extended family system and popular participation or representation. In the words of C. Nze, 'Communalism which is the African-Igbo man's answer and offer to those in search of a mode of living, contains the germ of salvation ... as it is in its fullness a consensus democracy ... It is a pattern of living which guarantees social solidarity and cohesion. It has a unifying strength and it can unite families, villages, towns, countries, continents and the world.'<sup>36</sup>

In an attempt to understand how consensus democracy works I took an active part in Igbo consensus democracy within my community. At present, one of my uncles is the head of the community being its oldest living male. Another is diviner and very versed in Igbo tradition. In addition, I conducted an extensive research on Igbo political systems using questionnaire and oral interview methods. I also collected many written constitutions which stipulate the current methods of decision-making in different Igbo communities. All these sources have been combined to provide far-reaching data on Igbo consensus democracy.

Under the African-Igbo consensus democracy two broad features are most important. They concern the nature of the geo-political units within a polity as well as the modes of representation and decision-making process. In a polity, for example a village-group or town, there are constituting villages, each of which is usually semi-autonomous, with its own leadership. For issues that concern the entire polity or village-group, all the constituting groups must fully participate on the basis of equality. This must be so irrespective of obvious cases of inequality in terms of economic, demographic, territorial, social and all other forms of human and material resources. It is important to remark that the internal boundaries of such societies were not arbitrary like in

the present African context. Equally significant is the fact that members of a polity or any of its sub-units usually have a common genealogical or historical background. Such factors tend to greatly enhance their acceptance of one another as members of a family. But their continued solidarity depends a lot on the socio-political organization which they subscribe to.

The most acceptable form of socio-political organization is the type which ensures popular and direct participation of all adult males or females in the decision-making process. This is obtained in situations where the number of people involved makes it not only possible but also fruitful. In other words, within a kindred group which is made up of families, all the adult males or females in their respective groups are expected to participate directly in the decision-making process. This is also expected at the village meeting in which all the kindred groups must be present. At the level of the village-group, however, direct participation of every adult male might become impractical. In such circumstances, it suffices when each of the constituting groups is equally represented in the decision-making process. Effort is thus made to ensure that at least one delegate, but usually two or more representatives come from each of the component units. It is important to note that the members of non-kinship groups (title societies, age-grades and professional associations like diviners, traders, blacksmiths and carvers) are usually present during community meetings to allow them to defend their own special interests as the need arises.

Every effort must be made to ensure wide publicity and attendance of the meetings. Usually, the town or community crier goes round using metal or wooden gongs to announce the time and place of the meeting. The venue is usually the compound of the oldest man or the community square. If the meeting is to be held in the community square, as many adult members as possible are encouraged to attend and to take part fully in the deliberations. Whereas, if the meeting takes place in the compound of the community head, mainly the members of the council of elders or their representatives are expected to attend. A very important practice is that the oldest man must contact the heads of other constituting groups in advance before the town crier can go round to inform the entire community. Nowadays publicity has become less difficult since printed and electronic media can be used. Unlike in the pre-colonial era, decisions taken by the council of elders or the general assembly can now be preserved in written forms. I have acted personally on many occasions as a secretary in my community elders council and general assembly. There are several other ways the modern society has enhanced or can enhance the practice of African-Igbo consensus democracy.

What remains dominant under the African-Igbo democracy is that decisions must be taken on the basis of consensus. The fact that the constituting sub-units in a polity are represented on the basis of equality ensures that the numerically strong and the numerically weak are each entitled to equal say in the decision-making process. It is not like the meeting of shareholders in which one shareholder can speak louder than the rest of the members. Effort is made not to institutionalize such inequalities which lead to domination and

oppression. The economic giant must accept that he might not become a war general. Besides, despite the diversity of talents, if the community must survive, every member must be at the service of others. Generally, this fundamental equality is allowed to characterize even their economic relationship: on the issue of revenue generation and distribution (a problematic field in contemporary African politics), for example, the sub-units must decide by consensus which formula to adopt. For instance, they decide by consensus whether input into the generation of common revenue must be on the basis of equality or proportionality (which entails that the weakest and strongest respectively must bear the least and the greatest burden). Any formula they eventually adopt would automatically serve as their basis of revenue distribution. In taking such a decision the least advantaged unit is usually allowed to have the last word on the choice of the available alternatives. Since such matters are very crucial they cannot be treated in the absence of any of the component groups. Likewise, none of the constituting groups can afford inadequate, poor or irresponsible representation. Some authors tend to deny the possibility of voting in African consensus democracy, claiming that the notion of political majority and minority is not part of the African tradition.<sup>37</sup> But I know from participatory experience that sometimes some issues can be unanimously accepted to be put to vote. In such circumstances adequate care must be taken to preserve the solidarity of the community.

