Liberal Democracy And Democratic Sustenance In Africa

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The idea and practice of democracy has often been linked with western world. Yet the basic question is; can the practice of western liberal democracy engender and sustain democratic practice in Nigeria cum Africa? Looking for answers to this questions, the paper traces the history of democracy and the contentions associated with such task; appraise democratic theory and its models; examines democracy and African political though as well as the issue of ethnicity in relation democratic survival. Examination of critical factors of ethnicity and culture as determinants, either positively or negatively, of democratic system and rule in Africa as well as its compatibility with liberal democracy using Nigeria as case study was undertaken. Conclusion and recommendations rounded up the paper.

Key words: Authoritarianism, Colonialism, Democracy, Governance and Liberal.

INTRODUCTION

The idea and practice of democracy has often been linked with western world. Even though democracy is said to have originated from the Greek city- state of Athens (See Dunn, 1996), other forms of this system of rule was said to have existed in other parts of the world including Africa (Ake, 1991). But be that as it may, the ascendancy of liberal democratic order as promoted by the United States and Europe has further created confusions about the meaning and actual mission of democracy in Africa (Ake, 2000). In fact, the failure of democratic system in Africa has been narrowed down to the incompatibility between liberal democratic order and African traditional political values (See Afolabi, 2006; Omoruyi, 1992: 4). Thus, it is not out of place to see people talk about democracy in general when actually discussing liberal democracy with its emphasis on economic determinism and ritual periodic election. This confusion, even though common with people, is also noticeable among scholars and policy makers. It is interesting to note that this confusion is associated with definitional problems and the practice of democracy as a concept as well as a system of rule.

   Therefore, in line with the two basic aims of political philosophy viz. a) clarification of concepts and b) evaluation of facts, this paper will seek to shed light on the history of democracy in political theory and the contention among scholars on who constitute the people and what should be the level of their involvement in governance. The study will also examine the nexus between democratic theory and African Political Thought to see if there is any correlation; after which ethnicity and culture will be analyzed within the democratic context in Nigeria as well as the suitability of liberal democracy in an emerging democracy like Nigeria. The conclusion will then be a summary of the main ideas discussed in the paper and the way forward.

DEMOCRACY: CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

The idea of democracy emerged when men began to seek for an enduring and stable polity. Who should rule and in whose interest has been a recurrent problem. This problem becomes pronounced given the ideological and cultural differences among states and nations. The problem also has made democracy either as a concept or a system of rule, highly ambiguous in modern times (see Held, 1996:1-3; Macpherson, 1966:3; Ake, 2000). The ambiguity arose in response to the claim of most regimes to be democratic in nature so as to generate political legitimacy for them. Thus, democracy is defined by each regime to justify its rule. This invariably brings about contradictory claims (See Betham and Boyle 1995; Dahl 1971). Yet at the beginning democracy was a much vilified idea and practice. It was regarded as one of the worst forms of government (see Plato 1974:304-10; Dunn, 1992: 243).

However, in the original Greek sense, democracy is associated with ideas as well as with a form of rule. Even though the meaning of democracy has changed over time, the classic Greek conception of it viewed it as rule by the people (Held, 1996: 23). The Greeks left no one in doubt about who the people are. For example , Aristotle argued that

democracy "exists where the sovereign authority is composed of the poorer classes and not the owners of property" (Aristotle 1981:115). It is noteworthy that the word democracy derived from the combination of the Greek noun demos, meaning 'people or common people' and the verb kratein, that is, to rule. Thus, even though democracy in Ancient Greece was associated with all citizens, it was nevertheless understood to be a form of class rule. That is, government by and for the benefit of the lower or working class. It was meant to cater for all adult citizens especially those without property.

Democracy in Athens was not just an ideal but was a workable idea that was vigorously practiced in form of government, where people rule themselves directly, underpinning the values of freedom, equality and tolerance. For Athenians, life is without meaning when divorced from the business of the polis. Filling offices by lot, rotation of offices and the adoption of very short period in office, to give chance to as many as would want to take a turn; shows the importance of equality, liberty and active participation.

