

African Women: Inventing New Forms of Solidarity

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How can we reinvent democracy today? The word 'reinvent' sets us on the path of what already exists, which we need to examine afresh, teasing out new dimensions and further issues. If we ask why democracy should be reinvented, among the many answers that would occur to us would be the quest for peace, social cohesion and coexistence. Every kind of democracy creates the social fabric and attempts to safeguard it, in particular through the equality of all before the law. So we might ask whether the political regimes present in post-colonial Africa are 'democratic' and in what sense.

Though the idea of 'democracy' is widely shared by African governments and peoples, it is a fact that presidential elections are very often disputed. Constitutions have been written in such a way that they allow for a head of state to be re-elected more than once and sometimes for life. Lack of respect for human rights, especially freedom of thought and expression, can be observed in a number of the continent's states. Thus it appears that the essential characteristics of a democratic regime – sovereignty (not of an individual but of a state and people), the secular principle (which assumes separation of state and religious institutions), equality for all before the law, consideration given to human rights including cultural rights, voting rights – are not present as they ought to be, such as they are imagined in the context of analysis of the democratic idea. And experience of democracy in Africa shows us the limits of application of the democratic idea today, the nature of its incompleteness and the likelihood of reinventing that political regime.

It is true that there were periods when African states were founded, around the 1960s, and then re-founded 30 or so years later, from 1990. Though the founding and re-founding appear to have put in place constitutions and laws to regulate social and political life, it is still the case that individuals' participation in public affairs raises a problem. In addition the idea of the welfare state is still widely accepted at a time when most African states are deep in crisis and facing all kinds of economic and political problems they find it hard to solve. African democracies still seem to be

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SAGE: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192108096833

searching for themselves, which is why the role of women deserves to be brought to the fore in the social field and questioned.

Perhaps it is first of all from a social angle that African democracies need to be re-invented: this is the reason why I shall quote here the example of those women whose action is to create social bonds and deal with emergencies. That action is made possible insofar as the people's expectations are far from being met and, despite appearances, the religious domain is still tied up with the political.

The idea of democracy and its forms

The idea of democracy as the 'most acceptable' political regime in the world does not immediately tell us what its different forms might be. And we might ask whether, through enquiry,¹ we can manage to show how many there are today and how many forms of the regime we consider 'the least worst of all' might be invented tomorrow.

In the ideal city Plato thought of democracy as one of the aberrant moments in a just and true political regime, that is, one well governed by a philosopher king. Democracy is a time of great disorder when thought no longer rules either individual or city, when the wishes of the greatest number have gained the upper hand and freedom is nothing more than the right to express them: 'Apparently this is a pleasant political form, with no real government but great variety, distributing a very special kind of equality to both equal and unequal' (Plato, *Republic*, VIII, 558c). Plato's strategy in the *Laws* is very different, since it is no longer a matter of imagining an ideal state but of carrying out an analysis based on existing cases.

Reviewing contemporary constitutions is the method used by Aristotle. In this sense he shows, in the *Politics*, how it is possible to talk about several forms of democracy. From Book II the philosopher in search of the best constitution and the most just political regime reviews examples of existing constitutions, analysing both 'correct' and 'deviant' forms of each political constitution. In this analysis (Book VI) democracy seems to be a popular regime in which sovereignty is in the hands of the greatest number, which can be composed of peasants, herders, artisans or other social groups. So we understand that in Aristotle's view it is neither the aristocrats nor the richest who are the main actors in the political regime called 'democracy'. We also learn that freedom, equality and justice are related to the type of sovereignty exercised. For example, laws that are just as regards peasants are not just for aristocrats. So we understand that the forms of democracy are variable and the function of those who rule is significant and can contribute to the success or failure of the political regime established. If this method of Aristotle's were applied to the case of Africa, it would be possible to learn a lot about the way African states are governed today, why some of them fail in respect of good governance, why others are clearly uncompleted.

In the work of 18th century philosophers, especially Rousseau, the theoretician of the social contract, we find another conception of democracy. Though the word 'freedom' is key, it assumes its full meaning in relation to the law, before which the citizens are all equal.

These examples taken from philosophers show us the sense in which we might

talk about 're-inventing democracy'. Perhaps it is a question of establishing the present situation for existing democracies and seeing how cultures, from one region to another, leave their mark on the political regimes in place. But cultures are embodied by women and men who are citizens or rulers. Though there are basic features we expect to find from one democracy to another, the political regime we are concerned with is not fixed in its idea and among experiences in Africa it is not found in its completed form (which would correspond to a sort of archetype, if such a thing can exist). This is why it continually remains to be invented and re-invented, on that continent much more than elsewhere.

Indeed, from the idea of democracy to the different political experiences that claim to embody it the road is long and often hard to recognize. It is necessary to take into account the history of each country, and its geography too, when we wish to know the nature and issues of the democracy we are dealing with.

