Deciding in Unison

Themes in Consensual Democracy in Africa

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Foreword

Barry Hallen

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The issues relating to consensual democracy offer unique insights into precolonial and postcolonial Africa. What makes consensual democracy important is that it is said to arise from indigenous African beliefs and practices with regard to human relations generally and governance in particular. Governance in precolonial Africa did not involve factional political 'parties' or occasional 'elections' in which people are supposedly 'free' (making an 'X' mark on a ballot) to exercise their political will. Consensual democracy is meant to restore the right (not privilege) of people to govern themselves on a constant basis.

In modern times, consensual democracy is first said to have been systematically expressed by noteworthy political figures at the time of African independence in the 1960s. More recently, its most important advocate is the Ghanaian philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu. Wiredu has published no less than ten major essays articulating, elaborating, and defending it as a political alternative that will save the nation-states of Africa from the perils of the liberal democratic forms of government they were obliged to adopt by the European powers at the time of independence.

For Wiredu it is a gross mistake to attribute the problems and instabilities of African nation-states to endemic corruption and incompetence. The liberal democratic form of government championed by the West has proved to be incompatible with the political and moral values and practices of Africa's indigenous cultures. That is why it has ended up causing more problems than it has solved. In a consensual democracy, ethnic bias is to be controlled via the absence of political parties. Candidates who seek office are to be evaluated solely on the basis of their professional qualifications rather than party affiliation. Regular 'town meetings' of the electorate with their representatives to arrive at a consensus on pertinent issues will be frequent and foundational. Consensual democracy thereby restores the right of the individual to participate directly in governance.

Wiredu recognizes that he alone is not competent to give a complete picture of the consensual democratic state. He, therefore, appeals to colleagues to help him with that task. That is at least one way the ten essays that constitute this volume should be regarded. They are written by colleagues involved with political philosophy in the African context who are concerned to review the merits and demerits of consensual democracy as a political alternative for the Africa of today.

With that in mind, the introductory chapter to this volume provides a history and synopsis of consensus theory, prioritizing the thought of Kwasi Wiredu. In subsequent chapters, some contributors endorse Wiredu's views overall, but with substantive revisions and additions. Others disagree entirely with consensual democracy and argue that adjustments can be made to the liberal democratic model that will make it compatible with contemporary Africa. Still, others focus on Wiredu's overall philosophy and the status and role of consensus in it.

All contributors recognize that consensual democracy is not to be treated as the product of a purely theoretical thought experiment. It is said to have roots in the cultures of Africa that can be empirically demonstrated. Consensual democracy, therefore, becomes an example of applied philosophy. It is meant to be of indigenous origin and a real-life political alternative that can be adopted by the nation-states of Africa. As far as Wiredu and the contributors to this volume are concerned that makes the assessment of its merits and demerits relevant to problems that should demand the attention of all.

Introduction

The chapters in this edited volume open up new vistas in the debate about how we could fashion a consensual democracy that minimizes the adversarial element of the majoritarian democracy African countries inherited from their colonial masters. In the main, the contributions set the stage for new frontiers by linking traditional African consensus decision making with knowledge production, epistemology, and the building of resistance movements. The volume also features a frontier breaking piece seeking to demonstrate that Wiredu's consensus proposal is consistent with his views about the relativity of truth, and how we should handle this relativity. But there are chapters demonstrating that the non-party system proposed by Wiredu is unsuitable for practice, and other chapters tracing the problems associated with transferring consensus-supporting values such as communalism into the contemporary Africa setting.

The collection is presently composed of eleven chapters. The first is a summary of the consensus debate so far, and aims to introduce the reader into what has happened in the literature. This chapter, written by Emmanuel Ani and Edwin Etieyibo, explains that the debate is a broad one that encompasses different debates, which have been going on regarding different aspects of Kwasi Wiredu's proposal, or/and different ramifications of his proposal. The sub debates that are currently active are on the role of rationality, the question of interests, the question of models of democracy, the communitarian question, the issue of the structure of the party system, and the consensus potential of different issues. This chapter devotes separate sections to summarizing these sub debates and developments in these sub-areas.