But it was not a success story all the way for democracy. Two centuries after it was developed and practiced in Greece, democracy was eliminated, not just from the history of Greece itself, but from other civilized society for more than two thousand years that followed. It was an elimination from which democracy as practiced by the Athenians did not fully recover. What followed its resurgence in recent times in almost all human society is a corrupted version of the original idea and practice (Ake, 2000; Weale, 1999). The contradictions between the Athenian democracy and other variants that are of recent origin have led to such things as: Liberal democracy, Social democracy, African democracy and other variants.   Even though opinions differ on the meaning and features of democracy, what should be the form and how to practice democracy to conform to the ideas of people practicing it, is also a big problem.

 Conceived as rule by the people, virtually all philosophers and the writers have assumed that democratic rule is rule by civilians, not soldiers. Not only did the Greeks from which the West inherited democratic ideas and practice, vest the authority to rule in non-military men, they also assume that it is the civilians that possess the vision, the faculty, the values and altruism to fashion a people-oriented political order. The Greeks and by extension the West assume this much because of their historical experience. But this is not surprising since all social and political ideas spring forth from the historical circumstances of a particular epoch (Mannheim, 1936; Marx, 1978). To adopt a variant or model of democracy being practiced elsewhere will not work except it conforms to the realities of the host country. The success of any set of ideas is predicated on its suitability to the country concerned. To state that the success recorded in the practice of liberal democracy today is founded on the ideas formulated and explicated in various writings of Euro-American writers is stating the obvious. From Adam Smith, John Locke, J.S. Mill to Max Weber, Schumpeter, Truman, Dahl and others, these writers have developed one idea or the other in relation to the concept of liberal democracy and to its continuing sustenance (See Held, 1996).

As earlier said, the socio-cultural and political milieu of a people would determine the ideas and perception of any writer especially in relation to democratic ideas. The historical and social conditions existing during the time of Plato, Aristotle and other writers certainly contributed to their understanding of the relationship between the military, the State and the civil society. The Aristotelian conception of the society had always recognized the divisions in the society and had placed people who are civilians on the top of the ladder, that is, the position of ruler-ship. The truth for Aristotle is that the society serves as the ground from which leaders are recruited. Plato and Aristotle also recognized the need for the military in the defense and maintenance of the society hence they are accorded role that makes them defenders of the state. Questions about democratic values in any epoch, have always engaged the attention of scholars and philosophers about the best condition under which men should govern themselves. These values however transcend the issue of governance and therefore embrace social relations among men. Answers to these questions have thrown up divergent views on the 'best' way of organizing men in their relationship with one another and the society. Central to such views are democratic values of equality, liberty, tolerance, justice, law and order among others. These values are what are regarded as having the potential to guarantee the best form of government and social relations among men (see Dunn, 1992).

Democracy means different things to different people. Globalization of democracy today has made the concept a highly disputed word. But as noted earlier, democracy originated from the Greek state of Athens. For the Greeks, sovereignty rests with the people who rule themselves in turns. For them, democracy as a political concept was very precise which means the rule of the people (Ake, 2000: 7).

Plato, who was not well disposed to democracy, define it "as a form of society which treat all men as equal, whether they are equal or not and ensures that every man is free to do as he likes" (Plato, 1974: 375-6). With the decline of Athens, direct democracy also declined. Contributing to this decline was the emergence of industrial society and the attendant socio-political crisis precipitated by industrialization where the idea of direct democracy could not work (Powell, 1982: 1-2).

Writing on the issue of democracy, Max Weber sought to show that the concept of democracy must be linked to the economy and re-defined to embrace representative parliamentary government and political parties.   He believed that the extension of franchise would lead to the emergence of new career political actors and invariably political parties.

These developments would also encourage the emergence of bureaucracy as a form of social organization that given its features; would be good for liberal democracy but bad for classical democracy (Weber, 1971; Ake, 2000: 17). The

end result of Weber's analysis is to show the limitation of democratic participation in an industrial society. This for Dunn shows that democracy cannot exist in a modern state (Dunn, 1979:26-27). For others, however, the refinements and changes associated with democracy over time as noted above and which have been imported to Africa cannot guarantee stable democratic order and economic development (Ake, 2000).

DEMOCRATIC THEORY: CITIZENS VERSUS ELITES

As previously noted, democracy exist as a concept as well as a form of rule. Abraham Lincoln sees it as "government of the people for the people and by the people". The two key words are people and rule. However, the argument has always been who constitutes the people and to what level they should be involved in governance (Shapiro, 2005:10; Thompson, 1970:1-2; Schumpeter, 1976). To resolve these arguments, various positions have emerged on democratic theory. Central to this argument in the Western literature are the citizens' (progressive) and elitist (modern) democratic models (Macpherson, 1966; 1977; Schumpeter, 1976 respectively).

