Liberal Democracy: an African Critique

Abstract

Despite the end of the Cold War and the ascendancy of liberal democracy celebrated by Francis Fukuyama as "the end of history", a growing number of scholars and political activists point to its inherent shortcomings. However, they have tended to dismiss it on the basis of one or two of its salient weaknesses. While this is a justifiable way to proceed, it denies the searching reader an opportunity to see the broad basis for the growing rejection of liberal democracy among African political theorists. Consequently, in this article, I argue that from an African perspective, the almost hegemonic status of liberal democracy can be challenged on at least five grounds, namely, logical inconsistency, impracticability due to the largely communalistic outlook of many africans, inconsistency between affirmation and action, violation of the right to ethnic identity, and the moral imperative to assert the right to cultural emancipation.

I conclude by calling upon African and Africanist political theorists to utilise indigenous African political thought, coupled with emancipatory aspects of political thought from other parts of the world, to design practicable models of democracy for contemporary African states. I further conclude that in order to promote genuine inter-cultural dialogue on democratisation, people from Western cultures ought to acknowledge the equality of all cultures, and to recognise that systems of governance are part and parcel of those cultures.

Introduction

The view that democracy is the best form of government now enjoys an almost orthodox status in many parts of the world. However, more often than not, democracy is uncritically construed as "liberal democracy", which is frequently commended for several strengths, among which are that countries that subscribe to it very rarely go to war with one another, rarely murder their own populations, nearly always have peaceful transitions of government, and respect human rights more consistently than other systems of government do (Crain 2016). Nevertheless, despite the end of the Cold War and the ascendancy of liberal democracy celebrated by Francis Fukuyama (1992) as "the end of history", a growing number of scholars and political activists point to its inadequacy in the African context.

In this article, I present a critique of liberal democracy from an African perspective. I seek to contribute to the available multi-disciplinary literature on the challenges of liberal democracy in Africa in at least three ways.

First, available philosophical critiques of liberal democracy within the African context have tended to dismiss it on the basis of one or two of its salient weaknesses. For example, Wiredu (1996) trains his guns on the single issue of the adversarial winner-takes-all nature of majoritarian liberal democracy, and on this basis, calls for a no-party, consensual democracy. Similarly, Hallen (2015) pays close attention to the fact that the liberal atomic conception of personhood has a formidable challenge in the communitarian outlook which points out that even the very liberal value of an atomic individual can only be inculcated within a social context. Yet focusing on only one or two shortcomings of liberal democracy denies the searching reader an opportunity to see the broad basis for the growing rejection of liberal democracy among African political theorists. Consequently, I seek to offer a more broad based critique of liberal democracy from an African perspective.

Second, the available relevant social scientific studies (e.g. Ajulu 1998; Chweya 2002; Lumumba-Kasongo ed. 2005; Oloka-Onyango 2007) tend to pay close attention to the facts about the repeated failure of liberal democracy in specific African states, but, in general, do not undertake incisive reflection on the conceptual difficulties that ultimately account for the failure. Consequently, there is need to supplement their commendable accomplishments with philosophical reflections on the presuppositions of liberal democracy itself, and the present article is a contribution to this much needed second order inquiry.

Third, the present article is also a contribution to the wider critique of liberal democracy arising from non-Western political contexts. For example, more than a century ago, Mohandas Karmachand Gandhi (1909) had already questioned the suitability of liberal democracy for the Indian context. Similarly, Bell (2006) argued for morally justifiable alternatives to liberal democracy in East Asia. Along the same lines, several Latin American countries have been experimenting with their own indigenous models of democracy in place of liberal democracy (Whitehead 2010), and such experiments presume alternative theoretical and ideological frameworks.

While I mainly utilise literature by African scholars in my critique of liberal democracy, I also make references to non-African publications, conscious of the fact that the process of knowledge production and exchange knows no political or geographical borders. Thus while ancient Greek thought is considered to be the foundation of Western culture, it borrowed heavily from ancient Egypt. Similarly, while paper and gunpowder are central to Western culture, the ancient Chinese invented them. Besides, the West borrowed the so-called Arabic numerals from Arabs, who had borrowed them from India. There is therefore no reason why the idea of "African-ness" should imply insularity. What makes my critique African is that it has a communalistic orientation characteristic of the worldviews of indigenous African peoples, as well as an emancipatory objective typical of

discourse on post-colonial reconstruction in the tradition of African thinkers such as Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kwasi Wiredu, and D.A. Masolo.

I set out with some preliminary clarifications regarding the dichotomy between Western liberalism and African communalism. I then present five grounds for objecting to liberal democracy within the African context, namely, the logical inconsistency inherent in the tenets of liberal democracy, impracticability of this governance model in Africa due to the largely communalistic outlook of many inhabitants of the continent, inconsistency between the affirmation and action of liberal democracy, its violation of the right to ethnic identity through its ethnically-blind vision of society, and the moral imperative for African theorists to assert their peoples' right to cultural emancipation.

