

# THE DEMOCRATIC NATURE OF AFRICAN SOCIETIES

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## Introduction

The London-based Africa Centre invited me to join a panel discussing the topic of elections and democracy in Africa in January 2011. My co-panelists were Stephen Chan, Professor of International Relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies; Patrick Smith, Editor of *Africa Confidential* and *The Africa Report*, and Remi Okunlola, Lawyer and Executive Director of SeaWolf Oilfields.

With speakers from such diverse backgrounds, the Africa Centre opted to let us discuss whatever theme we wanted to highlight, as long as it was connected to the broader issue of democracy in Africa. Professor Chan gave an overview of the constitutional environment in which elections were taking place in several African countries. Patrick Smith talked about the social, political and economic circumstances that led to the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia, while Remi Okunlola discussed the need to find ways of reducing the cost of the democratic process in Nigeria and, by extension, other African states.

In my intervention, I praised Somaliland for its adoption of a democratic system based on free and fair elections, as well as elements of traditional African structures of government. I then went on to argue that democracy was an intrinsic African way of ruling, and that just as African creativity and ingenuity did flourish under democratic systems in the past, they could do so again should modern African countries democratise themselves.

I knew that the misrepresentation of traditional African societies as fundamentally undemocratic and tyrannical was widespread in the West. But the feedback my intervention received from the attendees, who were overwhelmingly of African origins, has convinced me that this misrepresentation has been so internalised by Africans that it is now deep-rooted and ingrained in many of them. The aim of the following article is to help dispel this misconception, and encourage democratic, civic and social engagement amongst African communities both in Africa and in the Diaspora.

## **I. The Misrepresentation of Traditional African Societies**

I remember the first time I became aware of the tendency to overlook the democratic nature of traditional African societies. I was aged sixteen, and attending a philosophy lecture. The lesson was on the different forms of government. In relation to democracy, the lecturer stated that it was invented in Ancient Greece in general and in Athens in particular. As he described the direct democracy practised by the Athenians, I realized that the agora the lecturer was depicting was uncannily similar to the discussion tree, the place where, in our villages, people would assemble to discuss important issues and, when necessary, vote to determine what to do. I asked the lecturer what evidence he had that the Athenians, and not our ancestors, had invented the practice of direct democracy. He replied that he could not encourage us to view what was done in our villages as well as many other African villages as direct democracy because it was not recorded as such in the books he used to prepare his lessons. These were, of course, Western books.

The denigration, denial, misrepresentation or overlooking of the colonised people's culture and achievements is neither new nor unfathomable. Most people can easily perceive that this is done primarily to justify the colonial process. But what is less perceptible is how, even relatively long after colonisation, the colonial mindset can still shape the outlook of former colonisers on the ex-colonised, and that of the former colonised communities on themselves.

The myth of African rulers as intrinsically undemocratic and tyrannical permeates the frequent references in Western media and books to dictators like Robert Mugabe, Idi Amin Dada, Jean Bedel Bokassa or Mobutu Sese Seko as "African big men", "African strong men" and "African despots". The journalists and writers who use these expressions are often well-read, educated and informed people. They know as well as I do that without initial support from Western and other non-African countries, many of these tyrants would never have achieved power, or would not have been able to rule for a long time without being ousted by popular revolt. But through their constant use of the adjective "African" to describe these dictators, they are, consciously or unconsciously, attributing their existence to their africanness, rather than to external circumstances.

Africans' internalisation of the myth of the typically dictatorial nature of their rulers manifests itself in many ways. One of the most damaging is the tendency of many Africans to support dictators who, after falling out with their often Western backers, use fake African nationalism as a ploy to perpetuate themselves in power. Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Laurent Gbagbo of Cote d'Ivoire are cases in point. A lot of African people are usually eager to criticise the slaughter of Africans and the looting of African wealth by Western colonisers and neo-imperialists. But Mugabe and Gbagbo are committing these crimes as well; however many of these critics are unwilling to chastise them on the basis that they are, allegedly, ruling in an African fashion to defend African interests.

The internationalisation of the misrepresentation of African societies as fundamentally undemocratic and tyrannical is also evident in the tendency of many Africans to reject democracy as a Western invention that is alien to Africa. Other Africans, who have also internalised this misconception, but who are eager to embrace democracy, are unable to imagine that modern African countries can successfully incorporate elements of traditional African structures of government into a modern democratic system.