The citizens' democratic theory has its bedrock in the belief that the average citizen is normal, rational, reasonable and politically conscious of rights and obligation within the society. Thus democracy is not synonymous with periodic election of leaders or elites. The essence of the citizenship, according to Thompson, is the ability to possess "the present and future capacity for influencing policies" (Thompson, 1970:2). It implies active involvement in political life. For Warren (1982) in what he described as expansive democracy, the citizens' theory stands for:

Increased participation in and control over collective decision making whether by means of direct democracy in small settings or through stronger linkages between citizens and institution that operate on broadest scales. They are often concerned with into economic and social sphere, that is, into areas of expanding democracy beyond traditional political spheres power that are privatized in standard liberal democracies.

The above definition, as can be seen, combined the political, social and economic spheres of the society in what has been labeled a maximalist approach to democracy (see Ake, 2000). Embedded in the citizens' theory is the need for active participation by citizens, redistribution of economic order, human rights, justice and other democratic values (Thompson, 1970:2). Broken down further, the citizens' theory wants more opportunity for citizens participation in the election of leaders and in the decision making process. In this wise, there should not be barriers to bar them from reacting to issues and ventilating their opinions. The removal of these barriers will make the system more open, equitable and responsive to the needs and moods of its citizens which would make the people invariably more involved in the governing process (Pateman, 1970:60).

While the citizens' theory recognizes differences in ability and preferences, it nevertheless advocated for more participation for all citizens, irrespective of social and economic standing. The reason for unequal participation is obvious and could range from poor economic and financial base to socio-cultural limitation especially where these are strong. Thus, the theory takes into account the many hindrances many citizens encounter, which limit their participation to mere periodic voting. This is why Thompson has posited that citizens' theory cannot be equated with majority rule in the strict sense of the word and that the role of leaders cannot be overemphasized. Responsibility is placed on leaders to appreciate and appropriate the needs and beliefs of their citizens; be alive to their needs and do all they can to make active those who are inactive (see Thompson, 1970). The theory also recognizes that citizens could be apathetic and inactive but sees such as something that can be overcome through education and encouragement so as to make them politically sound as democratic citizens (see Plato, 1974). Thus for them, the shortcomings are not to be circumvented or made worse as elite theorists would unknowingly do by diminishing their political responsibility, or the need for their involvement in politics (Wolfe, 1985:374; Thompson, 1970).

For Warren, individual citizen is better equipped for public life and political activities including democratic one if:

Individuals are autonomous in their preferences, goals and life plans which are not the result of manipulation, brain washing, unthinking obedience or reflexive acceptance of ascribed roles but rannther as a result of their examining and evaluating wants, needs, desires, values, roles and commitments…. This autonomy wil blossom as the citi-zen interact with others in the process of participation (Warren, 1982:22-23).

As can be seen from the foregoing, the antidote for apathetic citizenship and participation is increased participation which is encouraged and sustained by leaders whose responsibility is to do such. This is why Pateman (1970:42-43) urged that " participation develops and fosters the very qualities necessary for it; the more individual participates, the better able they become to do so".

In sharp contrast to the citizens' model is the elitist democratic theory. The theory starts from the basic assumption that people and rule are mainly and primarily associated with elites (see Schumpeter, 1976). The theory posits that

policy making process and actual governance could only be located within the elites, ruling or not ruling. For its proponents, the claim of classical models of democracy that people are rational and politically conscious who participate in the political process to get what they want is not only false but misleading in the analysis of the individual in any democratic set up (see Dahl, 1963; Portis 1987).   In essence, what the elitist democratic theory posits is that even though the mass of the people constitute a base and cannot therefore be regarded as useless, the participation of these people is severely limited by so many factors among which are irrational prejudice, ignorance, lack of sound judgement, irresponsibility and manipulation (Schumpeter, 1976:262). For the elitist democratic theorists therefore, apathy which fosters limited participation is a positive function for the political system, which make it stable, since there will be little conflict in the political arena that could endanger the polity (see Almond and Verba 1963; Lipset, 1963:32).

