

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL DELIBERATIVE AND AGONISTIC DEMOCRACY: A MARAVI PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This essay traces elements of democracy in the history of African political thought, mainly in the Maravi Kingdom which once spanned the regions of present-day Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique. Based on the study of Maravi history, language, and some published philosophical reflections on democracy, elements of both deliberative and agonistic democracy are demonstrably present in these traditions. These elements include consensus-building, democratic legitimisation of leaders (such as kings) and the capacity to tame agonism in the community. While some of the main studies on African traditional theory of democracy build on an exotic and exceptional conception of African culture as communitarian, this paper argues for using the model of moderate communitarianism as representative of African societies through the ages. On this view the understanding is that indigenous African political cultures accommodate both communitarian and individualistic elements independently of Western influences. It is the accommodation of these cultural elements as indigenous to Africa that allows democracy to flourish in various African settings.

Key words: *democracy, Maravi kingship, communitarianism, consensus, agonism*

Introduction

Deliberative democracy is based on the centrality of rational consensus in decision making and the importance of participation of the majority. Chantal Mouffe (2000: 1) has stressed “that in a democratic polity, political decisions should be reached through a process of deliberation among free and equal citizens . . . [this practice] has accompanied democracy since its birth in fifth century Athens.” She argues that this deliberation is a revival of the old idea

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that dominated the explications of democracy in ancient Greek philosophy. In fact, in the Aristotelian tradition, it is considered that the majority sets the rule, characterised by decisions of the masses.

Recent theories of deliberative democracy in philosophy are often associated with John Rawls (1971) and Jürgen Habermas (1994). In Rawls's view, an agreement of rational subjects through a bargaining process is pivotal for a just democracy. In Habermas's view, rational subjects ideally reach a consensus in the public sphere. Agonistic democracy shifts from the model of rational consensus to the dynamic of social relations as central to democracy. Mouffe (2000: 13) indicated that, "[b]esides putting the emphasis on practices and language games, an alternative to the rationalist framework also requires coming to terms with the fact that power is constitutive of social relations." And so, too, power has to figure into the concept of agonistic democracy.

Many studies have traced elements of democracy to ancient African polities. Wamala (2004) discussed elements of deliberative democracy among the Buganda people of Uganda. Similarly, Teffo (2004) among the Zulu in South Africa. While acknowledging these works, our interest here is chiefly in the Maravi Kingdom, and the elements of deliberative as well as agonistic democracy that can be traced to that time and region.⁵ The mention of a Maravi perspective refers to the group of Bantu people who migrated from (former) Zaire to parts of Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique around the fifteenth century. It is standard to classify the ancient Maravi Kingdom as a communitarian system of social and political relations. Communitarianism in African political culture is presumed by many theorists to lead to autocracy; yet evidence indicates that the Maravi practiced democracy, as has been argued to be the case in other African pre-colonial systems (Wiredu 1997).

Maravi Kingdom: historical perspectives

Here we rely on secondary historiographical sources including Phiri (1975, 2004), Braugel (2001), and MacCracken (2012). The Maravi Kingdom was founded by Bantu speakers who originally came from the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly named Zaire), in an area known as Katanga (Ntara 1973; Phiri 1975). A different version of Maravi origins suggests that they originally came from Western Africa in the region of present-day Ghana and Nigeria. However, the most commonly held view is that they form part of a large group of Bantu people that were living in an area around Lake Victoria. Originally they had no chiefs, apart from the priests who were leading them in various matters of concern. In fact when they were moving towards the

⁵ Agonism refers to political conflict.

southern part of Africa in the seventh century, the Saud Hasan bin Ali realised that they had no chief and tried to manipulate them so that he could become their leader. His stratagems did not work in his favour and he died before actualising his plans to rule the Maravi.

For the Maravi people to develop into a kingdom centuries later, they are depicted as starting out with a movement from their homeland to a place known as Choma in the upper part of the Zambezi River. It is believed that they most likely entered Malawi in the Shire Valley around 1480 AD. In the Shire Valley they decided to elect one of their members to become the group's leader. This process of electing a first leader led to the crowning of Chinkhole of the Phiri clan, and the title Kalonga was given to him. Other early important figures among the Maravi were Kalonga's mother Nyangu, and Mangadzi, the mother of Kalonga's wife Mwali, who was also a great spiritual leader. These mothers were important as the Maravi adopted a matrilineal system, in which material wealth, legacy and status is inherited through one's maternal lineage. The movement from Choma that led to the scattering of members of the Maravi Kingdom into parts of present day Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique, seems to have happened immediately after the death of their leader, Chinkhole (Ntara 1973: 8). This movement was mainly motivated by the search for better land for farming. In some circumstances it was meant to maintain peace by avoiding conflict with other groups that wanted the same land. The first of such movements after the death of Chinkhole was led by his successor, Chidzodzi, who travelled easterly to the Chewa Mountain. It is believed that the name Chewa, attributed to a group of the Maravi people in the central region of Malawi, came from this place. From this mountain, they moved to Kapoche River in Mozambique, and later migrated in Malawi to Kaphirintiwa and to other places. They also moved to different areas of Zambia, mainly in the region of Chipata. Below is a map that shows the areas covered by the Maravi Kingdom.

