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YORUBA PROVERBS AND DEMOCRATIC ETHOS

*Introduction*

The principles of democracy are essential in the bid to build a virile and sustainable community of human beings. A nation requires the coming together of people from different backgrounds and exposures. A nation is a large society made of relatively smaller societies. These societies are made of relatively smaller groups of human beings with their different affiliations and groupings. It is imperative to maintain a just relationship among the groups in the societies. It is more imperative when it concerns nations and states. Among different approaches to any just arrangement of any state or nation, democracy enjoys some prominence. This paper intends to examine some Yoruba proverbs with the purpose of establishing some links between traditional Yoruba culture and the ethos of democracy.

*The Ethos of Democracy*

For the Athenians, democracy involves rotation in office, filling of offices by lot, and the enlargement of governing bodies.<sup>1</sup> Democracy emphasizes that values should not be forced upon any people against their will. It stipulates liberty, separation of powers, majority rule and, sovereignty of the people.<sup>2</sup> The ethics of democracy, according to G.H. Sabine,<sup>3</sup> regard mutual concession and compromise as ways of reaching agreements which overall were more satisfactory than any that could be reached by the dominance of one interest of one party over all the others.

A democratic social philosophy conceived a community not as a constellation of impersonal forces, but as a complex of human beings and of human interests. The fundamental importance of democracy is its avowal of the possibility of resolving human antagonistic interests through negotiation rather than force.

For scholars like Larry Diamond and some others,<sup>4</sup> democracy involves competition among individuals and organized

groups for all positions in government, at regular intervals without the use of force or any threat of force. Democracy is considered a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies through regular and fair elections in ways that no one who is eligible is disenfranchised. Democracy, in this sense, also emphasizes civil and political liberties. It encourages freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of association, all of which are meant to ensure sanity in political competition and participation.

According to Salim A. Salim, democratization must involve not only free and unfettered exercise of fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and political choice, but also the ability of all citizens to participate in the process of national governance. This comes to President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address according to which democracy is "the government of the people, by the people, and for the people."<sup>5</sup>

It may be interesting looking at the implications of the prepositions "of" and "by" in Lincoln's statement of democracy. The expression "of the people" indicates more than choosing those who are to rule, citizens also find ways to control those who rule them and to ensure that they are ruled in ways that conform to their wishes. When we say "by the people," we mean that democracy is a system of government whose constitutional rules, principles, and procedures are set up by the people themselves. In this regard, democracy is a system of government that allows the people to rule. This makes it possible for the people to participate in making decisions that affect their personal lives, community, or state.<sup>6</sup>

Given the competitive nature of human interests and possible antagonism in human societies, democracy provides mechanisms for mutual adjustments and readjustments. This spirit of democracy is acknowledged in the American Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776, according to which "... governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed". In other words, democracy recognises the inalienable right and power of the governed to remove any government that no longer serves their purposes.

The notion of "the people" is central to any definition of democracy. The definition implies that the standard by which to judge the democratic nature of a political system is the degree of

adequacy allowed for the expression of the will of the people, the extent to which the people are involved in decision-making processes. The problem of democracy, according to Kwame Gyekye, “is simply the problem of how to give institutional expression to the will of the people.”<sup>7</sup>

In this regard, democracy recognises the differences in human interests and puts structures in position to provide means for genuine meeting of minds. Democracy thus conceives politics as the area of negotiation and political institution as agencies to make possible the interchanges of opinion and understanding on which successful negotiation depends.<sup>8</sup> Democracy, as it is, recognises the political and moral values of equality, reciprocity, and respect for the views of others.

#### *The Democratic Content of Yoruba Proverbs*

Given the competitive nature of human societies, democracy places focal and thematic emphases on equality, reciprocity, and accommodation of dissenting views. Democracy gives prominence to the will of the people. It is a rule by popular consent. It recognises the freedoms of expression of opinions in the conduct of public affairs. It aims at checking abuse of power. Based on this, it is desirable to examine the ideas underpinning the traditional Yoruba proverbs. After all, underlying political institutions and political practices are a political theory, a philosophy, even though such philosophy may not have been articulated or worked out.<sup>9</sup> There is no doubt that numerous Yoruba proverbs express the democratic relationships existing among various categories of people in society.

