THIS IS AFRICA

Ways of Life 3: Indigenous Anarchism

By DJ Zhao on September 2, 2016 — African forms of democracy and egalitarianism exists independent of, and predates, modern Western progressive social movements. It is time we revived their histories from systematic erasure, because they may hold the key to our collective future

Contemporary Northern Ghanaians holding council. Photo: Marc Becker

Editor's note: This article is the third in a three-part series

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investigating different ways of organising human life on earth. The first and second articles in the series can be read here and here, respectively. Happy reading!

Indigenous Democracy

An epiphany of cosmic proportions dawned upon me during a taxi ride from Kampala International airport to the city last year. My incidental travel companion was the Ugandan filmmaker Dilman Dila; and in his

unhurried, quiet, and measured tone, this is what he said:

"Of the 53 major "nations" in the region today known as Uganda (name arbitrarily taken from one of them, Buganda, by the British), only 10 featured any kind of hierarchical political structure. The majority of them, with population size from 1 to 3 million, lived in entirely egalitarian organizations, voluntary cooperatives, and share/gift economies, without centralized political power, high levels of inequality, or warfare."

The filmmaker continued, "for instance, Acholi, the 2nd largest society in Uganda, lived in communal, collaborative, and mutualistic arrangements. In these societies elders and experts were respected, and held influence, but did not have exclusive decision making power over others.   In fact, the people of these societies having almost entirely no concept of power, control, domination, and subjugation was a significant factor for the ease with which Europeans conquered these lands."

Dila's disquisition continued, "When an Englishmen said to them „I will rule this territory from now on", they probably looked at each other, shrugged, and with such trust toward their fellow men, as strangely dressed as these were, said something like: "We don't know exactly what that means, but why not, it should be fine.'"

My sleep deprived brain cells all of a sudden began working in top gear, and I immediately sensed the vital significance of this information, its far reaching implications, as well as the colossal crime which is its total absence in the rest of the world.

> *"The Iteso (of Uganda) (has) a highly decentralized, largely egalitarian society in which social groups enjoyed significant autonomy concurrent with social unity…"*

Not long after my return to Europe, all of this was confirmed by German curator and researcher Dr. Nadine Siegert, deputy director of Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth. She described decision-making processes of East African traditional societies as direct democracy in its purist form, mostly consisting of long hours in conversation and debate, until literally everyone is in agreement. The message is then relayed to other groups by messengers (with no representative power), leading to further negotiations, and finally, action is only taken when the decision is unanimously agreed upon by every member of society.

But how can 3 million people all agree on anything, I wondered. And then I considered that these societies were based on reciprocity and gift economies, almost entirely without inequality, and must have featured levels of social cohesion and connection all but unimaginable to us. And the amount of time this process must take seemed burdensome, until i thought about how much of the time and energy of Western societies and its citizenry is taken up by bureaucracy.

Siegert's voice in this matter is supported by other scholars. British professor in political science Dr Alison J Ayers has written extensively about the sociopolitical system of the Iteso in Uganda, which "reveals a highly decentralized, largely egalitarian society in which social groups enjoyed significant autonomy…". In their society "the pursuit of justice and the maintenance of law, order, and harmony were highly important tenets, harmony being achieved through the overriding principle of consensus."

But absence of centralized power does not mean being without leaders, only that the leaders do not have authority over others. "Iteso society was governed by elders. But although vested with influence and respect, they possessed limited power – power being held and exercised by the people." (1)

Homegrown Consensus

Further research, and a bit of necessary luck, turned up

Funtunfunefu-Denkyemfunefu, the siamese crocodiles which symbolize democracy and unity in many African cultures

more information, and revealed that variations of non-authoritarian social arrangements are by far not exclusive to the East coast of Africa, but found all over the continent.

Nigerian Historian Dr D. I. Ajaegbofa notes that among the Igbo, "The values of consultation, negotiation, cooperation, compromise, and consensus were recognized and applied in the decision making process" (2)

Ghanaian Philosopher Kwasi Wiredu writes that "decision making in Africa was generally based on consensus".   Looking in detail at how this worked among the Ashanti, he notes, "The principle of consensus… 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 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.' …the means to that objective is simply rational discussion. 'There is', they say, 'no problem of human relations that cannot be resolved by dialogue.'" (3)

Dr Alison J Ayers continues:

…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 government. Meyer 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. (6)

…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. (1)

African Anarchy

East African Unity. Photo courtesy of Anonymous

Dr. Ulf Vierke, Director of Iwalewa house, told me of his own experiences in Northern Ivory Coast, when he lived for some years within a decentralized conglomeration of societies during the 1990s:

It was a truly pluralist world, consisting of very many small to larger ethnic and tribal groups, each with their own culture, identity, and language, without central authority. Poly-cultural clusters formed highly organised webs of communication and trade in a constant process of negotiation, in which exactly no one is neglected or marginalized. It took a lot of work and time to settle disputes or get things done, because literally everyone is involved in decision making; but things did get done, in a way with which everyone was happy.