I had the opportunity to experience a manifestation of the latter at the debate organised by the Africa Centre. In my intervention, I described Somaliland's form of government. It has a Constitution that stipulates the democratic nature of Somaliland; 3 political parties; a democratically elected president; a Parliament made up of 2 Houses: the Upper House, which is the House of Elders, representing traditional leaders, and the Lower House, made up of elected representatives. This system allows the respect of the democratic will of the people, while avoiding the disadvantages of the winner takes all practice, which has wrecked and is still wrecking so much havoc throughout Africa.

I referred to Somaliland's form of government as an excellent system for African states, which are artificial countries whose borders were designed by outsiders, with total disregard for cultural or ethnic differences. The House of Elders ensures that although democratically elected people are in power, the voices of everybody, including those of ethnic minorities, are heard, and this gives assurance to all the communities that their interests will be preserved. I gave concrete evidence that this

system is working very well, as several free and fair municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections have been held in Somaliland without confrontations or violence before or after these elections.

During the question and answer session, a young member of the UK African Diaspora criticised me for seeming unaware that traditional African leaders could so easily succumb to corruption that they could hardly be reliable agents of democracy. I was expecting at least one person in the audience to interrupt her with a remark along the lines of “We are good ones to talk, with the cash for honours, the MPs’ expenses and all the corruption scandals we have just had here!” Instead, her intervention received wild applauses from almost all the attendees.

Though surprising, the incapacity of so many people to acknowledge that traditional African leaders do not have a monopoly on corruption, and that they should not be excluded from the democratic process on the basis that they may commit a misdeed that all human beings are exposed to, is understandable. It reflects the persistence of the misrepresentation of traditional African societies as intrinsically undemocratic, and highlights the urgent need to dispel this myth.

## **II. The Democratic Nature of Pre-Colonial African Societies**

By modern standards, neither ancient Athens, nor pre-modern Western monarchies, nor pre-colonial African kingdoms, nor the Aztec or Chinese empires, nor any other past empires, would be considered truly democratic societies. For instance, the enslavement and ritual killing of other human beings were practised in most, if not all of these places. Where voting existed, several groups, often women and members of the lower classes, were not allowed to exercise this right.

However, the presence of a few democratic elements, such as the capacity of eligible voters to attend debates and vote on specific issues, and the existence of democratic mechanics, are used to assert the democratic nature of ancient Athens. Equally, the presence of several democratic elements in pre-colonial African societies can and should be used to assert their democratic nature. A study of many pre-colonial African kingdoms and empires, including the Kingdom of Kongo, the Songhai and the Mali Empires reveals the democratic nature of pre-colonial African societies.

The Kingdom of Kongo existed from 1390 to 1914. At its height, it encompassed large parts of present-day Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Congo-Brazzaville. The Kongo king, called Mwene Kongo by the people, was widely believed to possess great religious power and authority. However, the king's secular power depended on personal attributes, the will of the people and, above all, participatory democracy principles. The village, often made up of 100 to 200 people, constituted Kongo's basic social unit after the family. Each village was ruled by a chief elected by the village's citizens. Villages were aggregated in states of around 1,000 to 5,000 people, and were governed by rulers elected by the villages' chiefs. The states were grouped in provinces, which constituted the highest administrative units of the Kingdom of Kongo. The provinces were ruled by leaders elected by states' governors. The provinces' rulers, in turn, elected the king of the Kongo Kingdom. Although they were, in principle, elected for life, the villages' chiefs, states and provinces' governors, as well the king, were accountable to their electors, and could be ousted if they were deemed unfit to carry on ruling.<sup>1</sup>

The Songhai Empire, which existed from 1340 to 1591, extended across the Niger Valley, west to Senegal and east to present-day Niger, and covered nearly 1,500,000 square metres at its height.<sup>2</sup> The Songhai Empire was notable for the religious and administrative freedom enjoyed by its people, and for the democratic autonomy of its provinces. While the rulers and the elites were often followers of Islam, the overwhelming majority of the citizens were free to practise a wide variety of traditional African religions. Though the governors of the provinces were usually appointed by the Songhai ruler, they were free to administer these provinces according to the democratic will of their people. The citizens of villages and towns had the power to elect local representatives, who were directly accountable to them and not to the king on local issues. The judiciary system was independent and

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed depictions of the Kingdom of Kongo can be found in books such Ann Hilton's *The Kingdom of Kongo*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1985; Jan Vansina's *Les anciens royaumes de la savane*, Institut de Recherches Economiques et Sociales, Université Lovanium: Léopoldville, 1965; and Basil Davidson's *A History of East and Central Africa to the Late Nineteenth Century*, New York: Doubleday, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Sékéné Mody Cissoko in *Tombouctou et l'empire Songhay: épanouissement du Soudan nigerien aux XVe-XVIe siècle*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 1996 and John O. Hunwick in *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa'di's *Ta'rīkh Al-sūdān* down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, Leiden: Brill Academic, 1999 offer excellent descriptions of the Songhai Empire.

controlled, not by the king, but by members of the academic community who were answerable to their local constituencies.

