

SAWOROIDE: THE YORUBA MODEL OF SOCIAL CONTRACT

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Abstract

The theoretical underpinnings of this paper are grounded on (i) perceived belief of the relationship between philosophy and literature, when literature is understood as embracing artistic genres, such as film and philosophy as a reflective discipline; and (ii) as a reflection of Paget Henry's view that philosophy as an academic discipline is embedded in , and can be extracted from, non-philosophical discourses (iii) argument in Western political philosophy that the origin of government rests on a social contract between leaders and their subjects. The data for philosophical reflection centre on the Yoruba film, *Saworoide*, produced by Tunde Kelani and written by Akinwunmi Isola, in which the relationship between leaders and the people is depicted as a bound/contract between leaders and their subjects. It is observed that this contract is not only political, but it is also spiritual in the sense that contractual relation between leaders and their citizens takes the form of a bond /vow in which the violation of the terms of the contract/bond/vow can lead to unpleasant consequences, including death, on the part of the leader. It is argued in the paper that this model of social contract is stronger and more credible than a hypothetical contract, enunciated by some Western contractarian philosophers, in the sense that it relies on an actual historical contract which bypasses the scepticism against the explanation and justification of the Western model of social contract, which sees such contract as a hypothetical one. The Yoruba model of social contract that is illustrated by the film, *Saworoide*, is an actual contract that takes place in actual historical situation and therefore it is more relatable. The paper suggests that the Yoruba model of social contract as expressed in *Saworoide*, can be adopted as the explanation and justification of the origin of government and the political process, for the purpose of guaranteeing and ensuring accountability, responsibility and transparency in governance.

Key words: Literature and Philosophy, Social contract, *Saworoide*, Yoruba model of social contract.

I. Introduction

One fundamental question that defines the province of Political philosophy is the question about the origin and justification of the state and government. The question takes the form of why and how. For Philosophy, the why question is more fundamental than the how question. But we can work our way through the how question to the why question and vice versa. Thus we need to ask the question, why do we need the state and government at all and if that question can be answered then we need to ask how to initiate the process of state and government in actual historical situation. The how question can be viewed as a historical and ahistorical question as to when, in time, did government come into place. It might also be seen as ahistorical question in the sense that we are not asking when, in history, government started to exist; rather, the question is about why we need government at all. This is a fundamental, hence, philosophical question.

In Western political philosophy, the why question is often responded to by presenting a hypothetical situation in which there is no government and the presumed effects and consequences of such a situation. This presentation denies a historical state of affairs and regards the response as a model- a justification for the existence of state and government. This way of formulating this response has engineered a debate as to the distinction between political justification and legitimacy.

The contractarians of modern and contemporary Western political philosophy- Hobbes (1962), Locke (2000), Rousseau (2000), Kant (2000) and Rawls (1971) and Nozick (1974) respectively, were noted for this kind of response.

Two concepts that are noted for elucidating the contractarian positions are (political) justification and legitimacy. In the literature, some political philosophers had suggested that both concepts are fused while some acknowledge a distinction between them. (Simmons 1999, Bamikole 2017). In simple terms, Justification looks forward to the future while legitimacy looks backward to the past. Justification refers to the good purposes or ends of the state, while legitimacy relates to a function of showing that the actual history of the state turns on consent, on the actual history of that state's relation with its subjects.

Locke and Nozick were identified by Simmons as those who recognized the distinction between justification and legitimacy. For Locke, “ no one can be put out (of the state of nature) and subjected to the political power of another without his or her own consent (Locke 2000, 330). On the other hand, Nozick (1974, 134) opined that state legitimacy is a function of showing that the actual history of the state which is the relationship between it and its citizens is morally acceptable.

While the debate on political justification and legitimacy has taken a sophisticated dimension, in this paper we shall be focusing attention on political legitimacy because it is the analysis of this concept and its normative consequences that is directly relevant to the concern of this paper.

The position taken in this paper is that relationship between the leader and citizens is not only based on power, that is the ability of a leader to make citizens do what they want even when the citizens are unwilling; but more importantly, it is a moral relation- that leaders govern based on the consent of the citizens. In the history of actual states, political turmoil, which can take different

dimensions, have been the consequences of the infraction and violation of the moral relationship between leaders and the citizens.

