Afrocracy: A Values-Based Indigenous Governance System In Africa

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Abstract
Despite significant scholarly work on the utility of indigenous governance systems in Africa in place of liberal democracy in the last few decades, scholars are yet to come up with an agreed genre or family name under which the discourse is taking place. Yet, just as the blackness of ancient Egypt is being contested by Western scholars, there is a risk the continent would be deprived of its ownership to these indigenous political systems in the future. It, therefore, behooves contemporary scholars to consolidate these disparate theories on indigenizing the African governance system into a common conceptual framework. We contribute to filling this gap by proposing ‘Afrocracy’ as a unifying and collective term for the different shades of indigenous governance systems proposed for Africa.

‘Before even the British came into relations with our people, we were a developed people, having our own institutions, having our own ideas of government.’ J. E. Casely-Hayford, 1922. African (Gold Coast) Nationalist

Introduction
On September 2, 2021, Pope Francis condemned the United States and its allies for imposing democracy on others following the failure of America’s twenty-year nation-building efforts in Afghanistan. He accused them of deception for “twenty years of occupation and then leaving,” calling it “deceit or a lot of naïvetés.” Such strong words from the Vatican could have come a lot sooner
because many countries especially those in sub-Saharan Africa have been in the throes of the democratic laboratory since independence. A significant portion of Africa’s woes can be traced to what Quist-Adade calls “the trilogy of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism,” or the triple tragedy for the sake of this paper, democracy being the most potent weapon the West has used to effectively hypnotize the elephant that needs to be awakened.

The combined effect of what the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres calls an “epidemic of coup d’états” in Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, attempted coups in Niger, Madagascar, the Central African Republic and Guinea Bissau, and a spiraling conflict in Ethiopia is an inflexion point for democracy in Africa. But too often, questions posed by researchers seek answers to fix democracy in Africa as if democracy belongs in Africa. The real fundamental epistemic question is whether the Western liberal democracy template is fit-for-purpose in Africa. In response, many scholars have suggested an indigenous governance system as a plausible alternative, but none has so far suggested a brand name for it. This paper aims to perform the long-overdue task of coining a collective name for the values-based indigenous political system that these traditional theories portend. Beginning with a review of relevant literature, followed by an assessment of the African political condition, the paper will argue for a fitting political genre for the indigenous governance system in Africa.

**Theoretical jungle of democracy**

At its core, democracy is a principled governance system where all members of society are treated as if they are all equally qualified to participate in decision-making processes, and in governance, and as if politically equal. Traditionally, Greece is credited with the invention of democracy where it was known as demokratia, meaning a political system that promotes kratos (the rule) of the demos (the people) in Greek. Although, some contend that this cliché often ignores the body of evidence about the governance assemblies of ancient Syria-Mesopotamia, and the contributions of the early Islamic world and Africa.

As a result, scholars, especially African traditionalists such as Wiredu, Nketsia, and Wamba dia Wamba have long argued that liberal democracy in Africa must be jettisoned and replaced with traditional democratic systems. They contend that Africa should not just accept what the conceptual West imposed on them as democracy. Fayime recognizes the value in elements of indigenous practices which he argues could be refined for contemporary application, thereby pushing for a pluralistic understanding of democracy or a “consociational view of eclecticism” to address tensions emanating from Africa’s “multi-ethnic, religious, ideological, linguistic, regional and cultural cleavages.” Pragmatism or eclectic theoretical approach is people-centered, ensures a fairer distribution of power and influence in society, and is underpinned by the spirit of communalism, a mixed economy of socialist and capitalist orientations and social justice rooted in African ideology. This paper is aligned with the eclectic or pragmatic concept of African traditional governance systems which at this stage do not have a genre, family identity or conceptual name. But we must first understand Africa’s political condition before discussing the genre of the political systems.

