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Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics

A Plea for a Non-party Polity

Summary

Wiredu discusses the use of the consensus principle for political theory and practice in Africa. The consensus principle used to be widespread in African politics, and Wiredu elaborates on the example of the traditional political system of the Ashantis in Ghana as a possible guideline for a recommendable path for African politics. For empirical data, he draws from historical material published by British anthropologists (Evans-Pritchard & Fortes et al.) and Ghanaian intellectuals (Busia et al.). According to Wiredu, a non-party system based on consensus as a central principle of political organisation in Africa could avoid the evident problems of both the one-party system and the multi-party system imposed by the West.

Content

español
deutsch

[Decision making by consensus](#)
[The political organisation of the Ashantis](#)
[Representation and democracy](#)
[A non-party system](#)
[Western pressure to multi-partyism: a cul-de sac?](#)
[Non-party consensus politics: the way out?](#)

Decision making by consensus

1

It is often remarked that decision making in traditional African life and governance was, as a rule, by consensus. Like all generalisations about complex subjects, it may be legitimate to take this with a pinch of prudence. But there is considerable evidence that decision by consensus was often the order of the day in African deliberations, and on principle. So it was not just an exercise in hyperbole when Kaunda, (democratically) displaced President of Zambia, said *»In our original societies we operated by consensus. An issue was talked out in solemn conclave until such time as agreement could be achieved«* [1], or when Nyerere, retired President of Tanzania, also said, *»in African society the traditional method of conducting affairs is by free discussion«* and quoted Guy Clutton-Brock with approval to the effect that *»The elders sit under the big trees, and talk until they agree«*. [2]

2

Ironically, both pronouncements were made in the course of a defence of the one-party system. Of this I will have more to say below. But for now, let us note an important fact about the role of consensus in African life. It is that the reliance on consensus is not a peculiarly political phenomenon. Where consensus characterizes political decision making in Africa, it is manifestation of an immanent approach to social interaction. Generally, in interpersonal relations among adults, consensus as a basis of joint action was taken as axiomatic. This is not to say it was always attained. Nowhere was African society a realm of unbroken harmony. On the contrary, conflicts (including mortal ones)

among lineages and ethnic groups and within them were not infrequent. The remarkable thing, however, is that if and when a resolution of the issues was negotiated, the point of it was seen in the attainment of reconciliation rather than the mere abstention from further recriminations or collisions. It is important to note that disputes can be settled without the achievement of reconciliation.

3 **R**econciliation is, in fact, a form of consensus. It is a restoration of goodwill through a reappraisal of the significance of the initial bones of contention. It does not necessarily involve a complete identity of moral or cognitive opinions. It suffices that all parties are able to feel that adequate account has been taken of their points of view in any proposed scheme of future action or coexistence. Similarly, consensus does not in general entail total agreement. To begin with, consensus usually presupposes an original position of diversity. Because issues do not always polarize opinion on lines of strict contradictoriness, dialogue can function, by means, for example, of the smoothing of edges, to produce compromises that are agreeable to all or, at least, not obnoxious to any. Furthermore, where there is the will to consensus, dialogue can lead to a willing suspension of disagreement, making possible agreed actions without necessarily agreed notions.

4 **T**his is important because certain situations do, indeed, precipitate exhaustive disjunctions which no dialogic accommodations can mediate. For example, either we are to go to war or we are not. The problem then is how a group without unanimity may settle on one option rather than the other without alienating anyone. This is the severest challenge of consensus, and it can only be met by the willing suspension of disbelief in the prevailing option on the part of the residual minority. The feasibility of this depends not only on the patience and persuasiveness of the right people, but also on the fact that African traditional systems of the consensual type were not such as to place any one group of persons consistently in the position of a minority. Of this, too, more below.