Within the context of this paper, the refusal of Lapite to adhere to the tradition of Jogbo kingdom by refusing to take a vow and incision makes his leadership illegitimate leading to political turmoil in the society. By the same token, the forceful taking over of government by Lagata violates the terms of agreement between Jogbo kingdom and its people, not only leading to turmoil, but to the demise of Lagata, the military ruler. The paper used this model of social contract to argue that the contract between leaders and citizens does not only take a rational and moral explanation but a spiritual one. It is argued that if existing states, especially in Africa, can adhere and employ this model, then accountability and transparency would be promoted in the act of governance. We shall then have a better social and political state of affairs than the existing one where the moral virtues of governance are violated with impunity.

II. The film, Saworoide

Saworoide is a Yoruba film directed by Tunde Kelani. The film combines elements of tradition, symbolism, and storytelling to address important themes such as leadership, corruption, justice, exploitation, and the relationship between those in power and the people they govern. The story is set in the fictional town of Jogbo, a place rooted in strong cultural values and strict traditional procedures for installing a king.

Traditional Background

In Jogbo, becoming a king is not based on influence, desire or charisma alone; a ruler must undergo a sacred initiation and ritual involving a special drum known as Saworo Ide (the brass drum). The drum symbolizes truth, transparency, responsibility and accountability. Any king who goes through the initiation can hear the drum without harm. However, if a ruler ascends the throne without completing the ritual and eventually hears the drum, he is going to suffer unpleasant physical, social and spiritual consequences, marking him as an unlawful or illegitimate leader.

King Lapite's Ascendancy to the Throne

At the beginning of the film, Lapite, who is desperate to become king, commands Oba Adebosipo, the legitimate king, to be assassinated along with his son to obliterate Ayangolu's lineage from

ascending the throne. As fate will have it, Ayangolu is assassinated while his son is assisted to escape. After this, Lapite ascends the throne but refuses to participate in the sacred ritual because he wants the freedom to rule without being accountable to tradition. Instead of embracing the responsibilities of leadership, he seeks power for selfish and parochial interests.

Lapite forms alliances with corrupt chiefs and influential individuals who support his rejection of tradition. Through manipulation and wealth, he secures the throne. After gaining power, Lapite begins selling Jogbo's land and natural resources to foreign companies for personal profit. This led to the suffering of the citizens—farmlands were destroyed, poverty increases, and the leaders accumulate wealth while the people become impoverished.

Corruption and Decline in Jogbo

Over time, Lapite becomes oppressive and authoritarian. He silences anyone who challenge his leadership and ensure that the Saworo Ide drum is never played, fearing the consequences of being exposed. Under his rule, Jogbo shifts from a peaceful cultural community into one filled with corruption, injustice, and hardship. The chiefs who support him also exploit the town for their own gain. However, the citizens do not fold their arms and watched Lapite and his corrupt chiefs to oppress and exploit them. They rebel against the unjust administration of Jogbo kingdom.

Lagata's Coup

During Lapite's reign, a military officer named Lagata returns to Jogbo. Although he initially appear to seek peace, he also desires power. He helps Lapite to strengthen his rule but later turns against him. Lagata stages a coup, removes Lapite from the throne, and takes over power.

However, Lagata also refuses to go through the Saworo Ide ritual. He believes power relies on force, especially through the barrels of the gun, rather than cultural and legitimate authority. He ends up ruling with the same oppression and selfishness, causing more suffering for the Jogbo people.

Ayangalu and the Defenders of Tradition

Throughout the film, cultural figures like Ayangalu, the custodian of the Saworo Ide drum, continues to act as protectors of tradition. They remind the community that true leadership is rooted in culture, responsibility, and justice. They represent ancestral wisdom and moral guidance.

As the suffering in Jogbo grows, the people began to realize that restoring tradition is the only way to reclaim peace and fairness.

The Drum's Power and the Climax

In the climax, the Saworo Ide drum is finally beaten. Since neither Lapite nor Lagata undergo the required initiation and ritual, the sound of the drum exposes their illegitimacy and leads to their downfall and eventual demise. The drum becomes a powerful symbol of justice, proving that corruption and abuse of power cannot escape physical, social and spiritual consequences.

In the end, *Saworo Ide* emphasizes that true change and progress come from restoring truth, culture, transparency and accountability.

III. Philosophical Analysis of Saworoide as a Yoruba Model of Social Contract

Ayangolu and the ritual materials signify the origin of government as rooted in the contract between leaders and their citizens. This is a political contract which accounts for the origin of government and citizens' political obligation towards it. In the film being analysed, Jogbo Kingdom is rooted in tradition that confers legitimacy on the state and the government and the individuals who are symbols of these political institutions.

