Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Traditional Monarchical Experience as Precursors to Dictatorial Tendency in Modern Africa

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Abstract

Before the advent of colonialism, most of traditional Africa was run as empires, kingdoms and monarchies which were largely established and led by war-lords, who, to that extent were authoritative and hence dictatorial. African nationalist leaders of the fifties, sixties and seventies were resistant to foreign rule also because it posed a challenge to established/existing political and socio-cultural structures. Thus, once granted political freedom, African post-colonial leaders made haste and imbibed the dictatorial under-tune of African traditional monarchical structure under modern political state structure—democracy. Thus, what we have today is 'Esau's skin in Jacob's body' or 'new wine in an old skin'. It is the argument of this essay that just as pre-colonial African rulers assumed dictatorial powers as a result of their territorial expeditions, contemporary African leaders assume dictatorial tendencies once they succeed in galvanizing their way to positions of authority. The article concludes that even though that it is the pre-colonial/monarchical experience that breaded the modern tendency for dictatorship in a recrudescent form, both strands find expression and theoretical foundation in Hobbes' account of and preference for an absolute monarchy. It recommends, however, a blend of monarchism with the basic tenets of democracy.

Keywords: Monarchy, dictatorship, democracy, Africa, politics, power, leviathan.

I. Introduction

Successive leaders of goaded democracies in nascent African States have, unfortunately been sit-tight or dictatorial—never tolerant of any critical or meaningful opposition; and these dictatorial tendencies are not strange to historical Africa. Before the advent of colonialism, most of traditional Africa was run as empires, kingdoms and monarchies which were largely established and led by war-lords, who, to that extent were authoritative and hence dictatorial. Whatever the form of monarchical or democratic (contractual) dictatorship, ancient or modern, has some theoretical foundation in the political theory of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Thus, African nationalist leaders of the fifties, sixties and seventies apparently were resistant to foreign rule perhaps because it posed a challenge to established/existing political and socio-cultural structures. Hence, once granted political freedom, African post-colonial leaders made haste and imbibed the dictatorial under-tone of African traditional monarchical structure under modern political state structure (purportedly also of even the colonialist—democracy). Thus, what we have today is 'Esau's skin in Jacob's body' or 'new wine in an old skin'.

Accordingly, it needs to be indicated that just as pre-colonial African rulers assumed dictatorial powers as a result of their territorial expeditions, colonial rulers adopted dictatorship in order to exercise effective control over the new territories, and post-independent African leaders assume dictatorial tendencies, blending the two old strands, once they succeed in galvanizing their way to positions of authority. Dictatorial governance, no matter how disguised, is one of the principal bane of governance in modern Africa. It could be admitted that the original form of African monarchism (dictatorship) was embraced by all subjects. Such cannot be said of the modern versions of dictatorship in Africa since their goals and essences differ. This needs to be indicated and elaborated.

The need for present exercise is informed by the fact that by knowing the root of the menace of modern day dictatorship, considered undesirable, it could be easier to outline a possible political arrangement which would reflect the appropriate features of the past to suit the peculiar realities of the present. By careful conceptual and logical analysis, this article shall try to indicate that even though that it is the pre-colonial/colonial high-handedness and African historical monarchical experience that breaded the modern tendency for dictatorship in a recrudescent form; that both strands of dictatorship find expression and theoretical foundation in Hobbes' account of and preference for an absolute monarchy. However, the concepts of monarchy, dictatorship, democracy, Africa, politics, power, and Leviathan could be contentious, and, therefore need to be put on strong perspective.

II. Conceptual clarification

Monarchy, monarchism/monarchical Monarchy refers to a government in which a single person rules, with powers varying from absolute dictatorship to the merely ceremonial. Monarchism refers to any idea connected with the system of government headed by a king or queen.

Dictatorship Is an approach to (or a system of) government whereby one particular person (or handful of persons) act(s) as (a) ruler(s) with absolute authority/powers—which could be temporal or permanent.

Democracy implies a government of popular participation. It is a government by the people, either directly or through representatives elected by the people themselves.

Africa here refers to the continent and peoples of the 'African continent: the black race and the Arab world. ***Contemporary African political milieu (modern Africa)*** refers to the totality of the current social, economic, and administrative realities on the African continent since the 19th century.

Politics The activity of engaging in political affairs and the organization /administration of the state. ***Political*** refers to any measure pertaining to the conduct of government. **Socio-political**, therefore, refers to the political society or state.