Western Liberalism and African Communalism: Some Preliminary Clarifications

While liberal ideas are found in isolation in Western thought very much earlier, they derive mainly from the 18th century European Enlightenment and the French revolution, and are rooted in the scepticism of the 18th Century (Smart 1969, 647). However, it was in the 19th Century that they became more influential because they were allied with powerful social forces that, through the utilitarians and radicals, influenced social movements in Victorian England (Hawton 1963, 13-14). Nevertheless, liberalism fractures on several issues, among which are the nature of liberty, the place of property and democracy in a just society, the comprehensiveness of liberalism, and the particularist or universalist reach of the liberal ideal (Gaus, Courtland and Schmidtz 2014).

Despite their divergent views on a variety of issues, all liberals emphasise the pre-eminence of the autonomy of the individual. This is not to say that Western liberalism is *individualistic* (egoistic), but rather *individualist* (subscribes to the

doctrine of the preeminence of the freedom of the individual over the authority of society), the former being morally reprehensible, the latter not necessarily so. In 1859, John Stuart Mill classically articulated the centrality of the autonomy of the individual in Western liberal thought in his *On Liberty*, where he stated that the individual ought to be protected against the tyranny of the majority in the same way as he or she ought to be protected against political despotism. For him, society is only justified to limit the individual's freedom in instances where his or her actions result in harm to others (Mill 2001 [1859]). Through its insistence on the centrality of the autonomy of the individual, liberalism advocates for tolerance. In this regard, A.J. Ayer states: "…, I believe that the only possible basis for a sound morality is mutual tolerance and respect: tolerance of one another's customs and opinions: respect for one another's rights and feelings; awareness of one another's needs" (Ayer 1968, 10).

In the realm of politics, liberalism manifests as liberal democracy, which has held sway in the West for several centuries now. The major features of this model of democracy include individual freedom (which entitles citizens to the liberty and responsibility of charting the course of their lives and conducting their own affairs), equality before the law, universal suffrage and education, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly. Many of these features have been proclaimed in historic documents such as the U.S. *Declaration of Independence* (Congress of the United States of America 1776) which asserted the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (National Assembly of France 1789) which affirmed the principles of civil liberty and of equality before the law, and the *Atlantic Charter* (UK and US 1941) which affirmed the "four freedoms", namely, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear of physical aggression.

On the other hand, the outstanding feature of the outlook of African ethnic groups is communalism - the view that the individual can only find fulfilment when he or she co-operates with other members of the group to which he or she belongs, and puts

the interests of the group before his or her own. Central to African communalism is the notion of kinship - the idea that all the members of a community are related to one another by blood or marriage. Indeed, there are many kinship terms to express the precise kind of relationship pertaining between two individuals (Mbiti 1969, 104). Among the Luo of Kenya, for example, in a situation where an elderly lady meets a young man with whom they have no blood ties, she will refer to him as her son-in-law, because he could easily marry her daughter. This communalistic outlook finds expression in many aspects of life, including political thought and practice.

However, I do not wish to suggest that there are no liberal ideas in Africa, nor that communalistic ideas are alien to the Western worldview. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Western societies would have remained cohesive without a considerable dose of communalism. For example, the French Revolution, which is one of the most powerful expressions of liberalism, had as one of its mottos "*Liberté, égalité et fraternité*" ("liberty, equality and fraternity"), and yet "fraternity" has a much closer affinity to communalism than to liberalism. Similarly, African cultures have considerable room for personal achievement, as is manifest in the idea of heroism so pervasive in them. Thus I am not claiming that there is an *essential* difference between Western liberalism and African communalism. Rather, I am highlighting the fact that the difference between the two viewpoints has to do with emphasis, Western liberalism giving preeminence to the rights of the individual above his or her social responsibilities, African communalism putting a significantly higher premium on the individual's responsibilities to society than his or her personal freedom. Nevertheless, I opine that this difference in emphasis is strong enough to result in divergent political outlooks, manifesting as Western liberalism and African communalism, thereby warranting the reflections in this article.

It is also noteworthy that neither the West nor Africa holds a monolythic view of social order. Indeed, by virtue of the individuality of human thought, there is a plurality of outlook not only among cultural groups, but also within each cultural group. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that certain cultures exhibit considerable similarities that warrant some cautious generalisations about them.

For example, numerous ethnic groups in Africa are classified as "Bantus" because of the similarity of their languages, with linguists convinced that the languages and their speakers had a common ancestry (Ehret 1972). It would be strange if the Bantu shared a language and no other aspect of culture. In addition, it is a fact that neighbouring cultural groups have regular interactions through marriage, trade, and warfare, all of which result in their incorporating aspects of conceptual and material culture from one another. We may therefore infer that by virtue of centuries of proximity to one another, the worldviews of various African ethnic groups have some things in common, and that a similar situation obtains with regard to the worldviews of various Western European ethnic groups.

