

## **Does Africa need philosopher-kings?**

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### **Introduction**

The context of human existence is determined by both natural and human factors. Inherent in the context is the likelihood of degeneration since things are liable to go badly (Oguejiofor 2001: 7) and make life miserable for some people. Whereas not much can be done against the order and consequence of natural designs, man with regard to human-originated ills in the world can make a great deal of improvement. Owing to human agency, situations flounder and instability creeps in and this perverts the ideals of *good life* in society. World history has so many examples of leaders who have victimised their subjects by changing the laws abruptly and amassing power illegally. In Africa, civilian and military dictatorships, civil wars and genocides speak volumes of human suffering from the hands of those in positions of power. Further, mismanagement of human and material resources has often derailed development plans from priority areas of health, education and good governance. The human situation in Africa, therefore, calls for a special attention since the social, economic and political reality is already floundered. Africa is in a predicament whose redemption requires the exploitation of all available expertise. Accordingly therefore, those endowed with philosophical insight should not be seen to "fiddle while their domains burn" (Oguejiofor 2001: 7).

This paper explores the justification for philosopher-kings in Africa. The question, in other words, is, does the situation in which Africa finds itself call for philosopher-kings? This question, of course, takes into account the possibility of having kings who are not philosophers. The assumption is that if such a scenario obtains, the conditions of human existence in Africa remain unsatisfactory. Attempts for improvement in various aspects of life may be made but always with inadequate success because the efforts are either misplaced or thwarted somehow. There is

also the possibility of having philosophers who are not kings and are, therefore, not able to use their talents for the welfare of society. Under such circumstances the philosophers either 'live in ivory towers' and 'build castles in the air' or they are simply armchair philosophers who are contented with argumentations and "warming the same soup over and over again" (Hegel 1965: 2) without serving it for human consumption. It is the former position that is pertinent for this paper because it focuses on those people in positions of power and yet lack the necessary insight into the root causes of the problems of their states. The latter position is not too critical in so far as not every philosopher can become a king (or ruler) in the true sense of the word. There is just not enough space in the arena of leadership for the entire population of philosophers in any country. But this does not mean that the philosophers in this case cannot make their contributions to society in relevant areas.

In this paper I argue that a major step towards resolving Africa's socio-economic and political problems is to review the concept and change the attitude of state leadership. It is a fact that many African leaders easily yield to the corrupting influence of power against the urgency for good governance and national development. In the current waves of globalisation, Africa's performance is peripheral and so African states remain, at the most, developing. In this regard, this paper contributes to the responses against the perennial challenges of the relevance of Philosophy to problems of society, highlights the constraints faced by Philosophers in Africa and the importance of high educational qualifications for leaders (not only political leaders).

In considering the African scenario, I employ Plato's idea of statesmanship that conceives citizens' welfare through "putting good and wise men in authority" (Morrow 1960: 581). To that effect, I start by analysing Plato's 'philosopher-king' in an attempt to identify the elements that are still applicable to modern states. I then discuss the circumstances affecting the African philosopher within the call to resolve the problems of society. Before concluding, I address the issue of reconceptualising leadership and the likely benefits of that move to the African state. Finally in the conclusion, I emphasise the importance of high education for good leadership in the state. It must be made clear at the outset that this paper does not specifically analyse or discuss Plato's theories of education or justice.

## **Who is a philosopher-king?**

Plato conceived the idea of philosopher-king against a background of national failure, terror and defeat in Athens to such an extent that he was convinced that Athens needed moral and political recreation (Plato 1995: 12). According to him, politics was marred by the separation of the state from ethical principles and so corruption became the order of the regime. Justice was impaired, education lacked a national vision and was unsystematic and the military lacked discipline. Worst of all, democracy failed because it was not accompanied by people's intellectual and moral sensitivity. As far as Plato was concerned, a just society would not for example, convict and condemn a citizen of integrity and effective teacher like Socrates. A responsible democracy would not let unenlightened masses to participate in the fundamental decisions of government. A sound educational system that prepares future leaders would not be run without an official monitoring system, and a well-trained army would not perform so dismally at war (Plato 1955: 16).

It was, therefore, Plato's considered view that such problems would not be solved effectively unless philosophers became kings and kings that were not philosophers were introduced to philosophy argued,

there will be no end to the troubles of states or indeed...of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers become philosophers, and thus political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands...<sup>1</sup>

To this argument Glaucon, representing common opinion, warned that "if you produce theories of that sort, you can't be surprised if most decent people take their coats off, pick up the nearest weapon, and come after you in their shirt sleeves to do something terrible to you"<sup>2</sup>. For Glaucon and also for most people today, it is the idea of philosopher-king that needs to be clarified for modern usage.