These groups maintained intimate contact with each other, and with many groups in far away regions. For instance, women's pottery groups collaborated, and shared information and resources with other such groups, sometimes across great distances. There were

also societies within societies, who performed secretive dances and rituals only when no member of the other groups were present, maintaining their own identity and culture. Politics, spirituality, magic, art, and music were all inextricably intertwined in this way of life: a differentiated yet linked totality of multitudes.

These autonomous communities in the Ivory Coast region have likely never posed a threat to surrounding states and empires (which tended to be more effective at waging war*). The Arabic conquerers mostly left them alone, partially because they saw this way of life as "primitive" and imagined that they would soon naturally disappear in the face of "progress". Various waves of European colonists also did not bother with them much, for some of the same reasons; and every generation of visiting outsiders has said many of the same things about them, making similar predictions. In fact, Vierke himself had the same feeling when he was there, that this way of life could not last long. Yet today, in 2016, they are still living in large numbers in this way (but with cell phones); and something tells me they will still be there long after the collapse of global capitalism.

*In the independence era the mobilization of these non-authoritarian groups was indispensable: the hydra-headed guerilla army they formed acted autonomously, but in supremely organized fashion; and while other battalions were lost if their commanding officer died, these groups continued to function perfectly without central command.

These approaches to decision making have also been applied to the anti-colonial and liberation struggles in Africa. The PAIGC in its struggle to end Portuguese colonialism and the TPLF in its fight against the military dictatorship in Ethiopia, both developed and used similar consensus based decision making models. (4)

Anarchist banners at World Conference Against Racism, Durban, 2001. Khanya: a journal for activists, issue. 1, August 2002

There are similar indigenous and traditional societies all over the world with varying degrees of horizontal configuration and classlessness, which are very different from the modern Western top-down system of extreme economic and political inequality. From the myriad forms of often fluid and mobile Native American societies to Aboriginal collective councils, their stories are routinely, completely, ignored, displaced by glamorized tales of states, of war, and of capitalism. A few academic papers have been written about these diverse and incredibly numerous forms of traditional non-authoritarianism, but no doubt read by only a handful of people world wide. Making this kind of information inaccessible to the public is a violation against all life on earth, as it is only the structures of hierarchical power and the inequalities they generate which has caused so much systematic suffering and destruction during the last 10k years.

> *"…human beings have the ability eventually to cut through their differences to the rock bottom identity of interests."*

In literally every debate about communism or anarchism

in the Western world, we run into the same repeated sentiment: "It works only in theory or in small scale, but practically impossible for large societies, without becoming authoritarian nightmares". But the existence of these indigenous egalitarian democratic syndicates with "citizens" numbering in the millions, and the fact that they have functioned very well for longer than anyone can remember, is clear evidence to the contrary.

It is difficult to determine how long these various kinds of non-hierarchical societies have existed prior to the arrival of Europeans, and we know nothing of their evolutionary history. But African cultures should almost certainly be credited for the development of true communism long before the birth of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, anarchism before the work of Mikhail Bakunin, Jesus Christ, or LaoZi, as well as democracy before the Greeks.

In fact, during the last decade of his life, Karl Marx began looking more and more into the political philosophies of older, Non-European societies, and became increasingly convinced that we have much to learn from them. A few weeks ago Noam Chomsky claimed that "Indigenous people across the world are the ones keeping the human race from destroying itself and leading earth to a disaster".

For too long we have falsely believed that everything progressive, democratic, and radically left comes from the Modern West. As we support contemporary emancipatory and revolutionary global movements, let us remember that truly equal and just non-authoritarian societies are not only possible, but have existed on the African and other continents for much longer than the recent phenomenon of tyranny, the state, and capitalism.

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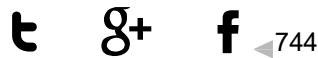
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