# Traditional African Political Thought and the Crisis of Governance in Contemporary African Societies

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The aim of this paper is to show the relationship between the normative outlook and political philosophy of traditional societies on the one hand, and the crises of governance and leadership in contemporary African Societies, particularly sub-Saharan states, on the other. Although there are quite some differences in the quality of leadership and governance among sub-Saharan African states because of the different political and economic circumstances, this part of the globe taken as a whole remains underdeveloped in terms of having the will to institute and maintain stable polities with responsive, responsible and efficient governance.

## 1. Introduction

Most of the time, the colonial and neocolonial experiences of African societies as well as other international pressures are adduced as explanations of this problem - all of which amount to an externalist approach to this problem; an approach that explains the problem, virtually, in terms of the impact of external factors on African societies. This paper while not denying the importance of external factors altogether, tries to show that certain internal factors, particularly, the nature of the nodal organizing principles in traditional societies and the attitudes, motivations and moods which sustain them as well as the worldviews, normative outlook and political philosophy from which they all derive, play an

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important, perhaps a more important role, in determining the current state of governance and stability in the continent.

The aims of this paper and the method by which I seek to accomplish them represent a third alternative conceptualization of purpose and methods of African Philosophy (the general research programme of African philosophy). This alternative, very well discussed by Segun Oladipo in his *Idea of African Philosophy* finds both the traditionalism and relativism of the ethno-philosophical school and the ahistorical universalizm of the universalistic school not only unsound, but also inadequate and irrelevant in contributing to solving the problems of the day[1]. The traditionalist school coming from the angle of patriotism and nationalism wants to procure and secure an unimpeachable African identity. The main problematic it addresses is the claim by some notable foreign scholars in the past, especially from the West (which could be said to be, to a large degree, the general belief of many foreigners - Westerners and non-Westerners) that Africans have no history, no philosophy, no culture, etc; and by extension no humanity or human identity. The objective of African Philosophy, in this regard, is to extract authentic African philosophy, which has been buried by the colonial experience and cultural imperialism (and the African identity that goes with it); to secure an equal position for this philosophy and identity amongst the philosophies and identities of the peoples of the world; and to preserve this philosophy and identity in this respected status[2].

These are interesting objectives; and at least one of the things traditionalists have accomplished so far is acquainting the world with traditional African thought and philosophy. But this approach is not geared towards solving the life threatening problems of Africans. In the first place, it does not address a problem formulated by Africans, but one formulated by foreigners and one which when solved will satisfy the intellectual curiosity of the foreigner; provide him/her with alternative thought patterns from which he/she could personally draw in developing theories to understand and solve local, regional and global problems; and possibly make him/her amenable to understanding foreign cultures. The argument that, by procuring and securing a respectable identity based on historical achievement, Africans will have the psychological prop they need to tackle the problems of development - political, economic local, etc development - is not sound. To mention just a few problems with this argument: pride in the accomplishment of ones ancestors and building ones identity around such accomplishments does not necessarily (in any way) lead to the order and rational creative (generative) energy that brings about and sustains modern development; it does not see the identity of a people as a dynamic thing which they are free to create and recreate in order to sustain their dignity, survival and advancement; and, therefore, makes it difficult for the African to engage his/her received identity in a critical dialogue with a view to transforming the African's world for the better.

As a matter of fact, the traditionalists frequently fight against such critical dialogue with the authentic African past for fear of unearthing or exhibiting uncomplimentary facts which may reduce the accomplishments and therefore status of traditional thought in the sight of the foreigner; and, therefore, the equality of African philosophy and identity with other philosophies and identities. Consequently, the traditionalist approach fosters an uncritical and inexact approach, much of the result of which can pass as philosophy only when they are taken as species of the record of African philosophy/thought[3]. The traditionalist does not quite see that the problematic has changed from the questions posed by foreigners (which was used in part as justification for colonization the answering of which, therefore, is part of the de-colonization process) to questions about why independent African states should terrorize their citizens, misgovern them, steal and/or waste their resources, etc; questions about why Africans are underdeveloping Africa. These new problematic require thorough examination of the self, of the nation and her inheritance both indigenous and foreign; by discouraging, critical evaluation, traditionalists are discouraging African philosophers and intellectuals from discovering and addressing the true basis of Africa's underdevelopment, and to this extent are doing Africa a terrible disservice.

The ahistorical universalists rightly emphasize critical evaluation of received ideas from African tradition, but they erroneously hold that there are universal philosophical notions, ideas and concepts that are not the products of any given culture at a given time; such ideas, notions and concepts according to them can be discovered and it is the task of philosophy to do so by the faithful application of its neutral scientific method. The ahistorical universalist, however, is hard put in pointing at any philosophical idea, notion or concept that cannot be shown to be the product of a given culture and epoch (including the laws, or principles of logic apart from the law of non-contradiction).

