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The African state today and the democracy ideal: A case for a critical return

Nancy Oppongwaa Myles* and Paa Kweku Quansah

Department of Philosophy and Classics, Faculty of Arts, University of Ghana, Ghana.

Undoubtedly, many modern nation-states seek to achieve a better form of democratic governance. The African nation-state is not an exception. However, the attempt by African nation-states to achieve the ideal form of democratic governance has been especially problematic. The real problem, as we see it, is that because of the forces of colonization and neo-colonization, Africa especially has scarcely had the opportunity to articulate and practice an uninterrupted democracy that accords with her indigenous political values and contemporary political experience. The upshot of this failure is the myriad of governance problems that plague contemporary African nation-states. Adopting both a descriptive and normative approach in this paper, we aim to uncover valuable aspects of traditional African politics which have been jettisoned in the politics of today. We further discuss why such worthwhile elements need to be refined and incorporated into contemporary African democracies. We analyze the traditional Fante governance system as a model of consensual democracy rooted in the African traditional concept of statehood that must be re-enacted to suit the practice of nation building in Africa today. Thus, we re-echo the largely held view that consensual democracy shows positive prospects for the issue of substantive representation in African politics today.

Key words: African democracy, consensual, multiparty, nation-state, colonial mentality, ethnic, tradition and modernity, Fante.

INTRODUCTION

One of the many problems African leaders have had to confront since the early days of the post-colonial era is the problem of conceptualizing and implementing an ideal system of governance for African states. This problem has been exacerbated because the very systems and structures that made possible the supposed final recession of colonial power were themselves of colonial origin and therefore not only fit awkwardly, in most instances, to local contexts, but were also hardly recognized or understood by the indigenous people they were bequeathed to (Abudu, 2012). The awkward fit created has undoubtedly contributed adversely to the dreary image of democratic governance in Africa today (Farah et al., 2011) and, to a large extent, it might not be

incorrect to say that the "contemporary state in Africa is a remnant of a colonially imposed system" (Wyk, 2007:3). In Ghana, for instance, the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, took charge of the reins of power by means of an electoral system put in place by the colonial powers of the day. Having assumed power however, Nkrumah thought it wise to re-map the political terrain and, in accordance with his metaphysical doctrine of materialistic monism, opted for a one-party state. He was of the view that, ''on the philosophical level, too, it is materialism, not idealism that in one form or another will give the firmest conceptual basis to the restitution of Africa's egalitarian and humanist principles. Idealism breeds an oligarchy, and its social implication, as drawn

*Corresponding author. E-mail: nancyomyles@yahoo.co.uk.

out in my second chapter, is obnoxious to African society. It is materialism, with its monistic and naturalistic account of nature, which will balk arbitrariness, inequality, and injustice (Nkrumah, 1969:76)".

Translating the ideal of egalitarianism into socio-political terms, according to Nkrumah, requires a one-party state because "a people's parliamentary democracy with a one-party system is better able to express and satisfy the common aspirations of a nation as a whole, than a multiple-party parliamentary system which is in fact only a ruse for perpetuating and covering up the inherent struggle between the 'haves' and 'have nots'" (Nkrumah, 1969:100-101). Nkrumah's proposal and practice of a one-party state has come under severe criticisms (Mazrui, 2004). According to Agomor (2019:67), for instance, although Nkrumah's implementation of a one-party state may have been well-intentioned, "the oppression of opposition parties undermined the evolution of Democratic Party politics in Ghana". Zimba (1984:129) also expresses a similar thought when he opines that "the one-party state after 1964 even worsened the position in Ghana, for it meant that the personal liberty of the subjects of Ghana was further eroded, since now the president had control over both parliament and judiciary". We agree with the posture adopted by the critics mentioned in the foregoing towards Nkrumah's one-party state ideology in spite of Nkrumah's incessant attempt to ground his one-party state politics in traditional African socialism. Indeed, the nationwide euphoria expressed in the wake of Nkrumah's ousting from the seat of government was indicative of the doubtful and precarious state of Nkrumah's one-party state. One may surmise that Nkrumah's idea and, indeed, those of the many early liberation fighters of Africa were not without fault. The above critical remarks not-withstanding, we are convinced that Nkrumah's intuition that any proposed system of governance for Africa must dialogue with Africa's past and history ought to be seen as fundamentally right. The same point being made here is stressed by the eminent American philosopher, John Rawls, when he justifies his proposed system for organizing the political institutions of western society thus:

what justifies a conception of justice is not its being true to an order antecedent to and given to us but it's congruence with our deeper understanding of ourselves and our realization that *given our history and the traditions embedded in our public life,* [Emphasis added] it is the most reasonable doctrine for us (Rawls, 1980:519).