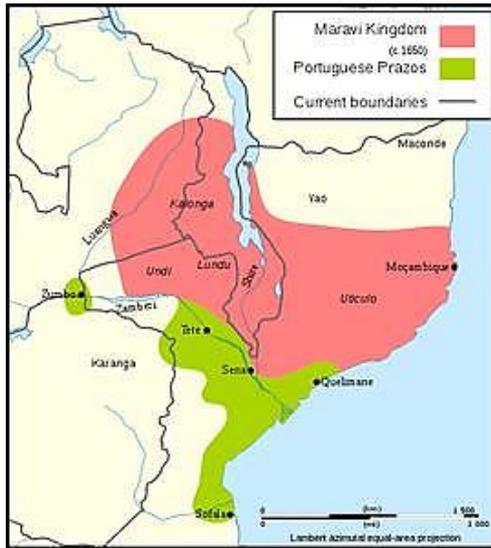


Figure 1: Maravi Kingdom

The map shows the estimated extension of the Maravi Kingdom, covering a larger part of Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia.

The Kingdom started declining in the eighteenth century, when different clan leaders organised under Kalonga started getting more power and independence. It has been argued that this was due to their involvement in trade with the Arabs and Portuguese (Phiri 1975: 50). Some of the groups that were part of this kingdom include the Phiri clan (meaning ‘of the hill’), the Banda clan (meaning ‘those who tread the grass under their feet’), the Mwale clan (speculated as ‘those that escaped death’), the Linde clan (‘those that are patient’), the Kwenda clan (‘the stripper’), the Mbewe clan (‘eaters of mice’), and Mphadwe (a group that split away from the Banda clan allegedly because of some shameful acts).

In sum, the historiographic record indicates that the Maravi Kingdom came to flourish in the period between 1400 and 1800 in Malawi and some parts of Zambia and Mozambique.⁶

Democracy in general and democracy in Africa

In the Western tradition of political philosophy, the very notion of democracy has been controversial for millennia since the ancient Greeks. For instance Aristotle, who viewed it in a negative light, recognised the system as granting

⁶ In the early eighteenth century the Maravi kingdom was already reduced to a small chiefdom as compared to how it was previously, due to rise to power of other tribes including the Ngoni, Yawo, Lomwe. However, the British intruded into political integrity of rules over the whole region and subjected all chiefs under their own illegitimate rule.

more power to the majority through decisions which are often not rational. Plato regarded democracy as inherently flawed, as he famously argued in his dialogue *The Republic*. But in modernity, popular notions of democracy have generally regarded it as a *prima facie* good. One commonplace conception of democracy is associated by the famous quotation of the American president of the mid nineteenth century, Abraham Lincoln, in his address after the 1863 battle of Gettysburg near the declared cessation of the American Civil War. Lincoln iconically identified democracy as a ‘government of the people, by the people, and for the people’.

More recent and more technical workings of the concept of democracy may be traced in the work of Robert Dahl (1971), who considered it in terms of political equality, where every individual has freedom in determining how a state is expected to be governed. For democracy to exist, Dahl argued that elements such as, freedom of expression and information, freedom of association, right to stand as candidate, universal suffrage and free and fair elections, are indispensable. Dahl’s views follow in the tradition cast earlier by Karl Popper (1945), who famously focused on features of democracy that underlie the capacity of citizens to remove a government whenever necessary as a response to totalitarianism. Therefore Popper regarded democracy as fundamental for freedom and human progress. Popper equated democratic process with the notion of an ‘open’ society, one commensurate with the very creativity and nondeterministic nature of human free will.

An earlier work by Schumpeter (1942) considered democracy as a system where power is acquired by individuals through competition of the elites in a particular society. Democracy demands that various groups meet and compete, so that the one who has the majority of votes is given power to govern. Przeworski et al. (2000) focuses on aspects of representational politics such as the election of the chief executive, the election of the legislature, competitions among different parties during elections, and clear electoral roles and procedures that allow for transfer of power in some circumstances. These factors are presented as necessary, if not sufficient, elements in order for democracy to be realised.