Furthermore, the difference between Western liberalism and African communalism is sociological rather than biological: it is not that members of Western societies are genetically constituted to give pre-eminence to the rights of the individual above the authority of society, nor that there is a gene in the members of African societies that drives them to emphasise collective responsibilities above individual rights. Indeed, pre-modern rural European societies were as traditional as pre-industrial societies in other parts of the world, with their communalistic outlook driven by religious beliefs and family values based on strong kinship relationships. As Marcel Fafchamps observes, in pre-industrial societies throughout the world, there are solidarity bonds among members of the same family, kinship group or village, manifesting in ways such as labor invitations and other forms of manpower assistance for the sick and the old, cost-free land and livestock loans, the care of children that parents cannot support, gifts, food transfers, and credit without interest (Fafchamps 1992; see also Posner 1980). The difference between the Western and African perspectives was largely occasioned by the advent of Western modernity that was driven by factors such as urbanisation that resulted in cultural plurality and relativity, eighteenth century Western European Enlightenment which put a high primium on the individual as a rational being, and the Industrial Revolution that gave rise to the Western European middle class with its drive for entrepreneurship.

Five Grounds against Liberal Democracy in and for Africa

Logical Inconsistency

According to liberal democracy, the individual has the right to chart the course of his or her life without interference from other members of society or from the corporate demands of society. Western discourse on human rights rests on this tenet, as is evident in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (Mill 2001 [1859]) and John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971), among others. Liberal democracy assumes that this individual is committed to promoting his or her own exclusive interests. This is the rationale behind liberal democracy's doctrine of "one person one vote". Yet it is difficult to see how this atomic individual could possibly function on his or her own. Indeed, liberal democrats acknowledge the need for concerted action to popularise the liberal ideals. This explains the existence of several avowedly liberal democratic political parties in various countries.

What is more, Barry Hallen has observed that liberal theory is silent when it comes to accounting for the origin of the rational, mature human beings who are a party, in fact essential, to the social contract:

> Liberal theory may have much of interest and value to say about contracting individuals and their rights and freedoms; but what about the social context that produced those individuals when they were in the pre-personhood stage? Does not liberal theory have to presuppose or presume

some form of social context that produces the rational, mature individuals

who enter into the social contract or who become engaged in the exercise

consequent to what rawls refers to as "the veil of ignorance"? (Hallen

2015, 7).

Hallen is highlighting the fact that the atomic individual of Western liberalism is

inconceivable in the light of the fact that the individual's outlook is necessarily

moulded by his or her social context, or, as Mbiti memorably put it fifty years ago,

"I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1969, 141) - a

fact which validates the communalist position that there would be no well-

developed individual person without society to mould him or her.

Furthermore, liberal democracy's insistence on the pre-eminence of the autonomy
of the individual above the collective good exposes it to the same criticism as is
frequently leveled against ethical egoism, namely, lack of internal consistency; for
in the light of our dependence on one another, it is not in my personal interest, nor
in that of society, that each individual consider the pursuit of his or her personal
interests to be his or her supreme goal. Some might object to this criticism by
pointing out that liberals understand the importance of concerted action to
promote liberal values. What such objectors fail to see is that the liberal call to
such action is still premised on the promotion of the individual's personal benefit;
and this implies that where the individual considers that such action will promote
other people's good rather than his or her own, he or she is under no obligation to
be part of it.

Besides, liberal democracy assumes that the individual *is* only concerned with his

or her personal interests, and goes on to infer that this is the way it *ought* to be.

Nevertheless, such an inference is unwarranted because while this may be what

actually happens in many cases, it does not follow that it is what *ought to be*. In other words, the inference proceeds from description to prescription without demonstrating a logical connection between the two in this instance. In short, liberal democracy fails to distinguish things as they *are* from things as they *ought to be*. Furthermore, we would all be the worse for it if every individual fastidiously lived by the dictum that he or she *ought* to act solely in pursuit of his or her own personal interests, whether short term or long term.

Impracticability Due to the Largely Communalistic Outlook of many Africans

Liberal democracy, with its emphasis on the freedoms of the individual, is a Western idea which stands in significant contrast to the communalistic orientation so characteristic of the worldviews of many African peoples (see for examples Nyerere 1974; Masolo 2009; Masolo 2010; Hallen 2016). However, I am not in any way suggesting that liberal democracy is inappropriate for Africa simply because of its alien origins: many things with alien origins are very useful to Africans, among them paper from China, cars, electricity and telephones from the Western European Industrial Revolution, and the aeroplane from the American Wright Brothers. Nevertheless, it is difficult to separate a people's political outlook from its whole cultural orientation because politics is an integral part of a culture. As such, it is easier to borrow technology than to borrow a political system. Thus although to some critics I might be bordering on committing the genetic fallacy, that is, dismissing an idea simply because of its origins, I am actually highlighting the negative effects of attempting to plant a system of governance into a culture with elements that make it difficult for the system to work. Indeed, liberal democracy has failed to take root in African states over the past sixty or so years of their political independence mainly because it was imposed on them in total disregard of the fact that it arose in Western Europe where there was a significantly different socio-political milieu with factors that not only caused it to spring up there, but also sustain it there, and which are absent from Africa.