Thus democracy, for the elitists, is founded on limited participation of the demos. Why this is so, is borne out of the fear that such increased participation might produce great mobilization of the people with grave consequences, the end of which no one can fathom (Held, 1996:178; Ake, 2000:5-7). For Schumpeter, a leading exponent of this view, sought to show how actual democracies work and to free men from what he called excessive speculation and arbitrary preferences. For him, democracy is a method, that is, "an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions by giving to some individuals the power to decide on all matters as result of their successfully obtaining peoples' vote" (Schumpeter, 1976:269).

Democracy for him should not be confused with the hope of equality and the vehicle for rich participation by citizens, but rather that the lot of the people is to periodically elect and authorize those given the mandate to act on their behalf. On the face value, this postulation accord to some basic rights and democratic values of liberty and equality:-

1)   The right to participate in choosing and replacing governments,
2)   Freedom of choice among several options on who to represent them.

But viewed in its totality, the elitist concept of democracy has actually limited peoples' participation and representation in governance and decision making process. Yet it is an acceptable fact that people should be allowed to make decisions on matters that affect them, whether palatable or not (Macpherson, 1978:80). To justify his empirical postulation, Schumpeter contended that:

In modern democracies… politics will be a career. This in turn spells the recognition of a distinct professional interest in the individual politician and of a distinct group interest in the political profession as such… it is essential that we insert this factor into our theory… Politically speaking, the man is still in a nursery who has not absorbed, so as to never forget, the saying attributed to one of the most successful politicians that ever lived: what businessmen do not understand is that exactly as they are dealing in oil, so I am dealing in votes (Schumpeter, 1976:285).

For him, people should not exercise undue influence and pressure on their leaders since traditionally, their participation should be to vote during elections so as to have a sense of belonging and not negate the principle of leadership (Schumpeter, 1976:290-5). The summary of Schumpeter's argument is that the average citizen should not go beyond periodic election of leaders since they do not understand the processes of policy making. Any attempt to go beyond these might create problems and dislocations in the polity.

Following the same elitist tradition but from a pluralist perspective, Dahl sees democracy essentially as a rule by multiple minorities (Dahl 1963:133). For him, the fears expressed by many liberal thinkers on the issue of liberty and democracy resulting in majority rule, was both unfounded and misplaced. Dahl believed that it is only at a minimum or low level that democratic theory as concerned with processes can ordinary citizens exert a relatively high degree of control over leaders. And this is because there is a regular election and political competition among groups and individuals (Dahl, 1971:2). Thus, at that level, responsiveness of governments to its citizens' needs and preferences is the most significant characteristic of democracy. Hence democracy for him cannot be said to be in operation if there is no trace of participation, competition and contestation (see Dahl, 1971:1-4). It is therefore, the competition and contestation that compels responsiveness from the leaders which is built into the electoral process, since people can vote for any other person if one of them is not okay.

But the attempt by Dahl to reduce democracy to responsiveness, which tended to suggest control of leaders by the mass of the people, is actually a way to do away with the idea and practice of democracy and replace it with polyarchy. Criticizing this attempt and the elitist school generally, Richard Joseph maintained that:

It is odd that democracy should be limited to a system 'completely or almost completely responsive' when the criterion of responsiveness is viewed by the notable students of democracy as vague and ambiguous (Joseph, 1991: 6).

Criticizing the elitist school further, Lively maintained that:

Organization skills, time, money, easy access to agents of government, parties or the media…these are all necessary to

the construction of an effective political action and all these attributes are relatively inaccessible to many (Lively, 1975:55).

Additionally:

… wealth and income plainly influence the extent to which individuals can participate in the activities of the ruling community….. a poor man has none of these advantages (Bottomore, 1963:123).