The above conceptions of democracy have been attractive to leaders of different national struggles because of the importance they place upon the liberal aspects of governance, in a world-wide atmosphere of approval to shift from autocracy to pluralistic structurings of political power. Different studies have focused on this geo-political shift from authoritarian oligarchies to democratic systems occurring in the second half of the twentieth century. One of the most widely discussed works of this kind is by Huntington (1993: 22-

49), who argued that a ‘third democratic wave’ had affected different nations in the late twentieth century. He saw this transition from authoritarian rule to democratic rule as driven by a range of factors including notable increases of economic growth in the private sector, escalating urbanisation, and promotion of individual rights and freedoms. Similarly, Doorenspleet (2000) has argued that a shift from the authoritarian regimes continues this trend in what she calls a ‘fourth wave’ of democracy, starting in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Discussions about democracy and independence have proliferated in Africa since the 1960s and 1970s period of formal Independence from explicit colonialism. Although it remains hotly disputed among African political theorists, observers, and activists, transformation as characterised by Huntington’s third wave and Doorenspleet’s fourth wave has been traced by some commentators as emerging in the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, different countries ‘south of the Sahara’ (such as Malawi and Zambia) appeared to embrace or to re-embrace multiparty democracy. For example, Malawi in 1963-1964 adopted the multiparty system, only to abandon it in the late 1960s. In the 1990s multiparty systems were re-embraced with the coming of the third wave of democracy (Kayange 2012) in Malawi; a similar situation might be observed in Tanzania under the leadership of Nyerere ([1996] 2000). Some theorists have perceived the democratic euphoria in African countries that adopted multiparty electoral politics was due to their apparent victory over dictatorial and military regimes that had characterised many new nations, such as Tanzania with Julius Nyerere, Malawi with Kamuzu Banda, Zimbabwe with Robert Mugabe and Milton Obote in Zaire.

Although the general African democratic wave came with a liberal (Western) understanding of democracy with a special emphasis on freedom (individual freedom, individual dignity and market freedom) and consensus, the autocratic elements still remained in most of the leaders. It is for this reason that Levitsky and Way (2001) argued that the element of competition in rising to power was adopted in most of the African countries, but authoritarianism still dominated or lay latent in most of regimes (see also Levitsky and Way 2002). They suggest instead that the democratic wave in Africa led to ‘competitive authoritarianism’. They proposed this as the view of political systems that mix democratic elements (such as free elections where the sense of competition flourishes) with autocratic elements.

African philosophers have reflected on these democratic waves and tried to redefine them with conceptions of democracy more suitably in line with African identities, values and norms. Some have used the characterisation of

extreme communitarianism as their framework. Considered as a move to accommodate and to characterise the African brand of competitive authoritarianism, the notion of extreme communitarianism seems fitting insofar as it captures those elements of African political culture that rewards authoritative rulers. Thinkers that have characterised modern African democracies in this way include: Eboh (1990), Wiredu (1997), Offor (2006), Oluwole (2003), Wamala (2004) and Teffo (2004).

Many African political thinkers who have analysed the African traditional form of democracy in depth have been sympathetic and apologetic with respect to African identities and political values. For example, Wamala (2004: 435-442) and Teffo (2004: 443-449) have both attempted to offer African conceptions of democracy that emphasise the practices of chieftaincy or kingship functioning together with consensus in the African communitarian framework. These two authors, working on Ugandan and South African experiences respectively, have argued that the Buganda and Zulu Kingdom structures both demonstrated essential elements of democracy.

Similarly, much earlier, Ake Claude (1991) apologetically argued that African political systems of all kinds were saturated with democratic values, such as the emphasis on participation, inclusion, consensus and accountability (Ake 1991: 34, 1990 Salami 2006).⁷ M. Todd Bradley (2011: 456-464) has also argued that among the several explications of democracy, many of them feature linear interpretations. These Western-oriented models overlook the historical and cultural variations of democracy in pre-colonial African systems of democratic governance. He therefore called for an African interpretation of the concept of democracy.⁸

From all these varied perspectives, African traditional forms of democracy have in common two basic features: (i) the presence of consensus in the community as an indication of deliberative democracy (Ake 1991; Wamala 2004; Teffo 2004; Bradley 2011), and (ii) the importance of kingship or chieftaincy systems being grounded in some essential way upon aspects of deliberative democracy (see Wamala 2004: 439). In what follows, these and other elements of democracy will be explored, in particular agonistic

⁷ See other authors as well who have discussed Ake's views of indigenous democracy as flourishing in Africa and their own independent analyses: Salami (2006), Offor (2006), Oluwole (2013) and Akintoye (n.d.).