Power The ability to or not to act, a capacity for acting in such a manner as to control someone else's (especially one's subordinates) responses; the legal right and legitimate application of this capacity is called ***authority***.

Leviathan The most renown and brilliant philosophical treatise by Thomas Hobbes (1651) indicating the emergence of civil society and grounds of political obligation.

III. Background to the study

This article is written especially against the backdrop of the developments in African nascent democracies, particularly Nigerian. Post independence life and emergent culture aided by the traditional culture/experience had its effects on the building of the new nation and attempts at governance made by the leaders of the newly independent Nigerian state. And given the artificiality of the political structures and regional boundaries of inherited monarchies and amalgamated territories, the inviolability of which was confirmed by the Independent and various post-independent Constitutions, attempts to build and govern a united country out of the myriad peoples and cultures produced leaders with primordial (rather than civic) sentiments, weird policies, disenchanted citizens, apathy, irredentism

and leading to inevitable political failure. Although this was not the case in traditional political authority, which was hierarchical and with the head held as spiritual and divine, such community heads where however seriously dictatorial and absolute in authority.

The hierarchical structure of traditional political authority in Nigeria (Africa) establishes a pattern where the head of a family, the eldest person(s) in the community, the community head possess some final say in their spheres of influence. These statuses where accorded divine reverence by their subjects. Among the traditional Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, the political structure is as spiritual as well as absolute in hierarchy and authority. According to a legend, and following some mysterious arrival of Obatala, Oduduwa, and some of God's messengers from heaven, on the land of Ife, Oduduwa steadily but effectively extended his territorial powers to the whole of Yoruba-land (Akinjogbin and Ayandele, 1980)—giving rise to the Oyo empire, headed by the *Alafin* (the fountain of authority, company of the gods who wielded much powers over many lands because of his brevity, indomitable courage and warlike spiritedness). Like Alafin, Sango (its fourth ruler) was wild, fiery, fierce and feared; skilled in sleight of hand tricks, with enormous magical powers (Nzemeke and Erhagbe, 2002: 9). These features, however, mark the acme of autocracy. But theoretically, the Alafin's powers were to be moderated by the seven-man council of *Oyomesi*—the kingmakers and ward leaders. The *Ogboni* cult moderated between the Alafin and Oyomesi in case of any infraction. The defense of the empire was in the hands of an army headed by *Ae-OnaKakanfo*. Nevertheless, that the traditional Yoruba political structure was hierarchical did not obliterate the fact that the heads were held divine and thus dreaded—making the other cadres nominal. This claim could be validated by another fact that the distant provinces were headed by princes, responsible and loyal to the Alafin, especially at the *bere* festival—a practice which, 18th century had started waning and diminishing, giving rise to many smaller kingdoms.

Variants of these features existed in all of traditional African kingdoms, emirates, and empires. Archaic or outmoded as one would consider them, African dictatorship produced responsibility, respect, love, happiness, cooperation and progress; and it finds vivid theoretical base in Hobbes' modern account of political society, power, authority, and obligation—though Hobbes' version is reprehensive. The interesting development here is that successive 21st century African (democratic, as they often claim) leaders have variously found both the traditional African and Hobbes' modes congenial to their political quest and gerrymandering, not withstanding that while the traditional African's integrates, Hobbessian version denigrates. Historically, this abjurable embracement could be traced and firmly established.

IV. Hobbes on power, authority and obligation

Prior to the instituting of the family and ethnic culture, as Hobbes (1651) explained, man simply lived in a *state of nature*, by mere instincts, wandering simply concerned with self-preservation thereby ignited conflict of interests resulting to competition, selfishness, egotism, and uncertainty of life: nasty, brutish, and short. In such society where might was right, it was only inevitable for the weaker to submit to and depend on the stronger for his economic needs and security amidst basic concern for survival: the pre-eminence of natural laws (to seek peace and follow it; and the willingness to give up all of one's (hostile) rights toward other people once they are willing to give up theirs in the same respect). It is "as if every man should say to every man, I authorize and give up my right of governing myself, to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that you give up your right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner" (Stumpf and Fieser, 2003). Significantly and for whatever the nature of the contract or sovereign, Hobbes identifies the transfer of the right to rule from the people to the sovereign as both absolute and irrevocable, reason: in order to secure the conditions of peace, order, and law. This condition led to the development of settlement, the rearing of the family, the emergence of lordship and serfdom, and the will thereby to create an artificial person, that great leviathan, as commonwealth. At the point, this is not a bad idea at all; but one worries about the supreme sanctity and indissolubility of the contract.