Founding and re-founding democracy in Africa

Today the word 'democracy' could be reduced simply to a name. In African countries there may be autocracy, political regimes where the holder of executive power is omnipotent, mythical and charismatic. In this regard the representation we have of a President of the Republic is interesting for many reasons. It conjures up images of family, religion, and also popular beliefs and founding myths. But we are led to believe that, once independence arrived, new political regimes were set up, each of them referring to a Constitution or Fundamental Law.

Analysis of the idea of a 'founding father', which was very widespread up to the late 1970s, gives us an indication of the forms of democracy being set up then. Indeed from African independence (1960s) up to the so-called democratization period (1990s) 'fathers of the nation' existed under the cover of political regimes with single, so-called 'democratic' parties. Thus Independence was a founding moment when states and citizens entered upon a new era with the intention of working to build their country after a century of colonial rule. It was a moment of both liberation and new-found freedom. Then we need to find out what happened to that freedom.

We note that the post-colonial state rests first of all on the unavoidable presence of an all-powerful single party. Cultural and social projects in education, construction and sometimes infrastructure were carried out. These founding times gave rise to forms of democracy in which women were ancillary to men insofar as they were seldom in the forefront as chief actors of the 'democratization' being constructed. Religions were more or less involved, especially in the education and healthcare fields. With time women's role grew both in politics and in the religious domain.

Then throughout Africa there was a time of 're-foundation' corresponding to the experience of 'democratization' (1990–93) of political regimes which already claimed to be 'democratic'. New constitutions were introduced. The multi-party idea was now accepted, but those experiments came to nothing, apart from a few exceptions, among them Benin and South Africa. However, these exceptions fail when we see whether there is actually separation between religion and politics. For instance in South Africa Archbishop Desmond Tutu played an important part in the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission at a time when the country was seeking new ways for people to live together. In Benin Monseigneur De Souza chaired the National Conference, the first to take place in Africa in the 1990s. It was men of the church who took the lead at the historic moments of re-foundation and reconciliation.

The example of Benin is interesting for several reasons. It shows how far exercise of political power still depends on the goodwill of religions, which are pressure groups. There are hundreds of new religions in the country, not including the presence of the revealed religions, the religions of the Book, and traditional religions, among them those that belong to the voodoo cult. On this topic a significant anecdote deserves to be quoted here. In 1995, in an article published in the *Cahiers d'études africaines*, the researcher Emmanuelle Kadya Tall asked why, after the introduction of a democratic, presidential type regime with a law-making parliament, the newly elected president Nicéphore Soglo, a former technocrat connected with international financial institutions, decided to organize an 'international festival of voodoo arts and culture'. The technocrat came to power after 17 years of communist rule headed by Mathieu Kérékou.² He realized that this art and culture are unavoidable in the country. The article's author goes further: 'With the health problems that struck him down at the end of the presidential campaign, Nicéphore Soglo found himself sharply facing the realities of "African mysticism" and its political influence' (Kadya Tall, 1995: 196). Indeed the situation was as follows. The president had won at the ballot-box but he found himself unable to govern. It is not known what illness he was suffering from (sciatica or typhoid?). Several theories were put forward. For six months people wondered whether the elected president was not already an ex-president even before he had been sworn in.

It is possible to think that the various democratic experiences that exist in the world are recognizable from a number of characteristics, among them: 1) separation of powers, first between politics and religion but also between executive, legislature and judiciary; 2) the right of all citizens to choose their representatives freely by taking part in the various electoral processes; 3) the existence of a Fundamental Law called a Constitution in which are written down all the rules for the operation of the state. It is around these characteristics that many problems arise in Africa. We note that there is imbalance between the different powers and that legislature and judiciary are subject to the orders of the executive, which often receives directives from religious powers, visible or invisible. Indeed separation between religion and politics may exist in law but in reality not only do existing cultures have an influence but today there are also the effects of the globalization of religions, which are turning Africa into a experimental laboratory for all sorts of religious institutions or movements from elsewhere, for example the USA or Brazil. We see too that at a time when these states, which claim to be democratic, call on religions existing as institutions or on occult mystical or spiritual powers, women are taking on an important role in building a life of 'citizenship'.

Women, politics and religion

The different forms of religion in Africa claim to supply answers to the search for meaning: the quest for identity and happiness in societies undergoing all kinds of change. These religious forms, whether old or new (since they are constantly renewed by the massive presence of movements arriving from elsewhere), play an eminently political part (during the election process, the search for peace in wartime, the resolution of conflicts). Though leaders from the various religious confessions take part from time to time in public affairs in the states where they operate, African women, for their part, act in the day-to-day to bring politics and religion closer together.

We might go back in history and give some examples. In this area there were Amazons, queen mothers and female prophets.

In the pre-colonial history of Africa women were able to have a prominent political and social role which was assisted by their status as incomparable individuals and women. There were, for instance, the Amazons from Dahomey (17th–19th centuries) as well as queens who held political power or queen mothers. The role of queen mother in some West African kingdoms – the kingdom of Benin (the south of present-day Nigeria) or among the Akan (Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire) – should not be ignored because it still influences so-called democratic states, which are inventing day by day new ways of governing. Queen mothers (and their substitutes, for example sisters of men in power) are women of authority who hold other powers than strictly political ones, such as mystical powers of protection or healing.