Two of the most influential factors in the rise of liberal democracy were the 17th and 18th century secularisation of Europe beginning with the separation of power between church and State, and the works of political philosophers of the time (Owakah and Aswani 2009, 91-92). Indeed, at the core of Western liberal democracy are such ideas as the Kantian concept of the autonomy of the will, Jean Jacques Rousseau's theory of the state as based upon the will of the people, Karl Popper's idea of an open and pluralistic society, and John Stuart Mill's notions of freedom and of the absolute sovereignty of the individual (Mojola 1996, 335).

Furthermore, while Western Europe's modernisation, including her adoption of liberal democracy, arose largely from her own internal dynamics (Held 1996, 97), Africa's was part of the Western colonial domination which is being perpetuated in the neo-colonial milieu, with negative social and political consequences. In the words of Eleazu (1977, 31), "The problem of political change in Africa is the situation created by new institutions embodying new values being imposed upon old institutions with their old values. …. What we then have are two political cultures facing each other." Nevertheless, in view of the diversity both in Africa and in the West, reference to "two cultures" would best be viewed as pointing to two clusters of cultures. Besides, the "two cultures" are not "facing each other" as equals; instead, through capitalism and its liberal democracy offshoot, Western cultures are imposing their individualist values on communalistic African cultures.

Besides, as Chweya (2002, 27) observed, liberal democracy works with a significant degree of efficiency in the West Due to its symbiotic relationship with other factors in the society such as capitalism, the nation-state, and professional knowledge - factors that either do not all exist in Africa, or do not do so to any appreciable degree. For example, in line with the capitalist value system typical of the Western worldview, liberal democracy "commoditises" the political process, holding that the "highest bidder" (the majority) ought to take possession of it. In this framework, opinion polling is viewed in very much the same way as market survey questionnaires, and elections based on the one-person-one-vote as the actual sales of competing political "products". Nevertheless, the Western capitalist thought that spawned liberal democracy assumes that human nature is characterised by a thoroughgoing individualism, while indigenous African thought views the community as the foundation of true personhood (Masolo 2010).

Moreover, as I indicated in the previous section, African communalism is expressed in the idiom of kinship, with members of an ethnic group viewing themselves as belonging to one family. It is noteworthy that the African conception of family is significantly more inclusive and therefore more communalistic than the Western one, as is evident from the numerous kinship terms in various African languages. For example, where a Westerner talks of a "cousin", an African talks of a "brother" or "sister". Besides, while the English word "uncle" describes both a father's brother and a mother's brother, many African languages have different terms to signify these two distinct sets of relationships. What is more, numerous African proverbs highlight the pre-eminence of solidarity. For example, the Swahili of the East African coast say, "*Mtu ni watu*", that is, literally, "A person is people" to communicate the conviction that personhood is meaningless outside a communal context. This explains why many African voters' choices are heavily influenced by their solidarity with their co-ethnics. In Kenya, for example, calls to drop the preoccupation with ethnic loyalty and to vote on the basis of "issues" instead has yielded no tangible fruits.

At a personal level, I am closely acquainted with the contrast between the communalist outlook of African peoples and the individualist outlook of people from the West. When, for example, my Western friend asks me, "have you had your lunch", my African friend asks, "Have you had lunch?" Note that my African friend does not lay emphasis on my ownership of the lunch, although he or she knows very well that one usually eats lunch which one has bought. Similarly, when I am with two friends in a car, one Western, the other African, my Western friend will ask, "Have you closed your door?", while my African friend will ask, "Have you closed the door on your side?" When my Western friend is shocked by some news, he or she will say, "O dear me!", while my fellow Luo will say, "*Yawa!*" or "*Jowa!*", both of which mean "My people!", and I am aware of several similar expressions in other African languages. While critics might view these illustrations as insignificant, they will need to give an alternative explanation

to them - why so much "me, …, my …" in Western expressions, and so much "we …, our …" in African ones?

Mafeje (n.d.) observes that the greatest mistake post-colonial African states made at birth was to adopt pre-conceived forms of government which were at variance with the socio-historical realities of their societies. At independence, African leaders accepted the idea of a multi-party system and an official opposition. However, the principle of the winner takes all predisposed the incumbents towards absolute power. This was given substance by the fact that under African conditions the government was not only by far the biggest potential employer, but also the sole distributor of public resources. In turn, this created a predisposition among the leadership of opposition parties to join the government in order to benefit from state largesse. The ultimate outcome of this was the one-party state which enjoyed absolute power and could afford to suppress its opponents with impunity and to reward its supporters at will. It legitimised corruption and created the ideal conditions for vicious intra-elite struggles and negative ethnic consciousness. Thus although it is often thought that the one-party state was the creation of scheming African dictators, it was actually the result of certain predisposing factors which aspiring "presidents for life" took advantage of retrospectively (Mafeje n.d.). The result was one-party dictatorships under a veneer of European bureaucratic structures and procedures, so that the outcome was neither African nor European (Mafeje 2002).

