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# A Popperian Interrogation of African Communalism in the Context of Nigerian Democratic Culture

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**Abstract:** Communalism is one of the socio-political traditions that has received scholarly interrogation in and among African scholars. The utmost essence of the tradition is woven around the doctrine of togetherness. It is believed to be a tool of galvanization in African society. While some are of the view that the place of an individual in African society is a part that secures its essence from collectiveness of human beings in the society, others argue that it is the individuals that give credence to the collectiveness ever experienced in African society. This discourse, sets to evaluate communalism from African perspective vis-a-vis the emerging democratic culture. This is done against the backdrop of Popper's conceptions of individualism and collectivism in his *Open Society and Its Enemies*, as a point of departure if communalism in the traditional African thought system is juxtaposed with the emerging socio-political trends in contemporary Africa, the former would have lost its credence as a tool that facilitates peaceful co-existence in African society. Thus, using the analytical and critical methods of philosophical investigation, the paper concludes that the need for a blend of the positives of both African communalism and contemporary democratic tradition to enhance social order in Nigeria is inevitable in resolving the current socio-political quagmire that beclouds Africa continent with particular reference to Nigeria.

**Keywords:** African, Communalism, Democratic Culture, Socio-political, Karl Popper

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## 1. Introduction

African communalism is an age long cultural doctrine and practice that pervades traditional African societies. It is one of the fundamental structures under which their socio-political activities are encircled. Thus, the antecedent of African socio-political preference could hardly be dissociated from the potency of togetherness as a holistic gamut that transmutes into peaceful co-existence of the African people and in their societies. Nigeria, being one of African nations could not be sheltered from this political scenario. However, the current political practice in Nigeria political space under the auspices of democracy is a deviation from the socio-cultural hegemony of the African societies with the acceptance of democracy as a form of political practice.

It is heart-broken that the custodians of democracy in Nigeria political space have swindled the necessity of democratic principles that could spur its essence for personal gain. Subsequently, the essence of democracy that hitherto suggests majority participation and/or people oriented form

of governance that could aid collectiveness, taking cue from its *Lincolnanian's* definition as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" has been reduced to government of the few privilege for the privileges and their associates. Hence, the assumed people *orientedness* attributes of democracy that could ascertain the wider spectrum of democratic principles have been jeopardized at the altar of few political money bag. It is therefore not illogical, to suggest that the potency of African communalism has been reduced to the dustbin within the context of Nigeria democratic culture.

Thus, this paper sets to unravel the nitty-gritty of African communalism vis-à-vis the prevailing socio-political situation. This is to attempt a justification of the preponderance of the fact that African communalism is a burden concept that seems to have lost its potency as a tradition that promotes peaceful co-existence in African society. In doing this, the paper contains this introductory part that gives hindsight to the expectation of the readers, this is followed by a critical exposition of African communalism.

Thereafter, the concept of democracy as a form of government was exposed with particular reference to its operations in Nigeria political space. This is followed with a synopsis of Karl Popper's *Open Society and Its Enemies*. It is from the analysis of the two major concepts that the paper gawks into the paradox that vitiates African communalism in the face of Nigerian democratic culture within the purview of Karl Popper's interpretation of individualism versus collectivism in the context of his *Open Society and Its Enemies*; and concludes that, given the current socio-political quagmire that beclouds Africa continent with particular reference to Nigeria, African communalism is a burden concept that seems to have lost its prowess; however, a blend of its positive attributes with the adequate adoption of democratic culture could help to emplace a viable social order.

## 2. The Idea of African Communalism

African communalism is a concept that defines African social and political life. It explains the socio-political life of Africa and/or Africans in the pristine age. The uniqueness of the practice is that which showcases the corporate existence of the African man. Thus, existence in the primeval African societies is hinged on collectivism, that is, a collective means of doing things, such that individuals derived its existence from the whole. Thus, African communalism projects a social tradition and form of living where "the community is morally and logically prior to the individual, in that an individual's dignity derives from, and choices are made meaningful or circumscribed by, the community" [1]. This holistic experience of sustaining meaningful existence is an idea that is graphically captured by earlier scholars of African tradition such as J. S. Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, Henri Maurier, Kwame Gyekye, Sophie Oluwole, Moses Oke, S. Ade Ali, Segun Ogungbemi, Segun Oladipo, Segun Gbadegesin, Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwasi Wiredu among others as that which stimulates the normative aspect of human person.

It is important to put the dissimilarity between communalism and communitarianism in a perspective to guide against misinterpretation of the onus of this engagement. Though, the two concepts go *pari-passu*, they are not without their difference. While communalism has to do with the community, communitarianism is a political doctrine that considers the community to be central in importance, especially when there seems to be contention between the individuals and the community at large. This dichotomy is well captured in the two main types of communitarianism namely radical and moderate communitarianism as stimulated in the works of Gyekye, Menkiti, Gbadegesin and recently Thaddeus Metz among others.