⁸ It is noteworthy that although the articles of Wamala and Teffo were published in 2004 and were both trailblazers in recognising and highlighting the democratic flavour of African communitarianism, neither Wamala nor Teffo were consulted or mentioned by Bradley in his survey and mandate published seven years later in 2011.

democracy in the Maravi Kingdom, using a moderate communitarian theoretical framework.

Moderate communitarianism

The forthcoming observations of ancient Maravi political life build upon models already established in the literature of African political philosophy which provide a moderate communitarian framework. This framework depicts African indigenous communities as prioritising the interdependence of the individual and the community. This picture of traditional African governance, i.e. governance structures that existed prior to and sustained despite the intrusive conquest of colonial rulers, has been the focus of considerable philosophical debate about African thought systems (see Eze 2008, Wiredu 1997, Gyekye 2004, 1992). In order to provide a better understanding of this framework, it is helpful to contrast it with extreme communitarianism (Menkiti 1984 and Molefe 2017), from which it arose in reaction as a corrective counterview.

Extreme communitarianism is the view that Africans are intrinsically and implicitly community-oriented in their various modes of being (Menkiti 1984). This claim has been presented as both an ontological thesis and as a political thesis (African socialism). According to some of its versions, the ontological thesis of extreme communitarianism purports that the essence of an African identity constitutes 'being with others'. One of the early proponents of this claim was Tempels (1959), who argued with reference to the Bantu, that in their being they hold an inseparable "intimate ontological relationship" (1959: 58). On this understanding, the essence of being human is defined by human relationship. Apart from this, an even more widely promulgated thesis of extreme communitarianism was elaborated by Mbiti (1969) who summarised being African with the dictum "I am because we are" (Mbiti 1969: 108-109). This implies that the very essence of a human subject is contingent upon the existence of others. The human experience here again is defined in terms of their relationships (see Menkiti 1984, 2004).

Extreme African communitarianism has been accepted by many philosophers, including in some interpretations of Ubuntu ethics and metaphysics. For example, Tutu (1999: 35) argued that the essence of an African is summarised in "a person is a person through other people." Again here the description of an African is in terms of relationships, just as in the case of Mbiti above. An individual African can affirm his or her belonging to the human race only if there is belonging to a particular group. In fact, Tutu intimates that 'I am human because I belong.'

In Malawi, writers such as Tambulasi and Kayuni (2005, 2012) have claimed extreme communitarianism as representative of Malawi's political and cultural structure. These thinkers have supported their arguments with references to traditional people's life and the various Chewa (Maravi) proverbs, such as *Kalikokha nkanyama, ali awiri ndi anthu* (one who is alone is an animal; those that are two are human beings).⁹ This famous Malawian proverb is sometimes used as an ontological expression, which indicates that the essence of being human constitutes being with others.

Apart from the ontological thesis, extreme communitarianism has been formulated as an ethical or political thesis (socialism). For example in Ubuntu ethical theory, Tutu defended a society that abides by communitarian virtues. In such a society, the main target of human actions is the achievement of values that protect the community such as solidarity, consensus and friendliness. Tutu argues that social harmony is the *summum bonum*—the greatest good that directs all human conduct in the society (Tutu 1999). Similarly, communitarianism was defended by Metz in his various expositions of Ubuntu theory (Metz 2012, 2014). For example, Metz (2012), influenced by the ontological theory of Mbiti and others (such as Menkiti 1984), argued that Ubuntu as a virtue theory is communitarian in contrast with Aristotelian virtue theory, which is both communitarian and individualistic.¹⁰

Although there are many other developments of extreme communitarianism in African political theory, the ideas of Julius Nyerere have played an important role in African political thought in Malawi, mainly in the ideas of Mutharika (2011). In his Ujaama theory, Nyerere argues for the centrality of the community and its related values in the traditional African society. This communal life is reflected by Nyerere's vision ([1966] 2000: 77) in the following passage:

Our Africa was . . . poor . . . before it was invaded and ruled by foreigners. There were no rich people in Africa. There was the property of all the people, and those who used it did not do so because it was their property. They used it because they needed it, and it was their responsibility to use it carefully and hand it over in good condition for use by future generations.

Being African in this view implies living a life of sharing in a community, where all people are equally important, and property is owned collectively. The system of Ujamaa contrasts markedly from capitalism, where individuals

⁹ See also Tambulasi and Kayuni (2005: 49).