It would not be incorrect, therefore, to argue that in constructing and molding her political institutions today, Africa ought to be inspired by the prescription that the most legitimate and reasonable political system must be the one that is congruent with the Africans' understanding of themselves as encapsulated in their history and traditions. However, the key historical traditions of socio-political thought that Africa may appeal to in constructing an ideal system of governance for herself remain a fundamental question whose response would not be devoid of specific and local coloration as they are brought to bear on her contemporary political scene (Busia, 1967).

Problem statement

Reflecting on the foregoing assertion is critical since the failure to envision and implement an 'African' system of democratic governance for Africa, we believe, has left the continent in a political turmoil with recurrent military and civil disturbances (Lessem et al., 2015:78-79). An instructive example in this regard is the post-election ethnic violence between the Luo and Gikuyu of Kenya after Mwai Kibaki, a Gikuyu, was declared winner in the 2002 presidential election (Kwatemba, 2008). Doubts about the 'cleanliness' of the electoral process fueled existing ethnic tensions and consequent violence. The recent military intervention in Guinea and Mali is a further testimony to the unstable nature of many African 'democracies' today (Adekoya, 2021).

We maintain that a wholesale adoption of the colonialist model is largely to blame for the consequent authoritarian, monopolized, exclusionary and corrupt African 'democracies' we are faced with today (Alemazung, 2010:79; Njoku, 2005:99-116). The point is, the very concept of multi-partism introduced in Africa by the colonial regime was from the start infested with its non-democratic ills (Salih, 2007:41) which gags, criminalizes or bans opposition parties and curtails the competition they bring (Gordon and Gordon, 2013:4) until governments reduce to one-party states or military dictatorships (Mazrui, 1994:61). It is our strong view that the historical foundation laid by colonialism cannot be sidestepped in any meaningful assessment and confrontation of Africa's sombre democracy today.

If left as it is, age-old ethnic or tribal tensions will be fueled by the unhealthy winner-takes-all competition and inherently divisive character of the adversarial, ballot-box focused and superficial 'democracy' bequeathed to Africa by colonialism, which has fomented and resulted in civil strife in many African states: Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, La Cote d'Ivoire, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, among several others. This is especially so in ethnically heterogenous post-colonial Africa (Abudu, 2012). The resources of post-colonial Africa have been extremely exploited by colonialism; whose peoples have suffered forcible divisions of their ethnic identities by colonial regimes in the infamous "scramble for Africa" (Mengisteab, 2011:15-16); and, whose populations' psyche in many ways have been deeply harmed by what Gyekye (1997: 27) has

called the 'colonial mentality'. We agree with Gyekye when he writes that, "It seems that the most enduring effect of the colonial experience on the African people relates to their self-perceptions, to skewed perceptions of their own values–some of which (values) can, on normative grounds, be said to be appropriate for life in the modern world". It is important to state here and now that the ruinous consequences of the colonial institutions bequeathed to Africa along with the 'colonial mentality' that has evolved after colonialism are very much pervasive in African politics and national life today than the simplistic dismissal it often meets in scholarly discourse in politics.

Besides deepening and perpetuating ethnic tensions, the fundamentally adversarial nature of the multi-party politics associated with the inherited liberal democracy is itself an enduring threat to any hope for sustaining political unity and social cohesion. For, its party-centered posturing poses a fundamental challenge to ensuring substantive 'decisional representation', not simply a nominal representation which merely meets the formal requirement of adequate representation (Wiredu, 1995). Today's democratic system of governance in Africa, generally speaking, scarcely considers the opinions of the non-ruling party, minority cultural groups and the poor and, hardly incorporates the views of those not associated with the ruling party in deciding issues of national interest (Katz, 1997). However, as Dahl (1998) has pointed out, it is not clear what is exactly democratic about a system of governance where stakeholders are not given a meaningful voice to their concerns and interests in decision-making. What to do, at least, to ameliorate if not extirpate these problems has been a matter of concern.

Conceptual framework

The eminent African philosophers, Wiredu (1995) and Gyekye (2010), reflecting on the issues enumerated above, have proposed 'consensual democracy' as a viable response to the problems engendered by post-colonial African politics in finding an ideal mode of political self-expression. The fundamental claim of these scholars is that an inquiry into the socio-political institutions of traditional Africa would uncover a mode of political existence where decisions about the polity are driven by the search for consensus itself inspired by a sense of community. We agree with this intuition, taking cognizance of the challenges to overcome in pursuing the 'traditional' in the modern life of today. We maintain that the challenges notwithstanding, the problems of state organization in modern Africa can best be confronted by deference to a reconceptualized notion of democracy that hinges, among others, on a genuine sense of nationhood and a consensual approach to decision-making in governance typical of most traditional African contexts

past and present. Thus, we argue neither for a wholesale glorification of Africa's traditional political past nor a wholesale condemnation of Africa's inherited post-colonial present. The view we defend here is that a value, practice, or institution of Africa's cultural past should be revived, revised and adapted by the present generations only if, on rational and normative grounds, it is determined to be useful. And, for today's post-colonial African politics, in order to make a modest political recovery, we make the case that Africans should defy colonial political systems being practiced on the continent and evolve a new one based upon the African traditional system of consensus search and a sense of nationhood.