What the above analyses of the elitist model have shown is the socio-economic angle to the issue of democracy. While the citizens' theory would want more political participation, human rights, justice, egalitarian society, the elitist model believes in a multi-party system and periodic election. With regard to the formal aspects of participation like election,citizens' theory places emphasis on direct involvement and participation of people than the elitist theory. However, it is better to state at this juncture, that given the democratic aspirations of Nigerians, pre and post military rule; it is obvious that the citizens' model approximate peoples' desire for a democratic system (see Ake, 2000; Lewis, 1965). But given the colonial legacy and the stranglehold on power by the elites, the elitist model would approximate what is in operation in Nigeria. In short, both approaches have their weak and strong points which could be used to foster democratic participation, rule and sustenance in Nigeria. It should be noted however, that both models derived from and founded on liberal democratic ideology and its perception of what in theory democracy should be about. In reality, the practice of democracy has been redefined and reformed by centuries of refinement by western scholars to bequeath to the world representative democracy that has promoted and solidify the rule of the few (elites) over and above the generality of the people which democracy is supposed to be all about. That, we dare say has led to the problems and crisis of democracy in recent times. To argue that some form of democracy was not practiced in Africa, is to miss the historical facts and democratic antecedents of the African demos. Thus, the next section examines the issue in greater detail.

DEMOCRATIC THEORY AND AFRICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

African political thought on democracy began initially as the record of registration of pretest and dissatisfaction by Africans with the advent of colonial rule. The protest was essentially against the colonial policy of discrimination and denial of the people of their right to liberty and equality. The focal point of peoples' agitation was defined in terms of equality of man and the freedom to organize them politically. Thus, the attempt by western scholars particularly anthropologists, to label African societies as stateless and with no governments was resisted by educated Africans writers (See Ogude, 1983). The flagrant disregard for the democratic rights of African people through intellectual assault and physical force did not prevent educated Africans from contesting the claims of the European colonizers. For John M. Sarbah and Casely Harford, the inalienable right of African people to choose their leaders was a custom that had always been practiced African people. To back up this claim, Hayford asserted that the "authority of the rulers was derived from the sovereign will of the people" (Hayford, 1970).

Likewise for Sarbah, the laws and customs of the African people is uncharacteristically unambiguous and clear. For him the law states that:

He who serves and is bound to obey must have a voice in the election of the person who is to command (Sarbah, !968:22)

Thus, the right to be heard was guaranteed under the native law. The law also prescribed the powers and limitations not only of the kings or chiefs, but also of the ruled, the masses and the generality of the people. Continuing further, Sarbah posited that:

In public deliberations of any matter affecting the country; each family, through its headmen and elders had a right to be present and be heard through well defined channels (Sarbah,1968:87).

Sarbah and Hayford postulations actually put paid to lies by the colonial powers who argued that African kings and chiefs had the power of life and death over the people. Examined critically, the argument of Sarbah and Hayford showed that the African traditional political structure was essentially a constitutional monarchy moderated by native laws. For them, the political systems of African states were undeniably democratic. The reality of the African situation in regard to democracy and democratic values is that in Africa communal and political life, families were the basis of decision making, followed by the compound, the village and the tribe. In most cases, no decision was taken without the involvement of the individual and the family. The power to choose their leaders was clearly vested in the people. However, in modern African state, the issue of ethnicity and disharmony among the elites had combined to weaken

democratic values and rule in the continent. There is no gainsaying the fact that African elites, no matter their rhetoric and ideological posturing are undeniably anti-democracy. Their actions and utterances show the type of people they are. For example, whenever the military takes over the reins of government, the elites will be the first to serve in such regime. The easy access the elites have to power and governance has always invariably limit the democratic space available to the mass of the people. But this could change if power is democratized such that people have the right to choose and elect people they trust. Any continued insistence on the old system of elites' takes all and election rigging, would definitely violate individual freedom to think and act differently from others as well create instability in the system. Hence, to consolidate democratic rule, African people must have the "right to evolve institutions which fit them best in their own historical and social context and not have models that satisfy certain persons and groups imposed on them (see Busia, 1967). Thus, it will be foolhardy for anyone to define sit-tight syndrome, military rule and civilian authoritarianism as African democracy.

No matter the argument for and against colonialism, one party or multi-party systems, African authors writing on democracy agreed that democracy has been thriving in Africa before the advent of colonialism. For these authors, the meaning of democracy was equated with equality; self rule and self determination that are critical values in democracy and democratic rule (see Lewis, 1965, Ake, 2000). And this was in operation before the advent of colonial rule that disrupted the 'normal' progression of African people towards self-actualization and secured identity. Therefore, no matter the arguments to the contrary, the havoc of colonial rule of colonial rule in Africa cannot be overemphasized.

