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# Towards Enduring Democratic Polities in Africa: Prospects, Challenges and Trajectories

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**Abstract-** By equating the functionality of regimes to indigenous culture, the study explores the causal mechanisms through which cultural conditions institutional outcomes and design. Upon review of relevant literature, the study opines the confounding role of culture on the nature of institutions cannot be downplayed. Building on Almond and Verba's perception of Participant Political Culture, it claims democracy in Africa is likely to remain unresponsive, and neither can it bring about predetermined outcomes such as developments, growth, equality, equity and the likes. It further claims the functionality of any political arrangement is more likely when such arrangement embodies social accepted norms, values and beliefs. Hence, it contends that for democracy to function in Africa there abounds the utmost need for contextual domestication as opposed to the current system of transplantation. Consequently, democratic values inherent in the dominant indigenous culture as a possible solution to the crisis of governance should not be dismissed. While the research does not assents to return to traditionalism, it propagates for the contextual domestication of democracy in tandem with prevailing norms and existential political and societal realities across the African continent.

**Keywords:** *post-colonial africa, democracy, culture, institutions and domesticating democracy.*

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# Towards Enduring Democratic Polities in Africa: Prospects, Challenges and Trajectories

Yahaya Yakubu

**Abstract-** By equating the functionality of regimes to indigenous culture, the study explores the causal mechanisms through which cultural conditions institutional outcomes and design. Upon review of relevant literature, the study opines the confounding role of culture on the nature of institutions cannot be downplayed. Building on Almond and Verba's perception of Participant Political Culture, it claims democracy in Africa is likely to remain unresponsive, and neither can it bring about predetermined outcomes such as developments, growth, equality, equity and the likes. It further claims the functionality of any political arrangement is more likely when such arrangement embodies social accepted norms, values and beliefs. Hence, it contends that for democracy to function in Africa there abounds the utmost need for contextual domestication as opposed to the current system of transplantation. Consequently, democratic values inherent in the dominant indigenous culture as a possible solution to the crisis of governance should not be dismissed. While the research does not assents to return to traditionalism, it propagates for the contextual domestication of democracy in tandem with prevailing norms and existential political and societal realities across the African continent.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Concentration of interest in the study of young democracies shifted from the ability of countries to achieve transitions to democracy to their ability to sustain and consolidate it. The demise of the cold war and waves of democratic transitions that swept the developing world, cemented democracy's place as the popular denominator for political language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. These new democracies vary contextually from each other as well as those obtainable in Western capitalist societies. For a better part of the developing world, periodic elections serve democratic prerequisites. If accepted that there is more to democracy than holding periodic elections, queries arise as to the degree to which governments are liable and responsive to public opinion, political inclusion, participation and representation for civil society, and the propensity to which power is balanced to deter arbitrary excise of authority. Hence, with a view to attaining threshold in line with global standard practices, the need to interrogate the interaction between state and society in democracies cannot be down played.

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The centrifugal and enforcing roles of institutions of governance, in conditioning and constraining social cohesion remains central to understanding the functionalities of developing democracies. Decades after independence, Africa is underpinned by myriad experimental institutional models, depicting the depth of institutional crisis in the region. Hence, the twin incidence of colonialism and emergence of post-colonial states arguably birthed the institutional crisis in Africa. Trapped in a perturbed middle ground between full-fledged democracy and utter dictatorship or personalistic regimes, the querying of auspicious and hostile prerequisite for democratization in Africa warrants a re-evaluation. As concurred by Abebe (2010) contrary to existing social political realities, post-decolonization elites inherited a liberal constitution making process aimed at building modern nation states. In assent Mazrui (2002, p. 9) proclaims the inherent system of transplanting Western political ideals was made by a way of disregarding well-embedded informal traditional values, and unlike the experience of other development models such as Japanese and the Turks. Consequently, Ethan and Nathan (2008), argue historically, data sets on democratization episodes have tended to lump together democracies founded before 1960 with those constituted after that date.

Their analysis in part point to the failure to acknowledge prevailing pre-existing norms in state building process and points to generalization as the bane of the misconceptions that characterizes the study of democracy in Africa. In concurrence this study posits, the established patterns as abound in mainstream literature are liable for generalizing democracies in Africa. In the course of which they fall short of acknowledging contextual variations across democracies in Africa. Building on Almond and Verba's *Civic Culture*, this research interrogates the probability of enduring democratic polities in Africa from an institutionalist perspective. Claiming institutions as the basis upon which political communities thrive, dictates the manner in which state and society interacts. As it does the prevailing and socially adhered norms, values and behavior in other words culture. In doing so the study employs the content analytical method of social scientific inquiry.

## II. CONCEPTUAL PROLOGUE

In line with the foregoing debate, this section is committed to elucidating pertinent concepts that are germane to understanding the subject matter in focus. They include democracy, democratization, institution and culture.