¹⁰ Note that Metz goes slightly towards moderate communitarianism.

are encouraged to compete in a market and to acquire and maintain their own individual property. In Nyerere's socialism, it is the whole community that owns, and everyone is responsible to everyone else.

Extreme communitarianism has been widely criticised on the grounds that it is a gross oversimplification of African traditional society (Wiredu 1997, Matolino and Kwindigwi 2013). Critics of extreme communitarianism have argued against the ontological and ethical thesis promoted by this theory (Kayange 2018a and 2018b). Mbiti's comparison between the Cartesian epistemic slogan, "I think therefore I am" (individualistic) and his ontological dictum (communitarian) "I am because we are" are mistakenly conflated here; the two notions are incomparable and cannot be used to justify African and Western social identity. Mbiti was driven by a common prejudice born of over-generalisation, that Westerners are individualistic. The same problem is seen in Tutu (1999) when he wrongly posits "a person is a person through other people."

Analysing African culture on the basis of its contrasts with Western culture does not help to understand indigenous conceptions of the complexities of everyday life. For instance in this case, such contrasts lead to a failure to appreciate the individualistic thinking which is also prevalent in African traditional settings.

According to the view labelled moderate communitarianism, everyday activities and pursuits are laden with both elements of communitarianism and individualism, both being in African social thought (Gyekye 1992) including solidarity, friendliness and collegiality, while individualistic elements include the valuing of temperance, self-control and self-determination (Kayange 2018a). However, these virtues are not regarded as absolute goods in the community. They are valued as instruments, which are utilised and therefore assets as and when they are appropriate in different social situations. The African traditional society is very pragmatic in its various affairs, so on some occasions individualism is promoted and on other occasions communitarianism is encouraged.

Apart from claiming that the African traditional society reinforces both individualistic and communitarian virtues, I would urge an interpretation of moderate communitarianism considered as a form of perspectivism, as suggested by Eze's view (2008). This is the theory that there are different perspectives of thought that are practiced and encouraged in African traditional society depending on the context in question. For example, in a perspective where social capital is valued, communitarianism will be reinforced. Among the Maravi people, this may be seen in the use of figurative

expressions such as, *Chala chimodzi sichiswa nsabwe* (One figure cannot kill a lice); and *Mutu umodzi siunsenza denga* (One head does not lift (carry) a roof). Both proverbs are encouraging the importance of supporting one another, hence prioritising the community. This does not imply that mutual support will work in all situations. For example, a different perspective will encourage acting against the community but in favour of the individual. Some of the proverbs showing this perspective include: *Kufa saferana* (You cannot die for the other); *Chuluke chuluke ndi wanjuchi umanena iyo yakuluma* (Being many is for bees, you identify the one that stung you); *Andiyitana pakalowa njoka, pakalowa mbewa akumba okha* (They call me when a snake has entered a hole, but when it is a mouse, they dig it out themselves).

The acceptance of moderate communitarianism leaves room for both community-oriented and individual-oriented elements within African society. The latter are not necessarily imported from Western thought, but are also a central part of indigenous African cultures. Moderate communitarianism as a principle highlights the fact that a society can promote individualistic flourishing as the goal and purpose of community solidarity (Gyekye 1992, Wiredu 1997).

Next I will demonstrate that viewing African society as moderately communitarian, it is possible to identify distinct patterns of leadership and political dynamics depicting the fundamental elements of democracy. These elements emerge in different situations or perspectives as they are needed by the members of African traditional societies.

As was alluded to already, different modern philosophical studies on democracy have considered various elements of democracy: these include competition during elections and seeking consensus in a decision making processes (see Schumpeter 1942, Przeworski et al. 2000, Dahl 1971, Habermas 1968). While these and other elements may be traced in the African traditional context and evidenced in different kingdoms, our focus now will centre upon (i) consensus, (ii) legitimisation of political leaders, and (iii) capability of handling dissension within a community. Aspects (i) and (ii) form part of what is suggested cornerstones of deliberative democracy (Rawls 1971, Habermas 1994), whereas the capacity to handle dissension forms a central part of agonistic democracy (Mouffe 2000).

