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Akan Chiefs and Queen Mothers in Contemporary Ghana: Examples of Democracy or Accountable Authority?

Gail M. Presbey

1. Introduction

Recently, Ghanaian philosophers Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu have both written articles in which they assert that there are many democratic features in the traditional Akan governing system. Their claims were motivated, it seems, by critics' estimations that attempts at democracy in Africa have largely failed. Some critics suggest that there is a lack of democratic culture in Africa, so that institutions of Western democracy cannot thrive. Gyekye and Wiredu argue that parts of African cultural practices do have democratic aspects. Perhaps by building on the local democratic foundations, they suggest, Africa can find a surer way to practical democracy, rather than importing foreign institutions that alienate people from their government.

But why is being considered democratic so important? As M.

I. Finley noted in his work on democracy in ancient Greece, there is now, unlike in ancient days, a world consensus that democracy is the only legitimate form of government. Finley himself wonders how unanimity on such a large scale is possible. He thinks it is due to the fact that the idea of democracy has changed and now is expressed with great variations of meaning, far from the original Greek idea. So now perhaps the only debate possible in our world regards *which kind* of democracy. (Finley, 1985: 9). Just such a debate is happening when Gyekye and Wiredu argue whether Ghanaian President Rawlings is democratic. In order to say he must be replaced, one must argue that one's own community is more democratic or democratic in a better sense of the word. Finley cites G. Parry who argues that *democracy* and *democratic*

have become the twentieth century words by which approval of the society or institution so described. This has necessarily meant that the words have become so debased in that they have almost ceased without further definition to be of any use in distinguishing one particular form of government from another (Finley, 1985: 9).

It is important to note that by some definitions, the U.S. is not a democracy. For example, for Aristotle democracy is rule by the poor. In *Politics* (1279b 34-80 a4) Aristotle says, "Whether men rule by reason of their wealth, whether they be few or many, that is an oligarchy, and where the poor rule, that is a democracy . . ." So, when discussing whether a society is democratic or not, we will have to pay attention to the definitions of democracy.

This article will recount the arguments of Gyekye and Wiredu and discuss their adequacy, in the light of critical comments put forward by Emmanuel Eze and others. Political analysis relying on the insights of anthropologists note that whereas it was earlier thought that some African communities had no government, it is now more accurately held that there are roughly two different kinds of government found before the advent of colonialism. These governments, which can be found up to today, are the centralized kingdoms and the decentralized or anarchic governments (Rubin and Weinstein, 1974: 11-13). One-party advocates appealed to the unity and consensus that could be found in traditional Africa. Interestingly enough, while Wiredu notes that many anarchistic governments existed and functioned in an orderly manner, he does not turn to societies "without government" to find his examples of democracy. Rather he looks to the Ashanti kingdoms, where he argues that kings, chiefs and counselors led essentially a representative democracy and were not monarchical rulers (Wiredu, 1997: 304-6). The philosophical community has the benefit of having several philosophers from the Akan community interested in these issues of government (e.g., Gyekye, Wiredu, Safo Kwame, Anthony Appiah and the philosopher-statesman Kofi Busia). Thus, the case of the Akan can be made in some detail.

I will use the wording of Gyekye and Wiredu by referring to the Akan governing system as traditional, but some words of caution

are in order. Eze observes that there is much "... flexibility, eclectic-ism, and overlap between workings of 'modern' and 'traditional' political formations in Africa" (Eze, 1997: 314). The term *traditional* refers to African self-governance as it was in the pre-colonial era. But often that governance system remains, perhaps with some revisions, intact and functional up to contemporary times. To suggest that Euro-American governance is modern is a figure of speech, which reinforces the impression that some countries are ahead of others in political development. That is not the contention of this article, nor, I suggest, of Gyekye's and Wiredu's arguments. Additionally, Eze cautions about the project of finding a kind of government that is "intrinsic" Western or African (Eze, 1997: 321). Once again, that is not the goal of this article. Gyekye and Wiredu, like myself, are both interested in finding valuable and useable models for a sound participatory democratic process, wherever they may be. It is the argument of this article that such models can be found in a governing practice that was often considered outdated and authoritarian, which happened to be in Africa.

