Afrocentricity as a Theory for Good Governance in Africa

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Abstract: Corruption and poverty persist in many African countries despite over two decades of implementing the donor's good governance agenda. The ineffectiveness of western approaches in Africa makes the case for institutional reforms based on theories that are compatible with African culture. The problem, however, is that while there is a proliferation of western theories of governance and development, there are few well-articulated theories emanating from African indigenous knowledge systems. In recent times, Afrocentricity has emerged as a scientific paradigm that is based on African culture and that serves African interests. Consequently, the objectives of the paper are to describe the characteristics of Afrocentricity and to present the Afrocentric principles of good governance. The methodology adopted relies mainly on secondary sources. The findings show that precolonial Africa has many democratic governance systems to learn from, and based on Africa's cultural democracies, some Afrocentric principles of good governance are brought forward.

Keywords: Afrocentricity, Good governance, Indigenous knowledge systems, Theory

1. Introduction

In his famous article "The End of History," written in 1989, the American political analyst Francis Fukuyama proclaims that the end of the cold war is "*the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."* This claim exemplifies the concept known as "Eurocentrism," which promotes the idea that European culture is superior to other cultures and that European principles should be applied universally. Liberalists like Fukuyama (1989) usually insist that western liberal democracy is the only appropriate governance system to achieve development. Not surprisingly, immediately after the end of the Cold War, the policy focus of the World Bank changed to the promotion of good governance in Africa and other developing countries. It needs to be emphasized, however, that the Western development partners' good governance agenda mainly comprises the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms. Despite the adoption of western liberal democracy and the liberalization of African economies, poverty, conflict, unemployment, and corruption continue in Africa. Put differently, the good governance agenda has failed to lift Africa from underdevelopment, just like other earlier development strategies imposed on Africa by the West.

It must be mentioned that since the time of independence, the development efforts of most African countries have been guided by theories and strategies emanating from the West. Examples include modernization theory, structural adjustment programs, and the good governance agenda. What these development approaches have in common is that they are all rooted in the European ideologies of individualism and neoliberalism. Moreover, instead of helping Africa escape underdevelopment, their implementation has increased Western capitalism's stake in the continent (Adejumo-Ayibiowu, 2020; Idrissa, 2018; Brohman, 1995). Consequently, Asante (2003) criticizes the use of Western theories and strategies to analyze African situations, particularly because European culture and history are very different from those of Africa. Thus, Africa needs to promote indigenous strategies that reflect African reality, are rooted in African culture, and function in African interests. As regards good democratic governance, Africa has many valuable cultures and indigenous institutions to learn from.

The problem, however, is that while there is a proliferation of western theories of governance and development, there are few well-articulated theories emanating from African indigenous knowledge systems (Nwagbara, 2012; Basheka, 2015). However, in recent times, Afrocentricity has emerged as a scientific approach well suited for African reality as it is based on African culture and history rather than an imitation of any foreign theory or approach (Asante, 2003). The position of this paper is that to

improve governance and welfare in Africa, institutional reforms must be based on theories that are compatible with African culture. Afrocentricity is *"the theory in which the centrality of African interests, principles, and perspectives predominates"* (Asante, 2003:2). Consequently, the primary research topic of this study is: What are the Afrocentric principles of good governance? The objectives of the paper are therefore to describe the meaning and history, to show that Afrocentricity is a scientific paradigm, to describe Afrocentric philosophy, its epistemology, and its ontology, and to suggest Afrocentric principles that can contribute to the achievement of good governance and improved welfare in Africa.

This paper adopts a secondary research method. This article is significant because it adds to the body of knowledge on Afrocentricity as a theory to analyze African institutional realities. The paper has eight parts. The introduction is provided in the first section. The second provides Afrocentricity's background and definition. The third discusses Afrocentricity as a scientific paradigm. The characteristics of Afrocentricity are covered in the fourth section. The fifth section talks about how African culture is important for good governance in Africa. The sixth section outlines some Afrocentric governing principles. The conclusion is in the seventh section.

2. Afrocentricity: History and Definition

Afrocentricity was born out of the he need to restore the self-esteem of black people and to rebuild the image of Africa, which was defamed and degraded by European colonialists and Western capitalists (Chawane, 2016). Thus, the history of Afrocentricity is rooted in the works of Afrocentric scholars and pan-Africanists such as Marcus Garvey, Cheikh Anta Diop, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, David Walker and Alexander Crummell. These scholars contend that ancient Egypt contributed to the development of world civilization and also demonstrated many other African civilizations, thereby invalidating the European racist claim of black inferiority. However, Molefi Asante revives the Afrocentric idea, especially as academic theory and methodology. According to Asante (2003:2), Afrocentricity *is the "placing of African people at the center of any analysis of African phenomena."* Afrocentricity is thus an effort in which an African phenomenon is understood through an African lens. Afrocentricity validates African culture, history, and ways of knowing as the best method to solve African problems, whether social, economic, or political (Mkabela, 2005).