In chapter two, Husein Inusah argues that current attempts at identifying an African epistemology fail because they do not consider what could pass as justified belief and knowledge. Inusah argues that they do not give us the opportunity to study how an epistemic subject stands in relation to a proposition, or study the doxastic attitudes of epistemic agents constructed upon the epistemic canons of truth and objectivity. Inusah suggests that consensus provides a possible platform for meeting these requirements in determining an African definition of knowledge and furthermore providing the resource to reconstruct African epistemology.

In the next chapter, Martin Asiegbu and Victor C. Nweke contend that Kwasi Wiredu's argument for an African model of democracy that operates in the absence of political parties is consistent with his conception of truth. They argue that there is a link between Wiredu's understanding of truth and what

has come to be known as consensual democracy in African political philosophy. Their approach is expository, critical, and argumentative. They present an analysis of both Wiredu's theory of truth as well as his position on the place of democracy and consensus in the intellectual heritage of Africa. Their central submission is that Wiredu's conception of truth as 'considered opinion' is fundamentally deliberative. They explain that a careful reading of Wiredu's idea of consensus and democracy in connection with his epistemological standpoint will reveal that Wiredu advances a specific variant of deliberative democracy that is consistent with his conception of truth. They thus conclude that Wiredu is a foremost theorist of a variant of deliberative democracy that stems from the African intellectual heritage.

The fourth chapter by Dennis Masaka takes issue with Wiredu's thesis that a non-party system of democracy is a realistic possibility in solving the political crises inaugurated in Africa through the imposition of majoritarian democracy. Whilst Masaka agrees with the thesis that liberal or majoritarian democracy has led to some significant problems in Africa thereby justifying the need to rethink the possibility of a return to the "traditional" consensual democracy model, he thinks that multi-party politics might still be viably pursued within the framework of a consensual democratic model. His general point is that the existence of political parties might turn out to be necessary for a viable consensual democratic system of governance in Africa in present times.

In chapter five, Bernard Matolino argues that supporters of consensus have to strike a balance between its rooting in traditional communalist societies, its modern conceptual defence and its possible application. He explains that this balance is necessary to bolster the claimed desirability and conceptual superiority of democracy by consensus vis-à-vis majoritarian democracy. He points out that the juxtaposition of these two modes of democracy is partially a historical and partially a conceptual battle. The historical factors present themselves as a mirror image of the contest between accounts of the conceptual vitality of traditional politics and the unsuitability of forcibly imposed Western liberal multi-party democracy. However, as Matolino observes, the sticking problem for supporters of consensus is the correlation between the past, in which consensus worked, and the present theorization of its superiority. In this chapter, Matolino attempts to show that the latest attempt by Martin Ajei at supporting consensus does not work as it fails to transcend the tension between consensus' rootedness in communalism and its supporters' attempts to cast it as conceptually superior to its rival.

We then see the sixth chapter by Vitumbiko Nyirenda, in which he examines Kwasi Wiredu's proposal of an alternative to the majoritarian system of democracy in Africa. In this article, Wiredu had argued against majoritarian democracy as a system of governance that fails to deal with most of Africa's

political problems — problems that arise as a result of the need for parties to retain power and lack of substantial representation of the electorate. To deal with these problems, Wiredu had proposed consensual democracy as an alternative form of governance. In this chapter, Nyirenda demonstrates that Wiredu's consensus democracy does not avoid the issues of elections that are central and problematic to majoritarian democracy. Nyirenda's central argument is that as long as consensus democracy involves elections, it will lead to the same problems in one way or another.