2. Critical Analysis

Kwame Gyekye notes that political institutions handed down from colonial masters have failed because they were alien to Africans. Africans did not have intellectual or emotional attachments to these institutions. He asks, can we forge a new politics from the base of Africa's traditional systems? Gyekye argues that the Akan system of government is democratic, because it provided a public forum for all to speak and be heard on political issues, and chiefs and queen mothers function more as elected representatives than royalty (Gyekye, 1992: 241).

Gyekye and Wiredu both turn to Busia for their description of Akan government. Sometimes references are to the Akan practices in general, and at other times they are more specific to the Ashanti model. *Akan* is the name for the entire ethnic group, while *Ashanti* is one of several kingdoms within the Akan ethnic group (Kwame, 1995: xv-xvii). Kofi A. Busia was a member of the opposition party in Ghana under Nkrumah's one-party socialist government. He went into exile in 1959, but returned after Nkrumah's overthrow to be

Prime Minister from 1969-1972, until he was ousted by a military coup. He had written an influential book, *Africa in Search of Democracy*. According to Busia, some people (Nkrumah, for example) argued that authoritarianism is in accord with the spirit and practice of traditional politics. Others say that it was Europe that destroyed African democracy (Busia, 1995: 209). Busia's own position is that the Akan system was not authoritarian. It had some democratic aspects that were not present in the European form of government. He defines democracy as the form of government in which the people are able to make the government express their will (Busia, 1995: 212).

Ashanti lineage has common territory, he explains. Since all Ashanti people are members of that lineage, all are represented through lineage, so each lineage is a political unit. A council is made up of lineage heads (Busia, 1995: 209). As Wiredu notes, it is usually the most senior, non-senile member of the lineage who has the best qualities for leadership (which include seniority in age, wisdom, sense of civic responsibility and ability for logical persuasion). Therefore, election is usually customary and there is no voting. One holds the office for life. The chief who oversees the council is considered a natural ruler, because he comes from the royal lineage, which is often the lineage of the persons who originally founded the village. A great number of towns and villages form a state, which is overseen by a paramount chief (*omanhene*). The paramount chiefs would send representatives to the national council, presided over by the *Asantehene*, the King of the Ashanti (Wiredu, 1997: 305-6, and Gyekye, 1992: 242-3).

In defense of this method of choosing chiefs, Gyekye makes a point of saying that the person chosen to be chief had to be acceptable to all the counselors as well as to the Asafo company of young men, which Gyekye calls effectively the body of citizens. Both Gyekye and Busia cite an anthropologist, Cruickshank, who argued that ordinary youths can speak and be taken seriously as elders (Gyekye, 1992: 246-7; Busia, 1995: 211). Wiredu even suggests that the Asafo companies are parties of sorts, without the negative connotations of adversarial-democracy style parties (Wiredu, 1997: 308). Gyekye concludes, "Thus, never was a chief imposed upon an Akan community, a fact of which the self-imposed military rulers of Africa today must take note" (Gyekye, 1992: 243. Italics in the original).

The criticism may have been directed to Jerry Rawlings, who at the time ruled Ghana as leader of a successful military coup. One could argue that referring to politically organized groups of young men as the "body of citizens" falls short of universal suffrage. It is, however, an example of a group of peers who form a voluntary association and act in concert based on programs for action, which are the result of dialogue among the members. It could be argued that the apartheid are left out because they decline to join. Such associations have been heralded by proponents of participatory democracy such as Hannah Arendt and Gene Sharp as paradigms of democracy.

Hannah Arendt was a critic of party politics while being an advocate of isonomy (self-rule) over democracy (rule by the majority). Wiredu, I suggest, would support her descriptions of politics as speech among equals, as well as her criticisms of party politics. It is important when looking at the satisfactoriness of African political systems that we do not simply compare them with the status quo systems of Europe and the U.S., which could easily be considered flawed. I will also not suggest that Ashanti politics are only helpful insofar as they approach the Arendtian ideal. While Arendt's theories may as well have shortcomings, I think it will be fruitful to look at her ideas since they present a helpful way to think about democracy that is different from prevailing political practices. Arendt explained that for the ancient Greeks, politics described those who live with each other by speech. Speech is a form of action, in that it is a way of influencing others and bringing about desired changes.