Elements of deliberative democracy in the Maravi Kingdom

Working in the context of communitarianism, Wamala (2004) and Teffo (2004) both argued for consensus in the African traditional kingship system. Following a similar trend of thought, I have noticed that the inhabitants of the

Maravi Kingdom as practitioners of moderate communitarianism, were following elements of deliberative democracy. That is to say, the individual's freedom to choose to exercise their own agreement in a situation, is presupposed by the act of forming a consensus. In my understanding, in African traditional framework, consensus emerges from individuals who are consulted by their representatives before reaching a general decision (communitarian decision) on matters that concern them. The trend of converging opinion is from individual to community. With this observation I join Wamala (2004) and Teffo (2004) who argued for the presence of consensus (hence democracy) among the Ganda people and the Zulu, respectively; both of these societies engaged in their political affairs in a set up similar to that of the Maravi people. Commenting on consensus, Wamala writes:

As a rule, the traditional consensus system of government worked well. It was a monarchical system of a limited rather than an absolute sort. The monarch ruled through a council of heads of clans, and there were heads, subheads, and chiefs at the various levels of the society. In any debate the aim was to reach a consensus.

The passage indicates a monarchical system among the Baganda people characterised as democratic because of a system of governance that was based on deliberation towards consensus. Similarly, Teffo argued that the activity of seeking consensus in the community illustrates the presence of democracy in African traditional contexts. For him, it should be viewed as the “hallmark of traditional political decision-making in many African communities” (2004: 446).¹¹

Comparatively, consensus may be traced primarily in the Maravi Kingdom by considering the political structure of consultations in the community during decision making. Phiri (1975) shows that in this structure, the King (Head of Nation Kalonga) consulted the Eni Mzinda (owners of the territory), who in turn consulted the court attendants or guardians (*ankhoswe*) or the ward or territory chieftains (*Aphungu* or *Mbili*), who then consulted the lineage or village chiefs, who in turn consulted the common people (family elders) in their respective villages (Phiri 1975: 75). This networking to garner varied opinions of different interest groups shows that there was an established chain

¹¹ In the modern theories of democracy various renowned thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas have underlined the idea of consensus. In his work *Communicative Democracy*, underlined the aspect of rational consensus as a defining element of proper democracy. This is a situation where rational subjects come together and deliberate on issues that concern them (Habermas 1969).

of consultations pursued before making a final decision on matters that concerned the whole community. Individuals forming part of the community were separately consulted; and decision making at different levels depended systematically on their individual points of view as essential contributions to the overall deliberation process. This clearly reveals a spirit and practice of respecting and encouraging individual participation in the community, which is central for democracy (see also Ntara 1973: 4-10, and Phiri 1975: 75ff).

In most modern democratic countries there is a demarcation between those that can participate in decision making and those that cannot. For example in some polities, legal majority is required for participation, which begins with citizens from the ages of 18 or 21 years and upwards. This demonstrates that in no modern democracy is there absolute and universal participation in decision making; certain qualities determine who can participate and who cannot. Similarly in African moderate communitarian settings, there were also exceptions to who was consulted as a participant in decision making.

Teffo (2004) indicated that in some communities, serious participation was reduced to adult circumcised males and not to everyone. Nevertheless, Teffo (2004: 445) argues that African kingship encourages equal participation within the community – clearly a democratic value. Among the Maravi people, more especially among the Chewa, some people were left out of decision making because of their lacking membership in the Nyau secret society. This was a society where male individuals were initiated and inducted as mature members of the society. Age was therefore not a measure of maturity in the Maravi kingship system. It might be said that although in principle every member of the society has the right to participate in decision making, participation requires a certain level of maturity as determined by the society.

In consensus the Maravi people encouraged the spirit of mutual trust among equal adults. For example, Phiri (1975: 77) notes that there was mutual trust between the Kalonga and Chauma's chiefdom on the Dedza plateau. Chauma's area became the reformatory of Kalonga's kingdom. It boasted of training the most competent public executioners (*amkomba*) who punished those that failed to reform. The leaders therefore trusted each other and tried to work together in ensuring that peace, law and order throughout their kingdom. Apart from leaders, all inhabitants were encouraged to cultivate mutual trust.

Consensus is also evident by a semantic study of the dominant Chewa/Nyanja languages spoken by the Maravi people. For example in proverbs such as, *Nkhang'a zidapangana kusadache* (Guinea-fowls agreed/reached consensus

before dawn). This proverb underlines the importance of building consensus first before doing anything in the society. “Before dawn” suggests the period before a decision is made, while dawn implies the time of action. Action must therefore be preceded by consensus. Consensus is also encouraged in the proverb, *Nzeru zayekha adaviyika nsima m’madzi*. (Mr His-own wisdom dipped stiff-porridge into water (Chakanza 2000: 265). This shows that consulting others before making a decision is fundamental. It warns against the danger of doing things without seeking guidance and consensus from others.