**African Political Condition**

The legendary African philosopher, Ali Mazrui, rightly argues that Africa is caught between rebelling against the West and seriously imitating the West. As the story of post-independence Africa’s struggle has demonstrated, it is hard to do both at the same
time. Mazrui posed a question that still begs for answers; why is Africa, the most central continent geographically, the most politically and economically marginalized? In The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis, Mazrui analyzed the continent with a metaphor in which he (the doctor) examined the patient (Africa). He effectively uses six paradoxes to explain the contradictions in African political development. Clearly, the African political condition evokes serious democracy and governance dilemmas. Even among the top nine African countries identified by Freedom House as “free” on its Global Freedom Index, there is ‘increasing public dissatisfaction and declining support for democracy as the best system of government.’ The prospect of democracy in Africa is at best ominous given that the epidemic of coups is fueled by pervasive bad governance, corruption, and weak regional blocs on the continent. This is also exacerbated by political systems that promote selfish capitalist approach to governance, in total contrast to African philosophy which preaches communalism, collectivism and solidarity. By caving to a system that is guided by “an every-man-for-himself philosophy,” Africa has effectively jettisoned its “eternal brotherhood” philosophy.

Since Mazrui’s work, several scholars have offered prescriptions to his patient in the form of African democratic theories and the indigenous political system. In his essay Indigenous African Institutions, George Ayittey postulates six key features of the African indigenous political system; i) decisions are made by public opinion; ii) checks and balances are implemented to curb despotism; iii) decentralization of the political system; iv) freedom of expression; v) decision-making by consensus; and (vi) participatory democracy. These are broadly consistent with Williams’s extensive list for the ‘African Constitution.’ This should provide a solid foundation for dinner table discussions in Africa, yet scholars are dissipating efforts at theorizing variants of indigenous governance types. I argue that without an African patent, the continent risks pursuing this important discourse disparately ad infinitum.

Mazrui later identified three schools of African philosophical thoughts with political consequences: cultural, ideological and critical. Cultural philosophy is the most enduring and authentic because it is built on key premises of African conservatism, the sacredness of ancestry, kinship solidarity and elder tradition. Cultural philosophy is collectivist and cumulative, and usually ethnic-specific, although as Williams (1987) observes, the political traditions of African political societies are very similar. Assuredly, this is the best philosophical foundation for Africa’s political salvation.

One of Africa’s foremost pan-Africanists, Professor Patrick Loch Otieno Lumumba, reinforced the need for Africa to develop its own political system, arguing that African democracy cannot be uniform, must be specific to each country and be defined by Africans. He also cautioned against adversarial politics imposed on Africa through multiparty systems, electoral politics and constitutional term limits. For him, Africa’s political salvation demands that the continent defines itself by decolonizing the mind. Taking this further, we will propose a unique name for the genre of the values-based indigenous African governance system informed by cultural philosophy as explained above by Mazrui. What’s in a name? Shakespeare once asked. For Africans, a name is important for several reasons, including showcasing one’s spiritual, cultural, political, socio-economic status and reinforcing identity and dignity. Names also exemplify the commitment of the people to their culture and their readiness to defend it with pride and dignity, symbolizing own-
ership and patents. Simply put, no name equals no ownership. If Africans do not name their brand of governance, there is a risk that future generations would be told it never existed, just as Africa is struggling to reclaim its historicity in ancient Egypt despite the dominant black African features (thick lips) in the Sphinx and the old Egyptian stock as noted by historians and archeologists. In a post-truth world, western democracy is only going to get more contentious while fragile African political institutions become even more hapless.

Afrocracy – towards values-based indigenous governance system

An African (Akan) proverb says se wower fri wokrom hene ab a woyera w badwamu, meaning if you forget the anthem of your chief in a durbar of chiefs (festival), you will get lost. Amidst the loud music, drumming and dancing associated with such festivities, representing the ongoing political mis-culturing and identity crisis, Africa must discern and follow its own anthem. Otherwise, the continent risks carrying other people’s garbage ad infinitum.