In contrast, relations with barbarians and slaves were based on violence and coercion, not persuasion, and so were not political (Arendt, 1968: 23, Parekh, 1981: 141). Similarly, Wiredu's emphasis on a consensual politics is also based on persuasion and the winning of consent. It is contrasted to majority-rule tactics where those who are outvoted experience the coercion of the state. For Arendt, persuasion is the most truly political use of speech, since it is meant to woo consent. Consent must be freely given. In persuasion, one appreciates not only the arguments but also the weight assigned to them and the assessment of likely consequences. Persuasion must refer to the good of the public world and not to profits for individuals

(Parekh, 1981: 143). We have demonstrated the Ashantis' emphasis on speech meant to persuade as explained by the chiefs noted above.

Kareb explains that, for Arendt, political action is the "direct participation in the conversation of diverse equals." Other modes of speech in which inequalities exist are not politics (Kareb, 1984: 16, 22). Arendt had argued that Aristotle was wrong to state that the old naturally ruled the younger; all must be considered equal for the polis to be a place of politics and not domination (Arendt, 1968: 116-19). Arendt was opposed to ideas of "experts" in politics and opposed to ruler/ruled scenarios where rulers command while the people must only obey (Arendt, 1968: 108-11; Kareb, 1984: 24-5). For Arendt, politics is a situation of plurality and opinion. Truth is left to God; to speak of truth in politics, rather than opinion, is coercive and founds tyranny. Arendt had fears, not only about tyrants, but also about consensus as a goal in politics, because plurality was so central to her notion of politics (Luban, 1979: 89). Do such fears voiced point to irreconcilable differences between Arendt's ideal and the Ashanti hierarchy?

Wiredu and others who describe Akan politics take pains to explain that the chief does not give orders to his subjects, but rather accepts the counsel of his counselors. The counselors would be a group of equals in dialogue. If it is true, as Wiredu and Gyekye both insist, that the youth are able to speak up and be listened to with seriousness, then the egalitarian community of speech is much larger than just the small group of counselors. There has been some debate as to whether Ashanti practices of excluding women for the most part from arenas of men's politics, is a sign of women's marginalization or empowerment. At the same time, however, these women are given their own political sphere and their own positions of leadership (called "queen mothers") (Kwarne, 1995: 253-60; Nzegwu, 1996). Regardless of one's position on this debate, it could be said that if women were indeed marginalized, this would be another way in which the Ashanti model would fall short of the ideal of universal participation.

Insofar as councils, as Wiredu suggests, consider the outcomes of their decisions as prevailing opinions accepted consensually, they would escape an Arendtian criticism that humans were set-

ting themselves up as representatives of God's truth on earth. But insofar as consensus stifles true debate, it would fall short of the Arendtian model. Eze has argued that consensus could be a code for favor swapping. Such self-interested action would be considered by Arendt the wrong motivation for political action and would certainly be a degenerate version of the Ashanti ideal as well (Eze, 1997: 322f).

Another possible problem with the Ashanti model's being considered democratic in terms of Arendt's description has to do with the stylization of formal speech. As Kwesi Yankah explains, Ashanti courts use deferential speech (as a form of politeness) that emphasizes the difference in status between the people and the chief. Speech is often saturated with apologetic formulae and disclaimers. The honorifics used point to asymmetrical social relations rather than the egalitarian ones needed for a relationship of peers in a democracy. The chief uses a spokesperson (*okyeame*) rather than speaking to others directly. While these may not be useful models for democracy in other cultures, such cultural norms and practices are important in Ghana and could not easily be dismissed (Yankah, 1995: 54-56).

What is the fear of party politics as is practiced in the U.S. and Europe that would encourage some African theorists to reject the model and find solace in Ashanti practices instead? It is not just parochialism. Wiredu's complaint is that parties do function in majoritarian democracies that thrive on adversarial politics. Although African governments were pressured by the West to adopt multiparty politics, there have been no substantial gains in freedom (Wiredu, 1997: 308-9). Indeed, Eze notes that many African dictators found tricks that could help them stay in power, despite transition to multiparty democracy (Eze, 1997: 315).

