

CIVIC EDUCATION AND RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY AFRICA: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The main thrust of this paper is civic education and responsible citizenship in the 21st century Africa: An Overview. A major dilemma which confronts those who employ citizenship as a performance criterion need to balance rights against duties and apportion responsibilities between the individual and the State. Since the early 1980s, this issue has been taken up in the growing debate among the liberal scholars. The main objectives of this paper are to examine the obligations and responsibilities of African citizens in this age of democracy and to evaluate the civic virtues of African citizens in the 21st century. The study was purely qualitative as the methodology of the research was based on secondary sources only. Simple historical and explanatory methods were used in the analysis of the data. The classical theory of democracy was adopted as the theoretical framework. The paper thus found out that citizenship is understood in a narrow sense by some countries in Africa, as a result the study recommends among others, that member-states of African Union should do well to educate their citizens on the civic virtues necessary for harmonious and peaceful coexistence in the continent of Africa.

Keywords: *Civic Education, Citizenship, Civic Virtues, Multiculturalism, Democracy.*

Introduction

Civic education in a democracy is education in self-government. Democratic self-government means that citizens are actively involved in governance; they do not just passively accept the dictums of others or agree to the demands of others. As Aristotle put it in his Politics (c 340 BC), “if liberty and equality, as is thought by some are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost”. In other words, the ideal democracy is most completely realized when every member of the political community shares in its governance. Membership of the political community includes its citizens, hence citizenship in Africa in the 21st century is membership in the body politic regardless of race, ethnic or country of origin. Membership implies participation and citizen participation in a democratic society must be based on informed critical reflection, and on the understanding and acceptance of the rights and responsibilities that go with that membership. To be effective, civic education must be realistic as well as address the central truth about political life.

From the above narration, it is clear that the idea of citizenship has a very significant place in the study of democratic system. The paper posits that we are not living in the age of the Greek and the Romans. This is 21st century, the “age of democracy”. Therefore we have moved ahead in several respects and so the concept of citizenship needs to be comprehended in a basically different way. It is no longer a privilege available to the free, affluence adult males of Athens or to the patricians of Rome or to the peer of England. It is a legal status available to all members of a political community regardless of their religion, race, caste, creed, language, wealth and so on.

In the words of Johari (2014, p. 638), citizenship implies “possession and enjoyment of civil and political rights which enable a person, (in spite of nationality) to lead a good life in society and to take part in the public affairs”.

Statement of the Problem

The idea that citizenship is the proper end of government can be traced back to the political thought of ancient Greece. For instance, Pericles in his famous funeral oration in (431 BC) stated that:

An Athenian does not neglect the state because he takes care of his own household; and even those of us who are engaged in business

have a very idea of politics. We alone regard a man who takes no interests in public affairs, not as harmless, but as a useless character; and if few of us are originator, we are all sound judges of policy (Heywood, 2004: 414).

A citizen is a member of a political community or state, endowed with a set of rights and a set of obligations. Citizenship is therefore the “public” face of individual existence. People are able to participate in the life of their communities to the extent they possess entitlement and responsibilities.

As the concept of citizenship is usually seen as a distinctively western invention, it is perhaps not surprising that liberal democracies perform well in this respect. The idea of social rights, however, has stimulated significant divisions, because it implies a level of welfare provision and redistribution that classical liberal and the New Right have regarded as both unjustifiable and economically damaging. Marxists and feminists have also criticized the idea of citizenship, the former on the grounds that it ignores unequal class power and the latter because it takes no account of patriarchal oppression.

A major dilemma which confronts those who employ citizenship as a performance criterion need to balance rights against duties and thereby apportion responsibilities between individual and the state. Since the early 1980s, this issue has been taken up in the growing debate among the liberal scholars.

In modern times, many people can legally claim the title of citizen, not only in the world as a whole but also within particular countries. Yet this expansion of meaningful citizenship has not been without pitfalls. As the number of citizens has risen, effective political participation for individuals has become more difficult, and governments have been hard-pressed to provide civic education and social environments needed to ensure that all citizens exercise their rights in a responsible manner.