METHODOLOGY AND GUIDED RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The paper straddles a descriptive and normative approach. The aim of such a dual-approach is two-fold: first, to uncover worthwhile aspects of traditional African politics which have been disregarded in the politics of today; second, to discuss why such elegant elements need to be refined and incorporated into contemporary African democracies as a matter of urgency. Thus, we are guided by the main research question: what does 'tradition' have to offer 'modernity' in African politics today?

Section one examines the traditional African conception of statehood. The aim of the section is to answer the question of what in traditional Africa, is conceived of as a 'state' (better rendered as nation – ɔman) and the features associated with it that inspire our proposed grounds of an African democracy. Section two follows from the arguments of section one and pursues the question of democracy as the people's rule of themselves for themselves and by themselves. Making the traditional Fante of Ghana our reference, we present a practical demonstration of traditional African consensual democracy at play. Section three looks at some prospects of pursuing a self-evolved democracy for the African context that meaningfully adopts a consensual approach to national governance. It engages some of the challenges to be encountered and proffers some responses to them.

UNDERSTANDING THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN STATE AS NATION (ƆMAN)

The state as a nation

The attempt to characterize any subject matter as African must first confront the hurdle of justifying the basis of such a characterization. It seems rather unlikely that a continent as vast as Africa comprising of diverse peoples and languages can be said to share the same understanding of any notion in its particular detail. We recognize the legitimacy of this problem and consequently do not presume here to give an interpretation of a traditional African conception of statehood held universally by all Africans regardless of geographical, temporal, and other significant variations. Notwithstanding the above caveat, we do not think that attempts to show commonality of beliefs and conceptions among an internally diverse body of people are entirely hopeless. After all, the mere fact that a people occupy a common

geographical space makes it more likely that they will develop common ways of interpreting and coping with the world for the sake of their collective survival (Gyekye, 2004). Our attempt to formulate a traditional African conception of the state, in this section, will be based on the examination of the beliefs and practices of the traditional Fante of Ghana which is typical of the generality of several traditional African contexts. As already indicated above, this methodological limitation need not necessarily raise accusations of hasty generalization or conceptual imposition.

The term 'state' may have different connotations but the definition by Marume et al. (2016) is a good starting point: ''The state is an association which acting through law as promulgated by a government endowed to this end with coercive powers, maintains within a community territorially demarcated, the universal external conditions of social order'' (Marume et al., 2016:24). Krasner maps out four essential elements connoted by the term 'state': government; administrative apparatus and institutionalized legal order; ruling class; normative order (Krasner, 1984). It is not difficult to observe the convergence between Marume et al. and Krasner's understanding of the concept of a state. What emerges here generally is the notion of an organized community of people with an authority structure by means of which its affairs are coordinated and executed.

The Fante of Ghana conceive of the state as Ɔman which is better translated as 'nation' (Law, 2013:38). A more appropriate and accurate translation considering the current discussion will be the term 'nation-state'. The added term better reveals an underlying assumption that the Fante 'nation' (Ɔman) captures better the view that the organized body of people in question also identify as a collective with a sense of belonging together based on what they believe they share in common: language, ancestry (even if fictitious), territory, among others (Smith, 1991; Tamir, 1995). It is such a sense of belonging together and sharing a common identity that seems hard to assume in today's patched up post-colonial African states.[1]

There is enough evidence to show that modern African states are typically composed of citizens who do not meaningfully identify primarily with the forged and imposed larger states like Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, but rather with their language or ethnic groups such as Fante, Ibo, Gikuyu, which they consider to be their actual nation. This is because they believe these are fraternal or biological and therefore worthy of their loyalty (Gyekye, 1997; Allman, 1993). Today's African state, then, for many, is not considered by its citizens to be a nation and therefore not worthy of their trust and allegiance, especially where such imposed authoritative entities, instituted by the colonial ruler's whip, are not committed to bridging the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual gaps of constituent national groups. This state of fragmentation poses a challenge for governing the state as a whole