Another proverb that encourages consensus states that, *Mutu umodzi siunsenza denka* (One head cannot carry the whole roof). This proverb teaches every member of this society including the Kalonga that it is important to work together. In decision making it alludes to the idea that decisions that concern the whole community must not come from one person but every member of that house must contribute. Lastly, another example is the proverb, *Kali kokha nkanyama ali awiri ndi anthu* (The one who is alone is an animal but those that are two are human beings). This underlines the importance of the community (solidarity), hence supports the centrality of consensus of communal members in decision making.

Maravi democracy through the legitimisation of kings

A second way that the moderate communitarian framework can help to reveal the democratic processes intrinsic to the Maravi Kingdom, is through illuminating the process of legitimisation of kings and other leaders by individuals and the community. Focusing on similar elements in Baganda and Zulu polities, respectively, Wamala (2004: 439-440) and Teffo (2004: 449) argued that kingship as an institution in Africa is in itself a form of deliberative democracy.¹² For example, Wamala (2004: 436-437) supports the idea that elements of democracy may be traced in the gradual legitimisation process of kings, which apparently does not contravene any democratic principle. As I will show, the same essential components of democratic procedure can be discerned in the legitimisation of Maravi kingship.

In Malawi, the traditional Maravi kingship may be considered a very good example of monarchical democracy if one examines the legitimization process of leaders (Phiri 1975), stemming from the tribal relations existing in matrilineal totemic clan system, wherein authority in the community is given

¹² Wamala talks about monarchical democracy while Teffo about the link between kingship and democracy arguing that United Kingdom is democratic although the Queen has an important role in their political set-up.

to women, who can then delegate it to men, usually the uncle. This is slightly different from the legitimisation process of the pre-colonial Ganda which took place in a patrilineal totemic clan system.

In the process of their becoming a democracy, the Maravi started with the female dominance in leadership positions (Phiri 1975). The first well-known ruler was *Mangadzi*, who came from the Banda clan (thought to originally come from areas around the modern Congo/Zaire). This female leader was endowed with both spiritual/mystical and physical powers. Some of the female leaders who were descendants of *Mangadzi* include: “Chauwa at Chilenge, Mwali at Mankhamba, Kafuluma at Machinji, and later Matsakamula at Ntchisi” (Phiri 1975: 50).

Although democracy required that the people elect their *Mangadzi*, it is not clear whether a formal type of election was held or not. What is known is that all the female leaders were recognised and endorsed or legitimised by the community, and secondly that there were some democratic elements in these female leaders that contributed to the development of a democratic monarchy, known as the Maravi kingdom. From the legitimization of one female leader in the Banda clan, a democratic spirit is manifested on how the female clan leader came in contact with other clan leaders forming one system of various legitimate sections under one general leader of all the clans. One of the commonly accepted versions indicates that there were other clans related to the Banda clan, which came to Malawi and initiated a dialogue with the female leaders. The main clans in this dialogue include the Phiri and the Mwale clans (MacCracken 2012). These also came from Congo/Zaire and were very good administrators (they acquired these skills from their motherland).¹³ They were also experts in Agriculture, trade and iron processing (MacCracken 2012). It is because of their rhetorical skills that they decided to follow a diplomatic and democratic approach when they met the female leader of the Banda clan. They decided to combine the varieties of their expertise and to divide authority amongst themselves.

Through an agreement, the Phiri and Mwale clan leaders became chiefs who were in charge of physical and earthly affairs, while the Banda became responsible for spiritual affairs. It was further agreed that the overall chief of this coalition of united groups was to be known as the *Kalonga*. Although there are disputes about how the Banda and the Maravi clans of the Phiri and Mwale came together (see Phiri 1975), the salient feature of these different groups deciding to come together under one main ruler reveals the

¹³ They are connected with the Lunda (1665-1887) and Luba kingdoms. The Lunda was a confederation of states with its capital city known as Katanga.

legitimation of a supreme authority by other leaders each representing their own clans. This is the signature of a democratic spirit present and functioning. It is from this nucleus that the Maravi started extending their territory and power by incorporating other clans, hence forming a complex system of confederation.

The leaders from other smaller clans exercised their power locally but at the same time recognised the central symbolic power of the *Kalonga* as their overall leader.¹⁴ This recognition again reveals a democratic spirit whereby chiefs of lesser scope in their power represented their people and participated in the general governance of the Maravi kingdom. The status of *Kalonga* was similar to that of the *Ssabataka* in the Ganda society in the sense that he was considered as *primus inter pares*, that is, an equal among equals (see Wamala 2004).