Even more alarming is the fact that the re-introduction of multiparty democracy in several African countries from the early 1990s met with challenges very similar to the ones experienced at the dawn of independence. Thus from the early 1990s newly elected governments were overthrown either through military coups (Sierra Leone, Burundi and Corte d'ivoire), or at the hands of armed guerrilla movements (Congo-Brazzaville). In other cases, adulterated multiparty elections resulted in the retention and legitimisation of the continent's longstanding authoritarian civilian regimes (Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Kenya). Even where there was a successful change of guard through multi-party elections, new, ostensibly democratic regimes quickly assumed an authoritarian character typical of their predecessors (Zambia and Malawi). A few others remained aloof to these democratisation initiatives (Sudan) (Chweya 2002, 1-2). All this suggests that

liberal democracy is bound to fail in Africa as often as it is tried. In any case, there is no reason for giving it a third try instead of exercising human creativity to come up with alternative models of democracy that take cognisance of the socio-political realities in Africa instead of trying to override them as experiments with liberal democracy have tried to do.

In sum, liberal democracy in Africa has failed to nurture constitutionalism - a process for developing, presenting, adopting, and utilising a political contract that defines not only the power relations between political communities and constituencies, but also the rights and obligations of citizens (Ihonvbere 2000). In most African countries, pre-independence deliberations on the writing of constitutions were dominated by Western-educated elites, so that the bulk of the African peoples were excluded from them. The outcomes of these deliberations were rules that did not reflect the people's interests, and were generally not understood by them (Mbaku 2000). The alien character of liberal democracy is also confirmed by the way in which Western Europe regularly sends election observers to Africa, but rarely, if at all, does it invite African observers to assess Western European elections. This indicates that liberal democracy has proved to be a tool for keeping African states in a subservient position in relation to their Western counterparts.

Thus Chweya (2002) correctly blames the repeated failure of liberal democracy in Africa on the Euro-centricity of the liberal democratic structures and values that are introduced into Africa in disregard of the peculiar local situation. He points out that the African situation is a complex outcome of the confluence of Africa's indigenous systems of government, many of which are still embedded in the fabric

of African societies, and of the colonial social and political order whose relics continue to have a strong presence in society. He goes on to note that "The coexistence of unfailing faith in the theory of liberal democracy with its practical failure is a paradox that underscores the ideologisation of liberal democracy in Africa" (Chweya 2002, 14). Chweya (2002, 20) correctly observes that the vicious cycle of doing and undoing liberal democratic schemes in Africa, and the failure to break away and to explore possible avenues to indigenous forms of democracy for the continent, pave way for the reproduction of both authoritarian rule and social disorder in African countries.

Some of the advocates of liberal democracy might reply to the present objection by asserting that the impracticability of liberal democracy in Africa was already highlighted by eighteenth and nineteenth century European liberals who distinguished between "advanced" and "backward" peoples, and insisted that the liberal polity was only suited to the former. Nevertheless, the reasons that those progenitors of liberal democracy gave for the said impracticability were motivated by an ideology of "white" supremacy rather than by an acknowledgement of the need for a political system to be responsive to the worldview of a cultural group. In this regard, let us briefly look at Immanuel Kant, Georg W.F. Hegel, and John Stuart Mill.

As Neugebauer (1991, 251) explains, "Kant discerns four races, to which he is already introducing a racial pecking-order. These are the White on the top, followed by the Yellow and the Negro and at the bottom the American or red race. The pecking order is defined by decreasing mental and general ability." Neugebauer (1991, 252) goes on to explain that "The general character of the Negro according to Kant is composed of imagination, laziness, hesitation and jealousy." Besides, for Kant, racial distinctions are the result of heredity, so that the mixing of races ought to be especially avoided, as it can only result in harm. For Kant, in view of the alleged hereditary origin of the inferiority of the "negro", there is really no hope for his or her improvement (cited in Neugebauer 1991, 252-253).

Similarly, G.W.F. Hegel declared that what he called "Africa proper", that is, Africa south of the Sahara, was devoid of reason, and therefore without history, and incapable of "civilised" political organisation characteristic of liberal democracy. He therefore alleged that the English acted in futility when they abolished slavery (Hegel 2001, 109-117).

Slightly different was John Stuart Mill, who wrote that "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end. Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion" (Mill 2001 [1859], 14). However, while Mill sounds more philanthropic than Kant and Hegel, he does not set out any timelines for this programme of "improving" the "barbarians".

Besides, liberal democracy has been under siege in its Western cradle for more than a century now from Marxists, social democrats, communitarians, advocates of racial equality, and feminists (Mclellan 1977; Carlsson and Lindgren 2007, 48-49; Taylor 1994; Crain 2016). As such, there is no reason why African political theorists should treat as orthodox an outlook which is questioned in its own cradle.