Another feature of the Igbo consensus democracy is that powers were not divided into that of the executive, legislative and judiciary as in the Western tradition. On the contrary, the same council of elders or general assembly can exercise the executive, legislative and judicial powers.

One of the major limitations of the African-Igbo form of democracy is that it makes a distinction between male and female. The right to participate in the community decision-making process is open to only the adult males. Women can attend only on invitation. However, those women also hold their own separate assembly in which they take decisions on the basis of consensus. This arrangement has been widely referred to as dual-sex system. (Reference can be made to Kamene Okonjo's 'The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria'.) It may be necessary to point out that the gap between the different gender-based political organizations varies from one community to another. In a joint meeting of both sexes, usually the male head of the community presides. The ideals of consensus democracy are often maintained. But the male group still exercises a measure of control over the female counterpart. Thus despite the active participation of women in the activities of the community a considerable degree of sexual inequality is maintained.

### **The task of democracy in contemporary Africa**

A major problem which contemporary Africa faces is how to overcome the limitations of Western democratic models which recognize the reality of mainly individuals but treat groups as if they do not exist. There is every need to tackle such problems of democratization in Africa not only from the theoretical but also from the practical points of view. It has been demonstrated that the principle of one person one vote, which is largely a game of numbers, cannot in theory or in practice eliminate the above problems. As the 'African Leadership Forum' put it 'Our own brand of democracy must be sensitive to our multi-national status in which the fostering of national unity and cultural identity, enthronement of justice and equality as well as the particularization of the will of all the sections of the society are made indispensable attributes of the polity.'<sup>38</sup>

In my opinion, since the Western multi-party democracy has largely failed, or has led to serious crisis at least in Africa, it might be useful to try the traditional African alternative models. Perhaps in the process certain aspects of both African and Western forms of democracy can be found useful for the construction of a new model of democracy. However, the extent to which either of the two traditions is relevant must depend strictly on the problems referred to above.

In order to re-establish the principle of consensus democracy in post-colonial Africa, it is necessary to restructure the internal geographical boundaries of each African country with due respect to its constituting ethnic groups. Worthy of note is that many modern political sub-units in Africa have virtually nothing to do with the people. In Nigeria, for example, there are two levels of federal constituencies, namely, the wider level from which senators are elected and the narrower one from which the candidates for the House of Representatives are elected. Both categories of sub-units are respectively about 90 and 600 in number. In each of the 30 states there are numerous state constituencies. About 6000 legislative units called wards have been created out of about 500 local government councils. The candidates for the above legislative units must belong to any of the recognized political parties. Having been elected nothing more is expected to happen between them and the people who elected them. To a very large extent this negates the African or specifically the Igbo concept of representation. The idea of a representative who must be either in principle or in practice independent of those he is representing is incompatible with the African tradition. Worse still, under this type of Western democracy none of these candidates can be withdrawn by those who elected him. The electorate must wait for three or more years to vote another candidate who might be a worse representative. The risks are thus enormous. Under the African consensus democracy the situation is different. The flow of information between the representative and the electorate must remain constant and mutual. A representative could be very easily withdrawn for unsatisfactory performance.

In order to tackle the above problems adequately, the internal boundaries of each country in Africa must be harmonized. For instance, in Nigeria all the traditional boundaries which define the ethnic groups and those that define all the modern geo-political sub-units must be reconciled. Already, the government is under constant pressure to create more states, local councils and wards. This indiscriminate creation cannot solve the present problems. Like most African countries Nigeria is a federation, the nature of whose composition has remained too vague. This is due to the fact that hardly any serious attempt has been made to understand its ethnic composition. The proposed harmonization exercise seems, therefore, to be an imperative.