Afroentricity revives African knowledge, customs, and ethics that were intentionally displaced by whites during the European colonization of the continent. Afrocentric scholars such as Koutonin (2014) and Mazrui (2005) have demonstrated that in order to retain their dominion over other races, the Europeans plundered many significant components of African knowledge, such as mathematics and astrology, and also ensured that the rest of African civilizations were destroyed. Examples of African civilization include Egypt, Carthage, Nubia, Mali, Great Zimbabwe, Zanzibar, and Timbuktu (Falola & Fleming, 2009). These great African cities were later invaded and destroyed by colonial interests. Europeans also invented a malicious history of Africa, presenting it as a dark continent without history or civilization, and subsequently imposed their way of knowing on African people (Mazrui, 2005). The aim of Afrocentricity is to correct these disparaging misrepresentations of African history by European racial scholarship as well as bring to the fore the contributions of African people to the world's civilization.

Moreover, it is observable that through the capitalist international trading system and the adoption of neoliberal policies in poor countries, the plundering of African resources persisted in the decades following colonization. This is one reason Asante (2013) argues that the challenge of governance in Africa is more about finding leaders who are culturally immersed enough to defend African interests in the face of Western hegemony. An Afrocentric notion of good governance would therefore involve an investigation into African culture to comprehend governance through the African lens and discover the cultural principles of governance necessary for societal welfare. The next section examines Afrocentricity as a scientific paradigm.

3. Afrocentricity as a Scientific Paradigm

One important question is whether Afrocentricity is a scientific theory usable for comprehensive academic research. The answer is yes, Mazama (2001) has shown that Afrocentricity complies with every aspect of Kuhn's scientific paradigm. Kuhn (1962)

introduced the concept of a "paradigm" as a framework for scientific inquiry. Even though Kuhn's model was mainly created for the natural sciences, the social sciences and humanities have extensively utilized it (Mazama, 2001). A paradigm, according to Kuhn (1962, 1977), is a research culture that a group of researchers share with regard to the purpose and methods of their research (Kuhn, 1977). According to Kuhn (1962), a paradigm has two components: the cognitive component and the structural component. The metaphysical, social, and exemplars are the three dimensions of the cognitive component. The metaphysical element is described by Kuhn (1962) as the organising principle necessary for the perception of reality. Afrocentricity has a metaphysical dimension as it espouses the cosmology, axiology, and epistemology that typify African culture (Asante, 1988; Mazama, 2001). The sociological dimension of Kuhn's paradigm is the disciplinary aspect of the framework. Africology, a discipline that studies African phenomena through the unique cultural lens of the African people, is one example of an Afrocentric discipline. (Asante, 1990). Moreover, Asante (2007) argues that several Afrocentric theories can be generated from within the Afrocentric paradigm. Thus, we can have Afrocentric governance theories, Afrocentric development theories, and Afrocentric gender theories.

Afrocentricity also fulfils the "exemplar" dimension of Kuhn's paradigm through the Afrocentric research works that have been published by Afrocentric scholars. According to Kuhn (1962, 1977), the exemplars deal with problems and solutions encountered by students. The structural component of Kuhn's paradigm denotes the community of researchers and practitioners who use it. In the same way, the global community of Afrocentric scholars, who have grown over the years and have been challenging conventional theories through their scholarly works, fulfils the structural part of Afrocentricity (Mazama, 2001). But in addition to complying with the cognitive and structural aspects of Kuhn's paradigm, Afrocentricity also possesses a functional dimension. According to Mazama (2001), from an Afrocentric point of view, knowledge is created not only for its own sake but also for the purpose of emancipation and the awakening of consciousness. The functional paradigm indicates the need for action. The cultural and political liberation of Africans is the goal of the Afrocentric paradigm. The Afrocentric theory of governance is a functional aspect of the Afrocentric paradigm because it emancipates and re-centers

African political systems for improved governance and development.