In chapter seven, Emmanuel Ani shows that Wiredu's proposal for a reading of consensus democracy as unanimity in decision making did not earn the agreement of scholars generally. Ani then shows that the feasible way for advancing the consensus democracy project is to re-read it as a democracy by compromise. Ani delves into the concept of compromise, explaining three types of compromise. First, we have proportional compromise (when we compromise in terms of degrees, quantity, scales, qualities). We do this when we bargain over what quantity of time to invest in meetings or projects with other people, when we bargain over the prices of goods, and so on. Second, we have strategic compromise (when we compromise to resolve a conflict over strategy and method, and over strategic interests). Third, we have normative compromise (when we compromise to resolve a conflict over normative values such as religious beliefs and moral principles). Ani compares this taxonomy of compromise to Chiara Lepora's three kinds of compromise (substitution, intersection, and conjunction compromise), and draws lessons. Ani argues that Lepora's taxonomy is about what we lose and gain, and Ani's is about the content or item upon which we wish to compromise. Going beyond this, Ani explains that the most important denominator between the two taxonomies is that the proportional and strategic compromises (as well as the substitution and intersection compromises) offer veritable prospects for practice, whilst the normative compromise (and Lepora's conjunction compromise) is the most challenging. Ani argues that scholars exploring the prospects and challenges of a democracy by compromise would need to take in stock these kinds and sheds of compromise to figure what practitioners in such a democracy are up against, as well as how, in what ways, and in which situations they could maximize the material and psychological benefits of compromising, as well as reduce its psychological costs to compromisers.

The eight chapter is the contribution by Munamato Chemhuru, who seeks to foster what he calls 'Afro-consensual' democracy as a plausible basis for inclusive democratic political practice in post-colonial Africa. He provides reasons why Afro-consensual democracy guarantees participation, inclusivity and freedom, which the multi-party system of liberal democracy

is thought to represent. Overall, he concludes that Afro-consensual democracy is more appealing when compared to the Western multi-party constitutional style of democracy as it is currently being understood and practiced in post-colonial Africa.

In chapter nine, Edwin Etieyibo discusses consensus in the context of dissensus, especially in the form of resistance movements. Etieyibo explores the implications of the idea of dissensus *qua* resistance to Wiredu's proposal for a consensus democracy. He acknowledges that although Wiredu's consensual democracy recognises dissensus as the starting point for consensus, and allows for suspension of disbelief by parties or representatives, the role and value of opposition or dissensus *qua* resistance appear to be compromised given Wiredu's claim that consensus leads to genuine reconciliation and abstention from further disputation and recrimination. Etieyibo argues that although Wiredu acknowledges dissensus and proposes a suspension of disagreement in order to reach consensus, the idea of opposition seems lost by the very nature of consensus and Wiredu's claim that consensus leads to genuine reconciliation, as well as abstention from further disputes and recrimination.

In chapter ten, Alexander Kwakye looks at what he considers some of the defects that some scholars have identified with multiparty democracy, a political order widely adopted in Africa. In particular, he examines the positions of Kwesi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye on multiparty democracy. Kwakye accepts the position that in order for democracy to thrive in Africa, it ought to be tailored contextually to meet the socio-political needs of Africa. However, he rejects the ontological view that partisan extremism is a *sine qua non* of multiparty democracy. He argues in support of Gyekye's view that partisan extremism is a product of people's behaviour rather than a necessary consequence of multiparty democracy.

The book concludes with the eleventh chapter, which is Helen Lauer's analysis of democracy and good governance in comparing Kwasi Wiredu and Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze. Lauer explores what she describes as 'the widely read controversy' between these two scholars of African governance systems. Lauer argues that we should re-read these two scholars on a more careful reading as compatible rather than opposing. As part of this, she revisits some of Eze's critique of Wiredu in order to revise them. Lauer notes that Wiredu is concerned with effective distributive justice whilst Eze is concerned with the entitlements of individuals to recognition and opposition, and Lauer argues that there is 'a basic congruity between these divergent yet complementary foci of West African political heritage and their relevance to our current economic and demographic conditions.'

Overall, the contributions in this book further the debate on consensual democracy in Africa by criticizing objectionable features of the consensus

proposal whilst affirming the general value of a consensual variant to African politics. We hope this book provides material for research that seeks to bring new dimensions to the consensus project.