(Bellucci, 2010). The foregoing is a fundamental phenomenon which Connor (1972:319) thinks should be overcome by adopting an approach of 'nation-destroying' rather than 'nation-building'. By this, Connor suggests that to be able to build the Ghanaian state, for instance, builders should rather aim at weakening the sense of identity-sense of nationhood-those members feel towards their ethnic or language groups such as Asante, Fante etc. which they consider primarily to be their nation (Ɔman), in the hope that the sense of attachment will be transferred to the larger multi-national state. But Gyekye (1997) argues rather that the focus should be on how to aid the transfer of such allegiances from constituent nation-groups to the larger state which is constituted by such multiple nation-groups. It is therefore imperative that the sense of identifying or belonging as a collective whole, which underlies traditional African conception of statehood as Ɔman, feature prominently in our conceptualization of the modern African state and its democracy. The path to fostering this much needed sense of nationhood in political governance is the task that must engage policy-makers. It is worth mentioning that while modern African polities take on the description of 'nation-state', this description barely reflects "the feeling or consciousness of belonging to a group that shares certain common socio-cultural elements" which, according to Gyekye (1997:79), is the most outstanding feature of a true nation. The problem he takes up is how this sense of belonging together is to be attained even in the face of the diverse constituent ethnicities of today's post-colonial African states. The proposal, as a starting point, is to dissociate the concept of ethnicity from the idea of shared or common ancestry. In his view, what binds members of an ethnic group together is less a question of common ancestry than a question of meaningfully sharing a way of life - culture - together. This is particularly so, Gyekye (1997) urges, because the free movement of people across the globe and the resultant increased rate of inter-ethnic marriages in modern times, cast doubt on any person's claim to a supposed pure line of ethnic descent.

The foregoing point is further elaborated by Myles (2013) who argues that a claim to an ethnic identity in contemporary times should be seen as a claim to cultural identity in the accidental sense of the term identity and not to cultural identity in the essential sense of the term identity where one cannot change their way of life – culture – regardless. Myles' contention is that a person can be identified culturally in the accidental sense but 'culture' does not have a fixed and unchanging identity, essentially speaking. The point of emphasis here is that if culture is properly understood as the way people live, and not erroneously as the way of life of 'a people', then it would be obvious that no existing way of life can be said to be impervious to change. Cultural forms have been, and will continue to be, incorporated from one shared context to the other territorially and temporally as people

seek alternative means of engendering human flourishing. Thus, it is fundamentally problematic to claim to be born into or belong to a culture as though 'culture' is a sealed world bounded, as it were, from other worlds (Ibid). The preceding statement only reinforces the false assumption that culture, which is simply peoples' way of life, is the same as ethnic, language or nation group. But culture, like ethnicity and nationhood, need not be defined necessarily in terms of blood-line and common descent or ancestry.[2]

Consequently, defining a nation strictly in terms of family or blood-line will fundamentally require conjuring a mythos "… 'natural' form of association, based on physical proximity and traditional ties" or "…unitary relationships…." (Miller, 1992:100). The trailing question here for the governance of the larger state, appreciated by Van der Burg in his examination of the notion of cultural community, is what the minimum size of a constituent national group would have to be, to be recognized as a separate or independent nation within the larger post-colonial African state (Van der Burg, 1995: 243). Our contention is that it would have to be the sense of belonging together which derives chiefly from an attachment to common values, aims, aspirations and goals, which makes nationhood desirable not the supposed biological links or the mere cohabitation within a specific territorial boundary, even if persistent cohabitation would foster a deeper sense of belonging together.

If the preceding discussions have any merit at all, then the presence of diverse ethnicities in any modern state need not hamper the achievement of the ideal of nationhood if conceived of as the quest for a shared national culture. The moral imperative here is to transfer loyalty and allegiance from a rather mythic identification with a particular ethnic group to the nation as the larger political community comprising of diverse nations or ethnic identities (Gyekye, 1997). We contend that such transfer of allegiances equally depends on a created mythic identification which members can look to and associate with as pertains in ethnic identities (Atuire, 2019). We are of the opinion that it is in this that Gyekye's notion of 'meta-nationality' of the modern nation-state, in which the collective is seen as constituted "primarily by individual human beings who happen to share certain cultural and historical experiences with some other human individuals in a given, well-defined territory" (1997:102), can be attained. While Gyekye (1997) makes no explicit claims about the cultural roots of his conception of the modern nation-state, the emphasis on the elements of solidarity and community feeling hints that his conception of the modern nation-state is rooted in traditional African political experience. Indeed, it is a telling fact that Gyekye distinguishes his concept of meta-nationality from Western individualist ideas of statehood which place priority on individual rights with little to no recognition of community and belonging. In tandem with the conception of meta-nationality outlined, one can characterize our proposed African conception of the state as a community of persons who identify as sharing a collective life as a 'whole', but not necessarily as 'one'.

The problem with the pursuit of 'oneness', according to Allen (2004), is that it allows democracy to function on a false assumption of a fictitious, homogeneous and uniformed 'one' state, instead of an actual and real 'whole' state constituted by various aspects. Allen argues that pursuing 'wholeness' is a better approach unlike 'oneness' which fundamentally overlooks the various concessions by sub-groups and their reluctant acceptance of certain disadvantages for the sake of constituting a 'one' state. We agree that such over-simplified invention of sameness is likely going to lead to the creation of marginalized sub-groups and communities and a resultant distrust that arises from a sense of 'us' and 'them'. Such a posturing, we maintain, undermines national dialogue, deliberation and consensual decision towards national development and progress since it discourages the various members of the larger state from talking to the other who is considered a stranger. Besides pursuing 'oneness' feeds the perception that the needs and desires of members of the various constituent groups are not mutually dependent. However, like Allen, we believe that the model of oneness and its negative consequences of mistrust and distrust "can be overcome only when citizens manage to find methods of generating mutual benefit despite differences of position, experience, and perspective" (2004: xix). We are of the opinion that key to the pursuit of 'wholeness' are the principles of reciprocity, fellow-feeling and solidarity built on a politics of friendship, care and equitable self-interest. In this regard, the question of whether the state structure is centralized or not is inconsequential here. A ''whole'' state as described above can be attained either by means of a decentralized or centralized state structure. What matters here is that, whether centralized or decentralized, the state is marked by, and consciously forged on, a genuine sense of nationhood.