The clarification above is onerous because it is obvious that in African traditional thought, community has a vital role to play in the concept of person. This is because, in Africa socio-cultural belief, being born into existence through a human parentage is not a sufficient ground that qualifies such

human being as a person. It is essential for such a being to adhere to the societal norms as he/she grows into maturity [2]. This is suggestive of the fact that in African traditional thought system, man or person is defined by reference to the environing community. John Mbiti captured this crisply, when he posits:

Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibility towards himself and towards other people when he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living. When he gets married, he is not alone neither does the wife 'belong' to him alone, so also the children belong to the corporate body of kinsmen, even if they bear only their father's name. What happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: I am, because we are; and since we are; therefore I am; this is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man [3].

A further variant of Mbiti's exposition of what attached meaning to existence as espoused in African communalism is aptly put in a perspective by Ifeanyi Menkiti who argues that, it is the community, which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory [4]. This is prosperous in Africa societies as against the Western world to which rationality forms the basis of meaningful existence. Suffice is to say, that African idea of what constitutes a person transcends into rational beings that are clothed in individuality. Nevertheless, it is not the case that rationality is not a quality that Africa adopts in concretizing existence, but to them such rationality must be relational. It is within this purview that Henri Maurier's position is considered apposite. He argues:

One might agree to designate this properly African conceptual framework by two words: I – WITH; the "I" marking the anthropocentric aspect both subjectivist and vitalist, and the word "WITH" marking the relational, the communitarian attitude essentially and existentially characterizing the "I" [5].

The implication of the above is that far above trussing man's existence to rationality that often suggests individualistic nature of man, Africa/Africans from the above is indicative of the fact that man's existence is defined within the communal set up. However, this is not a total denial of the possibility of individualism in African societies. It is not a pretension that individuals do not have their place in the societies; evidences abound that suggest this in Africa worldview vide some of their actions and utterances. For instance, the family and the community of a new born give name to the person upon arrival. The names given distinguishes that person from another, the names emphasized the uniqueness as well as the individuality of that person. It is, thus, arguable from Mbiti's and Menkiti's positions as articulated earlier that the individuals have their place in Africa communalism. For instance, the submission

of Mbiti that “we are”, upon critical investigation suggests individualism, for without the “I” there cannot be “we”. Aside this, some Yoruba saying such as *tori omo o ba daran ni on fi loruko* (meaning for in case a child will violate the rules and for his identification makes such a child has a name). Despite this, it is vital to mention, that this saying, though, with its relevance is often subverted, because a person is considered to be unique within the uniqueness of the society. This, is often displayed in the fact that whenever there is a clash of interest between the individual and the whole (society), preference is given to the interest of the whole. This is crisply captured by Taiwo Olufemi when he opines that:

Communalism is a mode of social living in which living together, communal living is to be preferred. As well, it is a principle of social ordering under which, in the relationship between the individual and the community, the community is held superior to the individual, and where their interests come into conflict, those of the community should prevail. And it should not be forbidden to bend the will of the individual or sometimes abridge her interests if doing so would serve the ends of community [6].

It is evidential from the above presupposition that in African thought, a person become person only after a process of incorporation. Without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere danglers to whom the description “person” does not fully apply. For personhood is something which has to be achieved, it is not given simply because one is born of human seed [4]. This position amplifies the essence of what social life connotes in African traditional thought, to them, social life is natural to being, because every human being is born into an existing human society. This is expressed ardently in one of the Akan maxim, “when a person descends from heaven, he (or she) descends into a human society (or human habitation) [7].

Upon critical reflection, it is arguable to suggest that the usage of the word “descends”, as from heaven herein refers to the belief that the child born into a human society came from God, who dwells in heaven [8]. The point of the maxim, therefore, is suggestive of the fact that human person, is communal by nature, a social being from the very outset. This means that the human person cannot and should not live in isolation from other persons. It also means that social relationship are essential for every human person, for no one is self-sufficient and therefore no one can in isolation function adequately in the social context [7]. The view that the role of community is superior to that of individuals, gives credence to Senghor claims that Negro African society puts more stress on the group than on the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is a community society [9]. In his own analysis, Kenyatta contends in regards to the traditional life in Kenya that to *Gikuyu* ways of thinking, nobody is an isolated individual. Or rather, this uniqueness is secondary about him; first and foremost he is several people’s relative and several people’s contemporary” [10] Elsewhere he observed that

“individualism and self-seeking were ruled out... the personal pronoun ‘I’ was used very rarely in public assemblies. The spirit of collectivism was (so) much “ingrained in the mind of the people” [11], that self-seeking was untenable.

Existence, therefore, to Africa/Africans is a social thing that goes beyond individual aggrandizement. This assumptive reality shares the bias of Karl Popper’s that suggests the existential reality of collective tradition. This, he argues:

Based upon the collective tribal tradition, the institutions leave no room for personal responsibility. The taboos that establish some form of group-responsibility may be the forerunner of what we call personal responsibility, but they are fundamentally different from it. They are not based upon a principle of reasonable accountability, but rather upon magical ideas, such as the idea of appeasing the powers of fate [12].

