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# AFRICA AND THE ORIGIN OF DEMOCRACY: A REAPPRAISAL OF THE IGBO 'STATELESS' SOCIETY

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## **Abstract**

So much have been conceptualized about democracy; its theories, models, principles, functionalities, etc. The concept has been over-flogged by an avalanche of scholars in the humanities, social and political sciences. Nevertheless, nominal effort is concentrated in critically studying the rudiment of its origin. Most scholars have however relegated the importance of analytically looking into the rather complex issue of the evolution of democracy and think it to be the prerogative of Athens. In some scholarly publications whereby a subheading for the history of democracy is rendered, the totality of the argument is based on Athens as the edifice to which modern democracy traces its origin. Such assertions remain unchallenged in western historiography but can same be said of Africa which had haboured several democratic institutions before the advent of Europeans? The focus of this work is not to deprive Athens of its rightful place in the history of democracy, but rather, to emphatically state that some forms and traits of democratic governance had existed in Africa devoid of Athenian and other 'foreign' influences; a case study being the Igbo traditional political structure. The work argues that these examples of democratic governments deserve a mention in the essays of democracy history. The work therefore charges scholars to note these independently evolved democratic institutions in pre-colonial Africa and do justice to them by incorporating them while arguing the history and evolution of democracy. Both primary and secondary evidences are utilized in this work.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Origin of Democracy, African Democracy, State, Stateless Society.

## **Introduction**

What is considered to be participatory government or a system of governance whereby the supreme authority is vested on the people is not alien to Africa. It is however, perturbing that "the general consensus among scholars seems to be that Athens is the birthplace of democracy; other parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa are ignored or omitted from historical evolution of democracy" (Tiky, 2012).



Such believe and trend in historiography is a direct consequence and implication of colonial systematic apologia implanted to discredit Africa of independently evolving anything of global worthiness. It was this same dogma that instigated Hugh Trevor-Roper, a Professor of History at Oxford University to avouch that

perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present, there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness...and darkness is not a subject of history (Uya, 1984).

Trevor-Roper was not alone in this prejudice but had accomplice such as G. W. F. Hegel who is credited with the vituperation that "Africa is no historical part of the world; It has no movement or development to exhibit" (ctd in Uya, 2004). The above statements clearly reflected the cultural prejudice of the Europeans which on the basis of metaphysics of European racial superiority, likened civilization with Europeanization (Uya, 2004).

In the dispensation of the presuppositions stated above, it was therefore not surprising that Africa was seen as a dark continent; stagnant, backward and practicing barbarism. Such perspectives were Eurocentric reflections from the outside-in rather than the inside-out perception. Effort was also made by Eurocentric scholars to relegate the importance of social anthropology and ethno-botany as well as the utility of Oral Traditions and ethnographic data in the reconstruction of African history since according to P. Newton, "history begins when men began to write". Even when the non-written evidences to historical reconstruction were reluctantly utilized, the resultant conclusions were historicized to paint Africa 'black'; a classical instance being the Hamatic hypothesis. The Hamatic hypothesis as observed by Ayaji & Crowther, posited that "negro culture, left to itself was never able to produce more than a low level of political organization. The ideology of state like everything else considered valuable by Europeans were brought into Africa by non-negro invaders" (qtd in Erim, 2004). This viewpoint was also bolstered by Seligman when he vituperated that

The history of Africa south of the Sahara is no more than the story of the permeation through the ages, in different degrees and at various times, of the Negro and bushman aboriginals by Hamatic blood and culture. The Hamites were in fact, the great civilizing force of black Africa (qtd in Zachernuk, 1994).

The scenario was such that even when it was empirically proven that Africa had the capacity and had indeed evolved anything worth commending, such innovations were attributed to external influences from the Caucasoid race. The strategy was that of introducing variables to either deny the possibility of such ingenuity and innovation or attributing such accomplishment to the influence of a race superior to the Negroid.