Inconsistency between Affirmation and Action

According to traditional logic, one commits the fallacy of *argumentam ad hominem* ("argument directed to the man") whenever one questions the authenticity of a claim on the basis of the character of the person who canvases it. The idea here is that any claim or belief ought to be assessed purely on its own merit. However, pragmatism makes the important point that the merit of an idea is in its usefulness, thereby attributing ethical and epistemological value to the practical difference that results from embracing it. It is therefore from the pragmatic point of view that I present the present objection to liberal democracy.

The affirmation and actions of Western advocates of liberal democracy concerning the dignity of all human beings have often been inconsistent. This affirmation was apparently not strong enough to prevent Western powers from enslaving the peoples of Africa, Asia, Central and South America. With regard to the strange tolerance of slavery by liberals, Domenico Losurdo gives the example of John C. Calhoun, vice president of the United States in the mid nineteenth century, who vigorously defended the values of liberalism, but also avered that slavery was "a positive good" that civilisation could not possibly renounce, and vilified those who fought against the enslavement of African Americans (Losurdo 2011, 1-2). Losurdo goes on to outline the same line of thought in numerous avowed liberals in the UK, U.S., France and Holland, including the English philosopher John Locke who had shares in the Royal African Company (an English company involved in the slave trade), and yet is regarded as the "father of liberalism" (Losurdo 2011, 2 ff.).

Furthermore, the clamour for the independence of the American colonies from Britain raised a paradox which Losurdo presents as follows: "The self styled champions of liberty branded taxation imposed without their explicit consent as synonymous with despotism and slavery. But they had no scruples about exercising the most absolute and arbitrary power over their slaves" (Losurdo 2011, 10). He further observes that "Virginia played a central role in the American Revolution. Forty per cent of the country's slaves were to be found there, but a majority of the authors of the rebellion unleashed in the name of liberty also came

from there" (Losurdo 2011, 12). As Losurdo further observes, "Slavery is not something that persisted despite the success of the three liberal revolutions [England's Glorious Revolution in 1688, the American Revolution in 1776, and the French Revolution in 1789]. On the contrary, it experienced its maximum development following that success" (Losurdo 2011, 35).

What is more, liberal ideas did not restrain those who professed them from colonising the peoples of Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and the Americas. Indeed, colonialism is a euphemism for a situation in which one state politically subjugates another in order to dispossess it of its human and natural resources with impunity - hardly the kind of activity one expects people from societies with liberal democratic traditions to engage in. Similarly, liberal ideas did not restrain the Caucasian dominated US establishment from maintaining "white" supremacist laws ("Jim Crow") for almost a century after the end of the American Civil War. Liberal democracy also failed to restrain Western powers from supporting dictatorial African regimes during the Cold War: all that regimes such as Jomo Kenyatta's and Daniel arap Moi's Kenya, Idi Amin's Uganda, Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire (now "Democratic Republic of the Congo"), and Jean Bedel Bokasa's Central African Republic needed to say was that they were against communism, and the West would fund and protect them against their repressed and exploited subjects.

Reflecting on such inconsistencies, Frantz Fanon wrote: "Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at

the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe" (Fanon 1967, 311). All this suggests that liberal democracy is ultimately a Western capitalist conspiracy rather than a genuine commitment to the emancipation of humankind. This suspicion is strengthened by the colossal sums of money needed for one to ascend to high political office through elections in this model of governance.

Violation of the Right to Ethnic Identity

Earlier liberals such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill recognised the difficulties that would arise in trying to practise liberal democracy in a multi-ethnic state. Thus Kant presupposed that nature dictates that liberal democratic polities be culturally homogenous, and held that the division of states along cultural lines (that is, the division of the world into nation-states rather than into multi-cultural ones) is a catalyst for cultural development, and promotes the realization of human unity without erasing cultural distinctives (Kant 1903, 313). On his part, John Stuart Mill argued that a portion of humankind may be said to constitute a nationality if they are united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist between them and any others, making them co-operate with each other more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be exclusively government by themselves or a portion of themselves (Mill 1890, 285). Mill also pointed out that an army formed out of a multi-national state has no real loyalty to the state, but only to its leaders, and therefore finds it easy to oppress the citizenry.

Consequently, he asserted, it is most preferable that each state be constituted by a single nationality (Mill 1890, 286-288).

However, in due course, advocates of liberal democracy, with their emphasis on the rights of the individual, increasingly prescribed an ethnically blind society, so that Rawls (1971) and Habermas (1984; 1987) presupposed that the basic units of a liberal state are atomic individuals whose single objective is to promote their own personal benefits. In line with this prescription, the common wisdom among liberals is that ethnic consciousness is one of the greatest obstacles to democratisation in African countries (Johnson 2001, 217). Nevertheless, towards the end of the twentieth century, the identity politics movement arose in the West, contending that apart from the rights of the individual, there exist entitlements that properly belong to cultural groups, including land and language rights (Kymlicka 1995).