In fact, this could be a key motivator for Gyekye's and Wiredu's concerns, as Ghana moves closer to a democratic form acceptable to the West, but further alienates people and becomes dysfunctional. Instead, Wiredu suggests a non-party alternative based on political associations, not parties, which would give expression to desirable pluralisms. In contrast to majoritarian versions of democracy, a consensus model would instead have the majority prevail upon the minority to *accept* proposals, not just "live with them." In this way, no one will become a permanent outsider, since minority views will be considered important and minority consent

considered important and minority consent will be sought after. In a consensual democracy, all parties feel adequate account has been taken of their point of view (Wiredu, 1997: 304, 310-11).

Eze in his criticism of Wiredu notes that Wiredu had called voting a modern cultural import or imposition. Yet Eze suggests that the formal system of voting was needed in the Nigerian context for Abiola to be able to claim that he had won the presidency from Abacha. Therefore, it is not the case that the only critics of an informal election, as Wiredu describes, would be non-Africans, since Africans themselves want formal voting (Eze, 1997: 314). Wiredu's arguments in favor of the Ashanti representative system rest upon his assertion that the above Ashanti scenario gives "substantive" representation and not just formal representation as in Western democracies. He considers the council to be strongly representative because of both the nature of its composition and the content of its decisions.

However, Gyekye points out clearly that the idea of regal lineage and a hereditary head of state are no longer useful for contemporary Africa. In addition, the interethnic makeup of modern nation-states makes the Ashanti model limited in its relevance (Gyekye, 1992: 252-3). Wiredu notes as well that traditional politics were marked by interethnic wars. Groups were fixated inwardly. Preoccupation with the consent of all members within the group was matched by too little concern for interethnic governing through co-operation (Wiredu, 1997: 309). Certainly the multi-ethnic makeup of Nigeria makes voting for a national leader problematic, based on the Ashanti model. But Gyekye nevertheless thinks there were important democratic aspects to the Ashanti system that should be maintained. What are they?

Gyekye thinks the vote was done in such a way that the people were choosing their own rulers, despite the lack of private polling booths, universal suffrage and the other trappings of representative democracy. The problem of democracy, as he sees it, is how to give institutional expression to the will of the people. It seems to me his argument for the will of the people being expressed through their government is based more on what he considers the popular checks on the chief's or king's powers, rather than on the focus of choosing the ruler from any part of the citizenry. The hubris of rulers is strictly

limited, because their leadership role is so finely delineated. They can do nothing without the consent of their counselors and thereby the people. You could say that who they are personally is dwarfed as an important attribute, since their role is limited. Not only can they not pursue their own self-interest, but they also cannot even choose to represent a particular interest of society, since they must please all lineage in a process of consensus.

In fact, Gyekye goes so far as to cite with approval an anthropologist who described the chief as a puppet moved at the will of the people. He explains that the chief's political authority is defined by injunctions, which spell out that he should not act on his own initiative and that his role is to hold power in trust for the people (Gyekye, 1992: 242-6). A chief's staff, which depicts an egg held in a hand, is metaphorical for the chief's prudent use of political power. Power is fragile, and the chief should avoid both excessive and indolent action, pictured as either squashing the egg through too firm a grip, or dropping and breaking the egg through too loose a grip. The chief must maintain his political authority to facilitate swift action on behalf of the people's will, but not become rigid in a way that would thwart the people (Gyekye, 1992: 251).

Busia noted that a chief might have appeared to be autocratic, when in actuality he ruled only by the consent of the people (Busia, 1995: 211). Gyekye agrees that the will of the people is crucial in the success of a chief's rule. If they do not like him, they could refuse to cooperate with him and all his projects will fail. Indeed, the people have the power to de-stool the chief if he is not expressing their will. The fact that the chief is chosen for life is tempered by the threat that he could be removed, not every few years at scheduled elections, but at any time the people choose to organize to de-stool him (Busia, 1995: 245). Gyekye cites the anthropologist Rattray who noted that the work of the Ashanti citizen did not end once the chief was installed in office (Gyekye, 1995: 247).