Objectives of this Paper

Arising from the above statement of the problem, the following objectives are formulated:

- i. To examine the obligations and responsibilities of African citizens in this age of democracy
- ii. To evaluate the civic virtues of African citizens in the 21st century
- iii. To explore the goals of civic education in the 21st century African curriculum studies.

Theoretical Framework and Analysis

For the purpose of this paper, the classical theory of democracy is deemed most appropriate, even though there are other theories suitable for it as well.

Democracy is a very old form of government and so its theory dated back to the days of the Greeks who identified it with “people’s power” (Pericles), or a system in which “rulers are accountable to the people for what they do therein” (Herodotus). Such a view saw its reaffirmation in modern times when Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysberg oration of 1863 called it “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people”. Great liberals like John Locke and Edmund Burke developed the same theme in the direction of a limited government” bound by the laws of the land. Later on, the utilitarians like Bentham and James Stuart Mill justified the case of democratic government in the name of their formula of the “greatest good of the greatest number” and J.S. Mill did the same on the basis of his moral or ethical argument (Johari, 2014: 379)

This trend continued in the present century and saw its powerful reintegration at the hands of Dicey, Bryce and Laski. Thus the classical theory of democracy as espoused by the liberals and the idealist of the modern age has these basic tenets:

1. Power is vested in the people and its exercise is given to them or to their chosen representatives accountable to them for their acts of commission or omission.
2. The people have certain natural and inalienable rights which the government cannot abrogate or diminish.
3. The classical theory in the view of the idealists like Rousseau and Green has a peculiar dimension. To Rousseau, democracy alone ensures prevalence of the “general will” while Green says that “will, not force, is the basis of the state” (Coker, 1954: 293).

This theory is used to explain this work as its principles and features correlate with the study. The theory has in part certain rights and obligations of the citizens and those rights must conform to them. The citizens have a natural right to participate equally in political power, just as they have a natural right to be free enslavement. What is known as democratic method is that institutional arrangements for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will.

Methodology

The paper is purely qualitative which employed exploratory research method. This means that secondary source was used as instrument for data collection, while simple historical and explanatory approaches were used in its analysis.

Civic Education:

This is a subsect or component of broader fields of disciplines, which in the Nigeria school setting, could be located in subjects like history, Government, social studies and the constitution (NERDC, 2005). Civic education focuses primarily on the electoral rights and responsibilities of all citizens of a nation. In addition it clearly presents the nationally accepted electoral procedures and the arrangements put in place for the operations of these procedures.

According to Ogunna (1994), the study of civic education “equips the individuals with the knowledge and ability to contribute effectively to societal change and national development”. He stresses that it is “a very powerful means of re-enforcing national unity, regional integration and identify, instilling love of the state and national commitment, and developing an informed and efficient democratic system”.

Through civic education, the societal expectations are known, roles are defined, individuals are made to imbibe and adhere to societal norms and values and right attitudes are developed and internalized.

Citizenship: A citizen is a member of a political community or state, endowed with a set of rights and obligations. Citizenship is therefore the public face of individual existence. People are entitled to take part in the affairs of their communities to the extent they possess entitlements and responsibilities (Heywood, 2004: 210). According to Marshall (1963: 20) it is “time to go higher in our search for citizenship, but also lower and wider, higher to the existing world, lower to the locality. The citizen has been too puffed and too compressed”. From Marshall’s explanation, it is clear that the idea of citizenship has a very significant place in the study of democratic systems.

In a narrow sense, citizenship implies possession and enjoyment of civil and political rights which enable a person to lead a good life in society and to take part in the public affairs.

Obligations and Responsibilities of African Citizens in this Age of Democracy

Marshall popularized the concept of citizenship by bringing out his monograph “Citizenship and Social Class” in 1949. In his view, citizenship is essentially a matter of ensuring that everyone is treated as a full and equal member of the society. He argues that the way to ensure this sense of membership is through according to people an increasing number of citizenship rights (Marshall, 1963). For this sake, he offers a tripartite conception of rights such as civil, political and social and puts much stress on the category of social rights ensured by the welfare state after its installation in Britain in 1945 (Johari, 2014: 640).