Popper’s articulation presupposes the avidness and prowess of the place of collectivistic nature of human cohabitation. His view, therefore, is suggestive of the fact that existence in a way solidifies the essence of co-habitation which gives credence to harmonious relationship that often transmutes to equal and even development devoid of sentiment as the institution leaves no room for personal responsibility. This is a viable standpoint, that could be regarded as the fulcrum on which the popular dictum; *an injury on one, is an injury on all* stands. Thus, in a way, any individual that finds him/herself in the position of leadership surmounts the herculean tasks of leadership by evincing in his/her projects and achievements an adequate sense of social responsibility. It is rapacious to assume a self-sufficiency in traditional African society due to their communal ways of life. The preponderance of the above is strongly communicated through some Yoruba maxims which have their equivalent in other culture. These maxims include but not limited to; *igi kan o le da igbo se* (a tree does not make a forest) and *aiko wo rin ejo lo nse iku pawon, ti oka ba saaju ti seebe tele, tani yio le duro* (lone-ranging snake is always an easy prey, if snakes crawl in groups, it will be difficult to attack them). Derivable from these Yoruba maxims is that when people cooperate and work together, they can overcome all kinds of hindrances and achieve better results. Hence the Akan maxim that says; “a man must depend for his well-being on his fellowman [10].

In all, it is arguable to contend that the reality of communalism/collectivism is adumbrated in the existentialist notion of being-in-the-world/being with the other. This is fundamental in the reflection of the *man-ness* of togetherness as essential ingredient that solidifies humanity in the world of one and many. Albeit, one is poised to argue that the discovery of the presence of others and being-in-the-world is synonymous to the critical inescapable communitarianism experienced and practiced in Africa before its domineering hoodwink by foreign individualism. The adoption of unguided individualism in Africa/Nigeria political space is causing humanity its essence as those in position of authority

under the guise of democracy imbibe the characteristics of individualism that has promoted civilization for guarantee of liberty, which is as good as absolute, such that free enterprise, paved way for scientific and technological progress wrongly. Instead of the holistic and humanitarian adoption of this, African/Nigerian democrats have used that to amass wealth for themselves. This is against the characteristics of civilization in Africa, where solidarity, communitarianism, and participation are at the front burner.

It is, therefore, apt to argue that Africa/Nigeria democrats have “bites (bitten) deeper and deeper into individualism; but this is a post-communitarian individualism which intends to retain the best of what its communitarianism has produced” [13]. The adoption of modern individualism in Africa, therefore, seems to deprive the individuals and society writ-large the luxuries of common wealth, as the very privileged few are the ones that enjoy the collective gain that ought to be dividend of democracy. This, is, a reflection of the modern idea of individualism, that is understood as a mode of social living, that is built on a philosophy of separation, as against the philosophy of communalism, that is founded on the affirmation of an organic connection among those who make up human community [14]. It is evident that the inculcation of the spirit and culture of individualism in Africa (Nigeria) body politics is equivalent of the transition from the traditional closed society where traditional cultures are protected without critical reflection of such ideas to open society that promote critical reflection of any given idea. It is suggestive of one of the major resolutions confronting democratisation processes in Nigeria. Given the tenacity of this possibility, open a chat for a trend of democracy coined ‘Nigerian democratic culture’ in this discourse.

### 3. Conceptualising the Nigerian Democratic Culture

Democracy is a form of government. As a form of governance, it seems to be a global trend mainly because of the wide but controversial belief that it is probably the best form of government. The reason for this borders on the fact that only democracy as a system of governance affords the rulers and the ruled the opportunity, no matter how little the participation in the running of their own affairs [15]. Though, it is arguable to claim that all form of governance allows minimal participation of both the rulers and the ruled, nevertheless, the level of participation in democratic system of government is outstanding in an ideal political situation. This is embolden in the Lincoln’s definition of democracy in his Gettysburg Declaration of 1863 where it was strongly asserted that democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people [16]. This definition, for a long time, has been construed to be the standard on which democratic governance should be based [15]. Derivable from Lincoln’s definition is the concept of popular participation. It is in the light of this participatory tendency ascribed to democracy that the conception of democracy as a system of

governance is adjudged to be reflective of the will of the people.

While the above could be said of democracy, it is subtle to cogitate that other forms of governance possess this attribute. For instance, monarchy is construed as the government by the king or queen, aristocracy, on the other hand is seen as the government by some privileged few. Plutocracy is government by the rich, just to mention three. It is evident from the foregoing that democracy, though, with its popular acceptability as the best form of government could not be rip off of being anchored on a minimum of coercion, despite its preference of enhancing maximum content of consent, not of the ruler alone, but of the ruled, the masses, or the plebeians. From this perspective, it appears very strong a view that democracy, even though admired greatly in the world as one of the best forms of government, is equally recognized as the most difficult to sustain. Nigeria democracy is not left out of the challenges, namely, inadequate political education and orientation, which manifests itself in election manipulation, inadequate accountability and transparency among leaders, violence in forms of political hooliganism, and thuggery among others have impacted negatively on the Nigerian polity and the nation’s developmental processes socially, economically, educationally, etc. It is with reference to these anomalies that Nigerian democratic culture is conceived as the way and manner in which democratic tenets is being corrupted in Nigeria political space. Hence, Nigerian democratic culture is a variance of democracy that begrudges the principles and fundamentals that sustain democratic processes.