It has been more than four decades since Mazrui the doctor diagnosed Africa the patient. Since then, the patient’s condition has gotten ominously complicated. The task of patient care has now fallen on the current generation (the new doctor) not only to undertake further diagnosis but to offer specific prescriptions. We propose Afrocracy to define an authentic African governance system to kick-start the branding of values-based indigenous governance systems in Africa. Given the heterogeneous nature of the African polity, a unified name is important for political coherence on the continent, although each Afrocratic practice would be unique to the respective national context. We define Afrocracy as an inclusive indigenous governance system developed for Africa by Africans through their struggle, sweat and blood from the triple tragedy to unify pan-African political ontology and identity. We argue that Afrocracy would not only reinforce but also indigenize the continent’s governance portfolio, thereby ensuring accountability, transparency, and integrity. Afro unmistakably represents the African people and their struggle, and cracy, the Greek word ‘kratos’, meaning rule/governance.

Like a chameleon, the political coloration of Afrocracy would take after the existing African condition in the country. The way clothes are sown to fit individuals according to the body curves and curvatures, Afrocracy would not be devised with any less rigor and details. To be authentic, the Afrocratic garment should be stitched with African philosophy, history, mythology, and proverbs. This is cultural philosophy a la Mazrui which “is basically about a familiar way of life, intellectually accessible to almost every man or woman in the village.” The village always reminds Africans that the system is from the ground-up, authentic, falsifiable, and collective.

Accordingly, we invoke philosophical thoughts such as Ubuntu, Nnoboa, Medemer etc, underpinned by communalism and collective

* Ubuntu is a Zulu word meaning the individual is a component of a greater (inclusive) collective whole, and it stresses social consciousness and unity. Simply put, I am because you are.
** Nnoboa is an Akan (Ghana and Ivory Coast) word translated as mutual-aid or self-help. It is used in cooperative ventures such as farming, informal banking sector and fundraising.
*** Ethiopia Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed introduced medemer as his cardinal philosophy. Medemer is a concept of national unity that seeks to bring all Ethiopians from all sides to work for the common good, prosperity, and sustainable development.
ism, to dictate Africa’s political futures instead of foreign cultures shaped by individualism.

Against this backdrop, Afrocracy is a spectrum of different political colorations ranging from one end, shaded by significant philosophical and traditional values (maximalist), to the other end, a system that is only tethered by a few African values (minimalist). For instance, the maximalist may opt for a system where the traditional leaders (chiefs) are restored and constitute the national government as the National House of Chiefs, representing their people directly. That effectively displaces full-time politicians as we know today, although some of them will continue to serve as technical experts at home and abroad. The House of Chiefs would select the President, a position that would be periodically rotated among the agreed ethnic representation in the country. The minimalist, on the other hand, would look more like Botswana’s example where chiefs are integrated into public administration at the local level.23 Underpinned by the Tswana adage Kgosi ke Kgosi ka morafe, ‘the king is king by the grace of the people’,24 Sir Seretse Khama, the first president of Botswana in 1966 introduced far-reaching but inclusive reforms that set the country on the path of economic development.*** While chiefs lost significant powers and authority through the reforms, chieftaincy remained critical and formal political institutions after independence unlike places such as Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda.25

Undoubtedly, Afrocracy can add real value to the African polity ranging from the drastic reduction of bureaucracy, decentralization, effective local accountability, socio-economic development driven by a community agency, conflict resolution, trust in governance, enhanced unity within and without the artificial boundaries, reduction in government expenditure and dignity of the African. Given the limited scope of this paper, we will only highlight a few of them.

Chiefs are not autocrats or dictators as Western literature would have us believe. Rather, chiefs represent their people directly, take direct responsibility for their political, and socio-economic development, and are accountable to them. The people can hold the chief accountable for his actions because as noted by anthropologist Isaac Schapera ‘the people are seldom afraid to speak openly and frankly’.26 Arguably, accountability at the grassroots is most effective. In the Asante kingdom, chiefs were destooled for different reasons by the people, including King Osei Kwame for being absent from his place of duty and failing to perform religious rites at a festival in 1799; King Karikari for extravagance in 1874; and King Mensa Bonsu for the imposition of higher taxes on his people in 1883.27 Failing institutional procedures, some African traditions used spontaneous actions to bring about justice and accountability such as adom ye (Akan), kirikiri (Yoruba) and itwika (Gikuyu).28 Traditional rulers are held to higher standards than contemporary politicians. I argue that if some of these traditional judicial practices are incorporated into the modern judicial system, corruption would be minimized, and justice will be dispensed far quicker.