It does not seem that there are any historical universal philosophical ideas, notions and concepts apart from the capacity to reason and develop patterns or systems of logic based on the principle of non-contradiction[4]. Apart from this, there are associated problems for the universalist. The universal ideas, notions, etc these philosophers speak of are invariably from the West: so the question arises, if there are universal philosophical notions, ideas, etc. how is it that only Westerners have discovered them? How would these philosophers provide answers that will not play into the hands of the cultural imperialists and racists? To get out of this dilemma, ahistorical universalists have concentrated a great deal of their effort on showing that the universal ideas, notions, etc. that have floated in from the West also exist in Africa. Much of what they do, however, is forcing the facts to fit the theory; raising in some cases questions concerning, why Africans did not articulate these ideas fully or emphasize them prior to contact with the West[5]. The ahistorical universalists by accepting the notion of cultural universals they way they do (that is without the knowledge of how these ideas are generated,

verified and validated) condemn Africa to cultural dependence; of the type in which foreign cultural products may be uncritically accepted. This approach does not aid the development of African societies because it does not rely on the critique of African ideas based on the alternative choice of philosophical values that were foregone, and therefore does not make for the organic growth of the stock of philosophical values in Africa. In other words there has to be clear and adequate philosophical demonstrations based on truth or verisimilitude (not on mere appeal to the possibility of material advancement or aesthetics, etc) in favour of a given choice of philosophical values(s) in any area - ontology, epistemology, ethics, etc. This is the proper relationship between theory and practice, in which theory informs and guides practice and vice- verse.

The third alternative represented in this work rejects the relativism and parochialism of traditionalism as well as ahistorical universalism. The basis of the rejection of these two schools lies in the fact that we can have historical-cultural products - particularly systems of thought - that are universally valid or, rather, more universally valid than other competing systems. The relativist/traditionalist on the contrary holds that we can look at the internal consistency of a system and establish the coherence of such a system, thereafter we can do no more because every coherent system is of equal status with respect to truth. This, however, is not correct, because we can show that a system possesses more of the principle of consistency than another system. The principle of consistency is the basis of the coherence theory of truth - truths obtained as valid inferences from premise(s) regardless of the existential status of such premise(s) - they therefore pertain to the logical order and provide us with logical truths. However they bear on existential truths, this is because whatever we are conscious of as existing - by way of our intelligence, reason, intuition, senses, etc - we are conscious of because such a thing remains consistent long enough (and this may be tiny fractions of a second) to register in our consciousness as being (of whatever order).

Consistency, therefore, is at the root of our consciousness of being; since this is the case, it follows that the converse is also the case: inconsistency is at the root of non-being. It follows from this that where there is inconsistency in thought reality cannot be as conceived. It also follows from this that the more the principle of consistency is exhibited in a system of thought, the more likely that such a system of thought approximates being; that is, the more likely that it is true, the more verisimilitude.

Given the above, a major task of philosophy is the exhibition of the occurrence of consistency, particularly the level of manifestation of the principle of consistency, in a system or sub-system of thought, a belief, etc. This task is an open ended one, more or less; philosophers have to keep striving to develop ways of apprehending the principle of consistency in a system of thought, belief, etc. The approach followed in this paper may be described as the method of analysis of consistency.

The third alternative in African Philosophy we are pursuing may be described as formal universalism. It is universalistic in the sense that there an identifiable universal reality that can be known (or known approximately as best as possible), that links our thought and knowledge with existence. This reality is essentially formal. Its concrete embodiment takes place in historical settings (cultures) but the ontological compositions that make up this historical setting (that is the stuff of this embodiment) is not seen as a necessary part of the universal essence. In the sections below, I have tried to examine traditional and contemporary African societies with respect to politics, particularly the use and misuse of power. Before we go on, let us note that the use of power is more or less invariably stalked by the misuse (abuse) of power arising from the fact that humans have a tendency to seek for self-centred purposes and personal advantages; Kant states it thus:

"Man is an animal that, so long as he lives amongst others of his species, stands in need of a master. For he inevitably abuses his freedom in regard to his equals; and although as a reasonable creature he wishes for a law that may set bounds to the liberty of all, yet do his self-interested animal propensities seduce him into making an exception in his own favor whensoever he dares[6] ".

There are basically two types of abuse of power, namely; the use of communal power for purposes it ought not to be used for. And, secondly, refraining from the deployment of communal power for purposes it ought to be deployed. An example of the first type is - in a modern Western type society - the arrest and detention, without trial, of dissidents. An example of the second type is refraining from arrest and or prosecution of a person who embezzled state funds. It is the duty of every society (country) to ensure that the state expresses governance in a self-regulatory manner that will keep out (minimize as much as possible) the abuse of power; thus there is the need for the proper management of communal power to accomplish desired goals and objectives. Following from the above we can say that one can estimate the intelligence (purposive intelligence or reason) of a society by looking at, among other factors, a society's level of success (or failure) in managing its communal power.