The family represents the ethical mind in its natural and immediate phase. This substantiality loses its unity, passes over division, and enters into the phase of relations—into civil society: an association of self-subsistent individuals in a universality, which, because of their self-subsistence, is abstract (Hegel, 1896). The new association is brought together by their needs, by the legal system—the means to security of person and property, and by external organization (government) for attaining their particular and common interests (the constitution). In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes presents a lucid account of the contract-base emergence of this association (discussed in the preceding paragraph).

The implication of Hobbes' contract is the emergence of an absolutely strong ruler amidst coerced eternal groveling subservient subjects. The ruler's single will and judgment, he holds, represents the will and judgment of all the citizens, resistance to which would be illogical and unnecessary. Law is the command and begins with the sovereign. Hobbes serious authoritarianism is vigorously expressed in saying that no law is unjust since the law was what was absent in the undesirable *state of nature*. Moreover, the leviathan is accountable only to God. Hobbes thereby subjugates the church to the state and reignites the divine element accorded monarchs in traditional Africa. For whatever else, Hobbes' account does not recognize the dynamic nature of human rationality; he thinks man as simply brute and unintelligent being subject to perpetual control. Does the transfer of

rights make the leviathan more human than the rest people? Apparently, Hobbes account provides a formidable theoretical foundation for absolutism or dictatorship already grown in the historic dictatorial structure of traditional African political system as—indicated by the Yoruba experience; and many modern political heads adhere to the its tenets—apparent or disguised; either they operate with stooge parliaments, or they operate without parliament at all; or they are gulped in the attempt to do either of the options. This attitude has led to so much fragmentation on the continent—from slavery, colonialism, conflict of tradition vs. modernity, ethnicity, religion extremism, political divide, pangs of individualism/capitalism, military incursion to politics, injustices, non-performance, and other forms violence (physical, psychological, environmental, institutional and personal). Nigeria's Obasanjo was hurled out of planned 'third term'; Libya, Egypt, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Tunisia, Liberia, Zaire, and Angola of the preceding decade are clear examples of such who have witnessed agonizing sit-tight rulers and dictatorial tendencies.

V. Aspects of African traditional monarchical experience

Before the forced embracement of western type political structure, the political ruler-ship and lordship of one generally accepted man/family was prevalent in the established kingdoms and empires in Africa. The essential features of that arrangement include the following:

1. The adoption/adulation of and submission to one man (the monarch) regarded as the political/spiritual and leader of the community, and identified by some title—king, queen, *oba*, *emir*, *esu*, etc;
2. Following of "1" above, the exaltation of the political/spiritual head semi-divine status and according him immense respect;
3. Protecting the head at all costs, including sacrificing even human life to ensure that such head lived;
4. An assemblage of an advisory council bound and limited in powers by some intricate laws, finality of the monarch and other metaphysical-base values;
5. A recognition of the monarch not only as absolute and semi-divine, but essentially as unassailable and indissoluble;
6. The institution of the monarchy as a permanent arrangement where its source-family is regarded as the 'ruling house' thereby making such authority hereditary or, as in most cases, primogenitural;
7. The monarch was the land-owner, life-owner, and custodian of custom, tradition, law, and values.

The features here outlined represent a few of the subjugating and inter-positing norms of the pre-colonial Africa. The immediate impact of the preceding features is the fact that those monarchies lasted decades and, in some cases, several centuries up to and beyond

the period of European interests in Africa. Temporarily adopted by the over-powering missionary and foreign political dominance, fragments of African monarchical authorities survived the colonial era and beyond into the 21st century. Immediate post-colonial Africa thus witnessed an attempt to blend traditional monarchical experience with the new political chart introduced by the colonial dominance. This thus led to a conflict of both legitimacy and of relevance. Such divergence of primordial and civic authority/sentiments perhaps did lead to the early exit of the governments of the new states—Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt, Togo, etc. What was left was to redesign or devise a system both independent of, not interfaced with but congenial to traditional authority. Such attempts led to enthronement of various largely unsuccessful strands of democracy—presidential or parliamentary.

