

**Talking to Africa: A Proposal**  
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Picture a map of the world. Take a moment to see every continent, every ocean as clearly as you can. For some readers, a blue and green representation of our world's topography may come into mind. For others, individual countries may be presented in beautiful pastels juxtaposed with others to show clear political borders. Either of these ideas could be considered accurate when thinking about how our world is structured, but what about the map's projection? Why does cardinal north seem to consistently appear as the top hemisphere? In Euro-centric map projections such as Mercator, still published today by companies such as Rand McNally, the land masses of the northern hemisphere are emphasized, given more space and grandeur on the representation of Earth. Examining these conditions leads us to several questions, questions about why we accept the given view of the world and what slips through the cracks when we do. Political thought in Africa is one such casualty of our times. A series of ideas long ignored, African political thought is rich in its philosophy, and it is worth examining whether or not these political ideas can add to the global conversation of political theory.

This paper begins with the definition of and reasoning behind the comparative methodology used throughout the paper. Second, I present a section of background information, including basic cultural information that connects with this methodology. Third, I discuss African cultural norms that influence political thought, including conceptions of justice, humanness, and what it means to be a "person." Fourth, I look at how African societies implement these ideas, using Richard Tambulasi and Happy Kayuni's Malawian case study as an example. Finally, I will use the methods and information outlined in this paper to laterally compare African political thought with several other philosophies from around the world,

bringing us to the conclusion that modern African political thought is not a set of underdeveloped principles that have been overridden by European colonialism, but a legitimate political philosophy with much to offer to international discussions of rights, rules, and what it means to be human.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As human society becomes more interconnected, it becomes our duty to understand as much of it as possible, modifying our own behaviors to mesh with the rest of the world. As Fred Dallmayr (2010) argues, there is no completely universal way to evaluate other political philosophies, no “view from nowhere” with which we can accurately judge cultures or politics objectively (10-11, 15). He does not advocate for a relativist method of analysis, though, but a pluralist one (4). In his recommended method for comparative political theory, we must adopt a “lateral” approach of comparison. Conceptually, this approach requires us to give up notions of Universalist superiority and realize that we are all influenced by the cultures that spawned us (10). To claim a universal, unbiased truth is to deny our history and our ability to learn anything new. By following these steps, we can more easily compare and contrast domestic and foreign philosophies and use what we have learned to reflect on ourselves, which will improve our understanding of our ideas and show us areas for improvement (12). African thought<sup>1</sup> is no different from any other in this respect. This underappreciated philosophy can offer much to a discussion of how to peacefully coexist on an ever-shrinking planet, and only by listening and making connections can we keep our own culture from stagnating.

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<sup>1</sup> Or “African political thought,” used in this paper to describe cultural and political norms associated with post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa, especially the African southeast

When evaluating another culture's ideology, we must first understand where we are coming from. Our understanding of reality is heavily tied to what we've been taught, and while we cannot fully comprehend even our own culture, we can use the connections we have and the viewpoints we have picked up to compare other cultures to our own (Bell 2002, 1-3). Essentially, there is no "view from nowhere," and it is impossible to see things "as they truly are" (4). Once we acknowledge the limitations of our own worldview, we can more clearly understand the point of our inquiry: we don't seek to find the perfect way to run everything, drawing closer to some abstract measure of perfection. Instead, we should treat our research as we would "approaching another person" to hear their ideas and apply them to our own lives (6-7, 10). The key is to be receptive of others' ideas, using the ones that we feel will help us and discarding those that we do not agree with (15). When we see the world through the connections and parallels we have with other cultures, we are better able to evaluate ourselves and see where we would like to improve (Dallmayr 2010, 8). The whole point of comparative political theory, therefore, is to understand our place within the world and move towards increased dialogue and cultural attentiveness when dealing with political thought (15).

