

From Chaos to Community: African Problems and Future Prospects

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The predicament of the entire African society that has generated the so-called Afro-pessimism and how to forge a better future for the society, is the focus of this essay. How can Africa be reconstructed and reconstituted for the challenges of the new millennium? The paper argues that the future of Africa can only be guaranteed if there is a conscious effort to transform the prevalent chaos for a community. A community in this respect is a nation-state where the politics of identity is effectively managed to the extent that consensus is constantly maintained and divergent interests are controlled to form common good.

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Introduction

The question needs to be asked today: How can the African nation-state be reconstructed and reconstituted to make her equipped for the challenges of the twenty-first century? To put it poignantly: How can we address the hydra-headed crisis facing Africa to make her realise her future prospects and promise? At the commencement of the new millennium, the question of how to avoid the predicament of the moment for the transformation of the African society is an imperative one. This is because today Africa is a society with serious problems. For over a decade now, the hegemonic project of national development which dominated African discourses and thinking in the early days of post-independence has grounded to a halt. The situation has become so bad in recent times that all institutions and structures originated and inherited from colonialism for the sustenance of the society have become ineffective. So critical and complicated is the crisis facing the African people that observers regard the society as an apt realisation of the mythical state of nature that was described by Thomas Hobbes in his seminal book: *Leviathan*, as a state of war by all against all.

The predicament of the African society today at the dawn of the new millennium is not only that the society is facing a multidimensional crisis, it is precisely that all measures employed to alleviate the crisis are complicating the situation. In this respect, we can mention the fact that the liberal policies adopted in most African nation-states in the form of democratisation and privatisation at the political and economic sectors respectively are not only incapable of reducing the problem, but also complicating it. This is in the sense that the democratic measure in Africa generated conflicts among the traditional groups leading to anarchy and complete disorder that even threaten the continued existence of most of the nation-states. The liberalisation of the economy on the other hand, as a measure forced on Africa by foreign interests further compounded the dependency of Africa and the debt burden.

The essence of our discourse presently is to reflect on the prevailing African crisis. We are interested in getting to the root of the problem. Why is it that all institutions and structures inherited from colonialism and even those that are adopted by post-colonial African nation-states are presently failing? How do we transform the society such that African nation-state can move from the state of chaos to a state of community; where common good rather than self interests shall be the motivating factor behind all actions and policies? These are the questions that shall

engage our attention in this paper. It is our belief that the only way to recapture the African promise and prepare for a more stable and organised future society in Africa is by addressing and suggesting ways of alleviating the present crisis.

African Crisis: Return to the Past

The question to be asked is this: What is the nature of the African crisis? The question is expedient because the character of a problem will go a long way to determine how to ameliorate it. The African problem is indeed an overwhelming one. The complexity of the situation makes any description an over simplification. It also necessitates the recent coinage of the phrase "Afro-pessimism". The phrase, "Afro-pessimism" refers to the precarious situation of Africa and the attendant despair and despondent belief that the prevailing problem cannot but consume its victim. The best that can be done to explain the prevailing African predicament is to conceive it as a crisis of development in the sense that rather than witness positive transformation in all aspects of life, African nation-states are witnessing not even stagnation but retrogression. Every department of the society: politics, economy, ecology and social relations are either fumbling or completely broken down. A graphic description of the African crises was given by Lance Morrow in a comprehensive feature of the African crises carried out by the Time International magazine. According to this report,

Africa... has begun to look like an immense illustration of chaos theory, . . . Much of the continent has turned into a battle ground of contending dooms: AIDS and overpopulation, poverty, starvation, illiteracy, corruption ~, social breakdown, vanishing resources, overcrowded cities, drought, war and the homelessness of war's refugees. Africa has become the basket case of the planet, the "Third World of the Third World," a vast continent in a free fall, a sort of neo-post-colonial breakdown.
(Morrow 1992:31)