The democratic character of the traditional Fante state[3]

This section explores features of the traditional Fante State (Mfantseman) that can be characterized as democratic. We argue further that the traditional Fante democracy is not only largely consensual in approach in political decision-making but is also hinged on a sense of family and community-feeling typical of a genuine nation as argued in the previous section. It bears mentioning from the onset that our choice of the traditional Fante state as a model of democracy by no means suggests an endorsement of a particular ethnic group as the very locus of consensual democracy which should thus be given priority in the modern nation-state.

This would contradict the conception of African statehood espoused above which aims to curb the ills arising from the marginalization of specific ethnic identities.   The traditional Fante state is here chosen to merely exemplify the democratic features of the traditional African state as characterized in the previous section. The traditional Fante State (Mfantseman), according to Nana Ayitey I, comprises of several sub-states such as Nkusukum, Abora, Ajumako, Gomoa, Ekumfi among others. Each state is headed by the Ɔmanhene (head of state). Unlike the Asante of Ghana, the Fante political system, according to Nana does not possess a unified state structure where a single person or a particular group of people is vested with authority to oversee the affairs of the whole state. The absence of such a state structure, however, does not mean a disorganized or ineffective state (Wiredu, 1995). As would be evident from what follows, the Fante traditional system of political rule evinces a very effective approach to state organization that gives meaning to democracy as self-rule.

The study begins with a description of the procedures and processes by which the Ɔmanhene is selected and installed. The selection of the Ɔmanhene begins with the presentation of a potential candidate for the position by any of the qualified families in the state. It is important to note that the starting point of this process is the notion of family, which is crucial. The Fante state, like many other traditional African states, is considered by its people as constituted by families. Each of these families namely Asona, Aboradze, Kɔna, Dishɛna Anana, Tekyina, and Ɔyɔkɔ, according to Nana Esi Abrawa,[4] constitute the base from which a chief candidate is nominated. This means even if there are conflicts, the starting point says a lot about how to address it; it is a 'family' issue. The respondents maintained that in respect of the selection of the candidate the consent of the abusuapanyin (Family head), which only represents the consensual view of his family unit, is secured to forestall any future problems of objection or disqualification. Further, the approval of the state (Ɔman) as a whole is extremely necessary for the selection process. Very often, this approval is given in the form of a vote at each of the decision-making units from the family, through the clan to the State. It must be pointed out here that mere voting is never sufficient in confirming the candidature of a proposed person for the office of the Ɔmanhene. Special attention is paid by the people of the state to the moral qualities of the would be Ɔmanhene according to the traditions of the Fante. In cases where the selected candidate is found to fall short of certain desirable moral qualities, or found to exhibit questionable moral character, this constitutes sufficient grounds to disqualify him.

Should the selected candidate pass the above preliminary tests, he is placed in the charge of the tufohene (chief of the gunners) who then leads the way in the installation of the selected candidate. The tufohene is the head of the asafoma (Warrior Company) who,

according to the Fante tradition, must know the selected Ɔmanhene before he is installed. It is said that no Ɔmanhene is installed without the knowledge of the tufohene. The installation process involves confining the chosen candidate for a period and initiating him into the ways of conducting oneself appropriately as an Ɔmanhene. A very critical part of the installation process is the oath the chosen candidate swears to the asafoma (warrior company). He promises to respond whenever they call upon him except in circumstances of dire health. The respondents further reiterated that the chosen candidate's swearing to the asafoma is seen as swearing to the whole Mfantseman since the asafoma themselves derive their authority and legitimacy from 'the people'. He is consequently answerable to 'the people' in the event of any failure to fulfill the promises made during the oath taking. The same phenomenon is recorded of the selection process of Asanteman (Asante state), also of Ghana (Rattray, 1929).