5 **B**ut, first, let us see how faith in consensus worked in one concrete example of an African traditional system of polities. It may be well to note, as a preliminary, that African political systems of the past displayed considerable variety. There is a basic distinction between those systems with a centralized authority exercised through the machinery of government, and those without any such authority in which social life was not regulated at any level by the sort of machinery that might be called a government. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard classify the Zulu (of South Africa), the Ngwato (also of South Africa), the Bemba (of Zambia), the Banyankole (of Uganda), and the Kede (of northern Nigeria) under the first category, and the Logoli (of western Kenya), the Tallensi (of northern Ghana), and the Nuer (of southern Sudan) under the second. 3

6 **I**t is, or should be, a matter of substantial interest to political thinkers that societies of the second description – that is, anarchistic societies – existed and functioned in an orderly manner, or at least not with any less order than the more centralized ones. It is also, perhaps, easier in the context of the less centralized social orders to appreciate the necessity of consensus. Where the exercise of authority (as, for example, in the settlement of disputes) rested purely on moral and, perhaps, metaphysical prestige, it is obvious that decision by the preponderance of numbers would be likely to be dysfunctional. But it is more interesting to observe that the habit of decision by consensus in politics was studiously cultivated in some of the most centralized and, if it comes to it, warlike, ethnic groups of Africa, such as the Zulu and the Ashantis. By a somewhat paradoxical contrast, the authorities in some of the comparatively less militaristic of the centralized societies, such as the Bemba or the Banyankole, seem to have manifested less

enthusiasm for consensus in political decision making than the Ashantis or the Zulu. 4 In what immediately follows I propose to take advantage of the elaborate description and analysis of the Ashanti traditional system of politics in K. A. Busia's *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* 5 and my own personal experience to trace the course of consensus in the Ashanti political example.

The political organisation of the Ashantis

7 **T**he lineage is the basic political unit among the Ashantis. Because they are a matrilineal group, this unit consists of all the people in a town or village having a common female ancestor, which, as a rule, is quite a considerable body of persons. Every such unit has a head, and every such head is automatically a member of the council which is the governing body of the town or village. The qualifications for lineage headship are seniority in age, wisdom, a sense of civic responsibility and logical persuasiveness. All these qualities are often united in the most senior, but non-senile, member of the lineage. In that case, election is almost routine. But where these qualities do not seem to converge in one person, election may entail prolonged and painstaking consultations and discussions aimed at consensus. There is never an act of formal voting. Indeed, there is no longstanding word for "voting" in the language of the Ashantis. The expression which is currently used for that process *(aba to)* is an obvious modern coinage for a modern cultural import or, shall we say, imposition.

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8 **T**he point, then, at which the head of a lineage is elected is the point at which consensus first makes itself felt in the Ashanti political process. This office, when conferred on a person, is for life unless moral, intellectual, or physical degeneration sets in. As the representative of the lineage in the governing council of a town, he or, in rare cases, she is in duty bound to hold consultations with the adult members of the lineage regarding municipal matters. In any matter of particular significance, consensus is always the watchword. It is also the watchword at the level of the municipal council, which, as indicated, consists of the lineage heads.

9 **T**hat council is presided over by the "natural ruler" of the town, called a chief. This word, though tainted with colonial condescension, has remained in general use even in the postindependence era by dint of terminological inertia. The "natural" aspect of this position lies in its basic hereditary status: normally, a chief can only come from the royal lineage. But it is only basically hereditary, for a lineage being a quite substantial kinship group, there is at any one time a non-negligible number of qualified candidates. The choice, which is proposed by the "queen mother" (the mother or aunt or maternal sister or cousin of the chief), has to be approved by the council and endorsed by the populace through an organisation called, in literal translation, "the young people's association" in order to become final.