Generally, the term 'king' was used by Plato to connote a ruler and more particularly a monarch. Athens had long moved away from the kingship system and in times of Plato, democracy, timarchy, aristocracy and oligarchy were other possible forms of rulership. But Sparta had maintained a hereditary kingship system that was combined with oligarchy<sup>3</sup>. Plato had a qualified admiration for the Spartan style particularly for its stability and steady governance. Sparta had experienced no factionalism and no tyranny for a long time. Unlike Athens which was in constant change of government and suffered humiliating defeats at war, Sparta

was regarded as "the most powerful state in Greece" for 300 years (Morrow 1960: 60). What won Plato's admiration was not the actual style of Spartan government but rather the stability, strength, discipline and a compulsory state-controlled system of education.

But what is fundamental in the notion of king for Plato is that the incumbent is bound by the laws with which he rules the people. So the concept of king entails a ruler who is the custodian of the state laws. In other words, the ruler is a caricature of the laws and the guardian of the values and principles of the state. Thus, Plato's ruling class in *The Republic* comprises custodians of the laws, the ethical principles and educational values. Philosophy, on the other hand, equips the ruler with critical insight and good reasoning which are necessary for intellectual and moral knowledge. So, in broad terms, Plato's philosopher-kings stand for those individuals who hold positions of power and whose eligibility is validated by their knowledge of the good. In modern states the list would include heads of state, government officials, religious leaders, the technocrats, among others. The training in Philosophy recommended by Plato includes subjects like mathematics, astronomy, harmonics and dialectic. This is equivalent more or less to the university education of modern times, which involves grasping the theoretical bases of disciplines so that the student is able to distinguish between appearance and reality.

So high education, moral rectitude and a commitment to justice are fundamental to the idea of philosopher-kings. Such a ruler "never does or orders what is best for himself but only what is best for his subjects" (Plato 1955: 76). A corruption-free leadership, according to Plato, would promote morality and justice in society. As the lover of wisdom, the philosopher is well qualified for such a responsibility in the state. The purpose of Plato's Academy, for example, was to train statesmen, legislative advisors, educators and leaders in philosophic insight. His theories of education, of law and of social justice, for example, were enquiries not simply for speculative interests, but more importantly, for finding solutions to the problems of statesmen and educators. To this effect, the Academy "was widely recognised as a place where men and women were trained in legislation, and from which advisors could be called upon when desired" (Morrow 1960: 9). Thus, contrary to popular opinion, philosophy and philosophers are not meant to build castles in the air and to operate only with abstractions. They originate and thrive from existential frameworks. That is, the philosophical mind is spatio-temporal; it is fuelled by existential conditions of a particular state or society, compares them

with and determines the universal ideal for practical life. The philosopher is motivated by the ideals of practical life. He derives *the ought* from *the is*, not for sheer theoretical excitement, but for resolving existential problems. The most serious attempt by the philosopher is to actualise that which is rationally objective. Hegel (1965: 10), for example, believed that for the philosopher, "what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational"<sup>4</sup>.

## **Would Plato speak for Africa today?**

If Plato's observations and prescriptions are worth serious consideration for Africa, one may start by asking whether Africa is in need of moral and political salvation, whether Africa suffers from serious miscarriages of justice, whether Africa kills its own Socrates, whether African economies are rigged by self-seeking leaders, whether African leaders are generally intellectually and morally weak. It is highly unlikely for the answers to all or almost all the questions to be in the negative. It has been observed that if it is not by force, it is by rigged elections that many African political leaders attain the office<sup>5</sup>. This means that the election results are usually not a true reflection of the people's choices. Naturally, a person who cheats at elections also cheats in the conduct of his/her official duties. That person would also tamper with the constitution and with the appointment procedures of public officers to suit his/her personal desires<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, elections depend on the "whims and fancies" of the masses, the majority of whom are easily persuaded by campaign rhetoric. The masses are usually not capable of evaluating campaign messages and also do not have adequate knowledge of human rights with regard to the electoral process. So, the cheating leader takes advantage of the democratic principle of "decision by the majority vote" by spreading false campaign messages to the masses to amass votes in his/her favour. Further, the educational qualifications of political candidates are still not considered serious criteria for eligibility. At the dawn of the first republics, it was a question of whether one had played a significant role in the liberation struggles against the colonial governors. In the new dispensation, the constitutions of a number of countries including Malawi are still silent or vague on the educational capacity of candidates<sup>7</sup>. It is, therefore, not surprising that the leaders' attitude to power is characterized by the desire to be served, to be praised or flattered, to have easy access to national resources and intolerance of dissenting political views. This behaviour is displayed regardless of popular claims for multiparty democracy. This state of affairs yields dire socio-economic and political consequences in the states.