If successfully installed into office, the Ɔmanhene dispenses his duties by means of consultation with his council of elders. The council of elders comprises of the heads of the towns that constitute the state as well as elderly members of the asafoma. When the Ɔmanhene wants to promulgate any law in the state, he first conveys a meeting with the council of elders in his palace (Busia 1951). Whatever law is to be promulgated is thoroughly debated with adequate room given for the expression of diverse views and opinions. When a satisfactory conclusion to the debate is reached, the result is communicated through the family and clan heads to the general populace of the state. It is quite easy to observe here that the heads of the towns function as intermediaries between the general populace and the Ɔmanhene, conveying the concerns of the people to the Ɔmanhene and vice versa. Again, it is instructive to note that the whole process is guided by the sense of 'family'. For, even if war and conquest, intermarriage with other ethnic groups and migration as a result of economic factors have created mixed groups, the intuition is that of one people —Ɔman—working for our own good, by our own selves. This is the defining mark of democracy, and we argue that this is the very engine of an effective system that is labeled as a democracy which ought to be intentionally pursued institutionally.

The question that arises next is the legitimation of the laws of the Fante nation-state. One might think that in such a traditional setting, the legitimation of political authority is vested in the religious aura surrounding the office of the Ɔmanhene. This is quite not the case. According to the respondents, although the Ɔmanhene's authority emanates from a certain anuonyam (glory) that is attached to his office, this has less to do with his being vested with any religious powers which cannot be denied. One may surmise here, as Wiredu does in his account of the Asante, that the intrinsically persuasive nature of the Ɔmanhene's propositions accounts for its appeal to his

council of elders and the people of the state[5] (Wiredu 1995). How is the political authority of the Ɔmanhene delegitimized? An Ɔmanhene who has transgressed the laws of the state or defaulted in fulfilling his promises to the people faces the danger of being stripped of his office. The respondents indicated that the family of the Ɔmanhene may bring a charge against him to the state or conversely the state may bring a charge against him to his family. In either case, proper investigations will be conducted to ascertain the basis of the charges leveled against him. If found guilty, he is appropriately dealt with. It was, however, related by our respondents that it is difficult to unjustly de-stool an Ɔmanhene because there is a certain 'sunsum' in the stool of the Ɔmanhene which provides him with the power and confidence to go about his regal duties. This position, then, throws into doubt the initial claim that the persuasive powers of the Ɔmanhene does not rest on his possession of any religious or metaphysical power as is seen in Eze's criticism of Wiredu (Eze, 1997). Nonetheless, it may only influence decision making and not necessarily determine it. In the event that an incumbent Ɔmanhene falls seriously ill, rendering him incapable of performing the duties of his office, certain rites and rituals are performed to successfully de-stool him.

Another salient democratic feature is revealed in the arbitration and adjudication process of the traditional Fante state structure. The Ɔmanhene sits with his council in arbitration to ensure that justice is not compromised. All arbitration or adjudication, according to our respondents, are conducted in the spirit of bringing health to the whole community by the final decision even while ensuring that the offended finds redress for their issue. So, in dealing with a rape or divorce case, for instance, the concern is not only to seek redress for the offended party but to ensure that in punishing the offender, the entire family, children, and entire nation-state, are not unduly affected. A person who wishes to advance a case against another person has direct access to the ahenfie (palace) where he or she can directly present his or her case for fair hearing of both sides, deliberation, and delivery of final judgment. The arbitration process could be quite extensive. In specific instances, the Ɔmanhene has the prerogative of making decisions when the urgency does not grant the opportunity of conferring with council. The norm however, as urged by the respondents, is to rule, arbitrate or adjudicate in consultation with council just as is seen in Asante and other African traditions (Gyekye, 2010).

Traditional African democracy as consensual

The point of the discussions in the preceding section is to show that the traditional Fante system exhibited important features of democratic governance hinged on a sense of nationhood. This is true if democracy is a "government of the people, by the people and for the people" as Abraham Lincoln defined it (Gienapp 2002:184). Nonetheless, who are 'the people' and how do they govern? It is evident that if democracy is not to remain a merely abstract notion, it must be fleshed out in a particular form and structure of government. Modern nations, being states, wield powers of enforcement of laws and other executive instruments. If these powers of enforcement are not going to be deployed arbitrarily, then some account of how they are justified must be given. The question of the source of the legitimation of these powers must be taken into consideration. Thus, according to Dahl (1998), the primary focus of democratic ideas is the state. But what particular form of democracy is exhibited by the traditional African state that, in our view, ought to be resuscitated?

What emerges from the examination of the traditional African state exemplified by the Fante of Ghana is that its democratic character consists in the emphasis placed on the consensual approach to political-decision making at all levels. As one may note from the account of the Fante state given in the previous section, the people feature prominently in every decision taken in the state. Consider, for instance, the procedures for the selection and endorsement of the Ɔmanhene. No candidate is selected and endorsed if the people and the relevant stakeholders involved do not, in the words of Wiredu, express decisional and not merely formal consent. Even if the selected candidate is successfully pushed through without securing consensus from the people and the relevant stakeholders, problems are bound to later occur. Indeed, according to Wiredu (1995), political decision making in traditional Africa was marked by consensus. It is important however to clearly characterize the notion of consensus under discussion here.