The etymology of democracy is fundamental and central to understanding Nigerian democratic culture; this necessitates an examination of the etymological conception of democracy where we are told that democracy is derived from two Latin words “*demo*” and “*cratia*” meaning “people” and “rule” respectively [17]. This etymological conceptualization of democracy has a certain credibility. One apart from its pioneering status, the conceptualisation is credited for unearthing two fundamental assumptions in democracy, namely, people and rule. The relationship between the two major requirements is that the former is a necessary ground for the latter to exist. Hence, where there are people, there is bound to be a way they govern themselves. This, to the advocates of democracy is ‘government of the people’ or ‘democracy.’

The implication of the above is that power rest on the people. This, however, seems not to be the case in Nigerian democratic culture. The experience in Nigeria is worrisome, such that democracy could not be seen as government of the people, by the people and for the people; rather, it could be described as *government of the people, buy the people, and rule the people*. This is the crux of Nigerian democratic culture as periodic election which is the pivot of assuming collective participation has been corrupted in Nigeria political space by the money bag politicians. This makes mockery of Nigeria democracy. This political shenanigan is popularly coined in Yoruba language *D’iboko se be*. ‘Lanre

Olu-Adeyemi espoused this corrupt democratisation process as he argues:

The democratisation process in Nigeria has been seriously hampered by endemic corruption. The blatant buying and selling of votes at polling booths during elections in Nigeria further dims the hope of democratic consolidation. Known and referred to comically in the Yoruba language as '*E dibo, ke se obe*', literally interpreted as 'vote and cook soup', that is 'vote for cash/cash for vote', in apparent reference to the money that voters get if they vote in a particular direction; the phenomenon is fast emerging as the new face of commercialization of Nigeria's electoral process [18].

Subjecting Olu-Adeyemi critical observation to a logical reasoning within the ambiance of participation as an unavoidable tenet of democratisation process, it is apposite to suggest that democracy as government of the majority could no longer be sustained in Nigeria democratic culture. This is not unconnected with the fact that the process of attaining majority votes is not through rational volition but one secure under the influence of momentary gain. This view crisply explains John Dewey's [19] perspective, that majority is not explained in terms of numerical surplus to determine the outcome supported by the greatest number. Thus, it is apt to argue that to sustain the notion of democratic participatory rights between the rulers and the ruled; there is the need to obey the rules of the game. Therefore, a consideration is to be given to D. B. Heater's five basic elements without which no community can claim to be truly democratic. These elements are "equality, sovereignty of the people, respect for human life, the rule of law, and liberty of the individual [20]. Giving support to Heater's view, Larry Diamond writes, "democracy entails meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties) either directly or indirectly, for the major positions of governmental power" [21]. Diamond, however expresses doubt about the diverse process of elections within the democratic culture. He explains:

In addition to popular participation in the electoral process and respect for the civil and political rights of the people, it must be noted, though, that the existence of numerous parties and the conduct of periodic elections may not result in popular choice of leadership [21].

Diamond's position as quoted above is a true reflection of Nigerian democratic culture as periodic elections has been turned to mere political cacophony and jamboree of and for the highest bidder. Though, the Fourth Republic began with an impressive move towards an enduring democracy, it was however, brandished with the power play that brought in a new breed of politicians that manifested some elements of political corruption through electoral fraud.

Electoral fraud, therefore, has devalued the essence of democracy in Nigeria. Pointedly, free and fair election is an aberration in Nigeria democratic culture. Reflecting on electoral fraud and the way forward Ayo Fasanmi in "*Awo is not Dead*", explains that, "electoral fraud undermines legitimacy of the beneficiary government and erode

confidence in the state. Fasanmi made a clarion call on the nation and asked for a revisit of the admonition given by Chief Obafemi Awolowo on the conditions that will vitiate electoral process and inter-party relations, namely, free and fair elections at all times – no rigging, electioneering process free from corruption, violence, restraint and hindrance [22]. It is however, pertinent to note that the apparent greed and love of money has rendered Nigeria electoral process a mere ruse.