Furthermore, in the religious field there are people who specialize in caring for the soul and women take part in distributing the words that heal and guide individuals towards happiness. They may be local prophets like Marie Lalou in Côte d'Ivoire in the first half of the 20th century. That female prophet had both a political and a social role in Côte d'Ivoire under French colonialism. Born in the late 19th century, she began her prophetic mission around the 1940s after a failed marriage. She was treated as a madwoman but in the end she gained women's confidence: she cured them of barrenness, which is seen in many African cultures as a great misfortune for a woman. Her first followers were women. She gave them back their confidence. She fought against witchcraft and other beliefs that prevented women from being free. She set up solidarity networks and started a religion that has its own liturgy, its rituals, its prohibitions, as is shown by Jean-Pierre Dozon (1995). Men also became members of the new religion, which encouraged its followers to resist colonial power.

Women have always thought and acted in their own fields, those allocated to them by the societies in which they live. But distribution of social roles depends especially on the hierarchy between male and female that exists universally, as Françoise Héritier demonstrates (2002: 11). In many ancient or modern societies women are first of all wives, housekeepers, mothers, even if they happen to have other functions. They organize and manage domestic affairs. One of the examples that could be quoted is the one the Greek philosophers, Aristotle in particular, refer us to. Citizens by definition were not women but free men, who had the right to take part in public affairs. From that viewpoint domestic, private affairs are one of the

places where women can excel and it is thought that they give the best of themselves, whereas the art of governing the city and taking part in public affairs is among male prerogatives.

In contemporary African cultures women are going beyond domestic areas and getting involved in public affairs. They are acting in the social sphere. They are taking an active part in campaigns during the election process. This participation occurs in organizing popular festivities, neighbourhood celebrations, tontines. They may also be economically powerful women like the Nana Benz in Togo, who are traders and were influential in the political sphere in the 1960s and beyond. But in contemporary Africa these forms of inventing or re-inventing ways of participating in public affairs are paradoxical insofar as they are still closely associated with the religious domain, which is dominated by discourse and words that not only link humanity with God but also imagine new forms of belief, reinterpret the scriptures, suggest ways of living that may be contrary to local customs and beliefs.

When the state fails or is in crisis from every point of view, when unemployment is rising, when education is in crisis, when there is no social security and all the public services are more or less privatized, it is the activism of women that assists in inventing new forms of citizenship in the context of solidarity associations and also religious communities. But in today's Africa women's place in politics is still regarded with much suspicion, even though they continue to be the chief actors working at the crossroads between the religious and political spheres.

A paradoxical activism

Today a woman rules an African state, Liberia. Sometimes exceptions are tokens that confirm male domination in politics. In this sense democracy, the most widely shared form of political organization in the world, does not, in its workings in African states, evade patriarchal laws where the ruling order is that of fathers, elders, ancestors. That order now seems to be subverted by the presence of communities existing within the political community.

Women are the actors of social change. But it is ordinary, anonymous women³ (and not celebrities), caught between religious fervour and the desire for emancipation, who give us pause for thought and lead us to ask questions about the consequences of these new solidarities being created through brotherhood and sisterhood.

Those new forms of living together which rely on religion for thinking and action in politics and society are not without their ambiguities, since they are also the site of exclusion and discrimination. The women who act in the context of associations are inventing forms of connection that have limits to the extent that religious ideologies are likely to divide citizens of the same country. Managing issues of survival in families and communities by dealing with emergencies is connected with safeguarding the social bond. These are probably actions of solidarity and education for those men and women who have the same cultural reference points. But the stumbling block of community identity crops up every time we rely on the idea of solidarity between 'brothers' and 'sisters' – those who have the same allegiances and reference points – instead of defending the equality of all before the law.

Though communal identities play a significant part in social change, they favour the formation of pressure groups in politics by bringing out that other paradox: in communities, as is shown by those in which women are the chief actors, people learn to be individuals able to express themselves while at the same time referring to the group they belong to. Indeed the role of the new communities, which are sometimes very influential, be they religious or mystical, is to train up individuals who are capable of rejecting old beliefs and traditions, to free individuals from fear of the future and bring them earthly happiness. But in the final analysis any form of community identity and turning in on the self is likely to cause cracks in the social fabric and harm to the whole political community.

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Notes

1. Enquiry is the method used in particular by Aristotle: he would review his predecessors' opinions on a topic, and also use direct observation and experience, for instance in biology, to discover not only the anatomy and physiology of animals, but also their habits (*bios*). Enquiry is used as well for classifying different political regimes.
2. President Kérékou had two periods in power. The first lasted 17 years. The episode about Nicéphore Soglo recounted here came between the two periods.
3. Those who have to cope daily with all kinds of difficulties and in addition suffer violence and abuse associated with their cultures and male domination: sexual mutilation, breast flattening, rape, marital violence, modern slavery and also polygamy, as I show in Boni (2008).

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