In the field of social science, the concept of democracy remains one of the most difficult to define, owing to its vast interpretation and application across time and space. However, it remains plausible to identify certain universal principles that are embedded in the idea and practice of democracy. Elaigwu (2015, p. 214) lists some salient physiognomies of democracy to comprise; authority, rule of law, legitimacy, choice and accountability. Dahl (1971) places more emphasis on contestation and participation. Ibagere and Omoera (2010) assert a definite feature of a democratic system is the supremacy of national or common interest, which must all times, supersedes individual or group interest. While Nwonlue and Ojukwu (2012) ascribe the success of any participating democracy upon three major factors; legislative efficiency, economic and economic management and inclusion of all in the affairs of governance, hence proportionate representation of interest. Perhaps a more concise definition is Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in (1864), which democracy extolled the virtues of what he considered as government for the people, by the people and for the people. In lieu, this research deduces the idea of popular mandate, legitimacy, participation, inclusion and representation as the cores of democracy. Hence defines democracy as a form of governance which derives its mandate from the outcome of a free electoral process, and puts the interest of all above any in the course of discharging its statutory functions. While democracy is not alien to Africa, the current socio-political institutions of democracy are Western. Hence, it is of the opinion of this study that democracy must be contextualized to address peculiar or predetermined problems for which it was adopted.

For Ifeanacho and Nwagwu (2009) democratization from a cultural perspective entails the institutionalization of democratic principles as part of everyday culture in the society. Osaghae (1999) sums it up as a procedural establishment, strengthening or extending principles, mechanisms and institutions that define a democratic regime. The proffered understanding of democracy and democratization in this research falls within the Euro-centric conception and interpretation of both concepts respectively. Hence, democracy as obtained in Africa today is the result of a transplanted ideals and values other than of the indigenous population. While lamenting the incompatibility of democracy with the African culture, the study opines the compatibility or otherwise is neither a triumph nor a loss for Africa. As contingently argued by

Adelman (1998) who claims, that while constitutional system in Africa is marred with irregularities, a return traditional system remains elusive.

In a foremost attempt to establish the impact of culture on democracy Almond and Verba (1963) developed a model in which they interviewed a sample of 1,000 respondents in (USA, Mexico, Great Britain, Germany and Italy) and defined a measure for political attitudes, perceptions and trends. They posit political culture remains a prerequisite for the operation of any political system. In another instance, Gorodnichenko and Roland (2013) came up with a model of democratization based on individualist and collectivist culture. They contend societies with individualist culture, despite potentially being less able to address collective-action limitations, are more likely to adopt a democracy faster than those with collectivist culture. While the underlying studies may be criticized for its limitations in the areas of numbers of participants and countries covered, they proffer an insight into the argument on the existence of a plausible correlation between culture and institutions. Macionis (2009) conceives culture as not just a manner in which thoughts are structure but also a way of acting and encumbers the material object that collectively forms a people's way of life. For Avruch (1998, p. 6) culture is a complex whole which encompasses knowledge, arts, beliefs, morals, laws, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.

Having summary attempted to clarify the properties and mediating roles of culture, it will be of utmost important to literary explore the mechanism through which it affects institutions. North (1990) claims institutions are humanly devised constraints that condition human interaction, largely made up of formal constraints (law, rules, constitution) informal constraints (norms of behavior and conventions) and their enforcing properties. If North's theory of formal rules is a result of modern states, upheld by a constitution, whereas informal constraints are norms of prevailing behaviors within a societal heritage, referred to as culture. Then, Macionis et al (2005, p. 106) understanding of culture as designs for living, the values, beliefs, behaviors, practices and material objects that constitutes a peoples way of life. Hence, within this context design entails formally devised constrains, while values, beliefs, behaviors and practices could pass for norms that have prevailed over time passed from one generation to another, which distinguishes one group from another, making institutions as conceived by North to be and embodiment and reflection of culture.

In another instance, Todd (1990) claims the evolution of political systems globally is a function of underlying values ingrained in people from an early age through family systems; parents child relations. Thus communism is likely to prevail in societies dominated by communitarian families and likely to be more tolerant to

authoritarianism, as they are largely accustomed to absolute authority yielded by the head of the family. Whereas a nuclear family in France, in a liberal non-egalitarian society is likely to foster intolerance for authoritarianism and promote individualism. As captured by the Economist (March 21, 2002) Sheik Zayed of Abu Dhabi largely credited with the vision that realized the United Arab Emirates and Sultan Qaboos of Oman refer to themselves as the father of their nation. In comparison to Africa, post-colonial and contemporary state elites more than often see the state as theirs and they as it fathers, in such societies liberal societies are relatively unsuccessful.

