

**IS LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC
CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION THE
WAYFORWARD? A CRITIQUE OF
ABDI'S *DEMOCRATIC
DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPECTS
FOR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION:
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA.***

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Abstract

Scholars from within and outside Africa, have steadily theorised on the best way forward for Africa's turbulent demarche towards democratization. The propositions usually generally center on how best to alleviate Africa's social, economic and political problems by proposing pragmatic solutions towards the consolidation of "successful" liberal democracies to accelerate the political development of African states as well as cater to the socio-economic prosperity of African peoples. The scholars often disregard the argument that liberalism cannot by itself effectively bring about the social, economic, political and environmental transformation needed in African states. Hence, in opposition to the prevailing discourse's pervasive adherence to liberal democratic principles with its disciplinary apparatus of citizenship education, this paper interrogates

similar ideas advanced by Ali A. Abdi in his article, Democratic Development and Prospects for Citizenship Education: Theoretical Perspectives on Sub-Saharan Africa. It examines Abdi's uncomplicated conception of liberal democracy and scheme to "Africanize" it, towards interrogating the view that Africans should accept liberal democratic principles as their starting point. It analyzes Abdi's position on citizenship education in order to highlight the ambiguous meaning of citizenship in African societies and Abdi's contradictory position of advocating democratization through the creation of politically engaged citizens, while suggesting an undemocratic approach to citizenship education.

Introduction

Ever since Africa's "decolonization" and turbulent demarche towards democratization, scholars from within and outside Africa, have steadily advanced theoretical ideas on the best way forward (see Hyden, 1983; Banya & Elu, 2001; Sefa Dei, 2000, Abdi, 2008; & Nnadozie, 2003). Usually well intentioned, these propositions generally concern themselves with how best to alleviate Africa's social, economic and political problems by proposing pragmatic solutions towards the consolidation of "successful" liberal democracies. These democracies, it is believed, would accelerate the political development of African states as well as cater to the socio-economic prosperity of African peoples.

Yet, in seeking to transform the crippling socio-economic circumstances of African states, especially those south of the Sahara, many of these scholars often disregard the neo-liberalization, Imperialism and failures of western liberal democracies upholding them as an exemplar for African states. But, as David Harvey argues in *A brief history of Neoliberalism*, the American liberalism, so often privileged as worthy of emulation by these theorists, has quickly descended into neo-liberalism, with much of the social infrastructure built by American middle and working class citizens during the 1960's and 1970's decimated by corporate interest (Harvey, 2007).

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A growing corporate interest that has also contributed to Africa's underdevelopment and lack of democratization is the imposition of structural adjustment programs facilitated by America's Imperial organs of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Yet, this accumulation of international capital has not been to the benefit of most American citizens, and in fact, as Wendy Brown argues, American liberalism has declined to such a state that many of its citizens love, but are no longer desirous of, freedom and equality, even its liberal variety; and what's more, they are also little 'distressed' by the increasing "concentrations of political and economic power" in the hands of upper class (p.692).

Nevertheless, one needs not look as far as the neo-liberalisation of Western states or liberalism's steady decline to argue that liberalism cannot by itself effectively bring about the social, economic, political and environmental transformation needed in African states. Hence, in opposition to the prevailing discourse's pervasive adherence to liberal democratic principles with its disciplinary apparatus of citizenship education, this paper shall interest itself in interrogating similar ideas advanced by Ali A. Abdi in his article, *Democratic Development and Prospects for Citizenship Education: Theoretical Perspectives on Sub-Saharan Africa*. At stake will be to examine Abdi's uncomplicated conception of liberal democracy and scheme to "Africanize" it, towards interrogating the view that Africans should accept liberal democratic principles as their starting point. An analysis of Abdi's position on citizenship education will then be undertaken to highlight the ambiguous meaning of citizenship in African societies and Abdi's contradictory position of advocating democratization through the creation of politically engaged citizens, while suggesting an undemocratic approach to citizenship education. However, before engaging in these analyses, a summary of his arguments is necessary.