There are a number of specific problems we must also worry about when our goal is to explain phenomena outside our own culture. Time should always be a consideration, since cultures are dynamic institutions (Black 1997, 55). Cultures transition not merely as a quick switch between two sides of a dichotomy, but as a slow evolution over generations (Rudolph 2001, 5). Additionally, the meanings of specific words cannot be taken for granted. Words can confound as easily as they explain, especially when everyday words are applied to several different phenomena. Words such as "person," "family," and "village," can take on different connotations depending on the context in which they are used, and to use these words fluidly

without any checks to them implies a universality of one definition (Black 2001, 57-59, 68).

Antony Black recommends using Max Weber's methods to deal with these issues. Weber suggests that an analyst must start with the understanding that, even though commonalities exist between different cultures, key differences exist that will prevent old conclusions and assumptions from transferring completely to a new location (63-64).

Should the key differences be ignored, an analyst runs into the problem that Susanne Hoebel Rudolph describes as the "imperialism of categories" (Rudolph 2001, 6). This intellectual imperialism is marked by the imposition of beliefs and goals onto another group of people with the assumption that values and morals are universal. To that, Rudolph remarks that absolute morality "is inspired either to withdraw from alien things or to transform them: it cannot live in comfort constantly by their side" (7). A violation of these warnings can be seen in the field of political science. Rudolph points to the rational choice model and its assumption that each individual is concerned solely with his or her own greatest utility in mind. Rational choice assumptions make it hard to "credit the prevalence in many societies of collective motives and collective actors to recognize the importance of culture in determining preferences" (9). Additionally, rationality is defined differently in different cultures, so applying such a label with no descriptors is to fall into the traps that Weber has outlined (9). Rudolph suggests that these traps can be avoided by relying on "situational knowledge," which recognizes the effects of time, place, and circumstance on cultures and philosophies (11).

Situational knowledge "proceeds from specificities and works upward to comparative generalizations." This method of inquiry seeks to find meaning, to understand without imposition of one's own beliefs (11). With this frame of mind, we can begin to do what Dallmyer suggests: use the connections and similarities to interpret political phenomena in their own context,

learning what we can to improve our understanding of ourselves. These techniques are essential to the analysis in the rest of this paper.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

To begin at the beginning, we must trace our way back to the past. Continuity is a core part of African culture and political theory; the past is viewed with reverence, since it is the past that connects people to each other in both a biological and cultural sense. Menkiti (2004) brings up the example of the umbilical cord as a single unit that has stretched back to the beginning of human existence, connecting everyone that has ever lived (324). The spirit of this connectedness is not thought of in a purely mystical sense, and so the reverence for the past would perhaps be mislabeled if referred to as “ancestor worship.” I choose to conceptualize the theory as a set of railroad tracks. They are links that have been made between people by people that came before us, but by respecting their legacy and working to preserve the tracks, we are able to reap the benefits of greater connectivity. In this way, ancestors that have been long forgotten (the “nameless dead” that Mekiti describes) still play an active role in our current lives. While they cannot continue to develop as people, they still exist through their contributions and play an important role in our lives today (328). To give the Western reader something more familiar to equate this experience to, Murove (2009) quotes Ali Mazrui on the subject of death: “to die was to change address” (28). In the same way that a friend or family member might move far away, someone who has died will still be an influence on a person’s life, through either the wisdom and experience that has been passed on or the physical or monetary contributions that the deceased have made to the lives of those that remain alive. These ideas tie into the African meaning of an individual and what it means to be a “person,” which is discussed later.

Though traditional African philosophy emphasizes the importance of the past, it still makes room for actions to be taken in the present. These actions manifest themselves with this understanding of connectedness in mind. When dealing with the present, though, the philosophy focuses on the here and now of daily problems (Mekiti 2004, 329). Masolo (2003) identifies an “explanatory strategy” in Africa far different from that of the West, one which relies on observation and experience rather than prediction (24). He cites Thomas Kuhn’s work, which has blurred the understanding of what is “real,” placing it within the realm of experience of the observer (22-23). Kuhn accomplishes this feat by arguing that knowledge and even scientific theory are human-based, and science is therefore culturally rooted and bound by what we are able to conceive of (22). The implication of these findings is that knowledge is not universal; cultural norms affect how we perceive and interpret knowledge and scientific findings. To expand our understanding, we must therefore be willing to step out of our own cultural and philosophical norms and call into question how we evaluate those of others. Politically, changing our paradigm will help us to understand why different governments make the decisions they do, thereby helping us move towards cooperation and revisions in our own systems.