4. Afrocentric Philosophy, Epistemology and Ontology

4.1 Afrocentric Philosophy

Afrocentric philosophy is the critical examination of how Africans interpret their existence and the universe in light of their cultural experiences and realities (Ekanem, 2012). African philosophy is rooted in precolonial African tradition and culture. Afrocentric philosophy embraces the African ideas of collective identity, communalism, humanness, spirituality, interdependence, and the interconnection of all beings in the universe (Asante, 1988). The precolonial society was based on mutual aid and sought the common good of every member. This is exemplified in the Zulu philosophy of *Ubuntu,* which posits that a person is only a person because of other people (Johnson & Van Schalkwyk, 2022). Afrocentric philosophy is a total departure from Eurocentric philosophy, which is based on the European culture of individualism, materialism, and competition. The exploitative economic systems of feudalism, slavery, colonialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism in Europe were all products of the European philosophy of individualism.

African philosophy, however, is rooted in oral traditions such as proverbs, folklore, myths, and ethical maxims, for which reason it has been criticized (Wiredu, 2008). Nevertheless, scholars such as Vansina (1985) and Anthony (2014) have argued that the African oral tradition of philosophy does not make it inferior to written philosophy because, in the African context, oral tradition is a valid means of knowing. Moreover, writing cannot establish the philosophical nature of African ideas, especially because even in the text-based European philosophical tradition, great ancient philosophers, like Socrates, are known entirely for the oral arguments imputed to them by others (Appiah, 1998). Hountondji (1996) also argues that African philosophy is uncritical when compared to Western philosophy, because it mainly concentrates on the narratives of an idealized past. Hountondji's (1996) comparison, however, has been criticized. According to Agada (2015), the validity of African philosophy cannot be judged by western standards of philosophy. Instead, to be considered valid, African philosophy must find its foundation within the African thought world rather than the European thought world.

4.2 Afrocentric Ontology

Afrocentric ontology is about the perception of Africans about the nature of beings occupying the universe. A major assumption in this regard is the belief in the spiritual nature of beings and the interconnection of all beings in the universe (Ekanem, 2012; Ngangah, 2019; Teffo, 1996). Africans in particular think that the spiritual side of life is just as real as the material side and that the material world can only be understood in the context of the spiritual (Etta, 2019). African ontology proposes that all beings exist as forces, and these forces exist in a hierarchy with God at the top. According to Temple (1969), "being is that which has force." That is, everything that exists is perceived as a force in African philosophy. Therefore, the term "force" includes all "beings": God, living and deceased humans, animals, plants, and minerals (Temple, 1959). Another assumption in Afrocentric ontology is the interconnectedness of all beings. Thus, individuals are part of an interconnected web of people, both living and deceased. Arguably, this consciousness of connection with the spirit promotes good moral behaviour and good governance. This is one reason religion, or the spiritual, was a source of political legitimacy in the pre-colonial era (Ekeh, 1975). Specifically, in pre-colonial African society, the belief in the spiritual was an important principle for governance that promoted accountability, and the current disregard for this principle in the postcolonial era contributes to public sector corruption and bad governance (Adejumo-Ayibiowu, 2018, 2020).

4.3 Afrocentric Epistemology

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. Afrocentric epistemology refers to the manner in which reality is understood within an African cultural setting. According to Nkulu-N'Sengha (2005), the African approach to knowledge can be understood through the culture, such as the oral tradition; the manner of seeking truth in social, political, and religious institutions; the work of healers; the channels for identifying guilty parties in traditional justice systems, and the methods of resolving family disputes and other social conflicts. Moreover, African epistemology is also rooted in African metaphysics. Thus, the spiritual is very important in our understanding of the world because African theories of knowledge consider the spirit world to be as real as the empirical world (Etta, 2019). In this regard,

Afrocentrists propose that there are supernatural and natural paths to knowledge. In the supernatural epistemological path, knowledge is gained through divination and revelation, as well as through the intervention of diviners, spirits, and ancestors (Nkulu-N'Sengha, 2005). In the natural epistemological path, knowledge is gained by logical reasoning, natural investigation, and intuition. African epistemology of governance, which is holistic, can serve as a sound framework for transforming the values of democracy in Africa.

5. The Relevance of African Culture for Good Governance

"Culture" is the way of life of a people. Moreover, culture is made up of many different values held and practiced by society (Idang, 2015). Thus, embedded in a culture are political, social, moral, religious, and economic values. In Africa, these values are important to achieving a well-ordered, peaceful, and prosperous society. According to Asante (1990), culture is important to understanding human society. Culture determines individual moral development as well as the nature and degree of a citizen's participation in political matters. Thus, to achieve good governance and development, Afrocentricity argues that culture matters. This position is in contrast to Eurocentric theories, especially modernization, which argue that culture hinders development. Every institutional structure necessary for achieving African development is ingrained in the continent's culture. Consequently, development approaches that advocate eradicating African culture first in order to improve the lives of African people are misleading and might even be harmful.