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Chapter 1

The Consensus Project: The Debate So Far

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Introduction

This chapter summarizes the debate that has so far greeted Kwasi Wiredu's proposal for a non-party system of democracy based on consensus. Wiredu's proposal is inspired by the traditional consensual practices of his native Akan of West Africa. We survey the support his proposal has received, as well as the opposition. The debate is a broad one that encompasses different debates, which have been going on regarding different aspects of Wiredu's proposal, or/and different ramifications of his proposal. The aspects or ramifications are the role of rationality, the question of interests, the question of models of democracy, the communitarian question, the issue of the structure of the party system, and the consensus potential of different issues. We devote separate sections to summarizing the debates and developments in these sub-areas.

Wiredu's Rejection of Multiparty Democracy

The debate about the propriety of democracy by consensus in Africa (which we shall henceforth call the consensus debate) began with a proposal by Kwasi Wiredu, a prominent African philosopher who argued that the multiparty system of competitive democracy is inappropriate for African countries. Wiredu argued that the multiparty system exacerbates political conflicts in an especially divisive way. According to him, it is not the case that political conflict is foreign to Africa; rather, it is the claim that conflict that emanates from the activities of political parties is not indigenous to Africa (2011: 1060). Wiredu calls this system of democracy "an epiphenomenon of colonialism" (Ibid) and argues that it is dangerous to practice in face of the

ethnic configurations and other kinds of conflicts in Africa because it exacerbates pre-existing tensions, including the marginalization of smaller ethnic groups by larger ones (2011: 1064).

Wiredu argues that the raison d'etre of political parties is to wrestle other parties for political power, which he sees as institutionalizing conflict or making it officially permissible and laudable. Electoral outcomes are sometimes very close, with the result that when one party wins and forms government, it wins by a slight majority, and those who support the opposition is often as numerous as those who support the party in power, resulting in what Wiredu refers to as a relative disenfranchisement of a section of the population (Wiredu 2011: 1060). He points out that this arrangement is backed by the constitution, amounting to what he calls a pre-established disharmony (Ibid). He writes that when a party wins power, others lose and stay out of it, and their ideas normally do not receive attention (2011: 1061). Wiredu asks us to think about the psychological infelicities of losing power, and the fact that the winners are keen to show their power to reach decisions to the exclusion of losers (Ibid).

It does not stop here. The multiparty system specifies that the political opposition is supposed to act as a check on the ruling party. But Wiredu argues that checks become unbalanced when one party has the presidency and another party the legislature, because the political opposition uses the legislature to turn opposition into obstruction of meaningful government initiatives (2011: 1059). Wiredu thinks the central idea is simply uncooperativeness, and a consequent adversarial spirit in politics (Ibid).

Wiredu also takes another shot at elections in the multiparty system. He begins by reminding us that the only way of seeking the consent of the governed is through rational persuasion, and argues that this is not what we see in elections. He notes that elections are so expensive that only those rich enough can participate, and much of the money goes into kinds of campaigning that do not aim at rational persuasion (2011: 1062). These are the kinds of processes that give us democratic leaders, including the President of the United States of America, as well as in many African countries where bribery and deception are among other darker methods of getting votes (Ibid).

In contrast to the multiparty system, Wiredu proposes a democracy by consensus. He argues that such a system could be inspired by traditional consensual practices. For an example of a traditional consensual system, Wiredu presented an account of the consensual political system of the Ashanti of Ghana.