Basic to a democratic set-up is the general agreement on the nature and form of government. To have a democratic political and social setting, there must be a general consent or agreement documented in the constitution of the society, stating the nature, the essence, and the mode of arrangement of government. This is expressed in the proverbs:

*Idalu ni iselu*

(The form of government determines the form of governance)

*Bayi l'aa se n' ile eni, eewo ibomiran*

The principle of action in a household may not be the principle of action in another household)

Going by these two proverbs, there must be a mutual consent from members, who populate a society, concerning what should determine what their form of government should be. In other words, the proverbs are to the effect that for a society to be democratic, citizens, through their representatives, should agree on some principles and codes of conduct. Once agreed upon, these codes of conduct become the regulatory mechanisms upon which the edifice of the society is erected. In such a democratic setting, it is assumed that there is a general consent among the people that the society should be governed in a particular way. Once the consent of the majority of the people is obtained, any time the codes clash with individual interests, the individual interests should give way to the mutually consented to codes. These mutually accepted codes should give direction to the running of the society. Based on these values, a society can be judged good or bad. It is assumed that where such consent exists, the people can also agree to change or modify them, depending on what they consider being their own good. The democratic thing about it is that the principles underlying the running of the society are premised on people's consent.

Democracy also calls for separation of power. It encourages that the organs of government and offices of government be shared among the people such that power is not concentrated in the hands of just a few individuals. For example:

*Aja kii roro ki o so ojule meji*

(A fierce dog does not watch two houses)

*Ohun ti a fun eso so l'eso n so*

(What is entrusted to a guardian is what he should guard)

The idea is the democratic ethos of separating the power of the executive from that of the legislature, and both in turn from that of the judiciary. The two proverbs are stressing the inefficiency that should be expected in one person or a single group of persons handling all the facets of governance. This division of political functions will go a long way to enhance democratic gov-

ernance. The proverbs are calling for the rule by the people rather than by some privileged few. The content of these proverbs, if granted, will curb the lust for absolute power. This way, no individual or group of people can monopolise political offices and institutions. It spreads these political offices and institutions to as many people as possible. This encourages the democratic participatory governance. These proverbs, among other things, are also meant to prevent or avoid undue interferences among different sectors of government. The proverbs require that those who hold political offices should concentrate more on the offices they hold such that they can bring the best out of their offices in terms of doing the best for the people. This, if achieved, will bring government nearer to the people.

Sequel to the democratic expectation of separation of power, the idea of checks and balances allows operators of state power in one sector to check the other operators in another sector of governance. This way, there is no sector that cannot be checked by the other. These checks balance the possible excesses of each sector, and thus, moderate the execution of the power of governance. This idea is contained in such proverbs as:

*Ibi a ba pe ni ori, a kii fi tele*

(What you call a head must not be used for stepping the ground, or, respect must be given to the head)

*Ika t'oto s'imu l'aa fii ro imu*

(We pick the nose with the finger that will go in)

*Agba ko si ilu baje, Baale ile ku ile d'ahoro*

(When there are no elders in the town, there is confusion; when the head of the family dies, the house becomes desolate)

*A kii fi eni j'oye Awodi k'ama le gbadiye*

(One who is given the title of a hawk should be able to prey on chicken)

*Aifi agba fun enikan ko je ki aye o gun*

(Failure to have a leader is not conducive to peaceful existence)

*Agbalagba t'o wo ewu aseju, ete ni yoo fi ri*

(An elder who goes to excess loses respect)

*Agba t' o je aje i wehin ni yoo ru igba re dele*

(The elder who eats all his food without leaving some for others will carry his load to the town)

*Agbalagba ki i fi ara re se langba-langba*

(An old man does not make fun of himself)

From these proverbs, it is clear that there is a spirit of checks and balances. While the first five proverbs under this heading talked about the virtue of giving due respect to the elders (who in this respect signify the rulers), the last three admonish the rulers to reciprocate the respect and obedience of the ruled. Given this, the rulers can check the excesses of the ruled and the ruled can check the excesses of the rulers. These proverbs, in all, emphasise the need for mutual respect between the rulers and the ruled for the smooth governance of the society.