Summary of Abdi's arguments

Abdi begins his article by identifying the numerous obstacles to Africa's "development", including issues of civil war, electoral theft,

corrupt leaderships, environmental degradation, and emergent neo-colonial policies (p.155). Arguing that these problems are fundamentally political in nature, he calls for Africans to move beyond the present problems by reforming their defective political structures through democratization (p.151). Democracy, which he defines “as a system of government that represents the people and responds to their needs and expectations, and that would essentially be undergirded by a transparent process of public responsibility and accountability” (p.154), would allow Africans to better transform the political and economic problems of the continent. However, he cautions Africans not to accept liberal democratic principles at face value, but to Africanize and culturalize it in order to avoid the excessive individualism characteristic of western democracies (p.163).

This Africanisation would then allow them to retain the African tradition of privileging the “political and socio-economic arrangements” of the community over those of the individual (p.156). Abdi also notes that much of the democratization that took place in Africa after the cold war has been of the “illiberal” variety; by which he means that the “the subversive constitutionalization of old structures and loyalties were cemented through the nominal arrangements of elections and other astute but selfish political manoeuvres” leading to widespread misunderstanding of the nature of democracy in Africa (p.157).

Hence, for Abdi, this current state of affairs necessitates the establishment of “citizenship education programs that literally teach people the values as well as the importance of political accountability and democracy” (p.152). Citizenship education would not only allow Africans to historicize their current developmental pains but enable them to elevate the material conditions of their existence through critical engagement with public and private institutions. Abdi imagines that citizenship education, which is to be achieved through “inculcation” and “schooling” (p.162), would then teach Africans about the virtues of democratization, allowing them to challenge the *status quo* towards greater enfranchisement, stability and prosperity.

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To support his arguments about the transformative potential of citizenship education and enfranchisement, Abdi describes the ways in which African Americans in the United States were able to organize and utilize the democratic process to change their socio-economic conditions and move into the “mainstream of American Public life” (p.162).

Abdi’s conception of democracy

As seen before, Abdi defines liberal democracy as “a system of government that represents the people and responds to their needs and expectations, and that would essentially be undergirded by a transparent process of public responsibility and accountability” (p.152). Liberal democracy, for Abdi, is thus inclusive in that it is about *everyone* or the “people’s needs and expectations” and pragmatic in that it is an efficient, practical and responsive “system of government”. Yet, as will be demonstrated, this view of liberal democracy is troubling for three reasons. Firstly, there is an assumption of neutrality observable in Abdi’s assertion that liberal democracy entails the existence of “public institutions” that are *responsive* to the civic, security and development needs of the citizen and the community” (Abdi, 2008, p.156). That these public institutions might be biased so as to privilege the needs of some members or groups of the community above others is completely obscured. And the politics, inequities and antagonisms behind what “responding” means as well as the question of who responds within and through these institutions is also left unaccounted for in his paper. However, liberal democratic responses to people’s differential needs have been historically less than effective. And, as the Bush’s administration’s sluggish response to the sufferings of African Americans following hurricane Katrina in 2005 demonstrates, these responses and reactions are often raced, gendered and classed (Forgette et al., 2008, p.672).

But, even more troubling is the way in which Abdi glosses over the historical issue of ethnic conflicts in African states, failing to

account for how liberal democratic institutions would engage with pervasive group differences and the political violence that is often engendered in Africa states as a result of them. Indeed, his conceptualisation of democracy seems to imagine the existence in Africa of cohesive nation-states with little or no religious or tribal conflict. Yet, as the recent rebellion by many Hausa Muslims following the presidential election of Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian and member of the Southern Ijaw tribe (Gumber, 2011), demonstrates, the existence of democratic institutions, feeble or not, does little to diminish the politicized nature and persistence of religious and intergroup conflicts. It is clear then that within Africa, group “needs and expectations” are so multifaceted that even Abdi’s proposal to Africanize liberal democracy towards a more consensus model are superficial at best. If in historical Africa the consensus model worked, it did because there usually existed a regional and tribal cohesion between different groups, who usually, and only, came into contact through trade. However, with the haphazard consolidation of different regions by colonial powers into nation-states, such consensus became difficult insofar as the differences between different tribes had been punishingly exploited by colonial powers, towards imperial economic ends (Rodney, 1972).