Wiredu's Presentation of Traditional Consensual Practices

Wiredu asks us to take a refreshing look at the consensual systems of governance that were used by some traditional African societies. Wiredu cited Kenneth Kaunda as saying, "In our original societies, we operated by consensus. An issue was talked about in solemn conclave until such time as agreement could be achieved" (Wiredu 1996: 182). Wiredu also cited Julius Nyerere as saying, "… in African society the traditional method of conducting affairs is by free discussion" and Guy Glutton Brock as saying, "The elders would sit under the trees, and talk until they agree" (Ibid). Wiredu then notes that consensus was not merely a political phenomenon, but was "an immanent approach to social interaction" and generally regarded as axiomatic, although this did not mean that consensus was always achieved (Ibid). There was indeed conflict in African society, but the important issue for Wiredu was that the aim of resolving issues was to achieve reconciliation "rather than a mere abstention from further recriminations or collisions" (Ibid). This is not the same as the usual scenario in which disputes could be settled without the achievement of reconciliation. And reconciliation is for Wiredu "a form of consensus", because it restored goodwill by a reappraising of "the importance and significance of the initial bones of contention" (1996: 182-183). Wiredu clarifies that consensus need not entail an agreement on moral or cognitive issues, what is important is that all parties felt that their positions were considered on the issue at hand, neither does consensus "entail total agreement" (1996: 183). Wiredu, in fact, reminds us that consensus actually presupposes (at least initial) diversity, and since issues do not always polarise along the lines of strict contradictoriness, dialogue could be used to smoothen edges and produce compromises that all agree to.

Wiredu argues that we might avoid value-laden issues and dwell more on agreeing over practical issues. He writes, "where there is the will to consensus dialogue can lead to a willing suspension of disagreement, making possible agreed actions without necessarily agreed notions. This is important because certain issues do, indeed, precipitate exhaustive disjunctions which no dialogic accommodations can mediate" (1996: 183). Here, Wiredu seems to be saying that certain issues are quite intractable to discuss. And when he prescribes that we should limit our consensus drive to action-related issues, he appears to be suggesting that intractable issues are more in the value-laden category. Wiredu tells us that the suspension of disagreement is usually to be done by "the residual minority" (Ibid). But what is special about consensus is that "the majority prevails not over, but upon, the minority" "… to accept the proposal in question", instead of simply living with it as we see in majoritarian democracy (1996: 190). He adds that a minority is expected to acquiesce in a consensus system in order for a decision to be reached (Ibid).

Wiredu, however, points out that this process depends on the patience and persuasiveness of the right kind of people.

Wiredu distinguishes between two categories of traditional African societies: those with a centralized authority exercised through the machinery of government, and those without centralized government-like authority. He noted that life in the second category was just as orderly as life in the first (Ibid). Wiredu then tells us that consensus was practised by those in the first category, who were among the most centralized and warlike ethnic groups in Africa, and he cited the Zulus and Ashantis as examples (Ibid 183-184). Wiredu then muses that, by contrast, less militaristic societies also manifested less enthusiasm for consensus. Wiredu sees this contrast as 'paradoxical', but does not reflect on it.

Having mentioned the Zulu and the Ashanti as two prominent examples of traditional societies whose political systems were based on consensus, Wiredu writes that, in the Ashanti kingdom, lineage was a basic political unit, and every such unit had a head, elected through consensus. The qualifications for such a position were "seniority in age, wisdom, a sense of civic responsibility, and logical persuasiveness" (1996: 184). Wiredu narrates that where these qualities united in one person, election was routine, but where they were scattered among different persons, discussions were often more prolonged but aimed at consensus. Indeed, Wiredu reports that there was never an act of formal voting, and no longstanding word for voting in the Ashanti language. All elections were done through consensus. The lineage head represented the lineage in the village or town council, which in turn elected someone to represent it at the regional council, which in turn elected someone to represent them at the national council headed by the king of the Ashantis, the *Asantehene*. Decisions (presumably both electoral and substantive) were by consensus at all levels (Wiredu 1996: 185).

Wiredu tells us that consensus was not an accidental method to the Ashantis, it was a premeditated option because they considered voting to be too easy a way to reach decisions (1996: 185), and voting side-lined minorities (1996: 183, 186, 190). Minorities are represented in consensus, and Wiredu tells us that there are two concepts of representation. We have formal representation (the representation of a given constituency in council), and substantive representation (the representation of the will of a constituency in the making of a decision). Wiredu observes that formal representation could exist without substantive representation, even though the formal is desired for the sake of the substantive (1996: 186). He writes that the Ashanti considered substantive representation a fundamental human right, that each individual should not only be represented in council but also in counsel on any matter that is relevant to her interests or those of her group, and that this is why consensus is important (Ibid). Wiredu concedes that consensus may not

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