Agonistic elements of democracy in the Maravi kingdom

A third dimension through which the moderate communitarian framework can trace democracy in the Maravi Kingdom is by revealing the capacity of indigenous African communities to accommodate individual and communal differences (respecting the us/them and I/you relations), and their dexterity in resolving problems related to alterity. Because of the respect and acceptance of both individual and community-oriented values and priorities, indigenous African political cultures are widely celebrated for their procedures of restitutive and reparative justice. This important area is not well researched or mentioned in the works of Wamala (2004) and Teffo (2004).

Here it is useful to introduce Chantal Mouffe's (2000) view that democracy is not only a question of consensus directed by rationality or morality; but fundamentally it is a system capable of accommodating dissension, differences and conflict. Agonism is viewed as inherent in human social relations and the aim of politics is not the elimination of conflict or differences. Politics must lead to a situation of unity and at the same time respecting differences. Mouffe (2000: 15) writes:

Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an "us" by the determination of a "them". The novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them opposition – which is an impossibility – but the different ways

¹⁴ This confederal Maravi kingdom may be seen as following a system similar to the United States of America where there are independent states with their leaders but always under the umbrella of one president.

in which it is established. The crucial issue is to establish this us/them discrimination in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy.

The inhabitants of the Maravi Kingdom apparently had a mechanism for living together which did not erase individuals' social identities. Diversity among clans was not met with derision. People were not forced to become cultural copies of other clans; yet at the same time they were united under one paramount chief.

Living together with differences among the Maravi people is exemplified further by the system of assimilation. For example some of the Lomwe's (Nguru chiefs Manhanga and Chiponda) assimilated in this group, freely adopted the Nyanja/Maravi clan names as a way of integration. Yet they were still recognised and respected as different from the Chewa. They were encouraged to maintain their cultures and apparently none were forced to enter the Nyau secret society of the Chewa. Another example of this respect for the Other emerged during the Nyarubanga famine, when some Lomwes belonging to the group of Mihavani were nicknamed *Ambewa* meaning mice man. This led to the development of the Mbewe clan, which was accepted in the society, but at the same time respected for its unique characteristics and differences from other clans.

The Maravi capacity to live with tolerance and without rancour among different social groups indicates a liberal democratic valuing of diversity. The political structure provided opportunities for each clan member to play their distinct role, with their local chiefs, at the same time as they were valuing the unity of conceding to one authority who ruled by accommodating to diversity.

Conclusion

Although consensus, legitimisation of political authority, and the capacity to deal with agonism have been presented as depicting the spirit of democracy in the Maravi Kingdom, objections can be raised about this analysis of democracy in an African context:

One objection to these considerations might be that some Maravi leaders were autocratic and not democratic. Confirming this objection, Codrington in 1898 indicated that the Maravi remnant chiefs practiced "oligarchical autocracy" (see also Phiri 1975: 73). But while it may be conceded that there were isolated cases of autocracy, these cases do not represent correctly the whole Maravi Kingdom, nor do their examples correctly characterise Maravi political norms as undemocratic. Although sometimes kingship may turn into

monarchism and not democracy, kingship office does not necessarily imply that the system is antithetical to democratic polity (Phiri 2004: 445). In fact, a king may practice democratic values.

A second possible objection may come from those embracing Jürgen Habermas's notion of rationality, which is more influenced by western logical principles. The objection is that the type of consensus that is claimed in the African traditional context lacks the western element of logic. An extreme position of this argument was forwarded by (Lévy-Bruhl [1910] 1985) who considered Africans were primitive, hence not rational enough. The problem of rationality and consensus demanded by Jürgen Habermas was already discussed by Iris Marion Young (2010) who indicated that there are other forms of communication that are excluded by the Western claims of rationality and consensus. It is therefore important to develop a type of democracy that includes other forms of rationality and ways of thinking, such that the minority is not marginalized. I will respond further that there are different philosophical tools that were used by the Maravi when trying to reach consensus, such as proverbs, metaphors, etc., all these forms are important in informing the public about the rational nature of their discussions that led towards consensus.

A third possible objection is that agonism among the Maravi had, on a number of occasions, led to separation and war. But this does not establish that the Maravi people did not qualify as democratic in their system of governance. Some of these wars were economically motivated, and might be interpreted as anomalies, caused by factors that disturbed the principles of democracy as happens all over the modern world. A perfect (ideal) democracy cannot be claimed among the Maravi people, nor of any people. But the elements of democracy can be discerned through the historical record, the application of the well-received moderate communitarian model of African social norms, and the semantic analysis of relevant proverbs, as demonstrated above.

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