A secondary issue with Abdi’s notion of democracy is that despite its assumption that democratic institutions are accommodating of a plurality of “needs and expectations,” taking for granted that these pluralities would exist without antagonism in a liberal democratic society. Yet, within western liberal democracies, which he deploys as an exemplar (p.162), the pluralities of people’s needs and expectations are rarely met in any substantive, totalizing way, often forcing cultural and or racial minorities to conceptualise their belonging in western democracies in different ways. However, as Davina Bhandar argues in *Cultural Politics: disciplining citizenship*, such alternative discourses are evidentiary of the limits of liberal citizenship insofar as they produce minorities as the cultural ‘other’ and construct the host nation as a representative of an essentialised set of values (Bhandar, 2010,

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p.332). One wonders then how African states, such as Nigeria with over 250 tribes, would accommodate the needs and expectations of its various tribal groups.

Given Bhandar's suggestions that liberal citizenship often produces a dominant group, which the cultural order is held up against, and its values measured against, how would the smaller tribes in a state, such as Nigeria, come to define its needs and wants apart from those of the dominant groups? However, Abdi's analyses does nothing to engage with the often wide disconnect between the liberal democratic ethos of inclusivity and equality and the lived experiences of its members and groups. And, this is probably due to Abdi's equation of democracy with a set of institutions; an assertion that is very much evident in his argument that democracy is characterized by a set of well functioning and responsive "public institutions" (p.156). This view is also manifest in his argument that Africa's democratic project should be one of correcting its "institutional ineptness" (p.163). But, while there is no denying that robust democracies necessitate "sound" democratic institutions, the problem with Abdi's assertions, beyond his equivalence of democracy with good institutions, is that liberal democratic principles of formal rights and equality have largely ignored the inequities and ideologies inherent in the operations of public institutions.

This is a contradiction that Carol Pateman, for instance, has taken on to expose the liberal democratic negation of equality and freedom in *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*. For Pateman, the enfranchisement of women in liberal democracies has operated to shroud the "patriarchal order of the liberal state," such that the liberal illusion of formal equality wrongly obscured the realities of women's social subordination (Pateman, p. 212-213). As such, the gendered treatment of women in the labour force could be rationalised away as isolated incidents rather than a broader institutional issue. However, Abdi appears to disregard these structural inequities to privilege the formal liberal principles of rights and equality, and this is illustrated when he implores Africans to

follow the example of African Americans, who have utilized the “democratic process ... to move to the mainstream of American public life” (p. 162).

Yet, this move of using the African American situation exemplifies the numerous problems with Abdi’s notion of liberal democracy. Indeed, it is precisely because he believes that liberal democracies attends to a plurality of needs and expectations, are defined by ‘democratic’ institutions, and are neutrally responsive, that he deploys this example to demonstrate his ideas in practice. This is of course contrary to the fact that despite formal access to the same rights and freedom as all Americans, African Americans remain overrepresented in correctional facilities and underrepresented in government, academia and other public institutions. For instance, the Children's Defense Fund has noted that out of the 6.3 million children living in extreme poverty in the United States, 2 million are of African American descent (2009); demonstrating what Frances Henry and Carol Tator have referred to as the effects of “democratic racism” (1994). Democratic racism, referring to the ways in which democratic liberalism maintains the contradictory values of egalitarianism, fairness and justice on one hand and discriminatory practices and racist behaviour on the other (Henry & Tator, 1994,p.3).

Abdi’s postulations, thus, leave one with no other option but to question how applicable liberal democratic notions of formal equality, enfranchisement and access would be in the African political climate replete with civil strife – exacerbated by a multitude of groups in one geographical boundary, historical antagonisms and inordinate power imbalances. This political conundrum is one Abdi answers with the sweeping proposition of *Africanizing* liberal democracy. Yet, this plan to Africanize liberal democracy is itself filled with contradictions. In the first place, we must note that beyond his emphasis on balancing individual and communal needs, Abdi is quite unclear about what he means by Africanisation.

This ambiguity is further compounded by his assertions that African democratization “must be undertaken with a measure of

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adherence to people's culture and background". Does this simply mean that upholding communal needs over individual wants would effectively Africanize democracy? If Africa comprises of a wide variety of different cultures and ideals, does Abdi's "Africanisation" not problematically assume that all Africans adhere to the same cultural norms and values? Moreover, if all Africans need to do in order to Africanize democracy is simply to avoid the excesses of liberal individualism, does not Abdi's plan appear less about Africanizing democracy and more about providing a ready band aid to liberal democracy's problems such that Africanizing democracy is explicitly dependent on what western liberalism lacks?