A society expresses reason at two levels: the level of the rationality of its goals - this deals with the logical relations of the goals (the extent to which they are contradictory - or non-contradictory); the level of the rationality of the society - this deals with the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization and actions of society in accomplishing its accepted goals. We may regard this as the macro-rationality (reason) of a society; and this should be distinguished from the micro-rationality of a society. Whereas the macro-rationality of a society is the rationality of a society as such (that is a society as a single unit); micro-rationality is the rationality of the individuals and groups that make up society in respect of their individual and group goals; and their efficiency and effectiveness in accomplishing such goals. There is apparently the need for a harmonious balance between the macro-reason and micro-reason of society, otherwise

the one may undermine the other, as in when fissiparous tendencies of individuals and groups makes it difficult for a society to effectively pursue its societal goals, such as security and justice for its members (here the expression of micro-reason stifles that of macro reason); or, as in when society is so totalitarian as to stifle individual creativity (here the expression of macro-reason is suffocating that of micro reason). The problem of the management of the communal power of a society, given the above, thus centres around the issue of the enhancement of the macro-reason of a society in an auspicious relationship with the micro-reason of society. Let us now look at African societies to see how they have fared in respect of the management of communal power.

## 2. The Management of Communal Power in African Societies

To understand the management (or rather mismanagement) of communal power in contemporary African societies, we have to look first at the management of communal power in traditional African Societies; in order to do this, however, we have to look at the sources of communal power and some of the ways by which they are controlled.

Usually, the government and the leaders of government are in control of the physical coercive power of a state (society). The State may be seen as an association that is meant to see to the security and welfare of its members, hence the need for it to control the physical coercive power of a society. Apart from the physical coercive power of a society, there is the moral coercive power of a society; this is expressed through ostracism and other forms of social rejection. The communal moral coercive power of a society may be expressed through the institutions of the state or through non-state associations such as religious organizations, or via a non-institutionalized manner, some of which may be spontaneous, for example, the spontaneous protest of a mob. Apart from expressing some communal moral coercive power, some non-state associations, particularly religious ones express spiritual (or metaphysical) power which may be very potent and very significant, if such a non-state association commands society wide membership or the membership of a sizeable part of a society; an example of this is the power of excommunication in the Catholic Church. Form the above, one may say that there are three types of mutually influential communal power; physical, moral and metaphysical power. Let us note that the way each of these forms of power manifests (including the way one may influence the expression of other forms of communal power) depend in some circumstances, in some degree, on the nature of leading personalities.

## 2.1. The Management of Communal Power in Traditional African Societies

In traditional African Societies, the basis of the prevention of the abuse of the communal power vested in states and governments lay in the metaphysical power (mainly religiously based metaphysical power) that could be depended on by a society or a significant section of it (this, as we shall see, clearly latter, is in contrast with the more secular and moral basis of contemporary Western societies which serve as models in many ways for modern African Societies). In what follows below, I shall show why this is so with some illustrations.

In the traditional African society, political power/authority derived from the possession/control of the vital force of a given political unit (which may be the family, clan, tribe, or nation). The vital force of a community is the source of vitality of such a community as a corporate body as well as the ultimate source of vitality of its individual members. It may be taken as the genus (or genii, as the case may be, of a community); it is essentially a spiritual (non-physical) force, which can exert its influence on both physical and non-physical nature. The rules by which people determine that a given person or persons are legitimately in possession of the vital force of a political community differ. However, once a person(s) is deemed to be in proper possession of the vital force of a political unit, the basis of limiting this power from below (that is, by those it is supposed to govern) ceases to exist. This is because those below derive their vital force from above (that is, that controlled the ruler controls) and, therefore, cannot limit it; in other words, they have no power (vitality) over and above that which the ruler controls, with which to control him/her. Mbiti's observation about the principles that underlie morality in traditional Africa generally applies to political morality and action; he points out that:

"The principle of hierarchy is most helpful here. As a rule, a person of a lower rank, status or age commits an offence against another person or being of a higher rank or age. One may also offend against a person of the same status. Never or rarely does a person of higher status do what constitutes an offence against a person of lower status? What is considered evil or offence are functions from a low level to a higher level... the king or ruler does not offend against his subjects, the elder in the village does not offend those who are younger or under him, and parents do not offend against their children."[7]

Given the above, it should be clear that power flows from the top downwards; hardly the other way round. The body that constitutes authority at a given level need not be composed of one person or a few persons; it may for example be an assembly of the adult male, as in the village or village-cluster democracies of the Igbo. Whatever the composition of the ruling body, the relationship between the ruler and the ruled is authoritarian. Even in traditional democracies, such as the Igbo democracies, women and children cannot have their way, or indeed their say, in many situations. The male assembly demand total obedience from them and there is hardly any legitimate way by which women and children

as groups can overturn the decisions of the male assembly; the same is also the care at the sub-unit level where the male head of family rules. So, although there were various types and sizes of states in traditional Africa - for example, monarchies with hereditary aristocrats as in Benin; monarchies without hereditary aristocrats as in Onitsha; democracies, which in some cases, as with many 1gbo communities, for example, were in effect a mixture of plutocracy, gerontocracy, and democracy - the authoritarian principle is more or less common[8] .