Ethnicity is also one of the teething problems that have constituted a clog in the wheel of Nigerian democracy. Democracy as a form of government gives room for equal participation of all qualified citizens. No matter where you come from inasmuch as you are a citizen of Nigeria, you have the same right in any state of the nation to participate in its politics. But in Nigerian democratic culture, ethnicity seems to have overridden this principle of equality. Ethnicity, instead of enhancing equality, the best it does is giving credence to tribalism. Put in other words, tribalism thrives on ethnicity. The definition of tribalism given by Achebe is found plausible. To him, "tribalism is discrimination against a citizen because of his place of birth" [23]. There is nothing that captures the problem of Nigerian democracy as ethnicity. In Nigeria of today, because our government wants to embark on all-inclusive government, ends up in the name of ethnicity appointing people who are not competent to handle a given post in the name of such persons being the most qualified or its acolyte from one ethnic group or the other. While other advanced countries from where Nigeria developed her own democracy will never appoint a man to perform an important task no matter his prominence in the scheme of things or his position or contribution to the ruling party. Nigeria, on the other hand, is a country under the guise of democracy where it becomes difficult, if not impossible; to find one important job held by the most qualified person; especially, when such does not belong to the ruling caucus. Though, it is not that advanced democracies do not discriminate, but the kind of ethnicity cum tribalism in Nigerian democratic culture has always encouraged the negation of national consciousness. In Nigerian democratic culture, nepotism, tribalism, ethnic cleavages and many other social ills have become the order of the day. No wonder, many Nigerians in positions of influence and authority naturally tend to indulge in favouritism that often transmutes to annoyance of other ethnic groups. More often, the contest for political power in Nigeria is driven by the contrasting imperatives of ethnicity and regionalism, which, by implications, is devoid of any sustaining unifying theme or ideology.

This inequality sets in from the problem of ethnicity. Equality is considered to be one of the major principles of democracy but reverse is the case in Nigeria. As touching equality, Onah writes:

The truth is that the only laws before which all human beings are equal are natural and divine law. Such in the case of divine laws, all human beings are equal only so long as no human beings arrogate to themselves the exclusive rights of interpreting and enforcing those laws. As regards laws of the State, the treatment of citizens has

always been discriminatory. In most democracies, immunity from prosecution is constitutionally guaranteed to some officials of the state. Presidential immunity, in the countries where it exists, is supposed to be only for the period in which one is in office in order not to distract him or her from the intricate of governing. But in reality it is extended throughout life and often requires a legal battle or a parliamentary vote to remove it [24].

Meanwhile, the inability of Nigeria constitution to stress the need for higher qualification as major criteria for holding political office to some considerable extent has made way for the mediocre in the process of Nigerian democratisation. These mediocre people who become political leaders by crook constitute a bunch of contradictions to democratic principles. They are set of people who in place of selfless service embrace selfish interest; by acquiring wealth for themselves in as much the competent masses do not have what it takes to belong to the ruling caucus, thus making them to see politics as a dirty game. This people's view might have informed Obafemi Awolowo's submission in his *Path to Nigerian Freedom* that:

the masses of the people are ignorant, and will not be bothered by politics. Their sole preoccupation is the search for food, clothing and shelter of a wretched type. To them, it does not seem to matter who rules the country, so long as they are allowed to live their lives in peace and crude comfort [25].

The implication of Awolowo's position is that, both the ruled and rulers are ignorant of what it entails to be a follower and leader respectively; hence, the lackadaisical attitude of the Nigerians to democratic principles. These selfish motives of Nigeria's political rulers have continued to destabilize the polity and thus retrogress the democratization process.

Despite the wide acceptance of democracy as a form of government, it is relevant to mention that its foreign posture as practice in Africa/Nigeria leaves much to be desired. This is to say that, before the advent of western form of democracy Africans have and practiced their own variance of democracy that fall within the caprices and whims of African culture. The adoption of the western variance of democracy at the expense of African democracy is grandstanding and it heaped much burden on Africa/Nigeria political situation. Olufemi Taiwo gives a clear summation of this as part of complex of institutions that colonialism had introduced to Africa while it lasted. In driving home his explanation, he pointed out that part of the Africa's colonizers legacy included the implantation in the colonies of the following concepts: (1) a democratic mode of governance built on the consent of the governed (2) a system of governance based on the periodic election of representatives (3) elected officials who swear to uphold the rule of law (4) a constitutional regime in which every citizen is equal before the law (5) a legal system that does not try individuals under retroactive laws (6) a legal system that does not respect persons based on circumstances of birth or heredity (7) an assumption that the accused are innocent until proven guilty (8) trials that are

regulated by due process (9) a system that affirms and upholds human rights, including the right to life, liberty, and all ancillary freedoms [26].

It is rather unfortunate that as good as the contents of democracy is, the Nigeria political class have succeeded in making mockery of it, because, of their personal interest. Given the ancillary of the perceived contradictions of what democracy is and how it is practiced in Nigeria; it behooves us, therefore, to argue that society is to be analysed in terms of its real social group as against imposition of not-too-comprehend culture, all in the name of modernisation and civilisation. It is hoped that when this is done, the whole essence of democracy could be stimulated, and thereby subjugate the current political doldrums that pervade Nigeria democracy as orchestrated by the antics and intrigues that trail Nigeria political space that is antithetical to the efficiency of communalistic experience of the past, where common good is guided jealously by the nationalists.