The Mali Empire existed from the 1230s to the 1600s.<sup>3</sup> It covered the modern-day countries of Senegal, southern Mauritania, Mali, northern Burkina Faso, western Niger, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, the Ivory Coast and northern Ghana. At its height in 1350, the Mali Empire was second only to the Mongol Empire in terms of size. The Mali kings, called Mansa, acquired territories through conquests and annexations. However, they were able to keep their empire united not by relying on dictatorial rule, but by resorting to a highly decentralised form of administration. Thus, eligible voters in villages, towns and cities were allowed to elect their own chiefs. These chiefs had, in turn, the power to elect the governors of the provinces who were recognised as Dyamani-Tigui or masters of provinces by the Mansa. The county-level administrators, called Kafo-Tigui or county-masters were chosen, not by the Mansa, but by the governors of the provinces.

Various factors explain the decline or collapse of many sub-Saharan African kingdoms from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The most common are linked to the transatlantic slave trade, which depopulated African states, and fomented wars and divisions amongst them. By the time of the scramble for Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the territories that were formerly part of mighty empires were too weak and divided to withstand the onslaught of Western powers and their subsequent colonisation. But the triumph of Westerners cannot and should not in any way validate their misrepresentation of pre-colonial African societies as intrinsically undemocratic and tyrannical.

### **III. The Need to Highlight the Democratic Nature of Pre-Colonial African Societies**

The negative impact on modern African countries of the denial of the democratic nature of pre-colonial African societies has been devastating. Convinced that democracy was too complex and extrinsic a system for African populations to master, former Western colonisers colluded with their African puppets and allies to

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<sup>3</sup> Excellent descriptions of the Mali Empire can be found in Joseph Ki-Zerbo's *Histoire de l'Afrique noire: D'hier à demain*, Paris: Hatier, 1978; Daniel Chu and Elliott Skinner's *A Glorious Age in Africa: The Story of Three Great African Empires*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Trenton: Africa World, 1995; and D. T. Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. Trans. G. D. Pickett. London: Longman, 1979.

impose dictatorial regimes on these populations for decades. The need to stop the spread of communism and prevent the collapse of the artificial states bequeathed by the colonisers strengthened the case for the enforcement of tyrannical forms of government that were, in reality, alien to African people.

Corruption was and remains rampant in these states, not because Africans are more corrupt or corruptible than other human beings, but because of the fundamentally corrupt nature of the post-colonial model of government itself. Power was not granted to rulers democratically elected by African people and thus, accountable to them. It was given to tyrants chosen, bought, backed and armed by foreigners to defend foreign interests, instead of the interests of African people. Having achieved power through corrupt, undemocratic and brutal means, these tyrants knew that they lacked legitimacy, and could only rule through corruption and brutal repression. With no independent national parliamentary, judiciary or any other mechanics to rein them in, they and their cronies were free to plunder their countries at will and keep their loot in banks and territories controlled by their foreign backers. Thus, although they constantly justified their dictatorial rule by asserting that it was necessary to prioritise the pursuit of development over democracy, they gave their oppressed compatriots nothing but abject poverty and corruption.

Democracy is far from being a panacea for all Africa's ongoing problems. It is not an event that can happen and satisfy people overnight, but a process that needs perpetual nurturing. However, at a time when there are many influential African and foreign voices advocating the adoption of a system similar to that of the dictatorial yet economically successful Chinese model,<sup>4</sup> it is necessary to stress that (a) dictatorship is more extrinsic to the African way of life than democracy, and (b) African countries such as Botswana and Mauritius that have embraced democracy for decades have fared much better than dictatorial African nations in terms of economic prosperity, peace and development opportunities for young and other people.

Furthermore, while corruption is as rife in dictatorial China as it is in dictatorial African countries, the corrupt Chinese elites are investing primarily in their

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<sup>4</sup> Such voices include the Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo who, in her hugely successful book *Dead Aid*, asserts that what poor countries need "is not a multi-party democracy, but in fact a decisive benevolent dictator;" quoted in *The New York Times*, 23 January 2011, p. 2.

motherland, whereas corrupt Africans are doing so in Western and other foreign nations. This is due to the fact many Chinese become members of the elite classes after distinguishing themselves by their patriotic zeal, whereas African elites are mainly made up of people who have distinguished themselves by their eagerness to loot their countries to serve foreign and selfish personal interests. Only a democratic system with provisions for democratic mechanisms as transparent and robust as those that existed in many pre-colonial African territories can change this sorry state of affairs.