To check the abuse of power built around the authoritarian principle, Africans relied largely on gods, spirits (especially ancestral spirits) and other spiritual forces upon which the vital force of the political unit ultimately depended. Consequently, abuse of power was checked by the following:

(1) Taboos that surrounded an office

(2) Fear of incurring the wrath of a patron deity (deities) or spirit that protects and oversees the welfare of a group or an individual.

In this regard, Mbiti's observation about parents as persons in authority applies to the various offices in a state:

"If parents do something which hurts their children and which constitutes an offence against the children, it is not the children as such who experience it as offence: rather, it is the community, the clan, the nation or the departed relatives who are the real objects of the offence, since they are the ones in higher status than the parents. Consequently, it is not the children themselves but the offended community or clan or living-dead, who punish the parents[9] ".

From taboos and the wrath of gods and spirits, different types of control of the power of rulers were developed. For example, in some places, taboos made kings to live in near total seclusion (for example, the Obi of Onitsha and the Aku-uka of the Jukuns); compelling such rulers to rely a great deal on their deputies and representatives whose assessment of situations and counsels were all they could get (they could not go above these representatives to deal with the people directly). And, if a ruler seriously goes against a god(s) or spirit(s) in his/her community, it is expected that such a god(s) or spirit(s) will punish such a ruler; in this regard the people may act as representatives of the god(s) or spirit(s) in getting rid of such a ruler[10] .

The system of checking the abuse of power in traditional African societies, given the above, may be described as divinely-limited-authoritarianism. It is, therefore, wrong to thing that abuse of power was checked in traditional African societies largely by the constitutional rights of the people or groups of persons[11] . Let us deal with this error by looking at a particular case: the city - state of Onitsha[12] .

Onitsha is a monarchy with a king (Obi) at the apex of political power. The Obi after going through the selection and installation rituals becomes divine. He becomes the personification of the sky-god Igwe (Igwe kaniogo: the sky-god who is more generous than the earth-goddess, Ani); hence his assumption of the title Igwe as a personal title. As Igwe he is above the ethical

standards required of all the other members of the community because these standards are injunctions from the earth goddess, Ani, whose suzerainty he is no longer directly under; R.N Henderson correctly records this:

"The King is freed of ordinary behavioral proscriptions, not only with regards to ordinary free men but particularly with regards to his own immediate agnates. It is said, "the king does not experience judgment or guilt"; because he is identified with spirit and cannot be accused of abominations or required to take ordinary oaths, he is free to attempt things, which others cannot essay[13] ".

And he also notes that: it is said that he is above accusations of violating land custom, for "the sky is higher than the land"[14] . Consequently, no one may condemn the decision or action of the Obi (disapproval of his actions may, however, be conveyed by way of courteous advice on how to conduct himself better); similarly, the king's children( and by extension his close relations are rather above the law - the proverb, " ikpe ama nwa eze (a king's son is not found guilty in his father's court)" expresses this; it shows that the rule of law is not held as an ideal in respect of the office of the king and by extension other offices of the state[15] .

A measure of the sort of power the Obi possesses could be seen in some of his titles or cognomens; apart from Igwe already mentioned, they include:

1.Agbogidi (voice of thunder)

2. Agu (Leopard)

3.Akenyikolua ("The hand of the elephant that is mightier than its hind-leg)

4.Ogbu Onye mbosi ndu ya nagu ya (He who kills a person on a day he desires life)

5.Okwue obe e (supreme Judge; final arbiter)

6. Onye okwu nana n'onua (He who has the final word on any matter)[16] .

In addition, the nature of the Obi's powers can be seen in the fact that he is the repository of the vital force of the community as such and consequently the chi of the Onitsha people (the divinely appointed destiny of the people, which is itself a spirit)[17] . It is in this context that one can properly understand Ben Chukwudebe's assertion that "when he (the Obi) is captured in battle the war ends"; the war ends because with the Obi in captivity the people can hardly find the spirit to continue the fight[18] . This explains the necessity of concentrating power in the person of the Obi. He has to be in control of the community in order to bear personal responsibility for the fate of the collective vital force (and hence destiny of the people).

Clearly, from the foregoing the Obi possesses despotic powers. But he does not act arbitrarily or despotically in practice. The reason for this, as I have already has been attributed to his being a constitutional monarch by Azikiwe, Nwala and others but this is erroneous[19] . Let us look at Azikiwe's case to demonstrate this sets out the arguments that should show that the Obi is a constitutional monarch thus:

1."It was customary that the Obi should consult the Ndichie [chiefs] who in turn, should, by previous exchange of views, reflect public opinion as expressed by the Agbala n'Iregwu [male and female commoners].

Having ascertained what is public opinion, it is mandatory that the Obi should act on advice"?[20]

2."Secondly, the office of Onowu lyase (traditional prime-minister) was to be confined exclusively to the non-royal lineage of Ugwu na Obamkpa"[21] .