From the above perspectives, this paper draws some ideas with the view of manifesting the obligations and responsibilities of African citizens thus:

- (i) If citizenship confers rights, it also imposes a set of obligations and responsibilities on African citizens. They should have a sense of loyalty towards the state along with a willing acceptance of the responsibilities irrespective of differences in ethnicity, religion, historical background and class. Each right has a corresponding obligation and responsibility and the two constitute two sides of a coin. To ignore one is to ignore the other.
- (ii) In the age of growing interference of states and multi culturalism, it is required that the African citizens have a broader range of loyalties. Heater, (1990: 293) calls it “multi-citizenship”. This

paper canvasses the view that the loyalty of citizens should not be confined to their community or country of origin, rather they should have their loyalty towards all communities living there whether they are a minority, a resident alien, or have a distinct racial and cultural identity of their own. It is all the more essential for achieving the ideals of national as well as regional integrations in African.

- (iii) The loyalty of an African citizen towards his state or country of origin is an essential element of the definition of citizenship. It should be broadened if a person is a member of trans-national state like the African Union. This paper believes that one of the features of the Charter of African Union is the establishment of common citizenship for the people in all the member states.
- (iv) Now is the age of globalization. The whole world has become like a village. The geographical dimensions of citizenship should be discarded so as to take the whole continent of Africa in view. This paper insists that it is essential if African communities want to live in a better and more equitable international political, economic and social order. It is an important point to be noted that the universal declaration of human rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December, 1948 having a battery of social rights “invested the idea of social citizenship with the authority of international law”(Johari, 2014: 639-640). Thus, a proper definition of the term “citizenship” should embrace all these aspects and as observed by Heywood (2004), “citizenship is a relationship between the individual and the state in which the two are bound together by reciprocal rights and obligations”.

Civic Virtues of African Citizens in the 21st Century

In a democratic system, as being practiced in most countries of Africa, citizenship is a virtue, not a vice. It is something positive, not negative; it is active, not passive. The rights which it entails are the virtues which cover all aspects of a man’s life. According to Galston (1991: 221-224), responsible or active citizenship (in Africa) requires these types of virtues:

- i) General virtues - as courage, law abidingness and loyalty;
- ii) Social virtues - as independence and open mindedness;
- iii) Economic virtue - as work ethics, capacity to delay self-gratification, adaptability to economic and technological changes; and
- iv) Political virtues - as capacity to discern and respect the rights of others, willingness to demand only what can be paid for; ability to evaluate the performance of those in office, and willingness to engage in public discourse.

Though no specific model of a democratic system can be prescribed for all countries of the world, this paper is of the view that the types of civic virtues required for Africa despite its large and pluralistic social and political order are as follows:

- 1) The citizens must be vigilant and have their eyes on the public officials who manage the affairs of the state. Their role should be critical also that the leaders remain accountable to them for their acts of commission or omission,
- 2) The citizens of Africa should cultivate the virtue of “public reasonableness”. It means that while raising their demands of fighting for the cause, they should see whether their struggle does not harm social, national and regional interests, what is also known as “public good”
- 3) Democracy allows wider participation of the people in the management of public affairs. Thus, the spheres of decision-making should be open to more and more people so that the “crisis of participation” as called by Lucian W. Pye cited in Johari, (2014) does not occur.
- 4) Politics is the art of decision-making. But a democratic system requires that it should be done by means of persuasion and compromise. There should be no place for violence, intimidation, coercion or xenophobic attack of any sort. Blattberg calls it “virtue of civic friendship”.
- 5) First deliberate and then do. It should be the maxim to be followed by the African leaders in power. Opposition should not be stifled. Voice rather than vote should be regarded as the vehicle of empowerment.

Keeping all these points, this paper therefore, observes that, democratic citizens in Africa must not only be active and participatory, critical of authority and non-dogmatic, but also must be

committed to seeking mutual understanding and continental brotherhood through deliberation and accommodation rather than exclusively seeking personal benefit through bargaining or threats. If the member-states of African Union fail to display these virtues, liberal democracy of 21st century cannot fulfill its promises of justice, continental brotherhood and may indeed slowly succumb to undemocratic or anti-liberal forces.

The Goals of Civic Education in the 21st Century African Curriculum Studies.