ETHNICITY, CULTURE AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

Ethnicity as a concept has attracted diverse comments from various scholars. The way one sees ethnicity will depend on how one conceptualizes and understands its meaning and nature. Principally, there exist two schools of thought on the nature and definition of ethnicity namely: primodialists and instrumentalists. For primordialists, ethnicity exist when, "members of the same ethnic group have a common primordial bond that determines their personal identity and turns the group into a natural community of a type that is older than the modern nation or modern class system" (see Ake, 2000:17). On the other side of the argument, instrumentalists view ethnicity as a means for individuals, notably leaders, to achieve their own ends through forming, mobilizing and manipulating groups of people for political ends. Thus for them, ethnicity is a process or a tool for achieving particular goals of political leaders who use and dump them at will.

However, primordialists and instrumentalists schools have attracted criticisms for their views. This is because what they are responding to in their analysis of ethnicity is the question of what is/are ethnic groups and if they indeed exist. Either individually or collectively, the two schools have flaws that limit their usefulness as a tool of analysis. The primordialists definition and description of ethnicity is not totally correct as it sees the ethnic group as being in existence for as long as anyone can remember. But taking their existence as a fait accompli , does not and cannot answer the question of their existence. For the instrumentalists, dwelling on an aspect of a concept that is not important is a misplacement of priorities. That ethnicity is often manipulated and used is not in doubt but to now use that aspect as the basis for definition and nature of ethnicity is like missing the whole point or getting the whole issue confused (Ake, 2000:17).

To provide a more useful tool of analyses, some scholars have developed other approaches to the issue of ethnicity. In this category are the objectivists and the constructionists. For the objectivists, they insisted that ethnic groups are real and cannot be wished away. Even though they (objectivists) agreed that there are some common traits that bind the people together, there is however no agreement among them on what those traits are. For Horowitz, the defining characteristics of ethnicity are "shared blood, birth and same belief in common ancestry and history with ties to a particular territorial area (Horowitz, 1985: 39-40). Nnoli sees language and culture as the important characteristics of ethnic groups (Nnoli, 1978:5). Clifford Geertz believes in the congruities of blood, speech, customs (Geertz, 1963:109 in Ake, 2000). As earlier said, the lack of unanimity among objectivists has made it attract criticism as a tool in the analysis of ethnicity.

For the constructionists however, their main aim is to deny the very existence of ethnicity. For them, the porosity and the indefinable nature of the boundaries of ethnic groups have made them to be of no relevance and importance. Thus, ethnicity is more of imagination and invention (Barth, 1969).

The question of ethnicity cannot be settled by any of the discussed theories. At best what the theories have done is to look at an aspect of a social phenomena that has continue to ignite debate on the reality or otherwise of this concept to the problems and practice of democracy in Africa cum Nigeria. Not far from this problem is the issue of ethnicity and violence and the type of relationship that exist between them, if any. To assume that ethnic relations always ultimately result in conflict is to be emotional and prejudiced. To be sure, conflicts do occur and this could have grave implication for the practice of democracy. But not all violence has ethnic origin. The ones that have been witnessed were principally due to the cut-throat contestation that arises from competition for political power among ethnic groups (Osaghae, 1992:54).

Nigeria not being an exception to the proliferation of these ethnic groups, have had these groups threatening the

survival of democracy as has been the case in the Niger Delta region of the South-South of Nigeria and Northern Nigeria where constant ethnic conflict has become the rule rather than the exception. Ethnicity in Nigeria like in many other developing countries must be understood to be complex, indefinable; it can be constructed, dissolved and reconstructed. Thus, ethnicity need not be a problem democratic system in Nigeria.

Culture on the other hand, has been defined as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, art belief, law, morals, customs and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society" (Malinowsk quoted in Ayisi, 1986:1). Following similar definitional pattern, Lucy Mair defined culture as the common possession of a body of people who share the same traditions in social terms (Mair, 1965: 7-8). These definitions of culture had been critiqued on the ground of being static, simplistic and reductionist. Static and simplistic because the definitions ignored the dynamism associated with peoples' life. Thus as Ngugi notes:

No living culture is ever static. Collective human beings struggle to master their physical environment and in the process create a social one. A change in the physical environment…affect their institutions and hence their mode of life and thought. Their new mode of life and thought may in turn affect their institutions and general environment. It is a dialectical process. (Ngugi,1982:4-5).