Most news from Africa is about misfortunes (or missed fortunes), which include human-originated evils from official corruption, huge government debts, political rebellions, political discrimination, political violence, displacements (refugees) and genocides. Opposition and competition are alien concepts to the traditional African politics and this is a politically disabling legacy for the emerging multi-party democracies of Africa. From historical times, the two terms have been associated with rebellious tendencies fuelling factionalism and *coups d'etat*. This occurs amidst natural disasters of floods, drought and the subsequent famine. Certainly, Plato would speak for Africa today. The African scenario is in a crisis. It requires management teams that are themselves not in a crisis.

The issue of a leadership with knowledge and moral integrity is central to Africa's improvement efforts. Reality speaks for itself. A comprehensive view of the continent reveals grave but preventable human suffering<sup>8</sup>. As Cheze (2002: 2) notes,

where there is no shooting war you probably have some form of a reign of terror, insecurity of life and property, armed robbery and hired assassinations, roaming thousands of riot ready unemployed youth...the continent enjoys the unenviable distinction of being the underdevelopment capital of the world, the unemployment capital of the world, the poverty continent, the Aids continent, the misery zone.

Although many countries now claim to be democratic, they are nonetheless not insured against the degeneration risks from the very principles of democracy. When the pursuit of liberty is not carefully guarded, democracy degenerates into authoritarianism and anarchy. As Plato (1955: 330-31) puts it, a democratic society is "an agreeable anarchic form of society with plenty of variety, which treats all men as equal, whether they are equal or not". Without painting the African scenario unnecessarily gloomy, the reality on the ground confirms that most of the problems are not of divine origin requiring divine intervention. They are the result of human failure especially failure in leadership, poor systems of justice, and weak ethical principles. Africa cannot continue to perform so dismally in the world that requires thinking globally while acting locally. If the leader is functionally disoriented the followers are often worse. Bad leaders mould bad followers who are often too ready to die for the bad leaders. The followers simply fix their expectations on immediate and dubious gratifications handed to them by the leader. They are incapable on their own to critically evaluate the status quo.

## The African philosopher's dilemma

The African philosopher is a victim of the age-old public opinion that regards the occupation as purely theoretical and, therefore, a waste of resources. It is then argued that given the meagre economies of Africa, such a waste entails a luxury, which is incompatible with the African reality. Training in philosophy evokes smiles of mockery or ignorance from the uninitiated. The criticism of philosophy is often from a position of ignorance. Those who have some informed idea about it appreciate and are sympathetic about it. One major characteristic that repels prospective initiates of philosophy is its demand for conceptual analysis and clarity. Philosophy seeks knowledge and objective truth. Truth hurts, it is alleged, but also truth liberates. There are so many people who flee from the truth but nonetheless remain haunted by it. The problem of corruption in Africa is a mark of this scenario. One can evade the truth but not forever and neither can one absolutely hide from it. The aim of philosophy is for mankind to know clearly about what it wants to do and to have it done without regrets. If it is the case that human practice is premeditated, then theoretical analysis is indispensable for effective projects. Indeed serious change, war or peace begins from the mind. The human mind, therefore, must be guided by reason. This is how the philosopher seeks to effect change for a better world. There is hardly any philosopher since Socrates who has not, explicitly or implicitly, sought practical change through his or her philosophy. In relation to the problem of governance in Africa, for example, it is argued that philosophers must find out "why the situation is so, and also how else it should be and how it can then be brought to be the way it ought to be" (Plato 1955: 330-31). While searching for the root causes of Africa's problems, philosophers are mindful that most *roots* are covered by *soil* and so there is need to dig below the surface. To this effect "nobody... digs deeper than philosophers" (Plato 1955: 12). The root causes may not be only the physical and historical ones, for these might themselves be mere symptoms of more deep-rooted cultural and spiritual malaise.

## So, does Africa need philosopher-kings?

In the present context, the answer to the question is in the affirmative. Africa seriously needs philosopher-kings. Solutions to African problems must be appreciated by the African after which the African himself/herself must endeavor to solve them and not expect some miracle or divine intervention. After all, God, we are told, helps those who help themselves, and that pray we may, but in addition to

prayer there must be action.