In many African cultures, like the Yoruba and Akan, political institutions are democratic because they are representative and participatory and have adequate checks and balances (Fayemi, 2009; Adejumo-Ayibiowu, 2018). These democratic attributes are important for good governance. Moreover, African culture is entrenched in strong moral or ethical values (Idang, 2005). Moreover, many African political systems have mechanisms such as cults, various classes of chiefs, societal norms, and traditional symbols to hold the leadership accountable (Idang, 2015). Often, traditional rulers are not only accountable for the management of public resources, but they are also accountable for environmental issues and natural disasters, including famine, floods, and epidemics. Two interrelated cultures that ensure

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peaceful coexistence and good governance in African cultural society are communalism and humanness. As noted by Igbokwe-Ibeto *et al*. (2015), traditional African values are humanistic and communal at their core. Africans place a high value on personhood, cooperation, harmony, community, and human wellbeing. African communalism is a social theory that emphasizes interdependence and collectiveness. According to this viewpoint, a person cannot exist outside of their community. It is an individual's participation in the community that makes him a man. According to Mbiti (1969), *'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.'* Thus, everyone in the community is expected to seek the communal good rather than their own self-interest. This is in contrast to the individualistic view of European societies. Politically, communalism promotes individual responsibility for public goals, access to public resources, mutual help, democratic participation, inclusiveness, and consensus decision-making (Adejumo-Ayibiowu, 2018; Etta *et al*., 2019).

Humanness or personhood, describes the epitome of African morality. In Africa, "a person" is defined as an individual who meets societal moral standards. Thus, personhood is attained by good moral conduct and good relations with other members of the community. An individual with good morals, who is kind, polite, and generous is described as "a person," while an individual who is disrespectful, unruly, selfish, and wicked is considered "not a person" (Gyekye, 1997; Igbokwe-Ibeto *et al*., 2015). Thus, personhood is embedded in communalism, especially because humanism and morality are not innate but learned through participation in the community. In Afrocentricity, the notion of personhood is presented with the idea of "Maat," which is a moral order among ancient black Egyptians. According to Asante (2011), Maat is associated with truth, harmony, reciprocity, balance, righteousness, justice, and the search for perfection. Maat is a natural law in all African societies. In Southern Africa, personhood is presented as Ubuntu, and to possess Ubuntu is to be virtuous, kind, and humane (Idoniboye-Obu & Whetho, 2013). Maat also connotes the idea of "Iwa" or "Omoluwabi" among the Yoruba of West Africa. "Iwa" is the epitome of good character (Asante, 2011; Adejumo-Ayibiowu, 2018).

Arguably, the selflessness, truth, and communal attributes of Maat, or African personhood, are important attributes for achieving good leadership, good followership, and good governance in Africa.

According to Obioha (2021), the failure of governance in Africa lies at the root of individualism and self-centeredness among public office holders. Whereas, if the communal sense of identity and solidarity is resuscitated in government and in contemporary African societies, good governance and improved welfare will be achieved. Moreover, the spiritual component of African culture makes it unique and also played a role in establishing rules for social and political behavior. For instance, among the Yoruba, it is held that breaking societal norms and taboos can result in punishment from the ancestor gods. The fear of sanction from the gods is a motivation for good behavior (Odejobi, 2013). Arguably, colonialism, modernization, and the subsequent subjugation of African culture contributed to the abuse of power and corruption by political leaders in Africa today.

6. Some Afrocentric Principles of Governance

There is a growing body of literature describing African traditional governance systems (Fayemi, 2009; Basheka, 2015; Igbokwe-Ibeto *et al*., 2015). However, there is still a dearth of literature on a culture-based governance framework. Two Afrocentric scholars have been able to bring forward some Afrocentric principles of good governance. These are the Afrocentric Theory of Political Systems by Okafor (2006) and a culture-based good governance model by Adejumo-Ayibiowu (2018, 2020). The Afrocentric theory of political systems by Okafor (2006) proposes that to achieve good governance in Africa, the philosophical viewpoint, strategies, and actions of political leadership must seek and advance Africa's interests. Political leaders must also promote the welfare of the people as well as their victorious consciousness. According to the theory, an effective political system that will guarantee good governance must be purposeful, benevolent, communicative, concordant, populist, maatic, and historically conscious.