As stated the underlying roles of institutions in structuring social cohesion and enforcing norms, values and shared rules remains central to the function of any political arrangement. Accordingly, North (1990) claims institutions are humanly devised constraints that condition human interaction, largely made up of formal constraints (law, rules, constitution) informal constraints (norms of behavior and conventions) and their enforcing properties. Helme and Levitsky (2004) define institutions as rules and process that condition social interaction by shaping and constraining actor's behaviors, with a distinction generally between formal and informal. It will suffice to argue that institutions are socially adhered and accepted norms, values and behaviors that conditions societal outcomes.

Africa's institutional crises can be minimally tied to the alien nature of democratic institutions inherited from the colonial administration. Without recourse to pre-existing socio-political realities, liberal democratic institutions were constituted legally to serve as a guideline for shaping and conditioning societal behavior. Consequently, in a handful of states in the continent, basic state institutions are relatively weak and in extreme cases dysfunctional, thus affecting their capacity to structure and regulate economic, political and social activities. This is thought be so because; they do not reflect the embodiment of shared values and norms. While a regression to traditional or informal African institutions remain a near impossible task, there lies the need to explore the possibilities of domesticating democracy in tandem with prevailing norms in the society.

### III. CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF INSTITUTIONS

Culture and institutions as endogenous variables are determined possibly by technology, geography, development, wars amongst other significant historical events. What then is the causal mechanism between the underlying variables? This research will attempt to establish a correlation between culture and institution based on the individualist and collectivist propositions respectively. Minimally defined,

individualism highlights personal freedom and achievement. Individualist culture therefore accords social status to personal accomplishments such as important discoveries, innovations, great artistic or humanitarian achievements and all actions that make an individual stand out. Collectivism, in disparity underscores entrenchment of individuals in a larger group. It emboldens conformism and discourages individuals from recalcitrant and standing out. Platteau (2000) for example illustrates collective culture in the context of African development. Specifically, he documents that productive individuals are seen with suspicion and are coaxed into sharing their surplus with the community.

Because individualist culture accords social status rewards to people who stand out, it may give a special, culturally motivated, incentive for innovation that is separate from the standard monetary incentive. On the other hand, individualism can make collective action more difficult because individuals pursue their own interest without recourse to collective interests. Collectivism, in contrast, makes collective action easier because individuals internalize group interests to a greater degree. However, it also encourages conformity and discourages individuals from standing out. This framework implies that individualism should encourage innovation more, but collectivism should have an advantage in coordinating production processes and in various forms of collective action.

Hence the study opines, liberal democratic value is embedded in the very idea of individualism, which is not in tandem with collectivism as obtained in pre-colonial African societies. The large family sizes in the region, kinship ties and ethnic affiliations amongst other contextual realities make individualism a near impossible feat to attain. Consequently, the emergence of the post-colonial state was accompanied by a clash of indigenous and alien civilization. This is thought to be so because of the inability to reconcile the uneasy relationship between pre-existing societal values of collectivism and the idea of individual preference and liberty as embedded in liberal democratic values. Huntington (1993, p. 23-24) sees civilization as an embodiment of cultural entity, which is defined both by common objective elements as language, history, religion, custom, institutions and subjective self-identification of a people. By adopting Huntington's thesis, this study opines societies from divergent civilizations are likely to have dissimilar views, beliefs, norms and values as to how a society should be structured and governed. And that the adoption of liberal institution of democracy, from an alien civilization, with no recorded attempt at domesticating such, arguably remains the basis upon which institutional crises in Africa thrives. As put forward by Said (1993, p. 2) who claims, even as we must comprehend the pastness of the past, there is no way in which the past

can be quarantined from the future. Huntington (1993) further claims cultural characteristics and differences are less mutable, thus less easily compromised and resolved than political and economic ones. Certainly they abound a lot of phenomena in which the collectivist and individualist claims can be inferred on. This study however opines the implication of individualism-collectivism cleavage is a fundamental one with many facets. Hence, the prospect of detaching cultural effects from institutional outcomes remains a cumbersome endeavor.

#### IV. DOMESTICATING DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

Albeit its shortcomings, democracy holds more potential for fostering and promoting human development than any other system of government. Fukuyama's (1992) contention that liberal democracy is the final stage of human development in terms of governance means Africa has no choice but to join the bandwagon of liberalist states. While liberal democracy has brought about significant increase in the quality and standard of living in Western society the same cannot be said for the African continent. When examined critically, one can argue the inability to practice democracy as theoretically conceived as the bane for the dysfunctionality of democracy in Africa. From an alternative perspective one can employ Huntington's theory of civilization or see attempts to universalize democracy as the new scramble for Africa. While the abundance literature of democracy has proffered numerous accounts as to why it has failed to attain predetermined outcomes in the development world. This study claim, the attempt to practice democracy as it is obtained in the West plays a major role in the unresponsive nature of democracy in the African continent.