Is the power to de-stool assurance enough that the chief will represent the people? Both Wiredu and Gyekye are critical of European and American representative democracies. They suggest that there is too much distance between the government and the governed in the U.S. and that formal representation has left people there

alienated (Gyekye, 1992: 254; Wiredu, 1997: 307). Eze notes as well that minorities in the U.S. share Wiredu's criticisms of majority rule (Eze, 1997: 322ff). Yet in the U.S. the citizens have the power to impeach their representatives, the U.S. equivalent of de-stooling. Impeachment is not easy to accomplish, and it takes a high amount of political mobilization to get the petition signatures and votes needed to do so. It is much more likely that disaffected citizens will vote candidates out of office when their term ends—an option not possible in the Ashanti's case, since chiefs are elected for life. It could be argued that the extreme measure of de-stooling is not easily accomplished and so to cite the people's right to de-stool is not alone an accurate measure of their power, apart from scrutiny of its actual practice. After all, in the U.S. the people's power to impeach has not translated into a general sense of people's political powerfulness, since apathy and disaffection is still rampant. What else guarantees that a representative will act upon the people's wills?

Gyekye and Busia argue that it is the decentralization and small units of the town and village councils, which kept the political action of the people alive. In contrast to one-party centralization, the hierarchical structure of the Ashanti government made sure that smaller units' interests were not stamped out by larger units. Any contemporary government would have to keep intact the benefit of small political units. Such village and town units would reduce the distance felt between government and the governed and keep intact sentiments of personal commitment to the community (Busia, 1995: 213; Gyekye, 1992: 253-4). Indeed, this would go along with Finley's praise of ancient Greek democracy, as face-to-face politics (without the role of the mass media).

What Arendt would certainly most like about the Ashanti system is its ideal of decentralization and its provision of local spaces in which people could speak and participate in the political deliberation of their local governments. For Arendt, identity is intersubjectively constituted. Political actors define themselves as those who had done certain deeds and spoken certain words (Parekh, 1981: 135). When one is marginalized from direct participation and instead consoles oneself with being represented through party candidates, the valuable direct political experience is greatly diminished. As George Kateb

points out, Arendt notes that in a healthy representative democracy, the people supposedly rule their representatives.

But since the people themselves do not act politically by engaging in speech, they do not experience political freedom (Kateb, 1984: 24; Arendt, 1972: 140). As Arendt explains, actions cannot be represented; only interests can. Therefore, formal voting falls short of the political ideal (Kateb, 1984: 24; Arendt, 1965: 227, 256; 1958: 205). Arendt was critical of government that, while claiming to be of or by the people, was actually *for* the people. Self-styled representatives replace monarchs and tyrants; while the representatives got their freedom, no one else did (Arendt, 1965: 74). I suggest that Arendt would therefore agree with Wiredu's criticisms of multiparty governments, which poorly represent the people but only put forward certain partial interests in favor of attempts to represent the common good through local councils.

Eze's biggest complaint with the positions of Gyekye and Wiredu regards the reconciliation of diverse interests, which are bound to exist in any society. Gyekye and Wiredu have described the politics of a society, which they say realizes that all interests are ultimately the same. The reference to the Akan symbol of the two-headed crocodile which shares one stomach is used by them to show the futility of a society in which individuals or groups compete with each other, when after all the food goes to a common stomach (Wiredu, 1997: 306). As Gyekye explains, the opposition should feel free to express itself, but must agree ahead of time that the social goal is solidarity and so consensus is desirable (Gyekye, 1992: 248). Busia explained that the small groups that made up Akan society had interests that had to be "harmonized" with the larger whole (Busia, 1995: 209).

Eze argues that the two-headed crocodile metaphor is not a realistic appraisal of the world as it is. Who is to tell the Ogoni and the Anglo-Dutch Shell Oil Co. to stop fighting, since their ultimate interests are the same? Capitalist exploitation is not just a matter of perception, as Wiredu describes seemingly divergent interests. Eze posits that one could only avoid conflict if there were no individuated structure of desire. If each of the crocodile's heads could experience desire and satiation separately, then their competition with each other

and competitive politics in general, would be rational. Eze noted that according to his definition, democracy is the management of desires; it is a way to mediate the struggles due to the competitive nature of individuated identities and desires. Democracy is a social compact, which says, "We will agree, or agree to disagree." It is a means or a framework for living together in a community, but it does not dictate the goal of the community. As such, consensus could occur within democracy, but it cannot be its goal (Eze, 1997: 318-320).