Going by these proverbs, the leaders, once in position of leadership, are accorded some powers and respect to assist them in governance. The first five proverbs are to the effect that citizens should accord their rulers with all the necessary requirements of office to enable them to discharge their leadership responsibilities. The proverbs enjoin that the rulers should be adequately empowered morally and politically. On the other hand, the last three in the series warn the rulers against any excesses in the execution of their social and political responsibilities. This set of proverbs emphasises humility and openness among the rulers to encourage a reciprocal respect from the subjects. These proverbs emphasise the point that the rulers should respect the views and opinions of their subjects and the subjects should abide by the societal rules and laws as formulated by their representatives in government. This is to serve as a sort of moderation. This enables the two sides to serve as a web in the process of governance. To maintain the web, each side must be moderated by the other. There must be checks and balances.

The democratic virtue of equality of human beings is prominently stated in some Yoruba proverbs. Some of these proverbs are:

*Ibi ko yato si ibi, bi ati bi eru ni a bi omo*

(There is no difference in delivery: a slave is put to bed in the same way as a freeborn of the family)

*Igberaga nii saju iparun*  
(Pride goes before destruction)

*Aparo kan ko ga ju kanlo, afi eyi ti o ba gun ori ebe*  
(A bush fowl is not taller than any other bush fowl except the one that stands on a heap)

*Asiwere eniyan nii pe iru oun ko si; ko mo pe*  
*Iru oun ju egbaa-gbeje lo*  
(The foolish man says his ability is unique but he is ignorant that there are several others of his kind)

Looking at these proverbs, there is a stress on equality of human beings. The proverbs assume that all human beings are equal in virtue of their humanity. It is this assumption of equality that underlies the quest for consensus that allows everyone an opportunity to speak his mind and promote mutual tolerance among the citizens of a nation. This assumed equality inspires a belief in the identity of the interests of all the members of the community. The first proverb in this category shows that equality of human beings can be traced to equality of birth. It stresses that slavery, which is antonymous to equality, is artificial and a mere product of oppressive imagination. We also learn through the proverbs about 'the bush fowl' and 'the foolish man' that human beings are by nature equal, while the proverb about pride warns against any feeling of superiority of one person over the other.

Based on the equality of human beings is the idea of collectivity. Since all human beings are equal, those who govern the society and the subjects who are being governed should be deemed equal. Each should be treated as having rights and duties or obligations. The governors have rights and duties and so do the governed. Collectivity carries the idea of mutual commitments. In a democratic setting, the rulers and the ruled all aim at developing the society to promote the general well being of the people in the society. This requires a level of commitment. This commitment requires mutual support from the rulers and the ruled. Since they are considered mutually involved, they need to render mutual support in order to actualise the goal of their commitments.

Some of these issues that border on collectivity are contained in some Yoruba proverbs such as:

*Pipe ni aa pe gbon, a kii pe go*

(One consults with others to make wise decisions, not foolish ones)

*Ada se nii wun ni, ajose kii wun ni*

(Taking a decision alone makes one solely responsible for its consequences, but one man cannot be held responsible for a joint action)

*Agbajo owo ni a fii so aya*

(We use the collectivity of our fingers for tapping our chest)

*Ajeje owo kan ko gbe'gba d'ori*

(A single hand cannot lift up a full calabash to the head)

*Bi ina ko ba ni awo kii gun oke odo*

(If fire has no secret ally, it cannot cross a river)

The import of these proverbs, among others, is to stress the importance of collectivity and mutual commitments as effective ingredients of democracy. For democracy to work, individually and collectively the general interest of the society should be the goal. Citizens should strive to contribute to the general well being of the society. In this case, people, both the governors and the governed, do compliment one another.

Going by these proverbs, the rulers are obeyed because they have the backings of the citizens. The proverbs also stress the point that having acceded power to the governors, the citizens need the cooperation from the governors to enable the citizens to enjoy the good things of the society. A society is then seen as a joint venture between the governors and the governed. This consensus or mutual agreement is of paramount importance to democracy. The proverbs portray a democratic society as a society based on consensus.