#### 4. A Conspectus of Karl Poppers Open Society and Its Enemies

At this juncture, it would be appropriate to consider the thoughts of Karl Popper on democracy, as a way of bringing this essay to a logical conclusion. Karl Popper published *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in 1945, as a timely philosophical critique of the rise and popularity of totalitarian governments at the time. But more importantly, for the purpose of this essay, the work presented Popper's unique theory of democracy, which was heavily influenced by his theory of falsification.

In his earlier contributions to philosophical scholarship, Popper according to Stephen Thornton [27] had argued contrary to popular belief at the time, that scientific theories can only be falsified, they cannot be proved true. Thornton [27] further revealed that while arguing in favour of verisimilitude, Popper's principle of falsification rendered the idea of absolute and objective knowledge redundant because it emphasized the fallibility of human reasoning. The emphasis placed on human rational fallibility in Popper's philosophy of science led to an understanding of the scientific method in terms of bold conjectures and refutations, and it awakened the spirit of criticism and open-mindedness in scientific circles.

In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper brought his scientific theory to bear by challenging the basic assumptions of Western socio-political thought. He faulted revered thinkers from Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Marx for establishing a tradition of historicist philosophies that often predict the inevitability of totalitarianism in one form or another. Popper rejected such predictions by contending that "the future depends on ourselves, and we do not depend on any historical necessity" [28]. Hence, in defiance of what some would call "the spirit of the times" Popper defended the right of the individual to think independently, and championed democracy as a means for

applying “the critical and rational methods of science to the problems of the open society” [28].

According to Mark Notturmo, Popper’s open society stands for “human freedom, fallibilism, and respect for other people and their ideas” [29] Notturmo further stressed that, “more specifically, Popper’s open society values freedom, tolerance, justice, the right to freely pursue and disseminate knowledge, the right to choose one’s own values and beliefs, and the right to pursue one’s own happiness” [29]. In contra to this, says Notturmo, Popper’s idea of a closed society is a “magical or tribal or collectivist society in which each individual knows his place” [30]. Whereas the individual is said to be “continually confronted with personal decisions” [30], in Popper’s open society, a closed society is said to be “structured around beliefs and institutions that are supposed to be absolutely certain and immutable, and their proponents are willing to impose these beliefs and institutions upon others -by force if necessary- and to uphold them against dissent” [30]. In other words, whereas the tribal or closed society forbids individualism and never tolerates dissension, the open society sets the critical powers of individuals free to constantly critique the institutions and policies governing their lives.

Popper’s distinction between the open and closed society is a reflection of the urgency of the socio-political circumstances that influenced his writing, and also a testament to the coherence of his ideas. In other words, having emphasized the importance of criticism and open-mindedness in the realm of scientific inquiry, Popper sought to achieve the same thing in the realm of socio-political thought. Hence, his project became: how to defend the open society and all it means to Popper, from its enemies. According to Karl Popper, the enemies of the open society are the pioneers of Western socio-political thought, starting from Plato down to Hegel and Marx. He faulted Plato in particular for setting Western socio-political thought on the wrong path by raising the question of: “who should rule?” [31].

For Popper [32], the question of "who should rule?" necessitates the kind of responses that create the impression that political power is essentially unchecked. And that since it is unchecked, political power should be entrusted to the best or the wisest, who are "naturally" inclined to use it righteously and wisely [31]. In the real sense of the word, this can be likened to saying that once political power has been entrusted to the best or the wisest, all problems will be solved; an assumption that suggests belief in the infallibility of the ruler whether in the few or in the majority. But in Popper's view, this position is fundamentally flawed because it is not open to the possibility of misrule. And yet, as Popper would say, "it is not at all easy to get a government on whose goodness and wisdom one can implicitly rely" [31] Hence, in Popper's opinion, the question of "who should rule?" should be jettisoned for a new one, which he formulated as: "how can we organize political institutions so that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?" [32] Popper's question scarcely disguised his intent, which as earlier mentioned is to infuse his fallibilist

epistemology into socio-political philosophy. But how does his approach work in practice?

Popper identified two kinds of social engineering, namely utopian and piecemeal social engineering. And both are approaches to organizing and effecting socio-political reform. Whereas, the piecemeal approach is pliable and can be used to effect circumscribed institutional reforms without tearing down the entire fabric of society. It is a less risky and more practical approach that allows individuals to use their initiatives to judge the effects of policies, learn from it and profit from its mistakes. The utopian approach as Popper described it is based on an attempt to reconstruct society as a whole in accordance with a blueprint or an ideal. Popper’s quarrel with utopian social engineering is that it necessarily involves an aversion to criticism, and therefore has a strong inclination towards tyranny [33].