Such criticisms strike at the heart of the Akan governance system, which is based on shared ideas of morality and a certain notion of what kind of life is worth living. When Wiredu suggests that Akans could set aside their limited perceptions of immediate goals and see beyond to a common interest between themselves and others, is he being idealistic or unrealistic? Or is he putting forth a much-needed message, which would rightly temper the competition-driven liberal democracies of the world? Finley notes that the democratic citizens of ancient Greece also shared a sense of community, reinforced by state religious myths and traditions. This unity, he suggests, was a big part of the pragmatic success of Athenian society. He thinks that the Assembly and selection of officials by lot could not alone have prevented chaos or tyranny without the self-control of the citizens (Finley, 1985: 30).

Aristotle spoke of the need for people to enter politics with concern for the common good and not personal self-interest as their main motivator. Hannah Arendt agrees with Aristotle and sees self-interest and group-interest as destructive of politics. It may be difficult to imagine people being motivated if self-interest played absolutely no role. Couldn't we see politics as being improved if instead of experiencing people fixated on their own short-term self-interest, a political culture encouraged them to see the benefits to the entire community and themselves as part of that community?

For example, what if Shell Oil corporate managers, the Ogoni and the world community of sympathetic onlookers saw that the greatest benefit for all would be in a sound environmental policy that extracted oil only as needed, while at the same time providing the Ogoni with a chance to farm their land or to modestly relocate with the cooperation of their neighbors? And what if all three parties were

politically mobilized so that the Oil Company could not easily run roughshod over the rights of the Ogoni? Wouldn't this be consensual politics at its best, with room for differing opinions and the push and pull of adversarial positions that nevertheless had consensual cooperation (and not defeat of the weak) as its goal?

An interview with Nana Ama Adobea II, Queen Mother of Aseeso, highlighted for me another way in which Akan politics are not about self-aggrandizement, but rather about service to the community as a whole. While U.S.-style elections count on individual candidates to be motivated enough to seek the limelight and compete with others for political offices, the Akan style has the people, through their lineage heads, decide which of a number of available candidates is most able to help the community. That person is elected regardless of how much or how little they themselves desire the office. In the case of Nana Ama Adobea II, she herself was not motivated to seek the position of queen mother, but rather had it thrust upon her by her community. After her initial rejection of the position (she fearing the responsibility and burden of the office), community members spoke to her repeatedly until she finally saw it as a good thing, and she gave her consent (Adobea II, 1996; Presbey, 1998a). Indeed, at least one contemporary Ghanaian novelist is convinced that women who purposely seek the office of queen mother, out of self-interest or vanity, are destroying the political office as well as defaming their own characters (Anwri-Boasiako, 1995). This Akan practice of election implicitly criticizes Euro-American-style election that claims to be democratic, but in the end only gives citizens the chance to choose from a narrow selection of candidates pre-chosen for them.

A look at Akan governance would show that at the heart of the political strategy is the notion that governance works best when a person's consent is won. There is a high value placed on chiefs who are known to be able to talk to persons in a way that wins their cooperation. In two of my interviews with chiefs, such a message was reiterated. Nana Latebea, Female Chief (*Akyempanin-Hemaa*) of Adukurum, in Okere, Ghana, said that a successful chief must speak and listen carefully. "One must sit down quietly, and think before you talk. Use your sense. When approaching someone regarding winning co-

operation on some matter, don't say 'Hey you, do this . . . ?' But rather, say 'I beg you . . . ' quietly, and give reasons for your request. Otherwise, the person may abuse you." Such a reflective speaker knows how to handle/talk to people; this is a sign of true education (Lateba, 1996; Presbey, 1998a).

Nana Ani Sakyi II, Chief of Abotakyi, Ghana, said that from his perspective the difference between democracy and authoritarianism is in the approach. A democratic chief does not bark orders, without thought for the adverse effects such orders may have on his subjects. A democratic chief makes compelling requests, but listens to the responses of others and has compassion for their situation (Sakyi II, 1996).

Both chiefs show by their remarks that they are sensitive to the truth that a chief could only govern successfully if the consent of the people is won and maintained. Such awareness of power dynamics is a sign of people's popular governance, according to Gene Sharp. Sharp distinguishes between two different kinds of relationships between rulers and the ruled. In the monolithic version of power, a ruler sets him or herself up as the sole source of political power, and people feel helpless when confronted with the ruler. But in a people-centered perspective, people know that the political leader is only as powerful as the people make him or her, and that if they were to withdraw their cooperation, the leader would be powerless (Sharp, undated). Likewise, Hannah Arendt compares the difference between rulers and the ruled to a leader and followers. The leader always knows that without his or her followers, he or she is nothing, and the followers likewise know that the leader depends on them (Arendt, 1958: 189-90). As Joy James explains, based on Arendt's insights, the "myth of the strong man" distorts the perception of power's communal nature (James, 1987: 51; Presbey, 1997).