Bauböck (1999) contends that there are at least two reasons why prima facie the liberal hostility towards group rights is hard to understand. *First*, rights of both kinds exist in every liberal democracy and not merely for cultural groups: voting rights are group-differentiated by age; social welfare is differentiated for the able-bodied and citizens with disabilities; wage negotiations involve collective bargaining rights for the members of unions; local and provincial self-government establishes collective rights for the inhabitants of municipalities and territorial units of federal states. *Second*, there is neither a clear line between individual and

collective rights, nor is it true that rights are more disputed the closer they are to the purely collective pole.

When the citizens' ethnicity is officially ignored in the name of building an ethnically-blind polity, the cultures of majority ethnic groups impose themselves on minority cultures (Taylor 1994, 43; Kymlicka 1995, 110-111). This dominance manifests in government policies on language, economics, and education, as well as in state emblems and public holidays, among others. Since numerous African ethnic groups that previously constituted sovereign politiecal entities now suffer a minority status mainly due to the formation of colonial and post-colonial states, the least that can be done for them is to acknowledge their right to cultural identity. As Preece (2001) observed, "our fundamental human desire for a language, culture and value system which is an expression of ourselves means that political attempts to forcibly suppress or alter these hallmarks of identity are unavoidably destructive of both human freedom and creativity." Similarly, Narang (2002, 2696) noted that in view of the fact that there is an interdependence between the individual and collective processes of identity formation, it is unrealistic to expect people to embrace public institutions that ignore their cultural roots. Besides, as Kymlicka (1995, 3) correctly observed, Western liberal democracy fails to recognise that basic human rights such as freedom of speech, association and conscience, while attributed to individuals, are typically exercised in community with others, and so provide protection for group life.

In view of the foregoing reflections, it is high time African states jettisoned the liberal democratic vision of ethnically-blind polities, and incorporated ethnic identity into their socio-political engineering instead. In this regard, Claude Ake memorably wrote:

> … ethnicity supposedly epitomises backwardness and constrains the development of Africa. This presupposition is misleading, however, for it is development rather than the people and their culture which has to be problematised. Development has to begin by taking people and their culture as they are, not as they might be, and proceeding from there to define the problems and strategies for development. Otherwise, the problematic of development becomes a tautology. The people are not and cannot be a problem just by being what they are, even if part of what they are is ethnic consciousness. Our treatment of ethnicity and ethnic consciousness reflects this tendency to problematise the people and their culture, an error that continues to push Africa deeper into confusion. …. The point of course is not to romanticise the past and be captive to it but to recognise what is on the ground and strive to engineer a more efficient, less traumatic, and less self-destructive social transformation (Ake 1993).

Furthermore, Ake (1993) warned that the usual easy judgments against ethnic consciousness were a dangerous luxury at a time when long-established states were decomposing under pressure from ethnic and nationalist assertiveness, and when the community of independent countries was shrugging off their demise. For him, the enormous implications of this for Africa, where hundreds of ethnic groups are squeezed chaotically and oppressively into approximately 50 states, are

easy enough to imagine. Similarly, Lentz (1995, 303) predicted that in the years to come, ethnicity, in whatever concrete forms and under whatever name, would be so important a political resource and an idiom for creating community, that social scientists and anthropologists had no choice but to confront it: I opine that this imperative equally applies to political philosophers if their quest for value frameworks that promote practicable models of governance in Africa is to bear fruit. Indeed, the recognition of group political rights would reassure ethnic minorities about their liberties and security, reducing the incentive for civil war, secession and the defence of co-ethnic across their borders (Rothchild 2000, 6; Talbott 2000, 160).

In sum, an important part of the cause for the dysfunctional ethnically plural post-colonial African states is that while the masses are loyal to their ethnic groups rather than to the state, liberal democracy, which these states subscribe to, prescribes an individualist, ethnically blind outlook in the citizenry. Yet the masses ought not to be blamed for this, because their incorporation into the colonial and post-colonial state was through coercion. Consequently, African political theorists ought to propose alternative models of democracy that take seriously the ethnic loyalties of African peoples.

The Moral Imperative to Assert the Right to Cultural Emancipation
As I have already indicated, post-colonial African states were designed in line with liberal democracy, with its emphasis on the rights of the individual above communal responsibility. Thus Praeg (2014, 239) correctly observes that in the

context of these states, "The playing field between individualist and altruistic tendencies is not level, but rather, as a direct result of colonialism, skewed in favor of individualism. Standards, histories, customs and habits; that is, forms of life that represent the altruistic, social or communitarian, are and continue to be fundamentally marginalised and instituted against." Indeed, in the discourse on Africa's democratisation, African states are, more often than not, viewed as inferior to Western ones. Indeed, it is within the Eurocentric conceptual framework that the distinction has been made between "developed democracies" and "underdeveloped democracies", with the presumption that the ideal is the Western social, economic and political trajectory.