The goals and importance of civic education are:

- (i) **Stimulating the Spirit of Nationalism:** Nationalism is a powerful spiritual sentiment arising from a people bound together by common ties and aspiration. It is a strong feeling of commitment to and love for one's nation which produces a sense of loyalty, service and sacrifice to the nation (Ogunna, 1994: 3). He also asserts that "it is a political aradite binding the people of the state together". Nationalism is a source of energy for the citizens for rendering selfless services and making sacrifices to the state. The concept of nationalism stresses the goals of civic education in the stimulation of nationalistic spirit and patriotism. Through civic education, citizens are taught on their civic duties and obligations to the state, the need for them to discharge these duties and obligations and the role of the state to their security and welfare. The study of civic education will help in the orientation of citizens to the ideologies of the state. It tends to develop in citizens a high sense of public interest. It is a means of reinforcing national unity and of instilling love of the state.
- (ii) **Promoting the Practice and Sustenance of Democracy:** The study of civic education is necessary for the success and sustenance of democracy in Africa. For a democracy to be in practice for the people and sustained by the people, the knowledge of civic education is an indispensable condition. According to Ogunna (1994) and Johari (2014), the citizens should possess a sound knowledge of the structures and operations of government, its duties and obligations to the citizens in order that they can ethically participate meaningfully in its process. Another important goal of civic education is political activism, mass political participation and competency. Thus, democracy can only be achieved in a society where a public is reasonably well informed on civic matters. Civic education endows the citizens with the capability for making effective and mature judgment about public issues.
- (iii) **Powerful Instrument for National Integration:** Civic education is a powerful instrument for national integration. It promotes social cohesion. Civic education possesses the power to change the ethnocentric and primordial attitudes and values to more national attitudes, beliefs and values. It attempts to transfer the loyalties and attachments which citizens have for their smaller communities (ethnic group) to their larger communities (state or nation- state).
- (iv) **Application and Practice of Rule of Law:** The study of civic education will help the practice and application of the rule of law, which is one of the vital principles of democracy. The principle of the rule of law is based on the equality of men, the dignity of the human personality, the inherentness of the human rights, and the idea of limited government (Sargent, 2009: 63, Ogunna, 1994: 7). Through the study of civic education, the citizens are equipped with the knowledge of their rights and privileges. Citizens are taught the fundamental human rights, the limitations of these rights and how to safeguard them.

In summary, the study of civic education equips the citizens with the knowledge and ability to contribute effectively to societal change and national development. This is a strong means of reinforcing national unity and identity, instilling love of the state and national commitment, and developing an informed and efficient democratic system.

Conclusion

The focal point of this paper was civic education and responsible citizenship in the 21st century Africa: An overview. The message of this study is that politics need not and indeed must not be a zero-sum game. Sharing is essential in a democratic society, that is, sharing of power, of resources, and of responsibilities.

Based on the discussions on this paper, it is relatively easy for Africa to produce responsible citizens. However, the kind of society Africans want to live in and the kind of government they want to have requires effort and commitment on the part of its citizens. Africans want a society and a government in which:

- i. human rights are respected;
- ii. the individuals dignity and worth are acknowledged;
- iii. the rule of law is observed;
- iv. the people willingly fulfill their responsibilities; and
- v. the common good is the concern of all.

Making that kind of society, indeed that kind of government a reality is a very important challenge Africans in the 21st century faces and the most important work they could undertake.

Recommendations

After a thorough examination and discussions of the subject matter of this study, the researchers thus propose the following recommendations:

- (i) Public enlightenment programmes should be carried out by the governments of the various Africa states so as to inculcate in their citizens the zeal to observe their obligations and responsibilities in this age of democracy.
- (ii) Member states of African Union should do well to educate their citizens on the civic virtues necessary for harmonious and peaceful coexistence of citizens in the continent of Africa.
- (iii) The goals of civic education in the curriculum studies should be broadened to accommodate more of regional and continental interests and African brotherhood rather than the parochial perspectives of statism and nationalism.
- (iv) Citizenship, multi-culturalism and identity politics should be embraced by all the African countries in this age of democracy. This is necessary to ensure African citizens resident in any part of the continent enjoy the liberty, dignity and freedom of liberalism envisioned by the African Union.

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