Subsequently, this dogma and misconceptions received a plethora of criticisms from the mid twentieth century with some of the foremost critics being Roland Oliver and J. D. Fage who in their book *A Short History of Africa*(1962) submitted that “the notion of Africa as a dark continent is a parochial European idea...” that the perceived “backwardness of Africa was always a backwardness relative only to the mainstream of human development in the more favoured parts of Europe and Asia” (Oliver &Fage, 1962).

It was on this note that African scholars worked tirelessly to repudiate, through painstaking research, some of the widely held opinions about Africa and its history. This paper shall therefore add to the existing Afrocentric scholarship by authoritatively bringing to limelight the notion that Africa exhibited democratic governance that is worth mentioning in the annals of history – the Igbo traditional political system being a case study. Did Africa play a role in the evolution of (Athenian) democracy? Was the Igbo Society really stateless? Was it democratic? Was indigenous Igbo democracy a product of borrowing or diffusion? These are the questions this paper intends to answer.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The concept ‘democracy’ is given special treatment amongst scholars and leaders of the most powerful nations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is therefore of little wonder that thousands of definitions and theories of democracy abound in journals, books, etc. However, we risk taking few definitions for the sake of focus and clarity of our work.

Democracy is a form of government in which final power rest in the people; not a part of the people that makes oligarchy or a monarchy but where it rests on the whole people (Fitzgerald, 1908). Democracy reflects a form of government in which supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly and indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodic election (Britannica, 2013).

The idea of democracy is also conveyed in Abraham Lincoln’s popular parlance of “...government of the people, by the people and for the people” (Lincoln, 1977). In a democratic dispensation, the sovereignty and legitimacy of the government lies on the people. They decide on who and how they should be governed. That is to say that in a democracy, government policies, laws, actions, as well as developmental schemes are people’s oriented and are designed for the betterment of the generality of the people.

Contemporary democracy is most often than not conditioned with variables such as government by the people, government based on equality of rights of the whole people, common center where the consensus will may manifest itself and be put into action, votes of the majority, unlimited freedom of the press and of public discussion



for all, equal right before the law and people's oriented institutions (Heinzen, 1871). Critically looking at this conditionality, one could clearly deduce that neither the Athenian nor the African democratic experience or experiments perfectly fitted into these conditions. However, either one or two of these conditions were met.

It is worthy to note that since all the major sectors (political, economic and religious) in African traditional societies were most often than not merged, African democracy constituted a process of systematic conjectures whereby the powers of the absolute monarchs and divine kings were diminished through certain taboos and injunctions to render such monarchal mere ceremonial figure thereby giving room for the will of the ordinary people who were represented in the government to prevail. It was more of a check and balance than outright direct participation in government. That notwithstanding, some African traditional societies such as the Igbo traditional society was an epitome of direct participation in government by the people.

### **Athenian Origin of Democracy**

The earliest known form of government in Athens was monarchy. But by mid 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, monarchy had begun to decline in virtually all the Greek city-states as a result of arbitrary use of power by the kings and rising influence of the nobles. This scenario paved way for a new form of government known as aristocracy. According to Aristotle's account, as summarized by Appadorai (1968) "the government was controlled by a permanent council of nobles and its details were managed by nine archons selected annually by the council" on the basis of wealth and noble wealth (Tiky, 2012).

The monopoly of religious and law secrets culminated in the Aristocratic nobles, despising the commoners, seizing their lands, infringing on their rights, harassing debtors, thereby, making the masses detest their rule. Aristocracy had thus evolved into oligarchy. However, from about 600 to 500 BC, tyranny had gradually replaced oligarchy. The tyrants came to power by mobilizing the aggrieved and disgruntled elements, thereby, using them against the oligarchs. Their government was sustained majorly through the help of mercenaries. By overthrowing the hated oligarchy, the tyrants paved way for the reactions that culminated in Athenian democracy (Appadorai, 1968).