3."Finally, in appointing Ndichie, the Obi was enjoined to have regard to the composition of each college so as to correlate as near as possible a reflection of the dichotomous nature of the Onitsha clan"[22]

First, the Obi is not known in Onitsha tradition to be bound to take the advice of the Ndichie (the chiefs that he appoints to represent him and perform administrative, judicial and military functions on his behalf); their power is essentially advisory[23] . If the Obi goes against the advice of the Ndichie and the will of the people, he was not committing any constitutional crime. If he persists in such acts it does not seem that it would inevitably lead to his deposition as Milne thought (provided, of course, he was not offending the gods by his acts)[24] . The reason for this is that the Obi can only be deposed when the most dreaded of the incarnate dead (masks), the Muo-Afia or Muo-Ogonogo (tall ghost) enters the kings square after passing under the traditional archway that guard the entrance to the palace. And, the Muo-Ogonogo being agents of the collective incarnate dead can only embark on this mission (it should be obvious) if there is a grievous offence against the god(s) and ancestors. No Obi of Onitsha since the over three hundred years history of the city-state has ever been deposed; an indication that they know their duties in respect of the gods and ancestors.

Secondly, although the Onowu lyase title should, as tradition indicates, go to the Obamkpa clan, it has been held by people outside this group for far more times than members of the Obamkpa group since the time of Obi Eze Aroli who reigned around the later part of the 18th century (of the fourteen or so Onowu Iyaseles in this period only 4 are Obamkpa men). The acceptance of these irregularities show how much the king can have his way.

Thirdly, the need to evenly spread the Ndichie tittles among the various units that make up Onitsha, is an administrative need that works to the advantage of the Obi. Indeed, he should desire to spread them evenly to enhance the effectiveness of his administration, such an act in no wise limits the power of the Obi.

Why then does the Obi consult his people extensively via the Ndichie as well as directly during public assemblies in the palace (an example of the later is cited as the key factor that shows that the Onitsha kingdom operated democratically with a limited monarchy in Elizabeth Isichei's Igbo Worlds. [25])? Why does he act in a not so overtly arbitrary, tyrannical and oppressive manner (his agents, for example, could forcibly take – virtually seize - a woman; present her to the Obi; whereupon she will become one of his wives, living in a closely guarded seraglio; the Obi however, usually sends some gifts to the parents of such women in lieu of bride price [26])? It is because his power/authority is limited by divine sources. He has to consult with his people and obtain their consent so that if misfortune comes as a result of a decision (say, the acceptance of Christian mis-

sionaries, as in the case cited in Igbo Worlds), the gods, and spirits, that protect and oversee the fortunes of the people will not hold him entirely responsible for inflicting disaster on their wards, rendering him indefensible against their wrath. Similarly, he will send compensating gifts to parents whose daughter he has forcibly taken to appease their personal and family gods. There is what one may call a spiritual logic in the actions of the Obi in relation to his people, which is aimed at maintaining a favourable cosmic and spiritual balance - the check upon his power, thus rests clearly on metaphysical sources.

As it is with the Obi so it is with other levels of authority right down to the family unit. The Omu (Queen - she is not the Obi's mother or his wife; rather, she is a woman chieftain appointed by the Obi to look after the affairs of the womenfolk; including, especially trade and market affairs which was one of the special domains of women; actually she ran a synonymous structure of government with that the Obi, complete with a council of titled women: "Otu Ogene"); Ndichie; Nze n'Ozo tittled men; Iregwu (untitled men); Agbala (Ikporo Onitsha - married or once married women). All these levels of power and authority were hedged by taboos and the need to ensure a favourable balance of cosmic and spiritual forces in the conduct of ones affairs.

The Ndichie and Nze na Ozo titled men (the latter title is "a precondition for taking the politically higher title of Ndichie), for example, observed elaborate taboos that governed their movement; eating habits; morality in terms of lying to, stealing from, or killing a member of the lineage group to which one belongs as well as sexual relations with females belonging to this group either as wives or daughters. The Iregwu had to observe taboos which all men whether they where titled or not observed; some of such taboos ensured that the community was organized along gender lines in which women though subordinate to men ultimately, had their own sphere and dignity; and that children were treated with fairness and some dignity. Henderson captured elements of this in respect of the latter in his documentation of the relationship between a father and his eldest son (diokpala):

"The senior son serves as a model of appropriate father-child relationships, and his interaction with his father is constrained by numerous proscriptions of acts that are defined as forbidden (Nso). He must never overtly challenge his father, lest he be thought eager to replace him. Of all members of the parental household, he alone is forbidden to enter his father's private "treasure room" (Òlisilióků) so long as the father is alive for it is believed that by doing so he might learn the extent of his father's wealth and wish to succeed him immediately, since the father and senior son interact in a context defined by the imperative of strict truth (Ofo) their relationship should concern matters of moral knowledge and responsibility, not possibilities of future economic gain... .many behavioral prescriptions bind father and son (especially senior son), and most emphasize that a son should submerge his personal will and interest in the will and interests of his father...