But there arises a question: do the Akan people really see their obedience to rulers as optional, based on their own consent? Or do they rather feel as if they have no choice but to obey the chief? Arendt stipulates a human source for law and therefore for authority. She explains that only to the extent that we see law as a commandment to which people owe obedience regardless of their consent, does the law require a transcendent source, like God. It is much bet-

ter to see law as a relation based on mutual promise (Arendt, 1965: 189). Wiredu argues that the Akan see themselves as having a law based on, among other things, the intrinsic persuasiveness of its ideas. This would certainly be seen as a human source for law and there is a tendency for Wiredu in many of his writings on the Akan to belittle the role of the belief in the supernatural. Instead, he focuses on the practical and humanistic aspects to Akan moral law (Wiredu, 1992). But as Eze points out, Wiredu also notes that the traditions see the chief as sacred and in touch with the ancestors. Eze speculates that if the notion that the chief was sacred were to disappear and be replaced with mere intrinsic persuasiveness of ideas, perhaps the obedience to authority that the chiefs now experience would be eroded. Eze doesn't suggest that myth can be dispensed with altogether, but he does think that contemporary times call for a secularized myth which is more usable (Eze, 1997: 316-8).

In my interview with Nana Amma Serwah (1996), a queen mother from Kokofo, Ghana, she explained that the respect and deference shown to her in her position as queen mother comes from two sources. Firstly, she stresses the importance of keeping oneself morally upright. Then people respect you and you can convince people to forgive each other, because of your influence. Secondly, there is the respect and dignity accorded the stool (on which she sits), and so people find it difficult to "walk over her." Indeed, the stool on which a chief or queen mother sits is given great symbolic significance, because it is believed that while sitting on the stool, one is in communication with the ancestors who give counsel in addition to the worldly counselors (Busia, 1995: 212).

While Eze is right to point out that reference to the ancestors brings in a supernatural factor to politics, I want to point out that it is not an omnipotent, monotheistic dictator-God who backs up the infallibility of worldly rules. Rather, the symbolism points to a wider audience of shared discussion, modeled exactly on the discussion in which the earthly living are engaged. The one who sits on the stool does not just bark orders they receive from above; the one who sits there listens to two parties at once, the contemporaries as well as the wise counsel of those who have gone before and are well known for their sound reasoning. It is not literally believed that anyone who

the same ancestors and culture (Arendt, 1951: 230). However, Arendt is a fan of the state and not the nation. She argues that while homogeneity of past and origin is important for the nation-state, it is not needed for political action (Arendt, 1965: 174). Arendt is concerned that the rise of the nation-state elevated the party system and crushed the council system of participatory democracy, which she favored. Rather than a nation-state, which has an undivided government monopoly on power, she favors a republic that has separation and division of power and is coordinated through federalism (Arendt, 1965: 245-7).

Arendt had considered the American Revolution more successful than European revolutions because it steered further away from the nation-state idea (Arendt, 1968:140). In the African context, Arendt would discourage the idea of nationalism and the role of ethnicity in politics and instead promote the idea of a republic in which all peoples as equals would engage in speech together, while regions cooperated through federations. Could such a project incorporate Ashanti-style self-government as part of its local plan? If it could avoid partisan ethnicity, its other attributes would serve as a good model.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to note that the kind of political system proposed by Wiredu and Gyekye has some strong democratic attributes. Here I mean democratic in the participatory sense and not in the sense of rule by the majority. We must separate the pursuit of participatory democracy for its own virtues from the pleasing of outside aid agencies and foreign governments by trying to appear democratic by popular standards. The Ashanti example is valuable for its stress on the role of speech among equals and for its decentralization, which helps to form many public spaces so that a large number of people will experience political action and speech firsthand. Its concept of the role of chiefs avoids some of the problems of representation found in party governments, where the representatives act while the electorate is passive or even victimized.