Thus, culture will change once there are changes in the environment, which in turn will affect the known way of life of the people. In other words, how culture is and will be defined is subject to the material conditions under which people exist at any particular period.

Before the advent of colonial powers, the various ethnic nationalities in Africa had a well defined culture that was easy to recognize. But the coming of the colonial powers to Nigeria and the rest of the Third World Countries has brought about a new culture which had as its source, the economic freedom of laizzer faire and its political counterpart in form of liberal democracy with its emphases on periodic elections. The import of such admixture of cultures was to create a disorientation of some sort in African people that make them confused. This is because the new culture gave undue advantage to some people (elites) over others as a result of their possessing western education and the easy access they have to our common wealth.

Thus, for democracy to work therefore in a country like Nigeria whose mixed culture is partly complementary and partly antagonistic – which do sometimes lead to social conflict – the best way out is to engender new political culture that would help achieve cohesion and guarantee stable democratic polity. It should be noted that the combined issue of ethnicity and culture as important variables in the establishment of democratic rule and sustenance is a question for which answers must be provided. This becomes imperative given the militarized nature of the Nigerian society and the culture of violence that pervades the state and society and which have often used an excuse by the military to take over the reins of power.

These issues have shaped, so to speak, the various transition programmes of the military and the need for democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Even the civilian regime that had been in power since 1999 has not faired better in terms of consolidating democracy and letting people reap democratic dividends. In fact, the regime has been accused of being civilian government with a military mentality. In a country where the issue of ethnicity is a constant factor that has threatened and actually subverted democratic rule, the gap needs to be bridged between democracy and ethnicity. This becomes significant when it is noted that the first casualty of ethnicity are democratic values of individualism and choice. Even though the danger posed by ethnicity has been noted, there are doubts as to whether safeguards have been provided to curtail the destabilizing effects of these phenomena on democracy. The success of transition programmes and democracy would only be guaranteed in a multi-ethnic state like Nigeria, like other African states, if new ideas that would change orientations and culture antagonistic to democracy could be evolved. This is more pertinent given the plural nature of the Nigerian society that would need, for security and political reasons, the inclusion of various ethnic nationalities in politics and governance (see Horowitz, 1996, 184-186; Report of Political Bureau, 1987 Vol. 2:518-533; Lewis, 1965).

CONCLUSION

Reflections on democratic theory undertaken in this paper traced the unending debate about democracy and what it means to different people including scholars in different socio-political and economic settings. The way democracy have been viewed and practiced has influenced individual perspective about its nature. At present in the modern world, liberal democracy has been argued to be in ascendancy over other variants of democracy. In this wise, there is a strong nexus/connection between the political and the economic. While the political is mostly in relation to voting in periodic elections, the economic is about economic determinism of market forces particularly that of deregulation and privatization. The argument/implication of this type of democracy for Nigeria and other third world countries is that it makes their economy to be subservient and dependent on the western world economy. Another implication is that it creates mass unemployment, with its attendant social unrest and upheavals that could jeopardize the establishment of a

democratic rule and its sustenance (Onimode, 1983).

To show however, that ideas and actual practice of democracy is not alien to Africa, various ideas of scholars on African political thought on democracy shows that Africa and Africans are indeed democratic. However the actual practice of democracy in modern African states revolved around the issue of civilian authoritarianism, single and multi-party system, mass participation in governance and military in politics.

Among the various elements identified that could affect democracy and democratic rule either positively or negatively are ethnicity and culture. While ethnicity may not necessarily lead to conflict and violence and hence jeopardize the chances of democratic rule; the preponderance of these conflicts have contributed in no small measure to truncating democratic rule and aspirations in Nigeria and in most African countries. It is the shifting and unpredictable nature of ethnicity/ethnic groups that has been a major source of concern to students of African politics and democratic governance.

Culture on the other hand has been identified as a critical element in democratic sustenance. If the people possess a culture that is democratic friendly, then the survival of democracy is guaranteed. And that appears to be the case in Africa. But the intervention of world powers through colonialism and ongoing structure of the international system including globalization has not helped matters. However, a re-orientation in this respect by all stakeholders in the democratic project in Africa cannot be overemphasized. However, in all, faced with the reality of ascendancy of liberal democratic system and globalization coupled with African traditional values, a middle course needs to be charted for Africa to get out of the woods and enjoy democratic dividends.

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