Furthermore, while scholars whom are referred to as pluralist, argue for legal pluralism in the practice of democracy, the traditionalist as widely referred to frown at democracy in its entirety. For them democracy as practiced in Africa cannot be sustained neither can it address the myriad of socio-economic and political challenges that plagues the continent. Against this Wamba dia Wamba (1990) in his distinction between democracy in Africa and democracy for Africa, asserts that since the inception of democratization in Africa, Africans have nurtured the culture of consuming what the West have articulated for them on democracy. In another instance Wamba dia Wamba (1990, p. 129) extolls;

Contrary to assumed democratization should be considered as a process of a struggle to win, defend, and protect rights of people and individuals against one-sidedness, including the right to self-organization for autonomy and not necessarily right of participation in the state process.

As a way out of the plethora of crisis that has remained despite the presence of democracy, there remains the need for Africans to devise contextual solution to address indigenous crisis. Thus, Moshi and Osman (2008) claim liberal democracy failed in many parts of Africa mainly because the Western political parties aggregate primarily along class interests, whereas in Africa an established class system is relatively absent. Similarly, Eboh (1990, p.176) opines Western style of democracy is not an authentic expression of contemporary African political culture. Consequently Eboh (1993, p. 98) declares the solution to the problem of governance in Africa lies in tackling the African socio-economic and political realities, thus according democracy an African flair.

Different explanations have been proffered as to why democracy has largely failed to bring about development to Africa. As for Offor (2006, p. 121) he attributes this to the refusal to accept that democracy varies, and for this reason it need to be practiced in strict adherence to the Western models. In summing up the debate, Kwasi (1996) opines Africa's political salvation cannot emanate from the current model of majoritarian democracy. His argument revolves around the fact that Africa is a heterogeneous society, and that attempts at practicing majoritarian democracy may amount to under or ill-representation of certain ethnic minorities.

While the underlying arguments independently or collectively capture the political realities in post independent Africa, they largely fall short of proffering equal measures, rather they lay too much emphasis on the incompatibility of the African collectivist culture and liberal democratic values of individualism. Hence, it is of the opinion that for democracy to bring about predetermined outcomes, democracy in Africa should not encompass a return to default political arrangements nor a transplantation of western democracy. Rather state should tailor their regimes to suit prevailing norms, serving as the springboards on which societies should be structured. This is thought to be so because democratic as well as anti-democratic values may be embedded in pre-existing political arrangements.

Hence, attempts at domesticating democracy in Africa must as a matter of urgency revise the idea of development as obtained in liberal democracies. As opposed to modernization, industrialization and even Gross Domestic Product, the study proposes collective well-being, signaling a return to collectivism as obtained in pre-colonial societies. In consonance Gyekye (1997) argued to sustain democracy in Africa, the practice of democracy should be contingent on a commitment to indigenous ideas and institutions, rather than alien democratic principles.

Consequently, the research opines the prospect for domestication of democracy remains arguably blur.

This can in part be attributed to the incidence advent of globalization, economic interdependence and the idea of collective global security. Nonetheless, void of regime type, a better part of the African continent has remained unsuccessful in establishing functional liberal institutions of governance. The study has identified political culture as central to the dysfunctional democracies in Africa. While there abound a host of causal factors, culture remains particularly pertinent to the crisis rocking governance in the region. In lieu, Tar (2010) claims in terms of political culture, most African states which are products of colonialism maintain strong ties with their former colonial masters resulting in constant interference in domestic policies. The so-called “colonial hangover” is deeply embedded. France, for instance, has always maintained strong ties with its former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa, aimed at sustaining its neo-colonial grip in these countries. This hangover as claimed above discourages indigenous models of democracy as it has multifaceted negative implications on sovereignty and autonomy in the region.

Another major challenge of governance in Africa is ethnicity. The paradox of dual identity has plagued the continent and has fostered socio-political instabilities, civil wars, religious and inter-tribal conflicts. Preceding independence the once nationalist African states often regress to ethno-nationalism, this hampers the prospects of establishing indigenous democratic models as well as deters the consolidation of liberal democratic ideals as obtained in Africa.

## V. CONCLUSION

The study argues, that to address the institutional crisis that abounds in the African continent, there lies the need for the consideration of legal pluralism in the practice of democracy. As it also proposes the need to explore the possibilities to domesticate democracy in accordance with prevailing social norms. While it does not assent to a return to traditionalism, it claims liberal democracy is less likely to address African challenges, owing that it embodies the values other than those accustomed to. While, the above recommendations may seem near impossible with recourse to the advent of globalization and spread of liberal democracy, it remains a viable option to addressing the institutional malice that rocks the African continent. Conclusively, the constitutional basis of domestication should take into cognizance the primacy of the people as well as the central role of institutions of democracy, emphasizing the need for power sharing and effective checks and balance mechanism.

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