Consensus, as an approach to decision making in traditional African politics does not mean overlooking the existence of diverse points of view which will exist anyway. Indeed, the quest for consensus was motivated by what has been described as "an original position of diversity" (Wiredu, 1995:54). The same point of view is espoused by Gyekye (2010) who maintains that consensus in traditional African politics presupposed dissensus. The idea here is that unanimity of opinion is not presumed at the start of the decision-making process. Yet, this is precisely where consensus as a decision-making process is challenged, for if deliberation starts off on a note of diversity, how is it possible then to secure consensus at the end stage of deliberation? Wiredu makes the critical point that while undoubtedly political decision-making was by consensus in traditional Africa, one should not cherish the illusion that consensus was always attained. What matters, according to Wiredu, is that attention is given to the various proposals about what is to be done even if not all the proposed actions put forward may be carried out. It is important to note here that for Wiredu, decision-making by consensus in

traditional African politics was a question of deliberating about what is to be done rather than what ought to be done. In other words, the decision in question is pragmatic rather than moral or cognitive.[6]

However, this characterization of consensus decision-making in traditional African politics has invited critical responses from certain African philosophers. According to Ani (2014), given that values are such an important part of people's lives, it is not exactly clear how they can be excluded in any consensus decision-making procedure as Wiredu seems to require since people's values inadvertently influence their participation in deliberation. In Ani's estimation the positive prospects of consensus decision-making will be far improved if there is a conscious attempt to rather factor in such values which are already present subconsciously anyway, in the deliberation process. Ani's point seems to be that a conscious inclusion of values in the decision making process is more likely to ameliorate what Wiredu famously describes as the "willing suspension of disagreement" in as much as the failure to take into account the values of the deliberators throws into doubt the idealistic posture of the whole idea of willing suspension of disagreement". It seems Wiredu will reject Ani's call to include values in deliberations aimed at achieving consensus, since the inclusion of personal values is likely to impair and delay urgent decisions that must be taken by the group. We are of the view that, neither the uncritical inclusion of values in the deliberation process nor their wholesale exclusion is tenable. As Ani himself opines, "some value differences are adjustable" (Ani 2014:319). Ani's remark here strongly supports the recommendation that values should equally be ''thrown into'' the deliberative process with the positive expectation that some common grounds can be worked out by means of the very process of deliberation itself. In other words, the fact that values themselves are to be subjected to the process of deliberation should allay any fears that some particular value is going to win the day a prior. We think Wiredu should welcome this new gesture of admitting values in the deliberation process especially in view of his conviction that all human beings ultimately share some identical interests.

Tied to the foregoing discourse, is the case Wiredu makes for the use of rational dialogue as the means to reach consensus in traditional African political deliberations. Indeed, as Wiredu maintains, "the willing suspension of disbelief in the prevailing option on the part of the residual minority" is made possible by the use of rational dialogue as the means of persuasion. It is significant that the viewpoints of the residual minority are not dismissed by the sheer power of voting, at least not without being initially given some rational consideration. Of particular interest here is the question of the basis of the persuasive ideas of the chief in the traditional African political decision-making process. Might it not be the case that the chief is able to secure consent from the people due to the mythico-religious aura surrounding his office rather than to the 'intrinsically' persuasive nature of his ideas? A counter view is expressed thus:

I think Wiredu might need further evidence to make a successful case that the king and the chiefs actually ruled and believed, along with their subjects, that authority could be legitimized only through the secular "virtue of persuasiveness of ideas" (rather than through religious and sometimes clearly superstitious-appeal to the sacred…)" (Eze, 1997:316)

Eze's point above has some merit particularly in view of the fact that our own field investigations revealed a certain ambiguity in the idea that the chief's persuasive powers were entirely based on the logical or rational nature of his ideas. This admission notwithstanding, we submit that it would be much more helpful to treat what Wiredu says about the persuasiveness of the chief's ideas as normative recommendations for effective governance in today's Africa rather than as mere factual claims about what occurred in the distant past. Wiredu, is after all engaged in the process of rationally reconstructing certain traditional African concepts in order to establish a connection between the past and the present. In this vein, Eze's concern with the need for ''further evidence'' in support of Wiredu's claims about the rational and logical basis of the chief's ideas need not impinge on Wiredu's claims if taken as normative recommendations for how governance in today's Africa ought to be practiced. Transposed into the context of modernity, it is quite easy to see the plausibility of Wiredu's claims given the religious pluralism that characterize many modern African nation-states. In such a context, the strategy of substantiating political decisions by appealing to religious and supernatural factors is unlikely to be very effective, if effective at all.