However, Claude Ake spelled out three aspects of the imperialist nature of the Western theory of political development and political science literature, with their emphasis on structural differentiation and cultural secularisation. *First*, "Development translates to westernisation and the pursuit of development becomes a matter of making the developing country more like the West" (Ake 2011, 11). *Second*, the distinction between "developed" and "underdeveloped" democracies promotes a sense of inferiority in the peoples of the economically disadvantaged countries. As a result, "…the will to assert oneself is undermined, the tendency to be dependent on the West is reinforced, and people become all the more available for domination and exploitation" (Ake 2011, 11-12). *Third*, Western publications on the theory of political development focusing on post-colonial societies "try to impose capitalist values, by presupposing a capitalist view of man and of society, and passing this on as universal truth. In particular, they assume the atomist conception of society. According to this model, men are

individualistic, act self-interestedly and are locked in competition for scarce goods. These are the familiar axioms of classical Smithian capitalism" (Ake 2011, 12).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the U.S.A. from the Cold War as the only super-power, Francis Fukuyama (1992) declared the Western liberal democratic State as universally victorious, and contended that industrial development necessarily follows a universal pattern set by the leading Western capitalist economies. Nevertheless, as Fayemi (2009, 108) observed, Fukuyama's liberal democracy cannot be the end of human history simply because we are not at the end of human intelligence. Consequently, African countries have every right to construct new models of democracy that are in accord with their cultural ideosyncracies. Only in this way can they make significant progress on their path to cultural emancipation from Western hegemony. Besides, Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the World Order* (Huntington 1993) contends that history is driven by culture rather than by ideology, politics or economics. What we have witnessed since the end of the Cold War (the proliferation of culturally-based secessionist bids and the rise of assertive politico-religious movements) seems to vindicate Huntington's view rather than Fukuyama's.

Most importantly, Politics is an integral part of culture, that is, a people's inventions and innovations in an attempt to make its existence more sustainable. As Bradley (2005) observes, since democracy is a configuration of governance

molded by the general values, biases, prejudices, and nuances of a given culture, a reappraisal of democracy as a form of governance is needed to find a paradigm that is more suitable to the context in which various African countries exist. This can only be achieved if we acknowledge that no culture is superior to any other, which implies that there ought to be mutual respect among cultures. In this regard, Michael Walzer noted:

> We are (all of us) culture-producing creatures; we make and inhabit meaningful worlds. Since there is no way to rank and order these worlds with regard to their understanding of social goods, we do justice to actual men and women by respecting their particular creations. And they claim justice, and resist tyranny, by insisting on the meaning of social goods among themselves. justice is rooted in the distinct understandings of places, honors, jobs, things of all sorts, that constitute a shared way of life. To override those understandings is (always) to act unjustly (Walzer 1983, 314).

Consequently, a discourse on Africa's democratisation which privileges Western liberal democracy over indigenous African models of democracy is a manifestation of cultural imperialism, and therefore demands cultural emancipation with a view to putting the two cultural blocks on a level playing ground.

Furthermore, for over seven decades now, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has worked for the preservation of humankind's diverse cultures. The imposition of liberal democracy on non-

Western cultures militates against this worthy endeavor. What we need is mutual respect among cultures, thereby facilitating healthy inter-cultural dialogues. In this regard, Mafeje observes:

> While any "dialogue between cultures" cannot be denied apriori, it is important to note that current processes of globalisation which aim at homogenisation are antithetical to such a dialogue. Monopolarity subsequent to the collapse of the Soviet Union seems to have given western imperialism a new confidence to silence other cultures and to deny in advance alternative or novel styles of life even by violent means in the name of world peace (Mafeje n.d.).

Conclusion

In view of the foregoing reflections, it is high time African and Africanist political theorists extricated themselves from the hegemonic Western mould of conceptualising democracy, so that they can examine the essence of democracy afresh for the benefit of the peoples of Africa. It is high time they utilised indigenous African political thought, coupled with emancipatory aspects of political thought from other parts of the world, to design practicable models of democracy for contemporary African states.

Indeed, African peoples have long histories of rich political thought and practice (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1970; Barclay 1990), and they have a right to see their political heritage reflected in the way they are governed in the twenty-first century. As Sium (2014) observes, sustainable African development must begin with a strengthening of the Indigenous identities and systems that have governed the continent since time immemorial. Sium points out that in this way, African development becomes anchored by local actors rather than by foreign ones. It is

therefore deeply regretable that many post-colonial African states have squandered more than five decades unsuccessfully trying to make liberal democracy work. Around the time when African countries were gaining their political independence, Frantz Fanon warned them against imitating their erstwhile colonisers:

> If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe …, then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us.

> But if we want humanity to advance a step further, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries (Fanon 1967, 315).

On their part, people from Western cultures ought to unreservedly acknowledge the fact of the equality of all cultures, and to recognise that systems of governance are part and parcel of those cultures. They will do well to remember Michel de Montaigne's observation that "every man calls barbarous anything he is not accustomed to", and that humans are biased towards their own country: "There we always find the perfect religion, the perfect polity, the most developed and perfect way of doing anything!" (de Montaigne cited in Losurdo 2011, 33). Only in this way can we promote meaningful inter-cultural dialogue on sustainable democratisation.

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