Adejumo-Ayibiowu (2018, 2020) developed a culture-based good governance model based on the cultural principles that ensured good governance in precolonial Yoruba societies. The Yoruba are predominantly in southwest Nigeria, although they are also found in other parts of the country and in West Africa. According to the study, the effectiveness of precolonial Yoruba traditional governance is achieved because the system is participatory,

accountable, and responsive; highly decentralized; consultative; and based on a high moral standard for leaders. Moreover, the power to elect and depose the leaders belongs to the people, while the oracle, that is, the inclusion of the spiritual, gives the political systems their cultural credibility. The study also shows that public services are provided through a communal approach. Moreover, to fight against poverty, the Yoruba government had a culture of hard work and equal access to economic resources. Based on these principles, the author created a culture-based good governance model for the Yoruba nation, Southwest, Nigeria, as shown in Figure 1. According to the model, achieving good governance in Nigeria will require the revitalization of Omoluwabi, that is, African personhood, the implementation of people-centered poverty reduction and development policies, functional and representative decentralization, accountability, checks against abuse of power, and cultural legitimacy of governance (See Figure 1).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

It must be mentioned that Afrocentricity theory has received criticism, especially from mainstream scholars. Ferguson (2011) has criticized Afrocentric scholars for romanticizing the past instead of taking action to solve African development challenges. Some scholars opine that African traditional norms are too archaic to fulfil the needs of the modern scientific world (Gyeke, 1997). Such criticisms did not consider the many years of suppression of African thought systems by European interests. This study has shown that precolonial Africa had many advanced civilizations that, if they had not been disrupted by European colonialism, would have evolved to meet today's demand and would compete with other advanced civilizations. The aim of Afrocentricity is to study African culture with a spirit of inquiry so as to advance the African knowledge system. Moreover, to address African development challenges, Afrocentricity provides the appropriate methodology for African-centred research and African-centred solutions. Moreover, because different nations have unique histories and cultures, the application of universal Eurocentric approaches can be counterproductive. For the African situation, Afrocentricity has emerged as a scientific paradigm that is based on African culture and that serves African interests. The benefit of using Afrocentricity theory to study governance is that it includes contextual considerations that the universalized mainstream framework typically leaves out.

Figure 1: A Culturally and Context-Specific Good Governance Model for the Yoruba Nation, South Western Nigeria
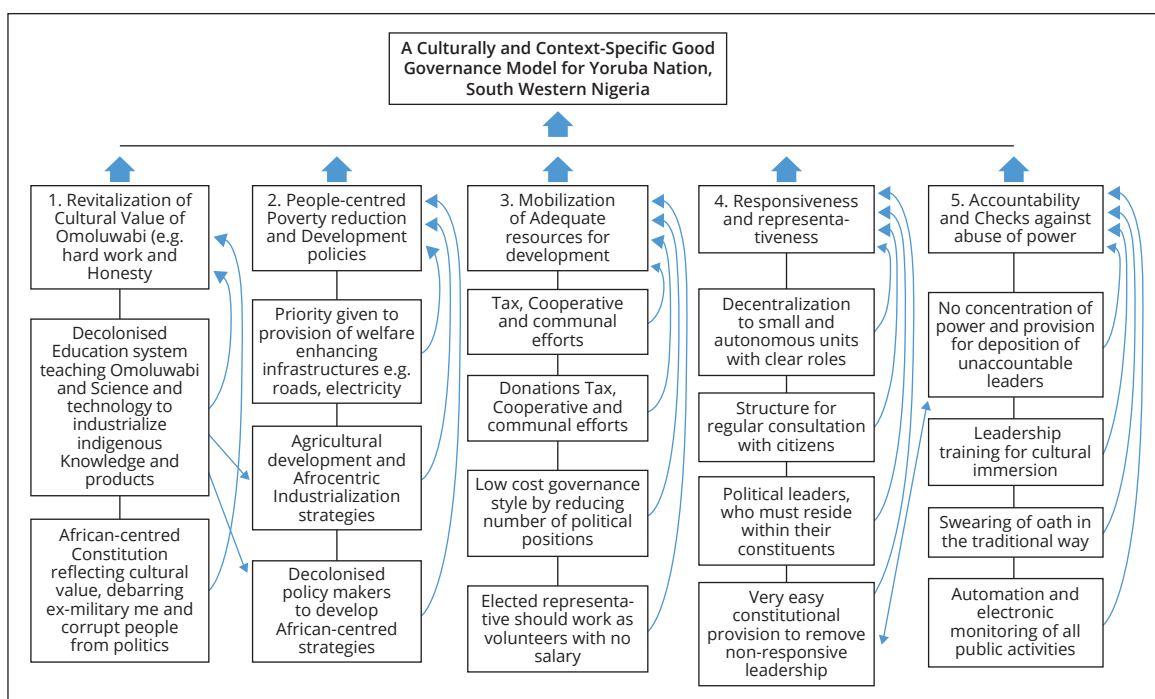
Source: Adejumo-Ayibiowu, 2018

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