»[B]ecause the king was surrounded by councilors whose offices were political, and was himself only a representation of the unity of the people, it was quite possible to remove him from office.«

W.E. Abraham
(Note 6)

10 **C**ontrary to a deliberately fostered appearance, the personal word of the chief was not law. His official word, on the other hand, is the consensus of his council, and it is only in this capacity that it may be law; which is why the Akans have the saying that there are no bad kings, only bad councilors. Of course, an especially opinionated chief, if he also had the temerity, might try, sometimes with success, to impose his will upon a council. But a chief of such habits was as likely as not to be eventually deposed. In truth, as Abraham, also speaking of the Akans, points out in *The Mind of Africa, »kingship was more a sacred*

office than a political one«. 6 The office was "sacred" because a chief was supposed to be the link between the living population and their departed ancestors, who were supposed to supervise human interests from their postmortem vantage point. In so far as it was political, it bore substantial analogies to the status of a constitutional monarch. The chief was the symbol of the unity of his kingdom and, in the normal course of his duties, fulfilled a variety of ceremonial functions. But he was unlike a constitutional monarch in being a member (at least as a lineage personage) of the ruling council, and in being in a position to exercise legitimate influence on its deliberations by virtue, not of any supposed divine inspiration, but rather of whatever intrinsic persuasiveness his ideas may have had.

11   **I**f these facts are borne in mind, it becomes apparent that the council was strongly representative with respect to both the nature of its composition and the content of its decisions. This representativeness was duplicated at all levels of authority in the Ashanti state. The town or city councils were the most basic theater of political authority. Representatives from these councils constituted divisional councils presided over by "paramount" chiefs. These latter units also sent representatives to the national council presided over by the *Asantehene*, the king of the Ashantis, at the highest level of traditional government. It is at this stage, perhaps, needless to say that decision was by consensus at all these levels.

12   **N**ow, this adherence to the principle of consensus was a premeditated option. It was based on the belief that *ultimately* the interests of all members of society are the same, although their immediate perceptions of those interests may be different. This thought is given expression in an art motif depicting a crocodile with one stomach and two heads locked in struggle over food. If they could but see that the food was, in any case, destined for the same stomach, the irrationality of the conflict would be manifest to them. But is there a chance of it? The Ashanti answer is: "Yes, human beings have the ability eventually to cut through their differences to the rock bottom identity of interests." And, on this view, the means to that objective is simply rational discussion. Of the capabilities of this means the Ashantis are explicit. "There is", they say, "no problem of human relations that cannot be resolved by dialogue." Dialogue, of course, presupposes not just two parties (at least), but also two conflicting positions: "One head does not hold council." Nor was any suggestion that one voice might be entitled to be heard to the exclusion of others countenanced for one moment: "Two heads are better than one", says another maxim. Indeed, so much did the Ashantis (and the Akans in general) prize rational discussion as an avenue to consensus among adults that the capacity for elegant and persuasive discourse was made one of the most crucial qualifications for high office.

Representation and democracy

13   **I** would like to emphasize that the pursuit of consensus was a deliberate effort to go beyond decision by majority opinion. It is easier to secure majority agreement than to achieve consensus. And the fact was not lost upon the Ashantis. But they spurned that line of least resistance. To them, majority opinion is not in itself a good enough basis for decision making, for it deprives the minority of the right to have their will reflected in the given decision. Or, to put it in terms of the concept of representation, it deprives the minority of the right of representation in the decision in question.

»One head does not hold council.«

Akan proverb

14   **T**wo concepts of representation are involved in these considerations. There is the representation of a given constituency in council, and there is the representation of the will of a representative in the making of a given decision. Let us call the first formal and the second substantive representation. Then, it is obvious that you can have formal representation without its substantive correlate. Yet, the formal is for the sake of the substantive. On the Ashanti view, substantive representation is a matter of a fundamental human right. Each human being has the right to be represented not only in council, but also in counsel in any matter relevant to his or her interests or those of their groups. This is why consensus is so important.