For one thing, it's clear that making such a recommendation allows Abdi to effectively uphold liberal democratic values while problematizing its emphasis on individual rights and autonomy. Yet the problems of liberal individualism are not unrelated to liberal notions of equality, rights, freedom and enfranchisement. Indeed, one could argue that liberal individualism is itself rooted in liberal ideals such that the very notion of privileging communal needs over those of the individuals destabilizes liberal democracy. For example, it is arguable that if American society were to value the needs of the collective over those of the individual, liberal notions of formal equality would have to be negated to allow for more equitable and substantive notions of equality, rights, and freedom. This would in turn improve the lived experiences of African Americans in the United States, since their underprivileged realities are based largely on liberal notions of equal access and rights that implicitly deny their oppressed histories.

Furthermore, the privileging of collective rights would mean that democratic institutions would have to disregard the façade of neutrality and move beyond being just "viable" and "responsive" in order to deal more substantively with the differential needs of the population. All the same, one must still ask if an emphasis on collective rights and responsibilities can truly "Africanize" democracy. That is, even if the major tenets of liberal democracies are challenged,

can Africans still afford to implement liberal democratic principles or should they look for a more radical alternative that respects the antiauthoritarian values of their communities, embraces the rights and sovereignty of different tribal groups, and that is interested in more collectivistic, substantive and transformative understanding of rights and equality?

This question is necessitated by Abdi's vision of democracy, which also informs his view of citizenship education. We see this relationship at work in his conception of democracy as a set of "viable public institutions" and his views of citizenship education as a mechanism to "enable individuals and communities to fully partake in the design as well as the management of their institutions and public spaces" (p. 160). Citizenship education, for Abdi, is thus a vehicle for the institutionalization of democracy. This understanding of democracy is ironic given that Abdi draws on John Dewey to ground his argument about the relationship between education and democracy. While Dewey certainly apprehended this intimate connection, he saw it as one in which institutions inhabit the "expressions, projections, and extensions" (Dewey, 391) of its citizens rather than one where citizens are trained to acquire a democratic 'habitus' (Wallace & Wolf 138).

What is more, Dewey saw democracy as "a way of life" that allowed the individual to utilize democratic principles in their everyday interaction with other citizens, whereas Abdi conceptualises democracy in a more mechanistic way, specifically seeing democratic citizenship as the ability to engage in the "design" and management of democratic institutions (p. 160). What Abdi forgets is that in liberal democracies, the management of institutions is not often – if at all – substantively attained by the people. Hence, for Dewey, individuals inhabit democratic ideals, which then allows for the formation of democratic institutions, while for Abdi, democracy exists before the citizen, so that they become democratic by engaging in democratic institutions. Abdi's stance is most evident in his claim that "in order for people to become democrats ... they must be taught about democratic principles and practice" (p. 160).

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Gert Biesta has argued that such views as espoused by Abdi are “instrumentalistic” in that citizenship education is held as an instrument for the reproduction and consolidation of democracy; and “individualistic” in that the success of democracy is seen as dependent on the transfer of pre-existing democratic principles and knowledge (Biesta, 2007, p. 742). Moreover, such an understanding of democracy often assumes the “common identity” of democratic citizens, negating the plurality of identities (p. 742).

Biesta’s warnings against liberal democratic citizenship education are observable in Abdi’s work. One example is that despite Abdi’s assertions that many African countries are in a state of civil strife due to the multiplicity of groups in colonially constructed geographical boundaries, his notion of citizenship education often assumes a western view of citizenship negating the ambivalence with which many Africans continue to accept their colonially defined boundaries and the idea of citizenship. Citizenship of a country for many Africans is, thus, not a given, but is rather a colonially constructed, politically contested, ambiguous concept. So, when Abdi argues for a citizenship education that would teach peoples “to become democrats (p.160), he ignores the fact that many Africans are still engaged in an active (re)definition of what citizenship means for them. And, here again, the recent electoral conflicts in Nigeria must serve as an exemplar because it shows the way in which the very notion of belonging to a nation-state, even one whose head of state is democratically elected, continues to be a site of tribal disagreement and religious conflict. But, because Abdi is informed by a liberal conception of democracy, he accepts citizenship education as a tool through which Africans can be taught to arrive at a rational consensus towards the formation of a common identity (Mouffe, 2002, p. 2). This view is most apparent in his claim that Africanized democracy “must still adhere to governance by consensus” to “help check current misfortunes of political and ethnic violence” (162).