However, certain beliefs limit this submergence of the senior son in collectivity with his father. First, it is said that a father must exercise extraordinary care in directing his senior son; should he chastise the son excessively the son may fall into a "prideful lament' (called akwa alili or ifu alili), and, it is thought, pine away and die. That would jeopardize the spiritual health of the household and deprive the father of his most reliable support for his old age... Third, the Onitsha father must respect the right of his son to accumulate his own personal property even though the son should voluntarily contribute the wealth obtained from such property primarily in the furthering of his father's glorification."[27]

A crucial element of traditional African political thought, as could be seen from the above, is non-opposition to properly constituted authority on the part of subordinates. A major reason for this is that all authority is god-given (it is at least given by the chi of such a person) and consequently it is in some way a divine right; the various offices in the State and the power and authority that go with them, are thus indistinguishable from the persons that hold them; a ruler owes no obligation to his/her subordinates as persons qua persons for he/she is conceived in the manner of the lord or mistress, not the servant of, his/her people; he/she however owes the powers above his/her level, whether they are human or divine, some obligations; the duty of the subordinate is to align himself/herself to the will of the ruler as much as possible hoping for the best (that is, that the interests, inclinations and dispositions of the ruler will be to ones own interest and welfare; and the intervention of the god(s) and spirits in ones favour).

We may summarize the principles and practices that underlie the nature and management of communal power in the traditional African society thus:

1. Occupation of a political office is ultimately explained in terms of selection (or allotment) by the god(s) or spirit(s), involving at least ones personal god (chi among the Igbo; ori among the Yoruba) who controls the fortunes and destiny of a person. This personal god, however, operates in some accord with other spirits and gods; and it appears the higher the office the more involvement of other gods and spirits. Corollaries of this are that offices are highly personalized; and a person in power/authority is ultimately accountable to the god(s) and spirit(s).

2. Responsibility in essence is taking care of the interests of the powers above ones office, including divine powers and interests, so that one will maintain a cosmic and spiritual balance that is favourable to ones personal advancement. Responsibility thus flows from bottom upwards.

3. A person in authority/power is essentially a collector of obeisance; one of the outward signs of which is the payment of homage (Ife nru, among the Igbo) – a widely accepted practice, rendered, for example by a son to his father, by the head of a nuclear family to the head of the extended family; by the head of an extended family to the head of the patrilineage group; by a chief to his king.

4. 1-3 above fosters a culture of non-opposition to power/authority by subordinates irrespective of the manner by which power/authority is exercised. In addition, the cost of opposition could be very high, because it is readily conceived in a personalized manner and so it easily becomes a do or die affair. Consequently, opposition is not organized or institutionalized in a manner that can benefit society maximally.

5. The apparently authoritarian and despotic tendencies above are mitigated (controlled) by the requirement of those in authority to observe taboos set out by the god(s) and spirit(s) as well as avoid incurring the wrath of the divine beings; both of which are divine provisions to ensure the welfare of devotees and wards.

6. The divinely demanded limitations in 5 above is the ultimate basis for curbing abuse of power and ensuring some level of responsive and responsible governance. Thus there is heavy reliance on metaphysical sources in the management of communal power.

## 2.2. The Management of Communal Power in Contemporary African Societies

The management of power in contemporary African societies is most of the time the mismanagement of power. The basis of this mismanagement of communal power lies largely in the fact that contemporary African societies are societies that are based on what one may describe as mutually distorting parallel frameworks: the traditional African framework and the modern Western framework. Each of these frameworks (composed of supreme beliefs, derivative beliefs, derivative values, institutions and practices) function in a way that prevent the abuse of communal power to a significant degree. The existence of these parallel frameworks can be traced back to the colonial period when the colonial system of administration (with its alien legal system and values) was superimposed on traditional institutions and values either with the aim of destroying and replacing the traditional system as with the French policy of assimilation or with the aim of rearranging the traditional system just enough to make it deliver cheap and efficient local administration to the colonial system as with the British policy of indirect rule, which was given some ideological backing in the notion of the dual mandate). We have already seen the nature of the traditional system let us now look at the modern Western system.

First, let us note that the colonial administration was imperialistic and authoritarian while it lasted, its legacy could still be seen in elements of the legal and security spheres. However, the colonial systems from the 1950's onward have been replaced by conscious adoption of the political institutions and practices of modern western societies. There are various types of institutions and practices borrowed from modern western societies. however, there are common features which show that they belong to a common framework. Let us now look at the features of this framework.

The basic features of modern Western system as it is today (we need not deal with the stages of its evolution here) may be summarized thus:

1. Occupation of a political office depends ultimately on election by citizens who have the right and the power to put people in office and remove them from office after a period. Thus, political power is ultimately bestowed by the citizens of a state; this replaces the notion of divine selection or allotment and any other conception of divine right. Corollaries of this are that offices are less personalized; and a person in power/authority is ultimately accountable to the citizens of a state (the electorate).

2. Responsibility in essence is taking care of the interests of the powers (the electorate) that put one in office. Responsibility, thus, flows from top downwards. There is some sort of contractual relationship (a sort of social contact) in which a person takes political office (authority/power) in return for serving the interest of the electorate.

