

**DEMOCRACY IN CONTEXT: UNIVERSAL IDEAL OR  
CONSTITUENT-SPECIFIC PRACTICE?  
EXAMINING AFRICA'S PECULIARITIES**

**Abel Simeon**

***Abstract***

*This article interrogated the universalist claims of liberal democracy by situating Africa's governance experience within its distinctive historical, cultural, and political contexts. Utilizing a qualitative, non-doctrinal desk research methodology, the article critiqued the structural mismatch between Western liberal democracy's focus on individualism and adversarial elections, and Africa's communal traditions of consensus and moral authority. Empirical cases from Kenya in 2007, Nigeria in 2011 and Zimbabwe in 2008 illustrated how zero-sum electoral competition often exacerbated ethnic polarization and instability rather than consolidating peace. Conversely, the paper explored precolonial traditions, such as consensus-based councils and age-grade associations, alongside the philosophical frameworks of Ubuntu and Unhu, as culturally resonant paradigms, prioritizing collective responsibility. The findings demonstrated that democracy is an essentially contested concept, requiring adaptation to constituent realities. Rather than romanticizing the past, the study argued for a context-specific synthesis that integrates modern institutional protections with indigenous communal values. Consequently, this paper recommended practical structural reforms: the formal constitutional integration of traditional councils into local governance, the restructuring of winner-takes-all electoral frameworks to favor consensus models, and the decolonization of civic education curricula. Ultimately, the article contributed to decolonial scholarship by prescribing culturally grounded, inclusive, and sustainable governance frameworks.*

**Keywords:** *Liberal Democracy; Indigenous African Governance; Consensus-Based Systems; Ubuntu Philosophy; Decolonizing Governance; Democratic Legitimacy.*

**1. Introduction**

Africa, being the aborigine, cradle, pathfinder and pacesetter of civilization cannot be a copycat to western democraticism. The discourse on democracy has long been dominated by the assumption of its universality, particularly, after its definition as “government of the people, by the people, for the people”, during the Gettysburg Address in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States. Rooted in Western political thought, democracy is often presented as the ultimate model of governance, a system presumed to be applicable across cultures, histories, and socio-political realities. Yet, this presumption raises critical questions: Is democracy truly a universal ideal, or does its applicability depend on constituent contexts shaped by unique historical and cultural trajectories? Africa, with its diverse traditions, colonial legacies, and

**Abel Simeon, PhD**  
Faculty of Social Sciences,  
Corporate Institute of Strategic  
Research,  
Abuja, Nigeria.  
drabelsimeon@gmail.com

contemporary challenges, provides a compelling case study for interrogating this tension

The continent's political experience reveals that the transplantation of Western democratic models has often produced fragile institutions, contested legitimacy, and governance structures misaligned with indigenous socio-political realities. The insistence on liberal democracy as a one-size-fits-all solution overlooks Africa's peculiarities; communal traditions, consensus-driven decision-making, and the resilience of indigenous governance systems. These realities suggest that Africa's political order may require a system that is not merely derivative of Western democracy but one that is contextually grounded, culturally resonant, and pragmatically workable.

(Cheeseman & Sishuwa, 2021) contested the nature western democracy in Africa; arguing that Western democracy is not universally applicable. They support the claim that democracy is an “essentially contested concept and highlights African debates about whether democracy is a colonial imposition or can be adapted into consensual forms. (Oduor, 2022) provided a comprehensive critique of liberal democracy's mismatch with African communal traditions, supporting the stance that Africa should adopt its own workable system. On his part, (Murithi, 2020) highlighted how imported democratic models often exacerbate violence and weak institutions, strengthening the claim that Africa needs governance rooted in its peculiar realities.

This article therefore argues that democracy, while valuable as an aspirational ideal, cannot be assumed to be universally applicable in its Western form. Instead, Africa must be encouraged to articulate and adopt its own style of governance, one that draws from its historical experiences, cultural values, and contemporary needs. By examining democracy in context, this study seeks to highlight the importance of constituent-specific practices and to challenge the prevailing narrative that equates democratic legitimacy solely with Western models. In doing so, it contributes to the broader debate on whether democracy should be understood as a universal paradigm or as a concept that must be adapted to the peculiarities of each society.