Consensual democracy and the question of substantive representation

According to Wiredu (1995), a consensual approach to political decision-making in traditional Africa implied the absence of a party system of governance at least as conceived in Western multiparty, liberal and majoritarian democracy as currently imposed on Africa and its traditions. This claim however requires some clarification. Wiredu's claim is not that there are no parties per se but rather that there were no majoritarian parties. That is, parties with the sole intent of securing power and who carried the day in decision-making not by seeking to include the minority concerns (not the same as ''the view of the minority'') through rational dialogue but by the sheer power of voting. There were parties, Wiredu (1995) claims, in the broad sense of the term in that diverse points of view were entertained in the decision-making

process but none of these were motivated by the desire to assume power at all cost and rarely, if ever, was a matter settled by formal voting. Indeed, in the author's estimation the bane of modern African politics is the majoritarian party system which ensures that a particular group of people—mostly a particular ethnic group—are always in the minority as far as governance of the state is concerned. This creates disaffection on the part of the ethnic group in question and accounts for the rather destructive politico-ethnic conflict which so often occurs in many modern African states. Wiredu's exclusion of majoritarian parties from consensus-based democracy in traditional African politics has sparked a number of reactions.

Gyekye (2013), for instance, agrees fundamentally with Wiredu's critique of the majoritarian party system practiced in modern African states. Nevertheless, he argues that decision-making by consensus can accommodate some form of majoritarian party system only that a supermajority rather than a simple majority is what should be aimed at. A supermajority, in his view, requires a two-thirds vote in order to carry the day when deciding upon vital national issues. Gyekye maintains that while a two-thirds majority still falls short of the ideal of consensus, it is nevertheless preferable to decision-making by a simple majority. Gyekye remarks that "Implicit in the two-thirds – which is a supermajority – method of reaching decisions is the notion that consensus (or something nearer that) is an ideal method: two-thirds majority is certainly nearer to consensus formation than the simple majority of fifty-one percent". Thus, for Gyekye, some form of majoritarian party system- a supermajority- can be accommodated in a democratic state based on decision-making by consensus.

Another important implication alluded to so far in our discussion which Wiredu draws from his analysis of the notion of consensus in traditional African political decision making is what he describes as "substantive or decisional representation" earlier mentioned. The point here is that even though in the traditional African political setting, the people may not be physically present in the chief's palace to argue out their points, representation is nevertheless given to them through the council of elders who act as mediators between the people and the chief. It must be recollected that the council of elders themselves derive their authority from consensus given by the people. Thus, unlike the majoritarian democracies which Wiredu criticizes, the question of representation in democracy based on consensus is not a question of simply being voted for as a representative but of being a representative of the viewpoints, opinions and ideas of those whom one represents. That includes their views being included in the final decision made which is what is crucial for Wiredu. This requires more than winning votes. It requires substantive engagement with the people by means of rational dialogue to acquaint oneself with their perspective

on matters. It is a species of what Gyekye (2013) has described as the politics of inclusion which requires an ever-widening of the net of deliberators in the political-decision making process.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the prospects of a truly democratic form of governance in contemporary African nation-states. Some of the problems that call for a re-consideration of the question of democracy in relation to Africa today were enumerated. We have argued to agree with the view that practicing a meaningful consensual democracy is the way to go. To provide philosophical grounding for consensual democracy as the proposed path for the African state today, we undertook an investigation of the very notion of statehood as understood from a traditional African political perspective, taking the Fante of Ghana as a typical case study. The study has shown that the traditional African notion of statehood indeed does embody features such as fellow-feeling, solidarity and a sense of communality which very well capture the essence of what consensual democracy largely entails. Gyekye's notion of meta-nationality was found most conducive for translating the communal values embedded in the African notion of statehood into helpful suggestions that can address the fragmented condition of many African states today. The study further examined Wiredu's thoughts on consensual democracy to bring home the vital fact that at the root of many of Africa's political problems today is the absence of substantive and inclusive representation in decision-making at the different levels of governance. In this regard, we conclude this paper by reiterating our call for a critical return to these outlined values of governance embedded in the African conception of statehood espoused in this paper. A critical return to these values, we believe, will propel the African state today towards the realization of a truly ideal form of democracy as is the case elsewhere.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest

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ENDNOTE

[1] As Herder will use the term 'patched-up' (Herder 1965:324).

[2] Compare Appiah's analysis of the concept of race in his *In my father's house* (Appiah, 1992)

[3] The account of the Fante state to be given here is based on an interview session with the following chiefs of Gomoa East district: Nana Ayitey I (*Nifahene* of Gomoa Kweikrom), Nana Asabre III (*Ankobeahene* of Gomoa Ojobi), Nana Esi Abrawa (*Adontehene* of Gomoa Jaman), Nana Kwao Kuse II (*Tufohene* Gomoa Milani)

[4] See endnote 3

[5] One of the chiefs cited an example of the passing of a law to the effect that no member of the town should pound fufu after 6pm. He held that the justification for such a law would lie not in any religious mystifications but rather in the rational fact that after eating heavy food at such a time, digestion becomes difficult which may lead to a condition of ill-health.

[6] See Wiredu 1995:54. Wiredu's point here is that the question of *truth*, either of a moral opinion or any other opinion for that matter does not enter the fray of deliberation.