The overwhelming and complicated situation of Africa is already engaging the attention of many interested parties. Academic discourse relating to Africa, throughout the last decade is devoted to the African problem and how to avert the impending doom. At the dawn of the new millennium, it has also become a priority project for all stakeholders to

meet this challenge and chart a new course for the future of the African peoples. Consensus of opinion among discussants of the African predicament is that the political dimension of the problem is primary to other manifestations of the problem (Ake, 1992 and Anyang Nyong'o 1987). In every aspect of life in Africa, there is discontentment, disorientation and disorder. The political problem is considered that to be foundational to all other manifestations of the African crises. This is the rationale behind Ake's apt title: "How Politics Underdeveloped Africa." The African problem is fundamentally political because the nation-state, which is the institution originated by modernity for moderating the secular/rational culture of the contemporary world, is precisely the institution in crisis. It should therefore not be surprising, if all other fabrics of the society begin to collapse.

The appropriate way to understand the precarious situation of Africa therefore is to consider it as the crisis of the state and breakdown of social order. In as much as the state, as the institution for managing the divergent interests that constitute the modern society is incapable of maintaining peace and social order, then one should expect the fumbling of the entire superstructure of the African society. Basil Davidson, the great Africanist in his book: *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History*, diagnosed the African ailment as essentially an institutional crisis. The modern nation-state inherited from colonialism is to him the root of the African predicament (Davidson 1994:261).

The crisis of Africa as a crisis of the nation-state can not be denied. It is very obvious. When Abiola Irele, in his essay "The crisis of Legitimacy in Africa" identifies a strong interface between the economic and political manifestations of the African problem (Irele 1992), he is merely affirming this obvious position. The fact that a state that is incapable of maintaining social order can not effectively mobilise her people for economic development is an axiomatic fact. Indeed such a failed state can not realise its essence of maintaining social order, in the multi-dimensional nature of the idea. The state as the nerve-centre of modern secular scientific organisation is important and primary to all other operations of the society. In the modern epoch, the state is like a spider spinning a web of activities such that the design and fabric of the structure depends on the spider performing the knitting. In this respect, it is the crisis of the state as the primary and foundational institution that has manifested in the various crises that we are presently witnessing in Africa today.

African crises have manifested in divergent forms; such as civil wars,

civil strife and violent group conflicts among religious, military and ethnic organisations as we have seen recently in countries such as Algeria, Burundi, Congo, Egypt, Liberia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. It has also manifested in the outright demand for the dissolution of the commonwealth as we have seen in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Senegal and Somali. All these popular struggles for the reordering of the state and clamour for social justice are occurring within the atmosphere of misery, destitution and diseases. This cluster of problems, has become the condition of the African society not only because of the many years of civil wars and environmental abuse, but most especially because of a weak state that allows its economy to be directed from outside. The economy of Africa has become so messy in recent times with the institutionalisation of liberal policies and the Structural Adjustment Programme (S.A.P) that it has made the situation of the ordinary man in Africa that of the "scrabble for existence." (Morrow 1992)

All these divergent manifestations of the precarious state of the African society can be explained as the failure of the post-colonial state. Discourse on the African crisis maintains that the failure of the African state is due to her colonial origin as an institution conceived primarily not for the positive mobilisation of the people for development, but rather as foreign instrument, deliberately fashioned for authoritarian acts and the exploitation of the colonised. In bringing the many nationalities together to form a country, the mission of the colonial lord was far from altruistic. The plural states were formed to satisfy administrative and economic interests of the colonisers. Rather than strive to encourage integration, the foreign power deliberately amplified the differences to perpetuate and make enduring the exploitation and dispossession. It is tragic that it is this externally conceived institution that African leaders received as an instrument of social mobilisation and decision making. As Davidson maintained post-independence leaders did not deem it fit to establish states based on pre-colonial arrangements, rather they prefer the colonial structures (Davidson 1984). Rather than making conscious effort to transform the foreign institution, the new leaders as true heirs of colonialism accepted it and continued to use it as a weapon of dispossession and oppression.