3. A person in authority/power is essentially a service provider. One of the outward signs of this is that there is a more or less clear separation of personal interests and official interests (interests of the state) in a manner that makes it illegal for one to use ones office for personal gains over and above those stipulated by law.

4. 1-3 above fosters a culture of opposition to power/authority. Indeed, opposition is a necessary element of this system, because through it the leadership (the quality of services) provided by those in power is scrutinized to make sure that they conform to the terms of the contract, Opposition is organized and institutionalized in a manner that will make it effective without generating disorder and chaos; and in a manner that can enable society benefit maximally.

5. Abuse of power, as could be seen from 1-4 above is checked by the constitutional powers and limitations of offices as well as rights of persons; and the active participation of citizens (civil society) in the exercise of such rights through opposition, lobbying, campaigns of various types, etc.

6. The ultimate basis for curbing abuse of power and ensuring a significant level of responsive and responsible governance lies in the moral force of the community by which it determines occasions for positive sanction (including rewarding some people with such things as political offices via the ballot) and negative sanctions (including denying some people political office via the ballot). This system of management of communal power thus relies heavily on the moral coercive power of a community.

The type of conscience and moral activism that is necessary for the successful operation of the modern Western system is not in African at the moment; in part, because Africa had not relied on moral coercive power in the past, but rather on metaphysical sources, for the management of communal power. In addition, the modern Western system came with a worldview (or perhaps worldviews) that are grounded in Christianity, humanism, naturalism, etc. all of which are opposed to the key elements of the supreme beliefs of the traditional African worldview; and have succeeded in eroding the foundation of the traditional system of managing power: the belief in commonly held gods and spirits

that actively Supervise human affairs at the communal and sub-unit levels.

The erosion of the beliefs that affects the policing activities of the gods and spirits followed the general abandonment of commonly held god (s) and spirits, such as the earth goddess (Ani, among the Igbo), but many people still privately hold on to personal gods and spiritual powers, which they believe will aid them in procuring power. The result is that many people still believe that power *is* to be acquired by the favour of some spirit(s) or god(s); this explains the widely believed use of "medicine"(magic) and fetish related sacrifices, that include human sacrifices at times: it also largely explains the widespread rigging and abuse of the electoral process – politicians do not really believe that the people's will matter, rather it is the will of some spirit or god and this is often known after one has tried to again power by hook or by crook. The notion of divine allotment thus remains and with it the upward flow of responsibility and the culture of non-opposition. In other words, the authoritarian and despotic elements remain but the divinely based limitation in the exercise of power is gone. This is the fundamental asymmetry of values and institutions in Africa.

The effects are gross abuse of power at all levels and governance that is highly nonresponsive and irresponsible. The institutional arrangements and practices that have delivered responsible governance in the West are not working here because the citizens whether they are operating as the led or as leaders are to a large degree unwilling to respect these institutional arrangements or engage in the practices required by the modern Western system.

## 3. Concluding Remarks

Let us first note that the management of communal power is culture and history specific; and the object of the management of communal power is the curbing of the recurrent features and tendencies in the abuse and irresponsible exercise (or non-exercise) of power in a given historical and cultural context. From our analysis, it should be clear that the abuse of power in contemporary Africa runs very deep, arising from the inability of the traditional African system and the modern Western system to impose any check on the all out pursuit of narrowly defined self interest. We saw in the previous section why politicians in Africa are not checked by the traditional system of managing communal power nor by the Western system. This unfettered African politicians readily terrorize and underdevelop Africa.

In order to deal with this situation, there is a need to develop functional ways of managing communal power in modern African. In this regard, it seems that a return to the metaphysical basis of managing communal power is not feasible, because the gods and spirits have been abandoned at least at the communal level; and Christianity that replaced traditional religion in many places is hobbled with sectarian divisions (that make religious leaders and their doctrines to have little or no influence outside their followers).

Africans, therefore, have to kick-start the management of communal power based on moral coercive force. The constitutions of Western countries which many African states have borrowed cannot do this because African communities do not share in the historical and cultural contexts out of which they evolved. For example, these constitutions do not address the ingrained sense of non-opposition that makes it difficult to mobilize people in many places to deal with abuse of power via legitimate means – a case in point was the non payment of the salaries of civil servants for many months by the government of Anambra state of Nigeria during the tenure of Governor C. Mbadinuju 1999-2003; there were little or no major rallies, demonstrations, etc to oppose this. African societies need to develop constitutions that can raise, strengthen and direct constructive opposition as well as oppositional-tenacity. For example, if there was constitutional provision stating that a government that cannot pay its workers' salary for up to two months automatically forfeits its term of office, then opposition groups would have found a better basis to mobilize and get the Governor out.