VI. Hobbes, traditional monarchism as precursors to dictatorial tendencies in modern African States

Traditional African political structure was replete with adequate vestiges of legal, social, economic, and moral rules mostly vested on some levels of hierarchical authority headed by a monarch whose powers were absolute. That the structure has survived into the 21st century raises some worry for the political theorist. The finality and absoluteness of the traditional African monarch finds adequate theoretical base in Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan—with the latter identifying the processes of acquiring, applying and sustaining political authority. In this way, Hobbes deified the existing African tradition amidst rational defense. Hence, from independence, emergent African leaders have been more interested in replacing the Europeans in leading positions/consolidation of power and privileges rather than good governance. The masses of people therefore remained captives, as was in the colonial era to their own leaders by coercion; as means to some selfish ends. In Zaire, for example, Mobutu Sese Sekou (its leader for many decades) was considered richer than his entire country. Intoxicated by irresponsible power, those leaders became ambitious for traditional/divine titles: Azikiwe became '*Zik of Africa*'; Nkrumah the '*Osagyefo*' and '*katitamento*' ('the redeemer' and 'one who is never guilty'); Banda was '*Ngwazi*' ('the champion'); Kenyatta was the '*Nzee*' (the wise man); and Emperor Heile Sellasie became the 'king of kings'—just to mention a few over Africa. These and successive rulers have been sunk and sometimes consumed by the aroma of power, preferring and doing all possible to get or remain in it (leading to untold genocide in many cases as was in Rwanda, Liberia and Somalia), with no restrain in acquiring, retaining or using it (leading to repression and highhandedness as in Zimbabwe); Nkrumah, Doe, Mohammed, Kabila, and Kaddafi are a few examples of those who have paid the supreme price for this (Uroh, 1998).

The immediate structural impact of these schisms is the emergence of a gerontocratic (or senile) political pattern (with all the rational defects) or the breeding of inexperienced heirs and cohorts (though not without severe risks) ascending political positions of authority/power, foisting several avoidable, ego-driven, and selfish wars of attrition on the continent. Apart from breeding an ever depressed and unsatisfied citizenry, disgruntled economies, degraded and insecure environment, the dictatorial desire of most contemporary African political rulers (rather than leaders) have created seemingly perpetual hopelessness and fear in the mind of the ordinary African. Despite the above, people still bore allegiance to kings, emperors, emirs, obas, obis, elders, etc, which also counts as being moral. The scenario gets worse by the day in the face and influence of individualism and the impact of imperialism. The Arab spring that has erupted in northern Africa since December 2011 against these malaises has introduced radical rejection of dictatorship; and it's spreading to other parts of Africa and elsewhere around the world, awakening socio-political consciousness among citizens.

VII. Analysis

It is a fact that in traditional African societies, one finds that morality permeated every aspect of life and this had to be reflected in the laws; this culture has since been supervened. Laws, unlike we know them today, were unknown, and as code of behavior and moral values, albeit unwritten, were deeply ingrained in every member of the society and this is what curbed vices and other improper behavior. Morality, as understood in the African world-view was law in a sense. Among the Etsako of Nigeria, for example, Law was also a command of the ruler, gods/ancestors (Asekhauno, 2011). Thus, in the African societies, there is no clear-cut distinction between law and morality since the rules of conduct did in a way amounted to law. Breaking them meant isolating oneself from one's community and the society was such that one could not exist outside a community—hence attracting the wrath of gods/ancestors or banishment or exclusion of one from his/her community was dreaded some to compliance; unlike present day, traditional political rulers were conscious of these possibilities. Nonetheless, written or oral held laws were set and put in place, and were supposed to set the moral standard in the emergent society. But the nationalism, resistance and current search for inward options pose the in-tenability of modern imperialist (democratic) option because it lacked the firm grip of the law as service to public morality—the public ethos which provides the cement of any human society, and that the law, especially the criminal law, must regard it as a primary function to maintain this public morality (Peschke, 2004).

Invariably, the confluence or whole-sale embracement of modern capitalism without also embracing the requirements of democratic principles (freedom, opportunity, etc) puts contemporary leaders (rulers) in a sort of dilemma. This has led to the building of

democrats who are autocrats in disguise; ascension of autocrats bereft of accountability and respect for freedom, lacking in any moral tinge/rectitude and the semi-divine conception accorded the command of the traditional African ruler. How can the liberal African mind therefore extricate himself from such immobile condition? Accordingly, because workable traditional historical values are so far-reaching and immense, an integrated existence/ordered society can only obtain by prioritizing them as of higher status in contemporary milieu. Doing this puts the concerned African in some dilemma—of stipulating the criteria of selection.