In this way, the Ashanti system does not fall short of a system considered exemplary in the U.S. and Europe, but rather is found to

be paradigmatic in exercising democratic practices to a great extent. Wiredu and Gyekye have already admitted that the system cannot be wholly maintained the way it is—some aspects must go, others stay, to form a future political system. I hope that this exploration of democracy from the Arendtian point of view has helped to identify some of the crucial aspects of Ashanti politics, which should be cherished and championed.

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steals a moment of sitting on the stool has a "hot line" to the other world.

The point is that the chief or queen mother is elected to sit on the stool, which is symbolic of their ability, acumen or sensitivity to the good advice provided from the past. As Nana Amma Serwah explains, if her character were not in line with what was expected of her, she would not be considered qualified to sit on the stool. Wiredu is right in that as hierarchical systems go, the Akan system is particularly helpful in its models of consultation and consensus, and in its constant checks and balances on the powers of those in office.

Could Eze still complain that the focus on consulting ancestors makes the Akan system backward looking? He might complain that what counts as moral virtue in queen mothers is rigidly dictated by social norms and not easily challenged through debate. In contrast, Kwesi Yankah (1989) in his book on the use of Akan proverbs shows that proverbs used in royal court ceremonies in Ghana are always changing through context. He gives the example of a queen mother who cites a proverb (which suggested that she should be def-erential to male chiefs) only as a prelude to her disagreement with it, as she went forward and performed a ceremony usually presided over by men (Yankah, 1989: 77-8).

Although it is always easy to look at any governing system and find shortcomings, Wiredu and Gyekye have provided an important service by pointing out aspects of Akan chieftaincy that are promisingly democratic. Each agrees that the goal should not be wholesale support of the present system; each has made careful distinctions about what is important to save. In this way they avert Eze's claims that they are traditionalists who support an unthinking "return to the source" (Eze, 1997: 313). While Eze does well to point out possible shortcomings to the Akan system, it is important as well to delve further into its successes and look there for adequate models of people's self-governance.

Wiredu goes further than justifying past practices of Ashanti politics, as shown by the subtitle for his article, "A Plea for a Non-Party Polity," which suggests that he thinks the Ashantis' case could help to provide a practical example for Ghanaian politics today. Wiredu's criticisms of party politics, whether one-party or multi-

party, parallel the criticisms of Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba of Tanzania (Wamba-dia-Wamba, 1993; Presbey, 1998b). Indeed, Ghana itself is an example of what Eze refers to as a military dictatorship that has learned to cope with multiparty politics while its dictator remains in power. But what can it mean to criticize parties? Does Wiredu suggest, like Museveni of Uganda, that parties are self-destructive in Africa, due to their basis in ethnicity and tendency to divide society into interest groups? (Oloko-Onyango, 1991). Whereas Wamba-dia-Wamba talks about the need for people's direct participatory politics, Wiredu differs in his advocacy of a model that could be considered hierarchical and (if one agrees that chiefs are elected) representative as well. But Wiredu and Gyekye argue that Akan politics are representational in a way that assures their participatory character, in a way that's better than the usual representation that comes through the party system.

However, Wiredu himself has noted that traditional politics were marked by interethnic wars. Today, multiparty politics are sometimes split along ethnic lines (Wiredu, 1997: 309). How could the Ashanti model be used on a national level to deal with interethnic conflict? Kateb also notes, in criticism of Arendt, that political action often has consequences that are bad or mixed for those outside of the company of actors (Kateb, 1984: 30). In the African context, we could imagine a group of persons who organize themselves politically, along the lines of Arendt's speech and Wiredu's consensus model, only so that they can better attack or suppress their neighbors and/or enemies. Such attacks could come from within a country or between countries. In ancient Greece, the citizens voted to engage in expansionist wars. However, Finley thinks it is important to note that in a democracy the citizens who voted for the war would be the same persons who would fight in it (not like today's armchair Pentagon analysts). As is well known, today's African states have borders that are the result of earlier European colonization, and most countries are made up of varied ethnic groups. Could a model of speech among equals be widened to contain members of different ethnic groups?

As Arendt explained, there is a difference between a state and a nation. The state exists to protect the rights of everyone within its borders; a nation has to do with national consciousness, people with

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