15   **N**or are pragmatic reasons lacking to the same purport. Formal representation without substance is apt to induce disaffection. If the system in use is such as to cause some groups periodically to be in substantively unrepresented minorities, then seasonal disaffection becomes institutionalized. The results are the well-known inclemencies of adversarial politics. From the Ashanti standpoint, consensus is the antidote. But, again, can consensus always be had? As already noted, the Ashantis seem to have thought that it could, at least in principle. But suppose this is not the case. Even so, it can always be aimed at, and the point is that any system of politics that is seriously dedicated to this aim must be institutionally different from a system based on the sway of the majority, however hedged around with "checks and balances".

16   **W**hat is the bearing of these considerations on democracy? Current forms of democracy are generally systems based on the majority principle. The party that wins the majority of seats or the greatest proportion of the votes, if the system in force is one of proportional representation, is invested with governmental power. Parties under this scheme of political things are organisations of people of similar tendencies and aspirations with the sole aim of gaining power for the implementation of their policies. Let us call such systems *majoritarian democracies*. Then, those based on consensus may be called *consensual democracies*. The Ashanti system was a consensual democracy. It was a democracy because government was by the consent, and subject to the control, of the people as expressed through their representatives. It was consensual because, at least as a rule, that consent was negotiated on the principle of consensus. (By contrast, the majoritarian system might be said to be, in principle, based on "consent" without consensus.)

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A non-party system

17   **T**he Ashanti system, furthermore, was not a party system in the sense of the word "party" noted in the last paragraph, which is basic to majoritarian democracy. But in a broad lexical sense there were parties. The lineages were parties to the project of good government. Moreover, in every Ashanti town the youth constituted themselves into an organized party under a recognized leader who was entitled to make representations directly (though not as a member) to the relevant council on all matters of public interest. The sense in which the system in question did not feature parties is that none of the groups mentioned organized themselves for the purpose of gaining power in a way which entailed others not being in power or, worse, being out of it. For all concerned, the system was set up for participation in power, not its appropriation, and the underlying philosophy was one of cooperation, not confrontation.

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18   **T**his is the aspect of the traditional system to which the advocates of

the one-party system appealed in their attempts to prove its African ancestry and authenticity. The illusory analogy was this. In a one-party system there is no conflict of parties. No party loses because the party wins. The comparison is faulty for the following reason. In the traditional set-up, no party lost because all the parties were natural partners in power or, more strictly, because there were no parties. In the one-party situation, the reason why no party loses is because murdered parties do not compete. (If these last remarks should occasion any sense of inconsistency, a careful disambiguation of the term "party" in this context should dissipate it.)

19 **T**he disappearance of the one-party system from the African scene is, and should remain, unlamented. But my reason for mentioning that subject is not to flog a dead horse; it is, in fact, to paint out the good parts of a bad case. One valid point which was made again and again by the one-party persuaders is that there is no necessary connection between democracy and the multiparty system. An associated insight was that indigenous African systems of politics, at least in some well-known instances, offered examples of democracy without a multiparty mechanism.

20 **B**ut although the traditional systems in question avoided this mechanism, it should be constantly borne in mind that, as already noted, it had room for parties in the broad sense. This is important because these parties provided the centers of independent thought presupposed by the very idea of meaningful dialogue in the process of political decision making – those conditions of rational interaction that the one-party system was so efficient in destroying.

Western pressure to multi-partyism: a cul-de sac?

21 **I**n the drive towards democracy that occurred in Africa in the past half decade or so, 7 African dictators, civilian and military, were under sustained Western pressure to adopt the multiparty way of life. This proved politically fatal to some of them, though others eventually discovered tricks for surviving multiparty elections. There is no denying, of course, that some gains in freedom have accrued to the African populations. But how substantial have these been and to what extent have these developments built on the strengths of the indigenous institutions of politics in Africa? It is hard to be convinced that this question has yet attracted enough attention.