The chieftaincy institutions also defy national political boundaries. In 2020, a former Ivorian president, Konan Bédié, paid homage to the Asantehene (Ashanti King) in Ghana to consult and seek his counsel and blessing. Bédié traces his roots to the Ashanti Region of Ghana (Nsuta) where the Asantehene is the overlord and pledged allegiance to the Golden Stool.29 The fact that a prominent Ivorian politician will pledge allegiance to the Asantehene (Ghana) is quite telling and

***With a centralized government, he established pluralistic and inclusive economic institutions and a stable democracy that boasts of the highest per capita income in sub-Saharan Africa.
demonstrates the unifying power of the old institution. I would argue that if politicians were to get out of the way traditional authorities would bring the continent together much faster.

Across the continent chiefs are mostly regarded as agents of socio-economic development, filling critical gaps in governance. For example, in 2000, the Asantehene (Asante King), Otumfou Osei Tutu II, launched an ambitious international project, Otumfuo Educational Fund, to mobilize resources to facilitate primary, secondary, tertiary and vocational education in his kingdom. Without a doubt this exemplifies good governance by all standards.

While Afrocacy will not solve all political problems in Africa, it can unify the people against a corrupt, individualistic and capitalist governance system imposed on them. We acknowledge that the chieftaincy institution itself is problematic particularly when it is manipulated by the state and turned into a decentralized despotism. As a result, some of the chiefs have been corrupted by politics and money. As former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn once noted, some of the traditional authorities have been too diluted and corrupted to be effective agents of change.

Against this backdrop, it will take a major shift in mindset to move Africa towards Afrocacy. In fact, a sea of change in generational attitude. Ayittey identifies two types of African generations, the cheetah and hippo generations. The cheetahs have the can-do spirit and are eager to move the continent forward beyond its slavery and colonial trappings. They acknowledge many of the current crops of leaders are hopelessly corrupt and will not lead the continent anywhere. They do not make excuses for the continent’s predicament, although they see the Western plot in every African adversity. The hippo generation, on the other hand, is “intellectually stigmatized and stuck in their colonial pedagogical patch”. They condemn injustices perpetrated by the West against Africa but ignore the very same abuses under their noses. They only scream about oppression and exploitation when perpetrated by the West and lead their countries to the gutters. We put Afrocacy’s future in the hands of the cheetah generation because they are the action takers who not only understand the fierce urgency of the times but are also concerned that the current generation of leaders is leading them to the ditch.

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued that whilst significant African epistemic scholarship has proposed an indigenous form of governance as an alternative to democracy, none has thus far provided a genre or family name under which this discourse is taking shape. The risk is that without branding the political system, Africa will be deprived of ownership just as some Egyptologists have successfully done to deny ancient Egypt of its blackness. We suggest Afrocacy as a collective name, identity and genre for the full gambit of indigenous coloration of political governance in sub-Saharan Africa. Afrocacy recognizes the heterogeneity of political culture across the continent and provides the best collective framework within which genuine political discourse can take place without any loss of identity, pride and self-esteem. Given its simplicity and ground-up approach, it provides the best guarantee for decentralization of authority and governance, and hence accountability. Of course, there are significant problems associated with chieftaincy institutions in many parts of the continent that merit attention during the sifting process. Just as adversarial politics would be jettisoned, the cheetah generation would do well to leave bad traditional values in the dustbin of history.
Endnotes


15 Williams, “Destruction of Black Civilization.”

16 Mazrui, “African thought.”


23 Sharma, “Traditional leadership.”


27 Damptey, “Rethinking Indigenous governance practices.”


34 Ayittey, Africa unchained, xx.