### **AFRICAN INTERPRETATIONS OF POLITICAL CONCEPTS**

To begin considering other political philosophies, we must first understand the cultural context of the region, such as the local definition of what a person is and where that person fits in society, including their political involvement. Unlike in the West, a human being is not automatically considered a “person.” K. Wiredu (2009) strongly warns against transposing Western ideas and dichotomies onto African culture, since doing so will almost certainly lead to misunderstanding of the subject matter (9). In K. Wiredu’s interpretation of the traditional

African conception, a “person” is a fully realized human being, one that is within and contributes to the connections and relationships between the people of his or her community (13-14).

Additionally, a “person” cannot exist in the abstract, because an abstract idea cannot fulfill his or her duties to the rest of society (13). A popular African idiom, “a person is a person through persons,” highlights this view very directly. Though the implications of this phrase may seem basic at first, the meaning lies within the idea that no one can be complete without other people around (Shutte 2009, 90). Taking this idea a step further, Shutte defines the person as outside the individual, existing only in relationships with others (91). These ideas contrast with the Western notion of the individual as the building block for society: instead of the community being a social contract or some other such device created by individuals, the community itself is seen as organic and evolving, made up of the people that inhabit it. In order to become a fully-developed “person,” an individual must work to increase their humanness, which is the basis for the concept of *Ubuntu*<sup>2</sup>.

*Ubuntu*, the idea that “I am because we are,” builds upon the latent connectedness in African society (91). *Ubuntu* has many definitions, but the idea is generally associated with solidarity, harmony, and friendliness within a society to help it run more smoothly and keep bonds strong (Metz 2009, 341). Shutte offers several anecdotes in trying to personify this concept, and I feel one is worth repeating to illustrate the focus on relationships that *Ubuntu* represents:

“[My colleague’s] father was a magistrate in what was then Northern Rhodesia. Traditional courts, presided over by traditional officials, were still allowed to deal with all but the most serious cases. Courts were held in the

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<sup>2</sup> *Ubuntu*, originally from the Bantu languages of southern Africa, is considered a common philosophy throughout most of the sub-Saharan continent.

villages from which the cases came, usually in some central space in the open air. Both sides would be allowed their say, calling friends and witnesses to support them. The courts were open and there was always an audience. At a certain point in the proceedings the audience would be allowed to comment. Sometimes the magistrate would ask the opinion of someone he thought might throw light upon the subject. Sometimes he would even listen to the opinion of a passer-by” (Shutte 2009, 88-89).

In this example, we see the dispersion of judgment from the individual judge, expanding beyond that of even the jury system we have in the West. Rather than weighing information in as impartial a way as possible, a prerequisite in Western jurisprudence, he relies also on the judgment of the crowd, drawing on the collective knowledge and experience of anyone that had gathered in order to pass a judgment that would be deemed fair by all. Because the decisions of the court will affect everyone in the community on some level, it is deemed appropriate that everyone who cares should have the chance to weigh in. There are similarities with the Western jury, but the African system is far less formalized. Power is not devolved into the hands of the individual or a small group, but rather channeled through the whole community, women included. Using this method, the judge is able to both see the case from several points of view and build on the interconnectedness within the community itself. Contrasting with the West, his status as a public official does not grant him more control than other members of society, but it instead gives him an avenue for strengthening his bonds in his community. This anecdote aligns well with Metz’s (2007) definition of African justice:



“An act is right if and only if it develops one’s social nature without violating the rights of others, i.e., relationships in which people share a way of life and are in solidarity with one another. An action is wrong if and only if it fails to honor relationships in which we identify with others and exhibit good-will towards them.” (365)