The rulers and the ruled should work as a whole. They should both compliment each other. Given this structure, the rulers are the representatives of the general populace. They are seen to be there through the will of the people. The will of the people confers authority on the rulers. There seems to be a hint about

consensus. The proverbs presume a society based on consensus. The rulers come into power through the will of the people, they use the power conferred on them by this will to promote the general interest of the people to enable them further to enjoy the support of the people. The rulers and the ruled, as these proverbs show, do acknowledge reciprocity. Consensus and reciprocity are paramount to democracy.

For consensus and reciprocity to materialize, a democratic arrangement must accommodate dissenting views and opinions. This calls for criticism and public opinions. For leaders to allow criticism, they need to know about the fallibility of human beings. Rulers should grant that they are not perfect and that they can make mistakes. These democratic clamours for criticism are contained in such proverbs as:

*Ipako onipako l'aari eni eleni ni iba ni ri t'eni*

(We see the back of other people's heads, other people see our own)

*A kii moo gun moo te ki iyan ewura ma l'emo*

(Water yam cannot be so carefully pounded without its having some lumps)

*A kii to nii ba gbe ki a ma to nii ba soro*

(If you are fit to live with a person, you should be fit to talk to him)

*Enu taiye fi pe adegun ni won fin pe adeogun*

(The same mouth that people used for saying the Crown is straight is what they will use in saying the Crown is crooked)

These proverbs, among others, stress the fact that rulers should consider criticism and public opinions as barometers for gauging the correctness and otherwise of their policies. The proverbs carry the assumption that rulers should realize that they alone cannot have the complete knowledge of the society and of the people. Based on this, they need to grant that public opinions, especially the critical ones, are important means for recognizing how far from or how near to the general interests their policies are. Without the freedom of speech, of expression, and other very similar freedoms, rulers may not be able to assess their own

performances. Apart from providing avenues for rulers to assess themselves, the possibilities for criticism and public opinion can also promote the sense of belonging in the people. It gives the ruled a sense of active participation in governance.

The upshot of the discussion in this section is to show that some democratic ethos can be established from Yoruba proverbs. The question is not yet whether Yoruba traditional society was democratic. The question is just that if we carefully examine some Yoruba proverbs, we can find some of them depicting some democratic values.

### *An Appraisal*

From our discussion thus far, we can identify some Yoruba proverbs, which contain some ethos of democracy. The present question is on the status of proverbs in the establishment of democratic values. What gives proverbs the force to contain representative values of the users of the language? From the interpretations of the various proverbs and any other, can we establish the point that the users of the language have some concepts to express democratic values? This is, without any prejudice to the question, about the fact of democratic practice in Yoruba traditional socio-political settings. After all, in spite of the former, the latter remains a legitimate question.

It may interest us to examine what affords the proverbs the authority to offer verbal representations of the beliefs of the traditional Yoruba on the values of democracy. This may be a question of justification. The question may be construed to ask from where comes the authority that makes the injunctions conveyed by the proverbs and their uses representative of the ideas of members of the traditional Yoruba society.

The answer to this question of authority and justification may, in a sense, be found in the fact that proverbs, as a special means of communication among human beings sharing the same culture, encapsulate the wisdom and the world-view of the people. In this sense, proverbs are some kind of oral record of the total wisdom of a people from the past, influencing the present and aiding a projection to the future. Hence, proverbs are aggregating standards in terms of being useful guards.<sup>10</sup>

As a useful guard, it can aid our account of the possibility of establishing the fact that the traditional Yoruba language speak-

ers were capable of expressing democratic values. To say that some Yoruba proverbs express certain democratic norms does not amount to saying that the Yoruba were conscious of democratic ethos.<sup>11</sup> It might not really be the case that they were aware of any need for any democratic arrangement of Yoruba polity. Whatever, the fact remains that if we carefully examine Yoruba proverbs, there is a prospect that democratic norms can be deduced. The problem associated with this is also that one may be accused of reading democratic meanings into the selected Yoruba proverbs. A critic may claim that having identified the western notion of democracy and its attendant values, a scholar merely exploited the flexibility in proverbs and imposed a democratic interpretation.<sup>12</sup> So, as the critic may wish to hold, the whole point may simply be that of interpretation. After all, proverbs are metaphors, and “metaphors characterize rhetoric, not scientific discourse. They are fuzzy and vague, in essential frills, appropriate for the purposes of the politician and the poet, but not for those of the scientist, who is attempting to furnish an objective description of physical reality.”<sup>13</sup>