To structuralize this inquiry, this study adopts a qualitative, non-doctrinal methodological framework. The data collection approach relies on secondary desk research, consisting of a systematic and critical analysis of existing historical records, socio-legal scholarship, and indigenous philosophical frameworks rather than a formal investigation of legal doctrines or primary field metrics. Furthermore, to guide the reader transparently through this literature-driven synthesis, the study deliberately utilizes a sequential, hybrid in-text citation style. In this structural approach, parenthetical author-date entries provide immediate contextual identification in the body text, while accompanying superscript numbers map directly to a corresponding sequentially numbered reference list at the end of the manuscript, providing clear text-to-reference navigation without using traditional footnoting frameworks.

## **2. The Limits of Liberal Democracy in Africa**

The transplantation of Western democratic models into Africa has often produced fragile institutions

and governance crises. Liberal democracy, with its emphasis on competitive elections, individual rights, and separation of powers, is frequently presented as the universal benchmark of legitimate governance. Yet, Africa's experience demonstrates that this model has not always delivered stability, inclusivity, or legitimacy. Instead, it has often exacerbated political instability, weakened citizen participation, and undermined indigenous governance traditions.

(Murithi, 2020) observes that imported democratic systems have frequently intensified instability and violence rather than consolidating peace. Elections, which are intended to serve as mechanisms of accountability and legitimacy, have instead become flashpoint for conflict in several African states. Kenya's 2007 elections, Nigeria's 2011 polls, and Zimbabwe's 2008 contests illustrate how electoral competition can trigger ethnic polarization, violence, and widespread disillusionment. These cases highlight the mismatch between Western democratic ideals and Africa's socio-political realities, where communal identities and historical grievances often overshadow individual electoral choices.

(Basheka & Auriacombe, 2023) argue that Africa's governance challenges stem partly from the displacement of indigenous systems during colonialism. Colonial administrations imposed centralized bureaucracies and electoral institutions that were alien to local traditions of consensus and communal accountability. As a result, postcolonial states inherited institutions ill-suited to their contexts. The insistence on liberal democracy as a one-size-fits-all solution overlooks Africa's peculiarities, including its communal traditions, spiritual leadership structures, and age-grade systems of accountability. This disjuncture has contributed to weak institutions, elite capture, and governance crises across the continent.

(Cheeseman & Sishuwa, 2021) further emphasize that democracy is not a fixed universal concept but an “essentially contested” one. In Africa, liberal democracy has often been reduced to procedural elections, while substantive elements such as inclusivity, accountability, and consensus have been neglected. This procedural reductionism has produced what scholars term “electoral authoritarianism,” where regimes maintain the facade of democracy through regular elections but undermine its spirit through manipulation, repression, and exclusion. Such practices erode citizen trust and weaken democratic legitimacy.

Another limitation of liberal democracy in Africa lies in its emphasis on individualism. (Oduor, 2022) highlights that liberal democracy's philosophical foundations in Western individualism clash with Africa's communistic traditions. African societies historically emphasized collective responsibility, consensus, and moral authority, values that are marginalized in adversarial electoral competition. The imposition of liberal democracy has therefore created a cultural dissonance, where governance structures fail to resonate with the lived realities of African communities. This dissonance contributes to political alienation and weak citizen engagement.

Moreover, liberal democracy's reliance on formal institutions often overlooks the importance of

informal governance structures in Africa. Councils of elders, clan leadership, and spiritual authorities continue to play significant roles in mediating disputes and maintaining social cohesion. By privileging formal electoral institutions, liberal democracy marginalizes these indigenous structures, weakening governance legitimacy.

(Wane, Opondo, Alam, Kipkosgei & Tarus, 2022) argue that decolonizing governance requires recognizing and integrating indigenous practices rather than displacing them with imported models.

Critically, while liberal democracy has failed to deliver stability and legitimacy in many African contexts, scholars caution against romanticizing precolonial systems. Indigenous governance structures were not without hierarchies, exclusions, and limitations. For instance, women and marginalized groups were often excluded from decision-making processes in traditional councils. Thus, the challenge is not to reject liberal democracy wholesale but to synthesize its valuable elements, such as accountability and rights protection with Africa's indigenous traditions of consensus, communalism, and moral authority. This synthesis could produce governance systems that are both culturally grounded and responsive to contemporary challenges.