The oppression of the demos (people) by the noble class together with scarcity of land as a result of population increase culminated in violent reactions. While the demos were bent on wresting power from the nobles, the nobles similarly were determined to repel such action. In the confusion that ensued, Solon, a former chief magistrate in 594/3BC was invited to mediate between the parties and as well profess



an alternative social organization where the aristocrats won't lose all its privileges and the poor majority no longer abused and oppressed (Tiky, 2012).

Solon in 594BC set the pace for the development of the political institutions that became the central feature of the fully developed democracy in the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Ober, 2007). Solon wrestled tirelessly to ameliorate Athens' economic woes, enacted new legislations and implemented remedies to curtail judicial abuse as well as set up a new government that was relatively fair to all Athenians. In 594BC, the poor whose lands were seized regained their lands free and public lands were reopened. Slavery was abolished and some Athenians who had been sold into slavery abroad were summoned back. Solon's law code guaranteed equality for everyone and justice was administered irrespective of social position or class. Solon's code also provided that verdicts by the *archonites* could be appealed to the *eliaia* (public court) thereby giving final judicial power to the assembled demos, not elite judges. The political structure was altered from the oligarchy induced hereditary or class system to that based on law, economic prowess and a formal political role for all Athenians. Classes were distinguished by agricultural production and military service and no longer by birth (Raaflaub, Ober & Wallace, 2007).

Also democratic in Solon's reforms was the provision for the demos to elect forty candidates for the archonship, ten per tribe; and from these forty, nine archons were chosen by lot. As part of Solo's legacy, the demos scrutinized the archai after their terms of office. This Solonian heritage gave the demos some control over the public authorities who had previously despised them. Solon's People's Council of Four Hundred set the assembly's agenda thereby preventing traditional leaders from dominating assemblies; for this council will be a decisive proof that solon "intended the *ekklesiato* develop into the effective sovereign of state" (Raaflaub, Ober& Wallace, 2007). Solon also diminished the powers of the Areopagus Court and transformed it into Areopagus Council, composed of all ex-archons.

Prior to Solon's demise, Pisistratus, an unscrupulous element who had garnered popularity among the demos gathered a gang of votary and seized power (Narcross, 1884) in 564BC. His two sons succeeded him and ruled for the next fifty years until one of his two sons (Hippias) was killed and the other (Hipparchus) driven out of Athens by two hot-blooded young men – Aristogiton and Harmoduis (Narcross, 1884) in 508BC.

Consequently, there was aristocratic dissension that involved Cleisthenes and Isogoras. Isogoras however, managed to win archonship in 508/7BC, forcing Cleisthenes to add the demos to his group of supporters. Cleisthenes by professing to reform the Athenian army garnered popularity. He reorganized the army by creating ten new tribes. This was a conscious effort to weaken regional loyalty since its membership cuts across regions in Athens. Cleisthenes used this tribe to rebuild the



people's council, expanding it from four hundred to five hundred; fifty men per tribe. The officials served for one year and could serve only twice in lifetime. Through this way, a greater number could serve and welding power to control state resources was prevented (Carson & Martins, 1999). Solon also restructured *deme* or village government around Athens. Each of these local governments had a deme authority, a treasurer, a meeting place, control of the citizenship list, etc (Raaflaub, Ober & Wallace, 2007).

It was after the constitutional reforms of Cleisthenes that the word 'democracy' was coined to contrast the new political arrangement with the past autocratic rule. Athenian democracy lasted for about two centuries but collapsed later due to wars and unification of Greece. Direct democracy arguable, could not flourish in a larger environment. Roman occupation sent Athenian democracy to its final sepulcher but its legacies were preserved by the writings of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, etc (Tiky, 2012).

It is however worthy to note that what was termed democracy in Athens, according to Ober, "was a capacity of a public, consisting of native adult males, to achieve things of value in the public realm, thus, "the people's power" not "the power of the people"...Democracy in the Greek context is best understood as a strong form of Greek Republicanism – that is, a regime of which substantial male population enjoys full political standing based on privileged equality of public standing among citizens" (Ober, 2007).