The fact is that by the very fact of the nature of the African state as a 'hand-me-down' phenomenon (Anyang' Nyong'o 1987), it can not effectively serve its essence as an instrument of mobilisation, order and social justice. The crisis of the African society, with the neo-colonial state at the centre has been described thus:

What is being observed in Africa today is that -given its class content, historical heritage and the global context of its current operation the state is losing or has lost both the ability and capacity to undertake the socio-economic programme necessary for the continued reproduction of the capitalist mode of production.

(Anyang' Nyong'o 1987:17)

The crisis of Africa as the predicament of a society that does not have an appropriate resource for maintaining social order is getting complicated with every passing day. The state that ought to be an institution of the modern society for managing not only the commonwealth, but the common good for the overall interests of the entire populace has completely abandoned her traditional role. It is in this respect that people regard the states in Africa as collapsed institutions.

The idea of collapsed state according to William Zartman refers "to a situation where the structure, authority (legitimate power) law, and political order have fallen apart and must be reconstituted"(1995: 1). The predicament of the collapsed state in Africa, which caused the precarious fate of the entire African society and peoples, is that it is incapable of performing its tripartite functions of serving as (1) sovereign authority (2) organiser of decision-making (3) security guarantor (Zartman 1995). In essence, African states are making the society crises prone because they are incapable of exercising the sovereign rights and duties to execute programs and policies that will help foster the public good and interests, particularly that of the preservation of life and property. As it has been said, all the duties and responsibilities of the state are intertwined such that "a weakening of one function drags down others with it." (Zartman 1987:5)

All over Africa today, it is appropriate to say that the state is giving way or about to do so. African crisis is indeed a crisis at the foundation of the society. It is for this reason that the problem is deep-seated and the drift cannot be easily terminated. The institution that ought to coordinate the entire situation is itself at the root of the crisis. The state has lost its capacity and confidence to control any aspect of the society. The state in most African societies, "no longer receives supports from nor exercises controls over its people, and it no longer is even the target of demands, because its people know that it is incapable of providing supplies. No longer functioning, with neither traditional nor charismatic nor institutional sources of legitimacy, it has lost the right to rule"

(Zartman 1995:5). It is for this reason, that Abiola Irele, in an essay cited earlier defines the African problem as a crisis of legitimacy (Irele 1992). Paulin Hountondji the popular African philosopher, calls it the crisis of confidence, in the sense that the civil society has completely lost faith in the state (Hountondji 1996). In essence, the problem of Africa today is that the state as the institution constituted to moderate divergent interests and manage it to reach a common goal, can no more be trusted. Rather than exercise power in the interests of all and strive to attain common good, certain groups have hijacked it for particularistic interests. And when such a situation occurs the state loses her legitimacy because the "legitimacy of the modern state is linked to its capacity to present itself as a provider of necessary public goods and more importantly, a neutral arbiter that guarantees the security of all sections of society. When the state is generally perceived as serving particularistic interests of one group, it starts losing its legitimacy, and indeed, its authority." (Ibrahim 1995:2-3)

This precisely is the case in Africa today. In their use of power, the groups that have hijacked the state, realising that they are executing a self imposed mandate resort to outright authoritarianism. It is for this reason that the African state is described paradoxically as a 'lame-leviathan'. The imagery of a 'lame-leviathan' aptly summarises the entire tragedy of the African state today. While the state has acquired all the paraphernalia of power by the partisan interest - that has seized it and is constantly repressing agitation from other groups, such power remains naked, unwarranted and illegitimate. In actuality the African state is merely exercising legal, rather than moral power. And its victims are obeying the laws (when they are still doing this) not out of obligation but out of expediency. Fear rather than duty is what the lame-leviathan appeals to. The state in Africa today is therefore legally strong, but morally weak (Osaghae 1989). And this is the root of the anarchy that has become the situation of most African countries today. It is the morality and legitimacy of the state that can ensure social cohesion and the mobilisation for development, not the naked exercise of power. With the absence of this, social order is already compromised and "mere anarchy is loose upon the earth."