This definition has strongly political implications. In this model, justice is seen as a system in which fairness is judged in terms of the duties of one person to another; justice is reconciliation, not restitution (341). A state’s job, therefore, is to work towards social harmony by promoting the most necessary relationships<sup>3</sup> (345). From these excerpts, we can begin to reflect on our own system. The African model presented here does everything it can to suppress elitism, which would move people from the *Ubuntu* perspective of “I am because we are” to a corrupted “I am because I have the most power.” In elevating someone above the group based on their power or abilities as a singular individual, the group dynamic would fade and the continuity and connections between people would be lost. Instead, African society must seek a way to manage a community that can both respond to individual needs and supply solutions that prove beneficial to the entire group.

Metz’s definition of justice ties into the socially correct method of discourse: rather than debate between two opposing parties, political and judicial discussion is meant to take place among a large group of individuals representing the widest possible set of beliefs in a group. Discussions such as these can happen at most times and places, from a group of nuns discussing the day’s politics to an open public forum, whenever a decision is made that affects the community as a whole (Shutte 2009, 94-95). A particular type of discussion, called *indaba*, is

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<sup>3</sup> Metz (2009) notes that, while important, family relationships do not automatically supersede all others (345).

meant as a way to improve conditions across the community whenever large decisions must be made, including through the judicial process (95), which fits in with Metz's definition above. The aim of these talks is not to further one's own position, but to contribute to a larger discussion and harness the creative energies of the larger group to solve problems. These discussions are similar to but distinct from the US's town hall meetings: they are meetings of the community to discuss community issues, but they can happen much more spontaneously. Of course, a single decision will be unable to please everyone, and though consensus is always sought after as the goal of *indaba* (with recognition of justice from everyone involved), tempers can flare if basic disagreements still exist. Shutte comments that, culturally, Africans living under this intellectual regime will often show anger or defiance to any decision that he or she deems unjust. (98). An African government, then, must take care to incorporate the ideas of all its citizens and try to find the best consensus for everyone with democracy seen as the best method by researchers such as Francis Deng (2004, 502).

For people that subscribe to African thought, participation in the discussion and recognition that the relationships within society provide their views with validity are essential to *Ubuntu*. In fact, political participation and socio-economic development are seen as the basic rights of a "person" (499). Deng (2004) argues that for an African society to meet these standards, the ruling body must democratize, though he doesn't say specifically which form democracy will take. He also emphasizes the importance of agreement and consensus during discussions; zero-sum methods of thinking are divisive and therefore unacceptable in African thought (502-3). Deng makes the point that smaller-scale societies are able to maintain the peace through these discussions and other peacemaking strategies, even and perhaps especially societies that are often prone to warfare and lack a strong unified government (e.g. tribal

societies). Such small-scale organizations have been referred to by Deng as “ordered anarchy” (505).

However, contemporary communities are often larger in scale than the single village, so we must also concern ourselves with the governance of cities and states as well as tribal or village societies. Looking at the recent history of post-colonial African states, one finds numerous examples of tyranny or totalitarian rule. These problems often stem from one-party systems. While one-party rule may seem oppressive to a Western observer, it makes sense within the African context. (252). To start off, institutionalized opposition would be completely out of place within African political culture, as it would infringe on the social solidarity that we have already discussed. Additionally, political parties in Africa often formed as a response to colonial rule, giving the people of a given region something to rally behind. By unifying many people against an outside foe, the single party can gain legitimacy if it can successfully repel the outsiders (253). It is on this nationalism that Taiwo (2004) suggests African society build itself into a democratic continent, creating governments that are able to cooperate through the lens of pan-African issues (250).