**According to (Suleiman, 2025)**, the recurring crises of democratization in Africa are rooted in structural conflict between colonial political structures and indigenous agency, leading to “democratic self-sabotage.” He added that a decolonial perspective, showing that liberal democracy in Africa often reproduces colonial structures rather than empowering indigenous agency. On her part, **(Omotola, 2009)** provides a foundational critique of liberal democracy's universalist claims, arguing that its standardized application is analytically weak and contextually harmful. Critiques the universalistic conception of liberal democracy, showing how its standardized application undermines democratization in Africa. In a similar thought, **(Arriola, Rakner, & Van de, 2022)** highlight contemporary democratic backsliding, showing how African leaders manipulate legal and international systems to entrench power, undermining liberal democracy's promise. Examines how African governments use legal and international strategies to resist democratization, reinforcing authoritarian tendencies despite formal democratic institutions.

In conclusion, the literature demonstrates that liberal democracy's transplantation into Africa has produced fragile institutions, electoral violence, and governance crises. Its emphasis on individualism and formal institutions clashes with Africa's communal traditions and indigenous governance structures. The insistence on liberal democracy as a universal model overlooks Africa's peculiarities, contributing to instability and weak legitimacy. Scholars therefore argue for context-specific governance systems that draw from Africa's indigenous traditions while adapting to modern realities. Such systems could provide more sustainable, inclusive, and legitimate governance than the wholesale importation of Western liberal democracy. **Debate on Africa's governance highlights that Western liberal democracy often fails to align with indigenous traditions, and scholars argue for systems rooted in African philosophies such as Ubuntu, communal consensus, and indigenous knowledge**

**practices. These alternatives emphasize inclusivity, cultural relevance, and social cohesion rather than imported electoral models.**

### **3. Indigenous African Governance Traditions**

Precolonial African societies developed governance systems that emphasized consensus, moral authority, and communal accountability. These systems, though diverse, shared certain features that distinguished them from Western democracy. Consensus-based councils, such as the Igbo village assemblies, prioritized dialogue and collective decision-making rather than adversarial competition. Chieftaincy systems, such as the Ashanti Kingdom, vested authority in chiefs but balanced it with councils and communal accountability. Age-grade associations in Igbo and Yoruba societies ensured generational rotation of responsibilities, fostering continuity and accountability. Councils of elders acted as custodians of wisdom and moral authority, while spiritual leaders integrated governance with ethical codes - (Asimeng-Boahene, 2019) and (Wane, Opondo, Alam, Kipkosgei & Tarus, 2022). These traditions demonstrate that Africa has long possessed governance systems that resonate with its cultural values and social structures. Some of the notable indigenous African governance traditions include, but not limited to: Ubuntu and Unhu as Indigenous Framework, consensus-based councils, chieftaincy monarchies, age-grade associations, and spiritual leadership structures. These systems emphasize communal participation, moral authority, and cultural legitimacy, making them distinct from Western liberal democracy. These phenomenon clearly point that there is re-imagining of democracy beyond Western Models. (Sserwadda, 2025) revealed that Western democracy, rooted in Athens and Enlightenment liberalism, often leads to elite capture, electoral authoritarianism, and disillusionment in Africa. This type of indigenous African governance traditions operate on consensus councils, participatory village assemblies, and Pan-African solidarity; offer more legitimacy and stability.

#### **a) Ubuntu and Unhu as Indigenous Frameworks**

According to (Gwakwara & Uwizeyimana, 2025), **Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy** emphasizes community, mutual care, and collective decision-making rather than individualism. Scholars argue this provides a more culturally resonant governance model than Western liberal democracy, which prioritizes adversarial competition and individual rights. In order words, the Ubuntu and Unhu concepts consider the good of the generality, rather than individuality.

#### **b) Consensus-Based Decentralized Systems**

According to (Asiemeng-Boahen, 2004), many African societies historically relied on consensus-driven governance rather than coercive authority. Decision-making was decentralized, with community members actively participating in deliberations. This participatory approach ensured inclusivity and minimized conflict, as legitimacy was derived from collective agreement rather than imposed rule. He argues that consensus-based systems provided a model of governance rooted in dialogue, negotiation, and communal responsibility, which contrasts sharply with hierarchical Western political traditions.