African crisis in its multifarious dimensions is precisely and poignantly the taking over of public good by private interests. Whether we talk in terms of authoritarian rule, civil wars and strife, capitalist's exploitation and degradation of resources, endemic corruption, overwhelming destitution and the overall degradation of humanity and abuse of all human

values, they can be explained as manifestations of the privatisation of the state. Ideally and normally, the state ought to be the neutral institution that will reconcile the diverse interests within the society. It ought to be the bastion of social justice in the Rawlsian sense of arranging "social institutions into one scheme of cooperation" (Rawls 1972:54). Social justice in this sense is essentially fairness among all parties in the distribution of benefits and burdens. We all know that justice as fairness, can not be achieved when a particular group - ethnic, religious, gender, professional, class - takes over the machinery of the state. The state, in order to maintain social justice and by implication social order ought to be neutral and equi-distant to all parties. It is for the simple reason that the African state can no more perform her function as the custodian of social justice, that social order broke down in the society culminating in the overwhelming crisis that has become the lot of Africa in this dawn of the twenty-first century.

The situation in Africa today is aptly and precisely that the age long tension between personal interest and communal welfare has been seriously mismanaged. The essence and purpose of the state in its original conception is to manage this and generate integration, expedient for the promotion of the common good. Rather in Africa a specter of egoism has taken over. It has been said that African leaders propagated a 'self model' that encourages self pursuit at the expense of national or public good (Oladipo 1998). The failure of the state to promote justice and security and the propagation of a public philosophy of egoism in Africa, finally consolidated primordial identities and generated the prevailing anarchy that we are witnessing in the continent. Having failed completely in all respects and particularly in forging national integration, the state became incapable of controlling the struggle for meager resources. People now submit themselves to clans, ethnic groups, religious bodies and other associations that could help meet their basic necessities: Nationalism became completely anathema in a state that has been taken over by a handful of people serving their private ends. It is for this that anarchy rather than order has become the case in many nations of Africa today.

Future Prospects and the Quest for Community

What then is the prospect for transformation? How can Africa be reconstituted to move from the state of crisis to the state of positive

development in all spheres of life? This challenge of transforming Africa today is acknowledged by all stakeholders. Our position here is that the appropriate starting point of this project is to demand for a revisit of the mythical social contract. In essence all countries of Africa need to re-examine the form, origin and character of their union and if necessary renegotiate its essence for the purpose of forming a suitable state that will serve common good rather than private interests. Anthony Appiah has said that the liberation from colonialism left Africa with the task of the state striving to be a nation (1992). The tragedy of Africa is that this urgent need was treated with levity, so much that in today's Africa, the many nations forced into a state are striving to pull out of the colonial arrangement. The essential problem of politics in Africa as the base of the entire superstructure of the society, is the failure to turn the polity into a community or strive at all to do so. By the community, we mean an ideal society where the recognition of the common good is always at the mind of most citizens. Community is a group of people who see themselves as members of the same family, "it is marked by mutuality and communal bonds"(Bender 1978:6). The community, because of this mutuality can effectively manage its differences and promote mutual progress. Our search for community in Africa is therefore the demand not only for national loyalty, but also for "common goals, interests and values in terms of which a national identity can be forged and a sense of neighbourliness developed among a number of hitherto disparate social groups."(Oladipo 1998: 107)

The future of Africa should therefore be dominated by the quest for community. The threshold of the last millennium witnessed agitation for popular democracy. The demand fizzled out or generated anarchy simply because of lack of social cohesion. As Zolberg predicted in an earlier essay, democracy established on the ground of cleavages cannot produce any fruit but anarchy (Zolberg 1992). As Laakso and Olukoshi say, mere introduction of democratic culture is not sufficient for alleviating the African crisis, the nation-state itself has to be reconstituted to reflect the pluralism and diversities that constitute the modern African state (Laakso and Olukoshi 1996). Democracy is therefore not feasible without a proper forging of community. The real project that should engage the future thinking and action of African peoples is the quest for democratic community, because it is a way of addressing the multiple problems confronting the African society.