In some way, the dilemma thus posed is compounded by the new religious moralities and prosperity gospel preached in Christian and Islamic theologies, again foreign to traditional Africa. The fact is that, by changing our thoughts, the west, through their many-faceted colonial expeditions, changed the African world; now, it's the time we change those western thoughts not appropriate to the African condition with African values and reality of social responsibility. On the determination of the grounds of the law and social responsibility, the Sophists, many centuries ago, had distinguished two grounds—the natural and conventional, with the first prior to the second; and to these, Critias added a third: the gods/religion, to deal with man's surreptitious immoral acts which have soc consequences. Such was the African traditional belief and practice; it builds, while its modern variants obliterate. Hence, Radbruch Gustav says that "The fundamental principles of humanitarian morality were part of the very concept of legality and that no positive enactment or statute, however clearly it expressed and however clearly it conformed to the formal criteria of validity of a given legal system, could be valid if it contravened the basic principles of morality" (Hart, 1958) applies to the African situation. Moral formation in traditional Africa is given to children at a very tender age in order to acquire the habits, attitudes, beliefs, skills and motives that enable a human being to fit into the community. Thus each and every aspect of life contributed to the moral formation of an individual. An individual lived in and was part of the community and it was every one's duty to uphold the community's values. Thus morality was and still is part and parcel of the community. Unfortunately in contemporary times, individualism and quest for power has eroded these ideals; no thanks to Hobbes.

The lack of respect for the written law, the common law and the doctrines of equity, the established and current custom or usage, as bases for the principle of justice, equity, and good conscience mark the acme of dictatorship and political absolutism in contemporary Africa. However, customary law is only applicable in so far as it is not repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience and not incompatible either directly or by necessary implication with any written law. However, it should be noted from some decided cases that what was deemed as natural justice, equity and good conscience was what the colonial

masters consider as such and it had completely nothing to do with what the Africans considered as natural justice, equity and good conscience. This is simply because African customs and cultures were considered as primitive and barbaric—regardless of whether or not they were good or bad or apply. Such was the beginning of the derailment (Trevor-Roper, 1963; Roseberg and Nottingham, 1967).

Regrettably, in many African states today, the derailment and the emergent statutes and their values introduced by the colonial rulers and sustained by imperialist interests still obtain. Dictatorship is imperialist capitalist in character; it does not reflect cherished African values. Thus from the post-independent era since the late 50s and early 60s, many laws have been conceived, drafted, and passed legal experts, governments and military juntas without involving the people targeted objects of such legislation or their cherished values. This non-participation and non-involvement of in law making by the peoples from diverse cultures the laws are meant to serve is the root cause of the dangerous dictatorial tendencies in contemporary Africa. The emerging established National Law Reform Commissions in Africa may have to have this point to contend with.

VIII. Conclusion

African historical experience of monarchical authority and Hobbes' validation of same have combined with the dictates of individualism to produce dictatorial-mindset in contemporary African leaders. No matter its foundation, political dictatorship and absolutism is aberration. The livid and inordinate neglect by contemporary political rulers of moral virtues and values is eccentric. Then, what is likely to happen if the law and governance in contemporary African states continues to be coercive, ignore or underestimate the power and the influence of the culture, morality, values and the common good of the people for which the law is made? The people are also likely and ought to ignore, undervalue and undermine such ruler-ship and the law because it is alien, unmindful and irrelevant to their worldview and philosophy of life. The manifestations of this variance are violence, immorality, insecurity and underdevelopment. And although Hobbes proposed his theory at a time the British monarch was in turmoil and civil war impending in England, the African state is indeed in need of alternative to political dictatorship and absolutism.

But an appreciable ideal could be contrived. Accordingly, Plato had recommended the rule by '*philosopher king*'—rule by the knowledgeable. However and even though modern leaders are widely elitists, they are worst for it. Therefore we must strive for a model of leadership and governance which incorporates respect for international human rights standards with cherished human (African) values. Accordingly, we must reject a whole-sale application of western individual-base strategies because they do not reflect African

effective values. We need, however, a blend of the opposites, the dichotomies: traditional/public responsibility couched in public law, in conformity with people's centrality of the human person, the community and the most cherished values on which African societies had been founded, nurtured and developed. The challenge now is how to build an African and enable him to live, truly modern, but truly African (AMECEA, 1986). The day this critical synthesis be achieved, that day the deadly dualism or dichotomy be erased—efforts at achieving this goal is should be a challenge contemporary academia.

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