Popper felt that with respect to his fundamental question which can also be rephrased as follows: “how is the state to be constituted so that bad rulers can be got rid of without bloodshed, without violence?” [34], democracy would be the best form of government for putting the piecemeal approach into practice, while also protecting the institutions of the open society. Nevertheless, Popper abstained from defining democracy as “majority rule”, preferring to define it as “the rule of law that postulates the bloodless dismissal of the government by a majority vote” instead [32]. Conceived this way, Popper believes that the paradoxes and bottlenecks of majority rule can be averted. Hence, Popper submits that “when we say that the best solution known to us is a constitution that allows a majority vote to dismiss the government; then we do not say the majority vote will always be right. We do not even say that it will usually be right. We say only that this very imperfect procedure is the best so far invented” [32]. This way democracy becomes only an alternative to tyranny, and a way of practicing the principle of trial and error in society. Meanwhile in practice, it means that the people who have been entrusted with the powers to affect people's lives must accept that their right to exercise those powers is not absolute. That as fallible human beings, there has to be certain measures that allow citizens to openly and freely question their decisions or policies. And in the case of rejection, the citizens can remove those who have been entrusted with power over them without violence and bloodshed.

Having established the fact that Popper's theory of democracy is effectively a socio-political variation of his fallibilist epistemology, we might want to embellish this fact by demonstrating how Popper's theory offers a theoretical framework within which the problems of democracy in Africa and elsewhere could be positively interrogated. Hence; it may be pertinent to ask: how might Africa/Nigeria benefit from Popper’s theory of democracy? Considering the problems associated with the practice of democracy in Africa/Nigeria, what practical difference can Popper’s theory make?

First, Popper’s usage of the word “tribalism” to conceptualize the closed society is quite apposite. In fact,

Popper's [35] definition of tribalism as "the emphasis on the supreme importance of the tribe without which the individual is nothing at all" adumbrates Mbiti's infamous "I am because we are" maxim which goes to show that to the extent that it can be said to exert any degree of influence upon the thinking of contemporary Africans, African communalism has contributed to the problem of democracy in Africa. This is because, in a similar way to the Popperian tribal or closed society, African communalism establishes the tyranny of the tribe over the individual through myths and socio-religious taboos that can neither be questioned nor criticized.

By the same token, the idea of majority rule itself has to be understood as a hindrance to the actualization of an open African society, because it is the contemporary version of the tyranny of the collective over the individual. In reality, the majority never rules, the idea of majority rule is simply a gimmick by the elite that is used to whip up tribal and religious sentiments in the pursuit of political relevance. To forestall the problem of dictatorial democracy in Africa, Popper [35] recommends that democracy should be based on the fusion of institutionalism (i.e institutional control of leaders), and personalism (i.e selection of the right personnel). "Institutions are like fortresses" says Popper, "they must be well designed and manned." In essence, like former US President Barack Obama once said, "Africa doesn't need strong men, it needs strong institutions."

## 5. African Communalism and the Paradox of Nigerian Democratic Culture

The crux of this discourse is to synchronise the essentiality of African communalism within the purview of Nigerian democratic culture. This is done with a glance on the nature of African communalism vis-à-vis the operation of democratic principles in Nigeria political space. It is, pertinent to state without prejudice that Nigeria democratic culture is a perjured form of democracy with its attendant corrupt nature. It is foolhardy to assume that what operate in Nigeria political space goes for democracy as it stand to be.

The inherent paradoxes that bedeviled Nigerian democratic culture is an aberration to the sustainability of social order and development of the nation as a whole and the individuals that constitute the nation. These paradoxes range from negative *godfatherism*, inadequate political education and orientation, which manifests itself in election manipulation, inadequate accountability and transparency among leaders, ethnicity, violence in forms of political hooliganism, and thuggery among others have impacted negatively on the Nigerian polity and the nation's developmental processes. These realities confront Nigeria as a sovereign nation, thereby reducing the nation to a nation that wanton in poverty amidst spacious wealth, because of the uncritical adoption of a system of government that does not reflect her socio-cultural milieu.

African communalism is a principle of social ordering that promotes cooperate existence where sense of belongingness and inclusiveness is fundamental. It kicks against the profound idea of *I-alone-ism* that democracy as practiced in Nigeria seems to celebrate. And, given the preponderance of the fact that no society can survive outside its culture, it is suggestive that the unguided erosion of communal spirit with individualistic spirit entrenched in democracy is unholy to promoting common good in Nigeria. Thus, it is incumbent to argue that the negative implications of individualism on the democratisation process in Nigeria could not be over ruled for the current political shenanigan that rattled Nigeria political and socio-economic space. This is crisply captured by Ikuenobe:

We cannot ignore the extreme negative implications of the individualism in Western modernity. These kinds of rugged individualism, egoism, and extreme capitalism have engendered a number of negative moral and social effects such as greed, exploitation, lack of empathy and sympathy for others, as well as many social pathologies that correlate with or create pervasive incidences of extreme deviant, criminal, and violent behaviours [36].