How can we realise the norms of popular sovereignty and social cohesion: which the idea underlying the phrase 'democratic commu-

nity' strives to attain? The starting point of the project is implicit, through the initiation of the public discourse and dialogue. Such a discourse has already been demonstrated by the national conferences we witnessed in many African states towards the ends of the last decade: This very good example truncated by - extrinsic and intrinsic - factors needs to be emulated.

National dialogue within the public sphere is a necessity for all democratic society in order to attain consensus and cohesion. It is an alternative to violent context that has frustrated all efforts of development. In actual fact, African nation-states more than others need such a national discourse because of the origin of the polity that has made the society very opposed to the idea of a state as a contractual phenomenon. African nation-state did not evolve nor was negotiated. Rather they are produced for the economic interests of a powerful foreign nation. Such an arrangement even for the simple reason that they cannot be sustained needs to be reconstructed. Indeed democracy as popular sovereignty commences when there is a virile public sphere in the Habermas conception of it. Africa needs the type of public sphere where we can converse about our differences and struggles without allowing them to degenerate. We need an atmosphere, which Hannah Arendt describes as the "world that gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other" (1958). In essence, we are saying that the community as a nation, where there is full national integration, can only be attained if we allow conversation to take place not only among the elites, but also among all the people.

What then should be the essential vision of our public dialogue in Africa? It ought to be the issue of justice - how to manage appropriately and fairly the common burdens and benefits that accrue to the entire polity. A nation attains the ideal of community only and truly when the nation has appropriately address the issue of social justice to the satisfaction of all, such that even when there is a feeling of discontentment, the aggrieved really knows the means of getting redress. Kai Nielsen has said that the question of justice is the question of social order, social harmony "in which people acknowledge their communal nature and their self autonomy"(1996). The project of resolving this tension which has hitherto being neglected should be the focus of our discourse in order to realise transformation in Africa.

The public discourse that is imperative for the transformation of the national society into a community of common interests in Africa needs to address in the first instance certain basic issues particularly the consti-

tution and configuration of the countries. The people need to address fundamental problems relating to the overall management of the society. What should be the nature of the arrangement for governance? Should power be concentrated at the centre or with the units? How should the resources of the state inherited or created be shared among the constituting units? In essence the public discourse as a means of negotiating the future of Africa and the means for realising the community "should be prepared to seriously address issues like federalism, the promotion of local administration, cultural autonomy, and proportional representation." (Laakso and Olukoshi, 1996:33).

Conclusion

The eminent African historian Ade Ajayi has said that Africa can annex the frustrations of the past, as an experience for managing the future. He says "The future of a new society in Africa will need to be developed in Africa born out of the African historical experience and the sense of continuity of African history" (Ajayi 1982: 8). At the dawn of the new millennium, the overwhelming African crisis of the moment needs to be addressed so that we can move from the society of chaos to the society of common interests.

The present discussion emphasised the need to make a rethinking of the idea of democracy as the solution of the African predicament. The democracy that we need is not elitism but genuine participation of all in a community where common goods and social justice are constantly pursued. This ideal society can only be realised in Africa if there is a genuine will to understand and appropriately manage our diversities. The management of divergent interests in Africa is a necessity not only for the achievement of social order in the continent, it is also imperative for moving us from the state of chaos to the state of cohesion. Social order and cohesion will return the rights and legitimacy of the African State back. It will enable the institution to undertake her socio-economic functions and restore her confidence to confront the foreign interests that have taken over the economy for their egoistic interests. The future of Africa can only be different, if and only if the nation-states in Africa become cohesive communities.

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