Pre-colonial African kingdoms and societies can no longer be replicated, not least because almost all post-colonial African states have to contend with the problems inherent in the forced co-existence of previously separated ethnic, cultural and religious communities. But this reality strengthens, rather than weakens the case for the nurturing of democracy in Africa. The decades of instability, civil wars, coups and ethnic conflicts that have characterised almost all dictatorial post-colonial African countries clearly show that the dictatorial system has not been, and will never be able to provide adequate solutions to these problems.

The way forward is the promotion of a democratic system. Unlike dictatorship, which is intrinsically arbitrary, unfair and thus, likely to fuel resentment and future retributions from aggrieved communities, democracy offers justice and opportunities for all. It binds different groups of people together with the promise that if they put aside their differences and work together towards the development of their nation, they will all benefit in a fair and equitable way. This is what has happened in ethnically diverse yet peaceful and democratic countries such as Botswana and Mauritius. Even where decades of autocratic brutality, injustice and corruption have led to ethnic divisions and wars, democracy offers people a way of overcoming their differences, healing their communities and working together for a better future. This is what is currently happening in Somaliland.

Of course, democracies are not immune to corruption, as we know only too well here in the UK. But even corrupt people in democratic African states will be far more likely to invest in their countries than corrupt individuals in dictatorial nations. For the former will know that (a) they will not be arbitrarily deprived of their wealth; and (b)

they will have to serve local and national interests to win votes and retain the support of their compatriots.

Implementing genuine democracy in the African continent will be far from easy, and will take a very long time in many states. For it will mean fighting to replace the corrupt, uncaring elites bequeathed by the recent post-colonial system with new, principled and conscientious leaders, and the corrupt elites will resist that as fiercely as possible. It took Westerners centuries to replace the feudal system with a more egalitarian society, and the battle to end slavery is still ongoing in many parts of the world. But Africans should be deterred neither by the enormity of this task, nor the challenges ahead, nor the time it may take to improve things.

There are concrete initiatives that can be implemented to nurture and accelerate the emergence of new, democratic leaders in the African continent. One way of achieving this objective would be the development of a programme offering grants to youths from African countries that are experiencing difficulties making the transition from dictatorship to true democracy. These youths would be sent to African countries where democracy has been successfully implemented, so that they could learn from these countries. Botswana, Mauritius, Ghana and Somaliland could be taken as democratic role models. One of the many advantages of such a programme would be its capacity to help grantees overcome the myth of democracy as an alien system that Africans cannot master.

It is not just African countries that can benefit from the eradication of the misrepresentation of democracy as a form of government that is extrinsic to African people. Many Western countries, including the UK, have hundreds of thousands of citizens of African origins. A sizeable proportion of this population is alienated, and does not participate in democratic processes.<sup>5</sup> This alienation is attributable to a wide variety of reasons, which include the persistence of the myth that democracy is unsuitable for African communities. Dispelling this myth will enable the UK and other Western countries to nurture members of African communities that are better integrated, and far more eager to engage in civic, social and democratic activities. And just as members of the Western-based African Diaspora played a key role in

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, the Electoral Commission's report, *Election 2005: turnout: How many, who and why?* reveals that black African and black Caribbean communities are less likely to vote than all other communities (p. 37).

triggering the decolonisation of the African continent, members of the African Diaspora with links to their countries of heritage could prove crucial in promoting and supporting the democratisation of Africa.

## **Conclusion**

The misrepresentation of democracy as a system of government extrinsic to African communities still permeates the West, and has been internalised by many African people in the continent and in the Diaspora. The study of several pre-colonial African kingdoms and empires, including the Kingdom of Kongo, the Songhai and the Mali Empires clearly shows that this is a myth. It is imperative to dispel this myth and highlight the democratic nature of pre-colonial African societies.

Dispelling the misrepresentation of democracy as too complex and alien a system for African populations to master will enable Africans to reject and abandon the failed dictatorial model bequeathed by Western colonisers, and embrace democracy as a true African form of government. Such a stance will allow African states to bind their ethnically diverse populations together with the promise that should they manage to put aside their differences and work together towards the development of their nation, they will all benefit in a fair and equitable way. The case of Somaliland shows that even where decades of autocratic brutality, injustice and corruption have led to ethnic divisions and wars, democracy offers people a way of overcoming their differences, healing their communities and working together for a better future.

The eradication of the myth of democracy as a system of government that is alien to African people will also enable the UK and other Western countries to foster the integration of members of the African Diaspora, and boost their civic and democratic engagement. Such engaged members of the African Diaspora could greatly contribute towards the promotion of democracy in the African continent.