22 **T**he cause of this relative neglect of the question may conceivably be connected with its difficulty. The conditions of traditional political life were surely less complicated than those of the present. The kinship networks that provided the mainstay of the consensual politics of traditional times are simply incapable of serving the same purpose in modern Africa. This is especially so in the urban areas, where industrialisation, albeit paltry in many parts of Africa, has created conditions, such as sharp socioeconomic cleavages, which carry all or many of the ingredients of ideological politics. In these circumstances it may well seem a trifle too utopian to envisage the possibility of a non-party approach to politics.

23 **I**t might seem, furthermore, that the account of traditional politics given above essentially involves exaggerations of harmony in traditional life. In fact, even if consensus prevailed in the politics of certain ethnic

Kwasi Wiredu: "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion". In: *African Studies Quarterly* 1.4 (1997). Article

»In the matter of conflict among the ethnic groups, it should be noted that African history furnishes examples

groups in Africa, historically, interethnic relations involving those same groups have, by nature, been marked, or more strictly, marred by frequent wars, the most extreme negations of consensus. The point is not just that there have been ethnic wars from time to time, as was conceded early on, but more seriously, that the ethnic orientation of the various groups, by their own inward fixations, has tended to generate conflict in their external relations.

24 **O**f this the contemporary world has unspeakably tragic illustrations. It might seem, therefore, that neither in the past nor in the present nor in any foreseeable future can consensus be seen to have been, or to promise, a realistic basis for politics in any African state that is a composite of distinct ethnic units. On the contrary, so it might appear, the more pluralistic approach of a multiparty system, provided it incorporates reasonable safeguards against the tyranny of the majority, offers the more practical option.

25 **T**he premises of both objections may be granted, quite readily in the first case and with a qualification in the second. But the conclusions in favor of the multiparty system in both cases are non sequiturs. As regards the premises, it is true that any suggestion that the kinship basis of traditional politics could be a model for contemporary African politics can be dismissed as an anachronistic nostalgia. But, in the matter of conflict among the ethnic groups, it should be noted that African history furnishes examples not only of conflict, but also of cooperation among them. Still, the history of interethnic conflict and the problem of its contemporary reverberations ought not to be minimized. Interestingly, exactly this is one of the reasons why the idea of a consensual non-party system ought to be taken especially seriously in Africa.

26 **O**ne of the most persistent causes of political instability in Africa derives from the fact that, in ever so many contemporary African states, certain ethnic groups have found themselves in the minority both numerically and politically. Under a system of majoritarian democracy this means that, even with all the safeguards, they will consistently find themselves outside the corridors of power. The frustrations and disaffections, with their disruptive consequences for the polity, should not have caught anybody by surprise.

Non-party consensus politics: the way out?

27 **C**onsider the non-party alternative. Imagine a dispensation under which governments are formed not by parties, but by the consensus of elected representatives. Government, in other words, becomes a kind of coalition – a coalition not, as in the common acceptation, of parties, but of citizens. There is no impediment whatsoever to the formation of political associations to propagate preferred ideologies. But in councils of state, affiliation with any such association does not necessarily determine the chances of selection for a position of responsibility.

28 **T**wo things can be expected. First, political associations will be avenues for channeling all desirable pluralisms, but they will be without the Hobbesian proclivities of political parties, as they are known under majoritarian politics. And second, without the constraints of membership in parties relentlessly dedicated to wrestling power or retaining it, representatives will be more likely to be actuated by the objective merits of given proposals than by ulterior considerations. In such an environment, willingness to compromise, and with it the prospects of consensus, will be enhanced.

29 **C**onsensus is not just an optional bonus. As can be inferred from my

»Odenkyem da nsuo mu nso ohome nsuo ne mframa.«

The crocodile lives in the water yet it breathes air, not water.