### **GOVERNMENT IMPLEMENTATION**

Political change, however, must not be rushed and must conform in some degree to the already accepted cultural norms. D.A. Masolo (2001) criticizes Oyango Ayany’s prescription for strong individualist values, warning that development cannot happen strictly on an individual level (88). He also notes that African culture, just like any other, is dynamic, not static; it is under constant change, but actively shaping a new state will require its citizens and government to evolve slowly, maintaining their cultural identity and integrating into their policies only those

ideas that their political theory can be made to allow for (86). Ali Mazrui (2001) explains a current problem facing the newer African states, one that has not been latched onto culturally: economic models (97). While capitalism has allowed for a fast spread of wealth through kin obligations and relationships, it has often failed and been rejected by Africans due to corruption and favoritism (115-116). Socialism, on the other hand, has yet to take strong root in Africa, which Mazrui sees as a result of the vast amount of specialized theory that is tied to the method, theory which African inquiry often lacks (118). When a state is unable to meet its obligations to both political participation by the people and socio-economic development, it begins to face major problems.

Richard Tambulasi and Happy Kayuni (2009) comment on how a government can misuse the precepts of *Ubuntu* to create a government that cannot be run effectively. They specifically use the case of Malawian President Bakili Muluzi, whose use of government handouts during his reign as president of Malawi (1994-2004) seemed on the surface to follow *Ubuntu*, but in reality rang of corruption. Claiming to act in response to the policies of the former “[Malawi Congress Party] dictatorial regime” by stopping their extortion, Muluzi would hand out around ten million Malawi Kwacha (US \$65,500) and one hundred tons of maize at each of his political rallies (Tambulasi et. al., 430-431). He considered his actions acts of *Ubuntu*, since it benefit Malawians, but there were issues with accountability and transparency (432). Though he claimed that all of the money and gifts were his own, there is no information where the money and maize came from, even within the various departments of Muluzi’s government that handle relief distribution (433). There was concern that Muluzi did not act fairly in his handouts, and these authors note that Muluzi would not give gifts to people of opposing political views, instead saving them only for those at his own political rallies. Such an action would be a major breach of *Ubuntu* thought,

as it would divide an entire country based on a single ideology that refuses criticism or discussion (434). Tamulasi and Kayuni's research show that these actions would prove a detriment to socio-economic development by creating a dependency on handouts. Additionally, local companies saw Muluzi's methods and began copying them, using secret handouts and gifts to influence popular opinion (436-7). With these findings in mind, the reader could conclude that Muluzi's *Ubuntu* was corrupted and required policies of good governance to set it straight (438).

I would go a step further. *Ubuntu* means the humanness that is inherent in our relationships. To be a "person" requires embracing a variation of the golden rule: "Life is an enterprise of mutual aid" (K. Wiredu 16). The Malawian government under Muluzi did not embody either of these principles. Muluzi may have referred to his campaign as one of *Ubuntu*, but his actions did not bring about the strong relationships that are required of traditional African thought, instead dividing the country between his followers and dissidents. Of course, we cannot necessarily judge Muluzi's government in a strictly utilitarian sense; to do so would be to impose our own cultural biases onto another part of the world, and we would lose a key lesson that this example teaches us about sub-Saharan African political culture: a quick rise to power with a meager understanding of social and political values and the group dynamic cannot lead to long-term stability.

### **CROSS-CULTURAL POLITICAL COMPARISON**

Although we've seen the failure of *Ubuntu* to be implemented as a tool for running a large community, I believe that the idea is still worth examining, and that we might be able to reflect on our own culture and see what we can add by using "multicultural studies" and "dialogical recognition" (Dallmayr 2010, 13). This task may be made easier by first drawing

some parallels. To better support my thesis that African political thought is able to enter into the global conversation, I compare and contrast philosophies with a wide variety of different schools of political thought: Confucian, Gandhian, and Western liberal. With Western liberalism dominant in the West and China and India as emerging powers on the world stage, it makes sense to start the conversation here, with these heavy hitters of our times.

