



An Examination of Consensus Democracy in African Traditional Thought for Nigeria's Political Development

Abstract

The persistent struggle for stable governance in Nigeria often stems from the friction between imported Western majoritarian models and the indigenous socio-political values of its people. This study explored the potential of "Consensus Democracy," rooted in African traditional thought, as a viable alternative for Nigeria's political development. The aim was to evaluate how traditional decision-making processes, which focus on harmony and collective agreement over winner-takes-all competition, can be adapted to the modern Nigerian body polity. A central question, therefore, was: to what extent can the principles of traditional African consensus-building mitigate the ethnic polarization and political exclusion inherent in Nigeria's current democratic practice? The problem lies in the systemic failure of the current adversarial system to foster national integration, leading instead to chronic instability and marginalization. Theoretically, this study was premised in *Communitarianism*, which posits that individual identity and political agency are inextricably linked to community well-being. A qualitative methodology which centered on the rigorous analysis of secondary data sources such as philosophical texts, historical records, and contemporary political writings were examined. A major finding revealed that while modern Nigerian politics is defined by numbers, traditional consensus systems relied on deliberative inclusion, where even minority voices held veto-like influence until a common ground was reached. The study concluded that Nigeria's political development is stalled not by a lack of democratic desire, but by a lack of cultural significance in its institutions. It is recommended that Nigeria undergo a constitutional restructuring to incorporate a consensus space that will see to cross-ethnic agreement on national issues while moving beyond mere periodic voting toward genuine collective ownership of the state.

Keywords: Consensus Democracy, African Traditional Thought, Nigeria's Political Development, Communitarianism, Deliberative Inclusion.

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Introduction

Nigeria's search for a stable and people-centred democratic order remains

unsettled because electoral competition has not fully solved the deeper problems of exclusion, distrust, and elite

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domination. Recent scholarship on Nigeria's political condition shows why this concern remains urgent. Jatula (2024 p.80) argues that Nigeria's democracy is not based on "a level playing field" and adds that the country's democratic culture remains "topsy-turvy, regressive and dysfunctional". This assessment is important because it shifts attention away from the routine celebration of elections toward the actual quality of political life. If democratic practice continues to reproduce inequality, money politics, and weak institutions, then it becomes necessary to ask whether other political ideas, especially those rooted in African thought, can help rethink the direction of governance in Nigeria.

It is within this context that consensus democracy has become an important subject of inquiry. The attraction of consensus democracy lies in its promise to reduce adversarial politics and give more room to dialogue, accommodation, and collective responsibility. In a recent intervention, Ibanga (2024 p.157) states that "Africa needs a democratic model that takes its rigid multi-ethnic character into account". This point speaks directly to Nigeria, where ethnic plurality, religious difference, and regional competition continue to shape political behaviour. The argument is not simply that African societies must reject all modern democratic ideas, but that democratic practice in Africa should be examined in relation to African historical realities and social values. Ibanga (2024 p.157) further notes that "indigenous knowledge can be the starting point for democratic practice in Africa", and this gives strong relevance to a study that returns to African

traditional thought in order to examine whether consensus can offer useful principles for Nigeria's political development.

Olanipekun (2020 p.1) notes however that Wiredu's proposal does not automatically make consensus "a workable means of decision-making in present African society" (p. 1). This point is useful because it keeps the study balanced. It suggests that the real task is not to present consensus democracy as a perfect alternative, but to examine its strengths, limits, and practical value for Nigeria. In the same vein, Jatula (2024 p.89) observes that "suggested alternatives to Western democracy are varied and imaginative". This study therefore enters an ongoing debate about how democracy in Africa can become more inclusive, more legitimate, and more responsive to social realities.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. Examine the meaning and main features of consensus democracy in African traditional thought.
- ii. Assess the nature of decision-making and political participation in selected African traditional societies.
- iii. Analyse the weaknesses of majoritarian democracy in relation to Nigeria's political development.
- iv. Determine the relevance of consensus-based political principles to the management of ethnic diversity, inclusion, and national cohesion in Nigeria.

Research Questions

- i. What is consensus democracy, and how is it understood within African traditional thought?
- ii. How did selected African traditional societies organise political participation and decision-making through consensus?
- iii. In what ways has majoritarian democracy contributed to political exclusion and weak development outcomes in Nigeria?
- iv. How can the principles of consensus democracy help to address the problems of ethnic division, marginalisation, and instability in Nigeria?

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's democratic experience has remained deeply troubled in spite of the regular conduct of elections and the continued presence of formal democratic institutions. The central problem is not simply the existence of democracy in procedural terms, but the failure of that democracy to produce inclusion, trust, accountability, and a stable sense of shared political belonging. In Nigeria, electoral politics has often encouraged elite domination, sectional mobilisation, and zero-sum competition rather than broad-based participation and collective commitment to national development. Jatula (2024) observes that the country's democratic process has been weakened by recurring problems such as electoral manipulation, weak institutional credibility, money politics, and the inability of political actors to sustain a democratic culture. This shows that the crisis of Nigerian

democracy is not only institutional but also structural and normative.

However, the place of consensus democracy in contemporary Nigerian political development remains insufficiently examined. Where it is discussed, it is often treated either as an idealised traditional practice or as an impractical alternative to modern state democracy. Olanipekun (2024) notes that although consensus is valuable in African political thought, its application in present democratic settings raises questions about scale, representation, and the protection of minority interests. This creates a serious intellectual gap. On one hand, there is dissatisfaction with the divisive outcomes of majoritarian politics in Nigeria. On the other hand, there is no sufficient agreement on how consensus-based principles can be critically adapted to present institutions without ignoring the realities of a modern constitutional state.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

The literature on consensus democracy in African traditional thought is built around the argument that political legitimacy in many African societies did not rest mainly on numerical majority, but on inclusion, deliberation, and communal acceptance. Recent studies show that this idea has remained relevant because of the continued dissatisfaction with adversarial politics in many African states. The central conceptual issue in the literature is whether African consensus should be treated as a moral ideal, a political

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method, or an institutional model for contemporary governance.