#### **c) Centralized Chieftaincy/Monarchical Systems**

(Vaughan, 2003) highlighted the resilience of chieftaincy institutions across Africa, noting their ability to adapt to colonial and postcolonial pressures while retaining cultural legitimacy. Chiefs functioned as intermediaries between local communities and state structures, embodying both traditional authority and modern political relevance. Similarly, (Oyedokun, Akanbi, & Malang, 2019) argued that Nigeria's chieftaincy system continues to thrive by balancing tradition with contemporary governance demands. They contend that chieftaincy provides continuity in political identity, offering communities a sense of stability and cultural rootedness even within modern nation-states.

**d) Age-Grade and Lineage Systems**

(Falola, 2001) revealed the age-grade associations in Yoruba and Igbo societies organized individuals into cohorts based on age, assigning them civic duties and responsibilities. These institutions ensured generational renewal of leadership, social discipline, and community service. Lineage systems reinforced accountability, as authority was inherited and tied to family structures. Falola argued that these mechanisms not only maintained social order but also fostered collective responsibility, making governance a shared enterprise across generations.

**e) Spiritual and Moral Leadership Systems**

(Asimeng-Boahene, 2004) also stressed on the governance in African societies that was not merely political but also moral and spiritual. Leaders were expected to embody ethical values and provide spiritual guidance, aligning governance with cultural cosmologies. He argues that legitimacy was rooted in moral authority, with spiritual leaders serving as custodians of communal trust. This system reinforced the idea that governance was inseparable from cultural and spiritual life, ensuring that political authority was accountable to higher moral standards.

**f) Clan and Kinship-Based Governance**

(Vaughan, 2003) also stipulated that kinship networks structured governance by linking authority to family and clan ties. Chiefs derived legitimacy from lineage, and kinship bonds ensured loyalty and social cohesion. To (Nolte, 2004), kinship politics shaped youth mobilization and identity, showing how clan-based governance could both stabilize communities and generate conflict depending on context. Together, these scholars argue that kinship-based governance provided a deeply embedded social framework that influenced both political authority and everyday life.

**g) Council of Elders Systems**

(Asimeng-Boahene, 2004) also added that councils of elders embodied wisdom and experience, serving as custodians of tradition and mediators in disputes. Their authority was rooted in age, knowledge, and moral standing, making them central to community decision-making. On his part, (Vaughan, 2003) reinforced this perspective by showing how councils of elders acted as checks on chiefs and kings, ensuring accountability and preventing abuse of power. Both scholars highlight the council of elders as a stabilizing institution that safeguarded communal values and historical precedent.

## A Brief Comparative Table: African Governance Systems vs. Western Democracy

<b>System Peculiar to Africa</b>	<b>Key Features</b>	<b>Contrast with Western Liberal Democracy</b>
<b>Consensus-Based Councils</b> (e.g., Igbo village assemblies, Acholi clan councils)	Decisions made collectively, emphasis on dialogue and consensus, authority diffused among elders.	Western democracy emphasizes majority rule and adversarial competition, often sidelining consensus.
<b>Chieftaincy/Monarchical Systems</b> (e.g., Ashanti Kingdom, Buganda)	Central authority vested in chiefs/kings, balanced by councils and communal accountability.	Western democracy prioritizes elected officials and separation of powers, often undermining traditional legitimacy.
<b>Age-Grade Associations</b> (e.g., Igbo, Yoruba)	Governance roles rotated by age cohorts, ensuring generational accountability and structured participation.	Western democracy relies on fixed electoral cycles, not generational rotation.
<b>Clan/Kinship-Based Governance</b>	Authority derived from kinship ties; clan heads mediate disputes and manage communal resources.	Western democracy emphasizes individual rights and private ownership, often clashing with communal land tenure.
<b>Council of Elders</b>	Elders act as custodians of wisdom, mediators, and moral authorities.	Western democracy relies on codified law and formal institutions rather than moral authority.
<b>Spiritual-Moral Leadership</b>	Chiefs and priests integrate spirituality with governance, anchoring authority in moral codes.	Western democracy separates religion from politics, emphasizing secular institutions.