In spite of fears expressed above, there is room for optimism. Even if there are questions of vagueness and flexibility of proverbs, there are reasons to acknowledge the significance of proverbs in the Yoruba’s expression of reality and world-view. This prompts the Yoruba proverb, ‘*Owe lesin oro, bi oro ba sonu, owe l’a fi i waa*’ (A proverb is the vehicle or mechanism for smooth communication). Thus, for the Yoruba, proverbs are like horses for clear communication of ideas. When there are obstacles on the path to clear communication, proverbs are used to surmount them. The traditional Yoruba language users assigned very important roles to proverbs. The roles are too important to be discarded with a wave of hands.

For instance, for Archer Taylor, proverbs “are the simple truths of life and contain the ethical or moral values of a society.”<sup>14</sup> No doubt, “... it is through proverbs that a culture expresses most of its value judgments and moral condemnations.”<sup>15</sup> Even when we may tend to point to the holes in ascribing veracity and acceptability to proverbial deductions, we cannot but agree that “proverbs are an excellent body of folklore to use when analyzing the sociological and psychological characteristics of a people.”<sup>16</sup>

It may be assumed that the democratic interpretations are imposed on the selected Yoruba proverbs, and that the traditional Yoruba society might not be any where near democracy as we presently find it. After all, from what is known of the political history of the Yoruba, we can identify four types of constitutional and historical developments. These constitutional and historical developments range from fairly settled constitutional positions to highly complex imperial organizations on the one hand, and to a complete lack of any central organization beyond the town level on the other extreme.<sup>17</sup>

The traditional Yoruba societies portrayed some ethos of democracy—although, not in the current advanced stage. It is a historical fact that some *Oba* (kings), who were at the apex of governance, can and were actually dethroned if they failed to protect the general democratic interests of the people. Each *Oba* could not rule without the supporting chiefs. In constituting the councils of chiefs, both the princely interests and the commoners' interests were duly taken into consideration.<sup>18</sup>

In the Yoruba traditional political setting, each person stood in a well-defined relationship to the others. The *Oba*, for adequate ruler-ship, enjoyed some privileges and some limitations were placed on his power.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, history accounts for a non-monolithic Yoruba society. In other words, there are some organizational variations from one Yoruba group to the other, no matter how little.

Whether or not the traditional Yoruba society was *de facto* democratic, it is plausible to establish some democratic ethos from some Yoruba proverbs. This is not far fetched if we take proverbs as well disguised psychological projections of underlying attitudes and emotions.<sup>20</sup> Proverbs, according to R.W. Gibbs, assert their veracity about society and moral matters through linking of social situations to other domains with widely known and clearly identified conceptual entailments. While proverbs may be regarded as cultural repositories, it is also important to recognize the hetero-situationality of proverbs.<sup>21</sup> The point to be emphasized here is that many of the proverbs used to establish democratic ethos might be capable of being interpreted to convey other meanings, which, to all intent, may be antithetical to democratic values. After all, since, in the words of M. Turner, proverbs present a condensed story that is interpreted by projec-

tion, one proverb can be projected on various and sometimes different situations and hence have different functions.<sup>22</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Given the prominence that democracy enjoys among the different approaches to any just arrangement of any state or nation, this paper examines some Yoruba proverbs with the main purpose of finding out if any link could be established between the traditional Yoruba culture and democracy as reflected in the traditional usage of Yoruba proverbs. In spite of some possible historical and critical remarks concerning the link between democracy and traditional Yoruba culture, the paper concludes that, going by some of the selected proverbs, a significant link can be established between democracy and traditional Yoruba culture.

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