Having harmonized both the traditional and modern internal boundaries an appropriate network of sub-units will emerge. Just as was the case in pre-colonial Africa, such new boundaries will tend to be more stable. In line with the spirit of consensus democracy, it must be ensured that each of the emerging sub-units is represented in government on the basis of equality. This will accordingly shift emphasis away from the interests of the political parties or the actors, to those of the constituencies.

Although in pre-colonial Africa a representative group like the council of elders exercised *all* the powers of government, in a contemporary African country the principle of separation of powers can be adapted to the African democratic model. In other words, three separate organs respectively composed of the representatives of the sub-units on the basis of equality must be established. The three organs shall be respectively responsible for the exercise of the executive, legislative and judicial powers. The representatives in each of the three organs shall be directly accountable to their various sub-units. In this way debates in the parliament, for example, will reflect both the parochial and general or common interests. This type of arrangement will generate more diverse ideas thereby making decisions to be more representative but also more difficult to reach. In my opinion, such difficulties are quite understandable and worthwhile. There is hardly any other way to realize the goal of democracy in contemporary Africa.

At the executive level, the representatives will elect a presiding officer from their members. He may be called a president, prime minister or - better still - an appropriate African term may be adopted. Other representatives and this presiding officer will constitute the cabinet or government. The whole problem of national or federal character which must be reflected in the executive appointments can be most decisively solved under this consensus democratic arrangement. The president as truly a *primus inter pares* cannot take certain steps without due consultation with other representatives in the cabinet. A government so composed is in a better position to at least know the problems of the people in order to offer appropriate solutions to them. Such problems can be promptly presented to the government from any corner of the country with the assurance that it will be adequately treated. There will be no structural majority or minority to predispose the members either positively or negatively.

The appointment of the judicial officers by the government or the executive is the most fundamental ground of the weakness of the judiciary under the Western democratic models. There was a report that 'In Ghana, for the Court of Appeal giving a judgement which was to the prejudice of the government headed by Kwame Nkrumah, the Chief Judge was dismissed; the judges were also dismissed.'<sup>39</sup> A president of the USA was said to have considered the appointment of a judge who decided a case against him (the president) as one of his greatest mistakes. Democracy in the USA was said to have remained in a state of 'judicial emergency', since Clinton has reduced the number of vacant seats to be occupied by judges (113 vacant seats under the Bush administration) by six only.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, it has been observed that in Nigeria the judiciary was by far the weakest of the three arms of government.<sup>41</sup> Under consensus democracy such a problem would not arise. The constituting sub-units must send their respective representatives to the judiciary. A body so composed will be in a better position to take care of judicial matters in the polity. This is by far a better condition for the required judicial impartiality. In such a context, courts must be careful in setting precedents because once set they can no longer be easily set aside. This model also creates the appropriate forum for the reform of the existing laws in Africa.

African consensus democracy makes the principle of separation of powers more meaningful since it makes the three arms of government more independent and so more effective as an in-built mechanism for checks and balances. They are each and jointly accountable to the people from whom they derive their authority. Since the consensus system does not require the existence of political parties a free atmosphere prevails during deliberations in the different arms of government. The possibility for any political party to high-jack the government by the control of political powers is eliminated. Such a ground for dictatorial powers does not exist under this model.

Concerning the 'universal human rights', it might be necessary to stress that like the opposition parties, pressure groups or civil societies, an individual may exercise enormous freedom of speech but with little or no influence within the Western multi-party democracy. His real and ultimate right is to cast his vote. The limitedness of freedom of speech can be understood better by the ex-presidents, ex-prime ministers and so on. Which government is prepared to listen to whom? Members of a political party basically want only a certain number of votes which gives them the licence to rule for a certain number of years. Since issues will constantly be referred to the constituencies, individuals have greater chances to participate in the decision-making process under the consensus democratic model. He is also better disposed to listen to alternative views since there are no political walls to jeopardize free discussion. It is an absurdity for an individual to cast his vote only to ultimately find himself powerless, hopeless and far away from the emerging government. What sense would the talks about human rights make in such a context? Why will he not develop political apathy in his helplessness before these governments widely known for their violation of the promised human rights?