Philosopher-kingship in Africa would promote rational approach to law, justice and governance and therefore,

- ethnicity and tribalism would be trivialized in political or public affairs, there would be adequate respect for the constitution by politicians. It is noteworthy that most African constitutions are at the mercy of politicians in power to safeguard their own interests. The "3rd term flu" is a topical example for Malawi, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Zambia just to name a few,
- there would be no need for government of appeasement or government of national unity since the primary motive behind government moves would be the common good,
- the masses would be empowered with the necessary civic and political rights to enable them to participate meaningfully in matters of government. Plato rejected the majority principle of democracy primarily because the masses do not have the necessary civic education. Therefore, given adequate empowerment their participation would be more meaningful and acceptable; democracy would be the most reliable form of governance,
- there would be reduced corruption since appointments and official transactions would be based on merit and proven ability,
- there would be mutual respect among members of different political parties regulated by law and common moral sensitivity,
- clear conditions for rising to positions of leadership, especially presidential positions, would ensure confidence in the incumbent and thereby rebellions would be rare if at all,
- there would be more sound economic practice untainted by party or personal aggrandizements. There would also be efficient use of human, time and material resources towards the common good,
- the education sector would receive the attention and support it deserves especially tertiary education since the leaders would be more appreciative of the

need for a highly educated population for development. There would also be no room for dogmatism or indoctrination in issues of politics and development and,

- there would be clearer and more sincere interstate relations and interstate organizations like the AU, COMESA, ECOMOG, ECOWAS, and SADC etc. so that regional unity and regional integration would yield visible benefits.

## **Concluding remarks**

Given the political exigencies of his time in Athens, Plato sought practical change that would filter down to civil organizations and to the general welfare of the citizens. To this effect, he targeted the leaders particularly, statesmen. These people must be well educated to be able to appreciate the values and goals of political leadership. Secondly, the leaders must be virtuous and exemplary in conduct. Plato was cognizant that moral worthiness was achievable through both socialization processes and formal training. The guardians, for example, had to be people of high intellectual calibre with excellent moral quality. Plato prescribed political life in the state that is grounded in principles of ethics so that all laws and transactions are legal and binding for all citizens. A major obsession for Plato was the prevalence of an impartial system of justice in the state. For him, justice must be seen to be done and this is possible where appointments are based not on 'lot' or any other capricious means but on merit and proven ability. In addition, the state must be conceived and operate as a unified entity. In this case unity is an ideal to be pursued or observed by different parts that form one organic whole in the state. Thus, classes or tribes are as parts of a unified system so that a marginalisation of one of them affects unity and performance of the whole. Of course, Plato has been criticised on a number of counts including the details of guardianship, insufficient consideration of the role of the economy in the welfare of the state, rejection of the majority principle and for being highly idealistic.

This paper has refrained from a discussion on the merits and demerits of the theory. Rather it has concentrated on those aspects seen to be valid for the African situation. Surely the general attitude to power in African states should be of great concern if positive developments for citizens' welfare are considered. The intellectual and moral caliber of the people in positions of power must be seriously taken into account prior to elections or appointments. In this context it is noted that Plato's concerns for the change in the political mentality particularly the atti-

tudes to power and authority are pertinent to Africa. One way of realising this is through massive civic education and through school curriculum to inculcate ethical political thinking and behavior befitting good governance and development. This should be reflected in the exemplary conduct of leaders and in a system of justice that rests on maximum respect for the constitution.

## Notes

1. Plato, *The Republic*, p 233.
2. Plato, *The Republic*, pp 233-34.
3. The king took an oath not to extend his power and the people reciprocated with an oath not to overthrow the king. Councils of elders known as the *gerousia*, and the *ephors* of five people to oversee policy issues and state administration cushioned the kingship. It was the strong element of checks and balances on power that assisted the stability of the Spartan system. See Morrow, G. R. *Plato's Cretan City*, pp 65-67.
4. It is important here to note that Hegel starts with *the rational* not with *the actual* as some critics state.
5. Open allegations of election frauds were officially reported in the recent presidential and/or parliamentary elections in Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In the second half of the year 2003, Mauritania held presidential elections amidst cries of widespread practice of vote buying. The elections were precipitated by a failed coup mounted by Mohammed Haidallah in June. Kumba Yalla, President of Guinea-Bissau was toppled in a military coup in September, and a dozen people were arrested in Ougadougou for allegedly plotting to overthrow President Blaise Compaori. Charles Taylor, President of Liberia was forced out of office and exiled to Nigeria by a popular rebel movement. The rebel forces in Uganda and Ivory Coast are also among the chronic internal power conflicts that seem to elude peaceful talks.
6. A few heads of state (F. Chiluba of Zambia, B. Muluzi of Malawi, D. Moi of Kenya, M. Taya of Mauritania and R. Mugabe of Zimbabwe) for example, have sought constitutional changes to remain in office for the Third Term though mostly unsuccessfully.
7. The Constitution of the Republic of Malawi, for example, is silent on the academic qualifications for presidential candidates. On the same question for the Members of Parliament, the Constitution simply says that the person should be "able to speak and read the English language well enough to take an active part in the proceedings of Parliament". See ChapV111, (7), and Chap. V1, (51) i.b.

8. Such problems include child soldiering, child abuse, arms trafficking, over-population, landlessness, illiteracy, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution and others.

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