### **African Origin of 'Athenian' Democracy**

Africa appears to be that priceless midwife that aids the birth of everything useful to the modern world. This submission is deduced from the several assertions made on the level of intellectual exchanges between Africa (Egypt) and Greece (Athens) (see James, 1954). Zachernuk, is of the view that Africans had indeed provided the nursery of science and literature to which the master spirits of ancient Greece performed pilgrimages...in search of knowledge (Zachernuk, 1994).

It was based on the above presumption that Tiky, (2002) projected an argument which submitted that the ideas behind the democratic reforms introduced into Athens by Solon were not of Athenian birth but a product of Egyptian culture. According to Tiky, Solon's ideas were novel and alien to the Athenian society of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and were not generally embraced until Cleisthenes perfected it. The Athenian political system was floated by the ideal of unquestionable rule by Eupatrids who were considered favoured by God. The revolutionary inclusion of the commoners in the political process was therefore alien and gotten elsewhere.



Judging from the principle of incrementalism and the idea that new economic and political design cannot emerge ex-nihilo, Solon got this idea from the fundamental characteristics of the Egyptian spiritual system – the equality of all before God (Tiky, 2012).

Thus, the Egyptian idea that God belongs to all was subsequently applied in resource distribution.

After his appointment as mediator in the Athens civil war, Solon travelled to Egypt where he acquired a perfect idea of government which will calm the social conflict and as well guarantee future peaceful coexistence. Thus, Athenian democracy argued Diop, “was the result of the legislative work of Solon, who first took a trip to Egypt to draw an inspiration from the laws of that country” (qtd in Tiky, 2012). The fact that Solon visited Egypt is also mentioned by the Greek first century writer, Diodorus Siculus.

The assertion that the nucleus of the Athenian democracy was of African origin is made more germane by the exhibition of some democratic principles like the checks and balance system that was viral across kingdoms and empires in sub-Saharan Africa. Like the democratic model practice in contemporary Britain, African monarchs appeared to be divine rulers but in the actual sense, they were not. One or two instances may illustrate this point further.

In the Jukun Kingdom, the *Akuin* theory was a divine king but in practice, he was a mere figure head. The *Aku* was under an obligation to consider his counselor’s advice. He also depended on the *Abo Achuwo* (prime minister) since he alone knew the secret of the royal rituals of which the *Aku* depended on for the mysteries of some demanding rituals. In the Jukun written constitution, the *Abo Ahuwow* was the principal actor in the election of a king and all the king’s orders were transmitted to the people through him. The Jukun constitution also provided taboos that restricted the king from visiting the salt working area which was the base of the kingdom’s economy and also restricted him from having direct contact with the governed (Majuk, 2004). This was more than a perfect check and balance to curtail arbitrary use of power.

Elsewhere, as powerful as the *Alaafin* of Oyo Empire was, he was checked by the *Oyomesi* (council of ministers) whose head *Bashorun*, was to tell an *Alaafin* to commit suicide if he goes contrary to the constitution. The *Alaafin* was not to be seen outside, and virtually all the administrative duties were delegated to different appointees. These provisions meant that the *Alaafin* could neither be tyrannical nor take unilateral decisions (Falola, 1989).

Similarly, in the Mossi constitutional monarchy, the monarch, *Moro Naba* had to be elected. The government was divided into tier and was liberal such that the



*rassamnaba* (chief of the slaves) could manage a district. It was such that an ordinary *MossikidirangaNaba* and *SamandeNaba* (a slave) headed the cavalry and infantry respectively. The monarch could not amend the constitution and was bound to obey it or be deposed. The arrangement was such that all the classes were represented and the feasibility of the noble seizing power was extremely curtailed (Tiky, 2012). Examples of checks and balances in African traditional political institutions abound.

Apart from checks and balances, a form of direct democracy also existed and this forms the crux of our subsequent discussions.