A question which is often asked is how decisions could be taken if, for example, a majority and a minority maintain incompatible stands. This is a problem. But this type of problem means one thing in the context of Western tradition and another within that of Africa. Under the Western multi-party democracy the majority or the minority is conceived of as composed of mere individuals. This obtains in every election within the polity or any of its sub-units. On the contrary, African consensus democracy shows that those individuals could belong to one or more of the constituting groups. In other words, a minority or majority could comprise members of an ethnic group. If any stalemate arises, therefore, the members must see it as a great threat to their solidarity, and must treat the problem with greater sense of responsibility. The right of every group to be heard is intrinsic under the consensus democracy. According to Nze, 'Just as the individual who makes his choice needs to be free, a group or community must be free to choose what is in its interest.'<sup>42</sup> It would be unfair to structurally prevent any group from defending its interests. The failure of Western multi-party majority rule democratic models to protect the interests of the disadvantaged groups generates a fear of domination and oppression that makes it impossible for it to thrive in Africa.

In conclusion, the plight of democracy in contemporary Africa can serve as the basis of a more critical re-appraisal of the democratic models which have so far dominated the democratization process. There is nothing so far to suggest that any given model of democracy is optimal. On the contrary, what has emerged from the entire critical situation is the need to take fundamental steps to save the present ugly situation. A very important goal is to make sure that all the groups in a polity are adequately represented in the decision-making process. Once this is done, hardly any group will continue to agitate for a separate existence or autonomy. As has been demonstrated above, this task demands a critical dialogue between African and Western traditions. Perhaps, the most important contribution the former can make is its emphasis on a type of equal representation of the component groups in a polity, while the latter will provide all the benefits of a modern society. Therefore, the democratization option for contemporary Africans might be neither the Western nor the traditional African model in its entity, but one which must have benefited from both traditions.

#### Notes:

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7. I.B. Bello-Imam, 'Democracy in Nigeria: a myth or reality' in: Atanda *e.a.*, *Proceedings*, 541-2.
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11. Oyovbaire, 'Federalism and constitutional change', 379.
12. V.D. Basse, 'An analysis of democracy in Nigeria (MA thesis, Nsukka 1990) 137.
13. Buijtenhuis and Rijnierse, *Democratization*, 76.
14. *Ibidem*, 54.
15. K.A. Busia, *Africa in search of democracy* 28; see also E.K. Ruch and K.C. Anyanwu, 'Consensus democracy and political personalism' in their *African philosophy* (Rome 1981) 30.
16. E. Anyaoku, quoted in *The Economist*, 22 February 1992; see also Buijtenhuis and Rijnierse, *Democratization*, 5.
17. Ruch and Anyanwu, 'Consensus democracy', 309.
18. Bello-Imam, 'Democracy in Nigeria', 551.
19. M.P. Eboh, 'Is Western democracy the answer to the African problem?' (conference paper, Rotterdam: EUR, October 1993) 3.
20. Quoted in Buijtenhuis and Rijnierse, *Democratization*, 40.
21. G.M. Carew, 'The betrayal of democracy - democracy and state formation in postcolonial African society' (unpublished paper 1993).
22. Buijtenhuis and Rijnierse, *Democratization*, 52.
23. B. Naanen, 'Oil-producing minorities and the restructuring of Nigerian federalism: the case of the Ogoni People' (seminar paper, Leiden: African Studies Centre, February 10, 1994) 2.
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25. Buijtenhuis and Rijnierse, *Democratization*, 72.
26. M. Galenkamp, *Individualism versus collectivism: the concept of collective rights* (Rotterdam 1993) 139-171.
27. Carew, 'The betrayal of democracy', 18.
28. Kimmerle, 'Art and philosophy', 174.
29. Buijtenhuis and Rijnierse, *Democratization*, 62 and 76.
30. Kimmerle, 'Art and philosophy', 174.
31. V.G. Simiyu, 'The democratic myth in the African traditional societies' in: W.O. Oyugi *e.a.*, *The democratic theory and practice in Africa* (Nairobi 1987) 68; see also Buijtenhuis and Rijnierse, *Democratization*, 5-6.
32. K.A. Busia, *Africa in search of democracy* 28.
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36. C. Nze, *Aspects of African communalism* (Onitsha 1989) 'Preface'.
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42. Nze, *Aspects of African communalism*, 12.