However, this move for consensus obscures the fact that in liberal democracies, consensus has come largely to mean what has

been decided by the majority - often at the expense of marginalized bodies – or, as Chomsky puts it, “ a system of elite decision and public ratification” (Chomsky, 2000, p. 35). This then leads one to ask what consensus would look like in a place like Nigeria with over 370 different groups. Would consensus not mean that which the major groups or its elites have viewed as favourable? Certainly governance by consensus has not significantly undermined the white nationalism of the United States nor alleviated the second-class status of African Americans, despite their formal rights to participate in that “consensus”.

However, Abdi (2008) apprehends this divide between western democratic principles and practice, arguing that citizenship education would inform people that the problems democracy faces in Africa has less to do with democratic principles and more to do with its erroneous applications (p.162). Yet, he misses the opportunity of suggesting an education program that would be fused with democratic principles so that Africans are able to see democracy at work in citizenship education. Rather, he advocates for a citizenship education that would be about “*inculcating* in people’s minds the virtues of viable African democracies” (p. 162). In doing so, he portrays Africans as objects to be formed democratically through citizenship education (Freire, 1998, p. 30).

Paulo Freire has written about this type of education as one in which a false subject is created, meaning that the learner – or citizen in this case - is positioned as a passive receptor of accumulated knowledge (p.30). This image of the passive citizen is implicit in Abdi’s article, an instance being his assertion that the “seeping of democratic values into people’s slowly altered mindset” would help limit the instances of ethnic and political violence in Africa (p.162). Certainly the “seeping of democratic values” indicates a citizen who is not active or productive in their learning of democracy and suggests Abdi’s equation of rationality and intentionality with “democratic mindset”; and irrationality and ignorance with what he sees as the current “African mindset” (Abdi, 2008, p. 162.).

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It also suggests that citizenship education is a neutral exercise that seeps into the citizen's mind unclouded by social and political realities and that what is privileged as citizenship education is unmediated by power structures and the like (Giroux, 2001, p. 179). However, citizenship education, as it has occurred in western liberal democracies, has been generally about the propagation of the *status quo* always at the expense of the people, especially marginalized groups. A widely cited example is the ways in which citizenship education has been historically deployed for the propagation of capitalistic ideals and liberal economic principles (Chomsky 2008, Giroux 2009 & Hahnel 2009).

We see the product of an uncritical citizenship education in the Tea Party Movement, where its working class members espouse the same conservative economic ideals that are both responsible for America's ongoing recession and their reduced standard of living. Still, Abdi would have his reader believe, as the Tea-partiers do, that the problems with liberal democracy are not inherent in its fundamental principles but in its local applications and this is explicit when he argues that citizenship education would teach Africans "about the benefits of democracy while ... indicating how the failure of national economic and social programs have specific local reasons, and are not necessarily inherent in the fundamental principles of democracy" (p.162).

Yet, the problems with democratic liberalism are inherent in its principles, and Robin Hahnel aptly articulates this when he argues that the appeal of such liberal concepts, like economic freedom, is that it "rests largely on a presumption that when one person exercises his or her economic freedom, that individual does not infringe on the economic freedom of others" (Hahnel, 2009, p. 1008). Abdi thus contradicts himself by proposing a citizenship education that is critical and liberating, while asking Africans to uncritically accept liberal democratic principles at face value.

It follows, then, that Abdi's conception of democracy and citizenship cannot hold because at the same time that it aspires to form

the democratic African citizen, it subjects the African to a democratic system that is uncritical and unexpansive, and a citizenship education that is liberally undemocratic. Furthermore, his article does not account for the crippling issues faced by most educational institutions in Africa.

Conclusion

This paper has elucidated the undemocratic nature of liberal democracy and its attendant citizenship education program. Using Abdi's paper as its entry point, it has troubled the dominant view that Africans should imbibe liberal democratic principles in democratization efforts. Its analyses thus suggest that African states explore other radical alternatives to liberalism. Alternatives, such as participatory democracy that move beyond the formal liberal conception of representation, rights and equality towards more substantive understanding of human rights, equity and politico-social participation.

This understanding would entail a negation of the assumed neutrality and responsiveness of liberal democratic institutions towards a more vigorous emphasis on collective participation and social justice. In this kind of democracy, citizenship education would move beyond the inculcation of liberal agendas, towards more critical reflections on the nature of citizenship and good citizenship. And most of all, Africans would participate in the formation of their own democracy.

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