Ashanti symbol

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earlier remarks, it is essential for securing substantive, or what might also be called decisional, representation for representatives and, through them, for the citizens at large. This is nothing short of a matter of fundamental human rights. Consensus as a political decision procedure requires, in principle, that each representative should be persuaded, if not of the optimality of each decision, at least of its practical necessity, all things considered. If discussion has been even moderately rational and the spirit has been one of respectful accommodation on all sides, surviving reservations on the part of a momentary minority will not prevent the recognition that, if the community is to go forward, a particular line of action must be taken.

This should not be confused with decision making on the principle of the supreme right of the majority. In the case under discussion, the majority prevails not over, but upon, the minority – it prevails upon them to accept the proposal in question, not just to live with it, which latter is the basic plight of minorities under majoritarian democracy. In a consensus system, the voluntary acquiescence of the minority with respect to a given issue would normally be necessary for the adoption of a decision. In the rare case of an intractable division, a majority vote might be used to break the impasse. But the success of the system must be judged by the rarity of such predicaments in the workings of the decision making bodies of the state. A less unwelcome use of majorities might occur in the election of representatives. Here choice may have to be determined by superior numbers in terms of votes. But even here the representatives will be under obligation to consult with all the tendencies of opinion in their constituencies and work out, as much as possible, a consensual basis of representation.

Further points of detail and even of principle remain to be spelled out, but these indications must make it plausible to suppose that, in the consensual non-party system, no one group, ethnic or ideological, will be afflicted with the sense of being permanent outsiders to state power. That alone should suffice to forestall some, at least, of the unhappy conflicts that have bedeviled African life into our own times. Thus, far from the complexities of contemporary African life making the consensual, non-party precedents of traditional African politics now unusable, they make them indispensable. For this reason, if for no other, the exploration of that alternative to multiparty politics should commend itself to the urgent attention of contemporary African philosophers and political scientists. But there is nothing peculiarly African about the idea itself. If it is valid, especially with respect to its human rights dimension, it ought to be a concern for our whole species.

Notes

1   Gideon-Cyrus M. Mutiso / S.W. Rohio (ed.) (1975): *Readings in African Political Thought.* London: Heinemann, 476. ⌂

2   Ibid., 478.
    K.A. Busia also comments on the same single-minded pursuit of consensus as it obtained among the traditional Akans of Ghana in his (1967) *Africa in Search of Democracy* (London:

Routledge & Kegan Paul). The passage will bear extended quotation:

»When a council, each member of which was the representative of a lineage, met to discuss matters affecting the whole community, it had always to grapple with the problem of reconciling sectional and common interests. In order to do this, the members had to talk things over: they had to listen to all the different points of view. So strong was the value of solidarity that the chief aim of the councilors was to reach unanimity, and they talked till this was achieved.« (28) ⌂

3 M. Fortes / E.E. Evans-Pritchard (ed.) (1940): *African Political Systems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 5. ⌂

4 See, for example, Max Gluckman: "The Kingdom of the Zulu of South Africa"; I. Shapera: "The political organisation of the Ngwato of Bechuanaland Protectorate" (present-day Botswana); and Audrey Richards: "The political system of the Bemba tribe – north-eastern Rhodesia" (in present-day Zambia); all in Fortes / Evans-Pritchard, Note 3. ⌂

5 K.A. Busia (1951): *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of the Ashanti*. London: Frank Cass.
The Ashantis are a subgroup of the Akans. Other subgroups are the Akims, Akuapims, Denkyiras, Fantes, Kwahus, Brongs, Wassas, and Nzimas. The Akans, as a whole, constitute nearly half of the population of Ghana, occupying parts of the middle and southern regions of the country. The Ivory Coast is also home to some Akan groups. The account given of the Ashanti system is true, in all essentials, of the Akans in general. ⌂

6 W.E. Abraham (1962): *The Mind of Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
»[B]ecause the king was surrounded by councilors whose offices were political, and was himself only a representation of the unity of the people, it was quite possible to remove him from office; the catalogue of the possible grounds of removal was already held in advance.« (77). ⌂

7 The text was written in 1995. *(Editor's note)* ⌂