### **To What Extent was the Igbo Traditional Society Stateless?**

The Igbo people are found in the present South Eastern part of Nigeria between latitude 5<sup>0</sup> and 7<sup>0</sup> North and longitude 6<sup>0</sup> and 8<sup>0</sup> East (Igwe, 2011). According to Ohadike (1996), they are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria with a total population of about 15 million. As observed by Majuk (2004), the Igbo cultural area is an area enclosed with an imaginary line running outside the settlement of Agbor, Kwalle, Ahoda, Diobu, Umuabaye, Arochukwu, Afikpo, Isiagu, Isuama, Enugu, Ezike and Ebu. Archaeological findings have added credence to the traditions that the Igbo are indigenous to their present area of settlement. Excavations from Igbo Ukwu and Nsukka confirmed that man had occupied Igboland as early as 3000BC (Majuk, 2004). The Igbo Ukwu findings, according to Majuk, yielded evidences of kingly institutions. Igbo traditional political system was developed quite early as the kingly tomb discovered is dated by archaeologists to the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. The development of this political structure, argued Falola (1989), was achieved by the fusion of previously scattered semi-independent villages into larger units for a larger polity and augmentation of collective defense against common enemy. These larger villages later developed into clans. This process of synthesis was a key to the evolution of what would serve as the most liberal form of democracy that existed in Africa devoid of Europe and Asiatic influence.

The Igbo settled in autonomous villages and towns governed by elders. The smallest social and political unit was the *Uno* (family) usually made up of the man, his wife (wives) and children. The higher unit in the structure was the *Umunna* (lineages) comprised of several *Uno*. The highest political unit was the *Obodo* which was a convergent of lineages to form a compact village. It is imperative to note that the lineages were semi-independent and that each house, village and town was headed by a leader, *Onyisi* who is supposed to be the eldest. Town, lineage and village meetings were often held with each *Onyisi* representing the interest of their towns (Ohadike, 1996).



Nevertheless, Eurocentric scholars, anthropologists and colonialists either deliberately or ignorantly vituperated the Igbo political structure to have been stateless. Some even described it as 'primitive republicanism' without taking cognizance of the fact that primitive as a concept is synonymous with early or first.

Having pointed out the basis of Igbo traditional political organization, it is pertinent to define what a state is and then use the variables embedded in those definitions to either justify the Eurocentric stateless theory or, again, refute it. A state is an organized political community living under a single system of government. It reflects a politically organized group that exercises authority over a particular territory (Wikipedia, 2016). Every state is composed of men combined (maybe in thousand or million but no specific number), territory, united polity (though there might be some internal different divisions with some level of independence), and distinction between the governors and the governed (Bluntschli, 2000). The essentials of state include a definite territory, population, government and sovereignty (Appadorai, 1968). In a more recent publication, Rourke & Boyer (2004) have included diplomatic recognition, internal organization, and domestic support to the variables qualifying a polity as a state.

The Igbo traditional society possessed all these attributes ranging from population, territory, sovereignty, diplomatic recognition, internal organization and domestic support. What then could have instigated the Europeans to classify the Igbo traditional society as stateless? It could have been what Okon (2013) termed 'African-phobia' whereby black was stained with dirt, regarded as having dark or deadly purposes, baneful, disastrous, foul, horrible, wicked, indicating disgrace, diabolic and dangerous, deadly, unclean, and therefore, its independent evolution could not be considered good enough to compare or equate with that which was evolved in Europe hence, a coinage of a concept to psychologically derogate such feat.

Erim (2006) has summarized that the term state "implies people and territory". Therefore, the Eurocentric concept of statelessness is very misleading, eluding, bamboozling, misguiding, and therefore is debunked, especially as no people in the African continent is known to have been without a defined territory.

### **The Igbo Republican System: An Embodiment of Liberal Democracy**

The Igbo republican system reflected a political arrangement in which village heads, rather than persons who could be described as imperial overlords, presided over village assemblies. It was purely representative (Nkwuocha & Emeghara, 2013). At all levels, all adult males took active part in the decision making process; and women too were known to have taken part in various processes that resulted in important decision (Falola, 1989). Its egalitarian nature ensured that checks and balances were not abused



and that government decisions did not run contrary to the aspirations of the electorates.