Consequently, the constitutions of African states must be founded among other things on a charter of responsibility, which will set out a minimum standard of services, rights, conduct, etc. which a government must meet to avoid impeachment, recall or automatic termination of a term of office - some of the items that may be included in such a charter are non- payment of salaries of government workers over a given period of time; inefficiency in dealing with easily solvable health hazard such as disposal of refuse and the filling in of potholes on highways; a code of conduct that reflects commitment and patriotism; punctuality (this is not a light matter at all, the lack of punctuality by high officers of the state reflect the general inefficiency of government); a given level of job creation; a given level of free flow of factual information about the activities of the state. These items are largely founded on the right to life - an individual's right to preserve his/her life. The respect of this right is the ultimate justification for the duty, on the part of an individual, to obey an authority in a political unit and this is because political power exercised by a person(s) on behalf of a political unit must necessarily include the preservation and promotion of the lives of the individuals that make it up; a political unit that neglects this, or actively works against this, is simply telling its members to seek alternative ways of preserving their lives or face death in some way; the individual has no reason to remain in such a political unit indeed he/she is obliged to seek an alternative arrangement.

Finally, let us conclude this examination of the management of communal power in Africa by saying that from the above examination, the formal structure of the proper management of communal power can be stated thus: the communal goals are deduced from the welfare and interest of the public; the purpose and pursuits of political leaders are derived from the communal goals; therefore, political leaders serve the welfare and interest of the public. This is more or less the universal formal structure of the proper use of communal power; it is therefore the formal universal every human political

unit sets it eyes on (or should set it eyes on). However, the way (institutions, practices, etc) by which this formal universal is made concrete depends on the history, culture and circumstances of a given society. Consequently, the fashioning of a viable constitution that can galvanize and move African Societies forward is a task for Africans themselves because it is an exercise that draws heavily on the perceptiveness of the people about their attitudes, values and motives for action.

**Notes:**

1 Olusegun Oladipo, *The Idea of African Philosophy,* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1998), pp.13-28

2 Ibid, pp 29 – 30.

3 Ibid, pp. 36 – 48.

4 Stephan Korner, Metaphysics: Its Structure and Functions,(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). pp 53 –54.

5 See for example J.C Ekei's attempt to show that "the Igbo and Africa in general have an ethics, an ethic that is quite different from their religion... a rational ethics". J.C. Ekei, Justice in Communalism, (Lagos: Realm Communications Ltd, 2001) p. 2.

6 I. Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Stand Point" in Alburey Castell, *An Introduction to Modern Philosophy,* Third Edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc, 1976) p. 382.

7 J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy,* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1969). p. 208

8 Azuka. A. Dike, *Tile Resilience of Igbo Culture* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1985). p. 109

9 J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies*, p. 208.

10 Ibid.

11 See for example in respect of the Igbo, T.U. Nwala, *IgboPhilosophy,* (Ikeja, Lagos: Literamed Publications, Nigeria Ltd, 1985). pp. 172; Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Onitsha Market Crisis* (Nsukka: Zik Enterprises Ltd, 1976). p. 4.

12 A similar examination of Yoruba and Benin communities can be made from, among other materials, Johnson, S. *History of the Yoruba,* CMS (Book Shops) 1960; Fadipe, N.A. *The Sociology of the Yoruba* ( Ibadan, Ibadan University Press 1970); Biobaku, S.O. *Sources of Yoruba History* (Oxford University Press, 1973); Egharevba, Jacob *A Short History of Benin* (Ibadan University Press, 1960)

13 R.N. Henderson, *The King in Every Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972). p. 274.

14 Ibid. p. 308.

15 S.I. Bosah, *Groundowrk of the History and Culture of Onitsha* (No 1: Bosah Street, Onitsha: Self Published, Undated). See also Henderson. *The King in Every Man*, p. 285.

16 N. Azikiwe, *Onitsha Market Crisis,* pp. 4 - 5. I have followed Azikiwe's translation *of* tittles 1, 3, and 5.

17 R.N. Henderson, *The King in Every Man,* p. 275.

18 Ben. N. Chukwudebe, *Onitsha Quo Vadis,* Second Edition (Self Published, 1986) p. 11

19 See T.U. Nwala, *1gbo Philosophy;* p 172; N Azikiwe *Onistha Market Crisis,* p. 4. In disusing Umuezechima Kindgoms from whence Onitsha migrated some three and half centuries ago, LU. Ejiofor says that "the Ezechima Obi is neither absolute nor autocratic. He rules his people with a 'constitution' to guide him.The many constraints *of* customs and traditions combine with the established powers *of* lineage heads and cabinet chiefs to clip visible traits *of* absolutism and autocracy". *Igbo Kingdoms* (Onitsha: Africana Publisher Ltd, 1982). p. 256. It should be noted that the lineage heads and cabinet chiefs on their own cannot cheek the Obi; it is the customs and traditions that make it possible and these in turn are founded, ultimately, on metaphysical grounds.

20 N. Azikiwe, *Onitsha Market Crisis.* p. 5.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 W.R.T. Milne. *Intelligence Report on Onitsha* (Enugu: Government Printer); reproduced in N. Azikiwe, *Onitsha Market Crisis,* p. 65.

24 Ibid, p. 64.

25 E. Isichei *Igbo Worlds,* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1977) pp. 256 – 259.

26 R.N. Henderson, *The King in Every Man*, p. 285.

27 Ibid. pp. 147 – 149.