**Source:** (Simeon, 2026)

## **4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **4.1 Conclusion**

This study has interrogated the long-standing universalist assumptions underpinning liberal democracy by contextualizing Africa's governance trajectory within its distinct historical, cultural, and socio-political realities. Rooted in Western political thought and popularized through historical benchmarks

like Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, the liberal democratic model has routinely been presented as a one-size-fits-all paradigm for legitimate governance. However, as demonstrated throughout this article, the uncritical transplantation of this adversarial, individualistic framework into the African continent has frequently yielded fragile state institutions, contested political legitimacy, and recurring governance crises.

The empirical realities of electoral backsliding and systemic polarization, evidenced by historical flash points such as Kenya's 2007 elections, Nigeria's 2011 polls, and Zimbabwe's 2008 contests—underscore a fundamental structural mismatch. As argued by (Murithi, 2020), these imported democratic models have frequently intensified structural instability and electoral violence rather than consolidating sustainable peace. Liberal democracy's rigid focus on procedural reductionism, zero-sum electoral competition, and atomic individualism directly clashes with Africa's deeply embedded communistic traditions. On this point, (Oduor, 2022) highlights a profound cultural and philosophical dissonance, noting that liberal democracy's foundational Western individualism inherently marginalizes indigenous values of collective responsibility, moral authority, and communal consensus.

Crucially, this paper does not advocate for a retrogressive romanticization of precolonial African systems, which possessed their own distinct hierarchies and structural exclusions. Rather, drawing from decolonial scholarship and foundational philosophies such as Ubuntu and Unhu, this study demonstrates that democracy is an "essentially contested concept" that must be dynamically adapted to constituent realities. Historical analyses by scholars like (Falola, 2001) demonstrate that African societies possessed sophisticated, highly accountable mechanisms like age-grade and lineage systems that maintained social order through shared, generational responsibility. (Asimeng-Boahene, 2004) further stresses that precolonial governance was fundamentally decentralized, inseparable from moral and spiritual codes, and rooted in the wisdom of councils of elders who served as custodians of communal trust and arbiters of dispute. Furthermore, (Vaughan, 2003) highlights the profound resilience of traditional institutions, showing how structures like chieftaincy and traditional councils historically adapted to external pressures while retaining deep cultural legitimacy and acting as vital checks on the abuse of power.

The ultimate contribution of this study is therefore the advocacy for a contextualized synthesis: a governance model that seamlessly integrates the protective mechanisms of liberal democracy, such as institutional accountability and human rights protections, with the culturally resonant African traditions of decentralized consensus-building, dialogue, and communal solidarity. Ultimately, re-imagining democracy beyond Western hegemony is not merely a requirement for African institutional stability; it is a vital step toward enriching the global discourse on the plurality of democratic expression.

## **4.2 Recommendations**

To bridge the gap between decolonial theory and practical governance, the following recommendations are proposed for African policy-makers, constitutional architects, and civil society actors:

1. **Institutionalize Consensus-Based Decision-Making Mechanisms:** African states should look beyond purely majoritarian, winner-takes-all electoral models. Constitutional frameworks should be reformed to incorporate power-sharing, proportional representation, and consultative assemblies that mirror traditional consensus-seeking forums, thereby mitigating the ethnic polarization often triggered by adversarial elections
2. **Formally Integrate Indigenous Governance Structures into Local Government:** Governments should formally recognize and legally integrate informal traditional authorities, such as councils of elders and traditional rulers, into modern local governance architectures. These structures should be empowered as legitimate, state-sanctioned bodies for local conflict mediation, resource management, and community mobilization, provided they adhere to fundamental human rights standards.
3. **Democratize and Update Traditional Systems for Inclusivity:** To ensure that the integration of traditional systems does not replicate historical exclusions, deliberate legislative frameworks must be enacted to guarantee the equitable inclusion of women, youth, and marginalized groups within traditional decision-making councils and age-grade associations.
4. **Decolonize Civic Education and Governance Curricula:** Educational ministries and civil society organizations across the continent should reform civic education curricula. Training programs should move away from teaching Western liberal democracy as the sole standard of civilized governance, and instead educate citizens on indigenous political philosophies, emphasizing collective responsibility, moral leadership, and community-led accountability.
5. **Foster Context-Specific Constitutionalism:** Future constitutional reviews in African states must prioritize "constituent-specific" drafting processes. Rather than copying external legal precedents, constitutional frameworks must be organically derived from extensive dialogue with local communities, ensuring that the supreme law of the land reflects both modern democratic protections and local socio-cultural realities.