Igbo republican system consisted of autonomous villages and village groups ruled by diffused authority without formalized, permanent, or hereditary leadership position. It was a direct democracy on the village level with a representative assembly, at the level of the village group (Nkwocha&Emeghara, 2013). The structure of this political arrangement running from the topmost included the *Obodo*, *Mba*, *Umunna*, and *Uno*. The highest level of political organization was the *Obodo* (village or clan Assembly) (Falola, 1989). The *Obodo* was composed of village heads, titled groups, secret societies, representative of Council of Women and all male adults. The *Obodo* settled inter-village disputes pertaining but not limited to lands theft, murder, etc. The *Mba* (lineage government) was presided over by the eldest male of the lineage and was composed of heads or representative from extended families. The *Umunna* (sub-lineage government) was headed by the head of household *Opara* and was responsible for the settlement of family disputes. The *Onu* (family administration) was the basic unit of social and political organization (Nkwucha&Emeghara, 2013). The arrangement was such that each lineage was autonomous in internal affairs but matters concerning the welfare of all were discussed by the whole village (Majuk, 2004).

In the Igbo republican system, only the *Ona* (community) could delegate powers to its members because no individual could exercise authority without the people's consent – that is to say, sovereignty was vested on the community. The *Oha* worked handy with the *Iwuala* (the supremacy of the law).

The combination of social forces of the *Iwuala* and *Oha* and the principle of consensus *Onugaotu* led to the evolution of a stable polity where principles of justice, solidarity and egalitarianism reigned (Nkwocha&Emeghara, 2013).

There were also elements of 'cross-cutting ties' among different lineages such as council of elders, age grade, council of chiefs, women's association and secret societies (Ohadike, 1996). Powers were also delegated to these groups to enable them enforce strict compliance of law across communities. It is however saddening that this unique democratic dispensation was annihilated by colonial overlords with the invention of alien systems such as the 'warrant chief' system (Ajaegbo, 2014).

Due to the absence of precise records, the conditions, events and social forces that instigated Igbo democracy as well as definite date when the system began remains obscure. It could have in some centuries after 3000BC when evidence of first human settlement is traced or it could have been an aftermath of a revolution that ended divine monarchy in 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. What is however certain is that the processes leading to the evolution of this political system were internal. The fact that a form of



democracy was also practiced in Athens as early as 6<sup>th</sup> century BC does not invalidate the position that Igbo democracy was an independent evolution devoid of Athenian influence. It would therefore be unjust to stick to the popular Athenian mono origin theory of democracy.

### **Conclusion**

This work has evidently established that democracy both in context and application was not alien to Africa. Formulating a theory or coining a word to describe that form of government may not have existed but its actual practice was prevalent in Africa. This work has employed available evidences to adduce the independent evolution of democracy in Africa. It has also shown that the reforming ideas that culminated in Athenian democracy were a product of African heritage. Though they were of different epoch, the fact that democratic practices in Africa were independently evolved devoid of European influence, make such practices as old as that practiced in Athens.

The Igbo democracy which was previously derogated with several misleading variables has been examined and found to be a perfect model of democracy that is worth giving attention by both domestic and international scholars in the Humanities, Social and Political Sciences. Colonialism truncated Igbo village democracies thereby foisting a bourgeois form of democracy tailored to meet the demands of metropolitan socio-economic formations.

The essence of this work as earlier averred is not to relegate Athens' achievement pertaining to democracy and its evolution but to give credence to other independently evolved democracy in Africa. A clarion call therefore, has been made for scholars to incorporate African examples while arguing the evolution or history of democracy. It is undisputable that Athens coined the word 'democracy'. However, such practices embedded in democracy, that is, people's oriented government, were viral in pre-colonial African societies –the Igbo traditional society being an epitome.



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