It should be noted that the current trend of democracy that is being practiced in Africa/Nigeria is an offshoot of colonialism, adopted without adequate understanding of its principles and morals that enhance its suitability in the Western world. Wiredu, put this in a perspective and observes that the Western moral foundation that sustains democracy such as "those finely designed parliamentary palliatives, which in the United States or the United Kingdom, for instance, do mollify the opposition to some extent, are in Africa often non-existent, or equivalently, existent only on paper" [37] The absence of such parliamentary palliatives that could be used to placate the opposition in Africa/Nigeria democratic culture is a great minus to the sustainability of democratic principles, especially the doctrine of checks and balances. This doctrine of (checks and balances) is one of the fundamental principles that solidify democracy; its absence, however, reduces democracy in Nigeria to a mere ruse. This is reflective of the unguided cross-carpeting of the legislature to ruling executive party for personal gains at the detriment of their (party doctrines and principles) constitutional duties, thereby, reducing the potency of the needed checks on abuse and misuse of executive power. This is reflective of the fact that Nigeria democrats are only obsessed with power politics without any interest in full-fledged adoption of the essentiality of democracy. It is on this note, that an alliance is formed with Wiredu advocating for a revisit of the African communal ethos that is sensitive to the plight of all by recognising the values of consensus and common good.

It is obvious that the current assumed democrats that govern Nigeria are not at home with the profundity of solidarity nature of Africa way of life is encumbered in their selfish desires amounting to unnecessary accumulation of wealth with impunity, that circumvent the democratic

principles that project it as that which favours the majority instead of the minority. Failure to ascend to this, is a radicalised way of encouraging *poverty of unity* that often transmutes to uncouth violent conflict that could be averted with avid stimulation of communal living as entrenched in African communalism. This, in a way increases the wave of class struggle that bedevilled contemporary Nigeria political and democratic dispensation. It is an ambient that showcases the individualistic tendencies of the political class which could be ascribed as an offshoot of open society, where many members of society strive to rise socially, in order to take the places of other members as against the cooperate nature of the communal life style that project Popper's idea of a closed society that lacks such tendencies.

The propensity of the above is not unconnected with the fact that Africa/Africans ontologically are believed to be people who derive meaningful existence through harmonious living devoid of solitudes. This is because, "the yearning to live not in isolation but with others has ontological priority over our personal intellectual explorations and individual needs. We are ontologically social beings. We need one another to survive. This is highly recognised in African traditions as well as in Western cultures" [38].

Thus, it is arguable that the adoption of democracy as a form of government in Nigeria should be hinged on Nigeria socio-cultural milieu so that its relevance could be helped in promoting social order that will advance humanity. This is imperative with the fact that no society can survive outside its socio-cultural milieu, for hardly and if not impossible can two societies operate same culture. Therefore, there is the need for the recognition of cultural relativism in adopting any system to meddle and peddle the affairs of such system for "the culture of a particular society may not be meaningful to others" [39]. Thus, the gross violation of the principles of democracy as obtained in its practice in Nigeria political space makes it polemical. The polemics that entangle the Nigeria democratic culture are a build-up of the incongruity of the spirit of individualism that has subjugated and supplanted the communal spirit of the "we" envisioned in Africa society and the unwholesome adaptation of the "I" syndrome that robbed African/Nigerian citizens the attendance dividend of democracy.

Derivable from the above is suggestive that the best that individualism, orchestrated in democracy can offer Nigeria, if not guided is a chaotic society, as individual will always see him/herself as the best. The end of this could be violent conflict, for the individualistic nature of man has often made it difficult to have order in a society. As such, one is poised to suggest within the anti-social and development activities of Nigeria democrats as those operating under the influence of *oligarchy oath* which according to Aristotle runs 'I promise to be an enemy of the people, and to do my best to give them bad advice!' [40]. It would be difficult to denounce this, in a glance, as a peep into the activities of virtually all politicians and political office holders in Nigeria reflect this presumption. Little wonder, the on-going security challenges that rattle the country, sacking/suspension and reinstatement

of some alleged corrupt office holders, and the assumed witch hunting of political opponents/oppositions among others.

## 6. Conclusion

The wide acceptance of democracy as the best form of government has eroded the viability of virtually all other forms of government. The continent of Africa to which Nigeria belongs has been caught in the web and her adoption of democracy seems to have halted and deprived her the essence of communalism that uphold sense of togetherness. In a way, the adoption of democracy has suspended the traditional spirit of collectivism under which her socio-political and cultural milieu operate.

This, discourse within its scope tried to synchronise African communalism and the paradox of Nigerian democratic culture within the understanding of communalism as that which project closed society and democracy as that which promote open society. This in a way suggests the inevitability of change. However, it is hoped that, though, a return to holistic African communalism could be hopelessly wrong, it is arguable to suggest that the individualistic posture of Nigerian democrats that project Popper's idea of open society needs a surgical attention that would in turn uplift human dignity of African communalism that shares Popper's idea of closed society as projected. Hence, it is expected that there is a need for a blend of the positives of both African communalism and contemporary democratic tradition to enhance social order in Nigeria. When this is achieved, the current socio-political quagmire that beclouds Africa continent with particular reference to Nigeria, could be managed both minimally and maximally.

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