The first school of thought I will compare African thought with is the Confucian school. Much like in African thought, Confucianists see the fulfillment of our roles in society as key to successful growth throughout our lives. It is worth noting that Confucius believed strongly in the stratification of these roles; each was very rigid and required that every individual answer to those above him in the social hierarchy (Leys 1997, *xxvi*). However, the Confucian model of justice allows for someone of lower status to do what is morally right or challenge his or her superior's actions, sometimes putting a strain on interpersonal relationships<sup>4</sup> (68). Though the focus is on mutual benefit in African thought, these two ideologies both deal with the importance of discussion and the gaining of knowledge: Confucianism through studying, African thought through the garnering of experience. By becoming better people, we can better manage the groups that we belong to and avoid devaluing the human aspect that is most important to existence: Confucius wanted to avoid legalism, which he saw as a symptom of a broken state (*xxv*), and African thought seeks to maintain solidarity. In both of these philosophies, man is held as far more important than law. The idea of a fully-realized individual also plays into both philosophies. For Confucianism, the 君子 (*junzi*, "gentleman") was an individual that had the highest of morals and fulfilled his roles dutifully (5). The same can be said of an African individual that does great work within his community. The key difference here lies in the roles of

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<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, a man could achieve higher status through examinations and rule in their own way.

these people: gentlemen were seen as the most fit to rule over everyone else (*xxvii*), whereas a “person” was one that utilized the ideas of everyone available to make compromises that gave mutual benefit to everyone involved.

Moving to Gandhian thought, we can see parallels within the ideas of unity and governance. For Gandhi, the goal was “*swaraj*,” internal freedom and the rule by a strong community through cooperation (Dalton 1996, 11). The focus in both Gandhi’s and African political thought is not so much hierarchical; they instead rely on much broader participation with the understanding that changes will take time. In each of these dogmas, a high level of input by the community is required, and both are meant to work at all levels of society, though each has seen struggles with implementation. In terms of leadership, Gandhi held up as leaders the *satyagrahi*, the people most committed to change through active resistance (12). To him, there was a true morality that would come out in time, but in order to expose it, people would need to turn a light towards the injustices of the world by actively resisting them (52). African thought, as shown, focuses mostly on using the present to build on past relationships when dealing with decisions. For this school of thought, the important thing is to find ways of mutually benefitting all members of the community, not to move towards an abstract goal by sacrificing individuals.

Finally, the version of Western liberal thought used in the United States also shares some overlap with African political thought. The idea of *Ubuntu* is tied closely with the idea of social capital. Both of these ideas prize complex social networks in an informal way, each understanding the inherent value of mutual help (Putnam 2000, 19). African thought aligns most closely with “bonding” social capital, a type of social capital that seeks to increase small-group solidarity (22-23). Unlike in African thought, though, citizens of the United States tend to hold individualism in much higher regard. This difference leads to an even greater distinction between

Western liberal and African conceptions of a person. For them, personhood is something individuals are born with, an inalienable status that we gain simply by being biologically human. I don't mean to imply that African political thought doesn't value an individual that isn't a "person." Being less than a "person" isn't an antagonistic label, only a comment on an individual's performance in the group (K. Wiredu 17). To that end, both of our political philosophies are pluralistic, seeking input from the largest number of people possible. The distinction comes from majoritarian rule versus the need for consensus.

From these examples, we can see that African political thought is able to comment on and be commented on by other influential schools of thought. There are a number of ways we can implement different ideas into our own political culture, and bringing Africa into the global conversation can only help us further our own understanding of ourselves. The two largest US political parties are an excellent example. Currently, there is a view that Democrats and Republicans represent two ends of a spectrum, two forces that must push as hard against each other in order to make ground. Many politicians claim to try to "reach across the aisle" to reach compromises, but mere offers for cooperate on certain issues will not lead to long-term solidarity any more than Muluzi's policies will lead to long-term stability. If we were to change our attitude and see these two major parties as dependent on each other and not merely as existing in opposition, we would likely be able to prioritize the most important issues of our time and come to compromises that work better for everyone. This is all conjecture, of course, but as I and others have said above, we must be willing to reflect the ideas of others back on ourselves in order to drive ourselves forward.



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