Lapite's non adherence to the Jogbo tradition by refusing to take the oath and incision suggests arrogance and crack individualism; not recognising the prevalent view in African philosophy, that "I am because we are" (Mbiti, 1970, p.108)

By the same token, Lagata's forceful take-over of government without resorting to the will and the consent of Jogbo people is a violation of the contractual arrangement between Jogbo leaders and their citizens. The turmoil that results from this illegitimacy is reflected in the relationship between the state and government. Illegitimate government uses its power to oppress, exploit and does injustice against the citizens of illegitimate states. Thus, state and government legitimacy are not to be independent of one another, since an illegitimate state could not have a legitimate government.

In Jogbo, the vow and ritualism that bind the leader with the people are based on the tradition of the society, which has to be accepted critically or uncritically (Popper, 1991) but more importantly,

it should not be taken lightly. It is the nature of oaths and rituals that when the object is violated there are always immediate unpleasant consequences (Mbiti 1972).

IV. Saworoide: A Yoruba Alternative Model of Social Contract

It has to be noted that besides the internal criticism of the Western contractarian theory; for instance, that the theory only signifies a hypothetical contract and that it is not binding on future generations, Charles Mills (1997) has suggested that the social contract theory is a racial contract.

According to him, the orthodox social contract is based on white domination, given the historical events of slavery and colonialism. Thus, the social contract cannot explain the political justification and legitimacy of non-white states and governments. On the orthodox model of social contract, non-whites are not regarded as subjects; rather, they are objects. Consequently, the moral elements in the orthodox social contract do not apply to the relationship between white and non-white persons. Given this view, the orthodox social contract should be replaced with another form of contract that is based on the existential realities of non-white peoples.

This provides the impetus for developing a model of social contract that is based on the thought system of the African society, using the Yoruba culture as an illustration.

As aforementioned, the Yoruba model of social contract is not only a rational and moral contract, but it is also a spiritual one. The spiritual dimension relates to an actual contract that is based on concrete spiritual materials and processes that are predicated on the belief system of the Yoruba people. One of the ways by which the Yoruba can ensure trust in relationship is the process of oath taking among parties concerned in a given relationship. Oath taking is a traditional way of binding and entrusting parties to a relationship. It is the belief that given the concrete situation of the contract, parties to a relationship will keep to its terms when specific spiritual items are presented to them which cement the relationship. It is also believed that if any of the parties violates the spirit of the relationship, such a person will be met with unpleasant consequences.

At this point, an objector might suggest that in concrete terms, leaders in our time swear on the Bible and the Koran as the case may be, and the question is: What is special about the Yoruba model which gives it an edge over the Western model of oath taking?

Our response to this question is that the consequences of breaking the terms of contract within a given relationship within the Yoruba spiritual model is immediate and conclusive. The Western model of oath taking is predicated on the assumption that justice can be meted out to a violator of contract in the fullness of time, if not in this world but in the world to come. This is the idea of God's penal justice in Kant's (1960) philosophy of religion. On the other hand, the Yoruba idea of not delaying consequences which follow upon violation of an oath is based on the saying that *ki ile to pa osika ohun daradara a ti ba je* (Before nemesis catches on the evil doer, good things would have undergone irreparable damage). Therefore, the Yoruba model hinges upon immediate justice for the evil doer, especially when s/he has been a party to an oath taking in relation to a given (legitimate) relationship.

This is not to suggest that the Yoruba believe in jungle justice, which Western legal system would regard as the violation of the rule of law. The point is that the violation of an oath and the consequences that follow upon such violation is a natural process, not mediated by human agency and as such, the involvement of a formal judicial process is out of the picture.

V. Conclusion

This paper has been an exercise in rethinking the elements that form the kernel of the subject matter of political philosophy- the question about the origin and justification of the state and government. Given the nature of the philosophical enterprise, the question is a perennial one and that has provided the impetus for examining anew, the Western contractarian philosophy.

The subsequent criticisms that have been levied against the orthodox contractarian philosophy provides the justification to shift the 'geography of reason' and look towards the African philosophical tradition as an alternative model of responding to the age old question about the origin and purpose of the state and government.

The Yoruba film, *Saworoide*, provides the data for philosophical reflection and it is argued in the paper that the Yoruba model of social contract is a good alternative to the orthodox social contract that has been bedevilled by myriad of criticisms.

In its application to actual states, especially in Africa, it is the belief and suggestion of the paper that if the Yoruba model of social contract is adopted in contemporary African states, then there is

a possibility of witnessing accountability and transparency in government; rather than the existing situation where the moral virtues of governance are violated with impunity.

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