Agunbiade (2025) explains that the debate around Wiredu's consensual democracy has moved beyond simple advocacy for unanimity. He argues that the value of consensus democracy lies in its moral concern for inclusion and its rejection of the winner-takes-all structure that often characterises liberal majoritarian politics. His reconstruction is important because it presents consensus not as a rigid precolonial formula but as an adaptable democratic resource. For this study, the work is useful in showing that consensus can be understood as a principle of broad-based accommodation rather than the impossible demand that everybody must agree completely.

This position is strengthened by Etieyibo (2020), whose edited volume brings together reflections on consensual democracy in Africa from different perspectives. The volume shows that the concept of consensus is not one-dimensional. In some accounts, it refers to unanimity after extended dialogue. In others, it refers to a process of compromise in which dissent is reduced to an acceptable level without necessarily disappearing. This distinction is important for the present study because it helps avoid a narrow understanding of consensus. In the Nigerian context, where social diversity is wide and political tensions are deep, consensus is more realistic when understood as negotiated inclusion than as total agreement.

Eegunlusi (2022) adds another conceptual layer by criticising secular

readings of Wiredu's theory. He argues that African traditional systems of consensus cannot be fully explained apart from the metaphysical and moral beliefs that shaped communal life. In many traditional settings, social order was sustained not only through argument and persuasion, but also through shared beliefs about sacred obligations, moral sanctions, and the spiritual seriousness of public decisions. This insight is important because it reminds scholars that consensus in African thought was not simply a technical procedure. It was rooted in an ethical and social worldview that gave communal life a binding force.

Ayika (2020) also contributes to the conceptual discussion by showing that traditional Igbo society was grounded in values of communality, egalitarianism, and mutual belonging. Though her work is not framed directly as democratic theory, it helps explain the ethical environment in which consensus could function meaningfully. Consensus requires more than procedures. It depends on a culture that values dialogue, responsibility, and social interdependence. This conceptual point supports the theoretical framework of the present study, which is anchored in communitarian thought.

Empirical Review

Empirical contributions to the literature are important because they show how consensus operated in actual African communities rather than only in philosophical argument. These studies help couched the discussion in observable practices and make it easier to assess whether indigenous political

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systems offer useful insights for Nigeria's contemporary democratic condition.

Muo's (2012) study on *Ohazurume* among the Ndigbo is one of the most directly relevant empirical works for this research. He shows that decision-making among the Igbo traditionally involved open assembly, broad participation, and efforts to reach outcomes that could command communal legitimacy. The significance of this study lies in its demonstration that consensus was not merely a theoretical idea imposed later by scholars. It was part of everyday political practice in a Nigerian society with a strong culture of consultation and public debate. This gives the present study a concrete Nigerian basis for discussing consensus democracy.

Onyeakazi (2020) examines *Igwebuiké's* philosophy and its role in peace and conflict resolution among the Igbo of South East Nigeria. His work shows that indigenous thought places strong value on togetherness, complementarity, and the refusal of social fragmentation. Although the focus is peacebuilding, the implications for democratic practice are clear. A political order shaped by the logic of *Igwebuiké* would likely favour accommodation over hostility and collective responsibility over narrow partisan victory. This is relevant to Nigeria, where democratic competition often deepens ethnic and political divisions instead of managing them.

Egara (2025) broadens the discussion by connecting *Igwebuiké's* socio-political philosophy to national integration and sustainable peace in Nigeria. This work

is important because it directly addresses the national scale, moving beyond village or ethnic level analysis. It argues that indigenous ideas of unity and relatedness can support efforts at inclusion in a fractured society. For the present study, this is especially useful because it helps bridge the gap between local traditional values and national political development.

Akpan (2020), though writing in the form of a review, also reflects the empirical concerns in current scholarship by showing that consensus democracy is now being judged by its practical applicability. Questions of how consensus would function in large-scale, complex societies are central to the debate. This shows that the literature is no longer satisfied with merely celebrating African traditions. There is now greater attention to whether and how those traditions can inform actual democratic institutions.

What emerges from these empirical studies is that African traditional thought contains genuine practices of inclusive consultation and communally validated decision-making. At the same time, the literature also makes clear that these practices developed in smaller and more morally integrated communities. This means that any effort to apply them to modern Nigeria must be careful, critical, and adaptive.

The reviewed literature makes three points clear. First, consensus democracy is widely seen as an important feature of African traditional political thought. Second, many scholars agree that its strength lies in inclusion, dialogue, and communal legitimacy rather than in

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simple numerical victory. Third, there is increasing agreement that the modern relevance of consensus depends on reinterpretation and institutional adaptation.

However, many of the existing studies focus either on philosophical defence and critique or on specific cultural practices without fully linking them to the wider question of Nigeria's political development. Some works discuss consensus as a moral idea. Others describe indigenous decision-making in particular communities. But fewer studies bring these strands together to ask how consensus democracy in African traditional thought can speak directly to Nigeria's democratic crisis, especially in relation to exclusion, elite domination, weak legitimacy, and national fragmentation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Communitarian Theory since the subject of consensus democracy in African traditional thought cannot be properly examined outside the moral idea of community. Consensus democracy is not only about a method of decision making. It is rooted in a wider understanding of the person, society, obligation, and public authority. In African traditional thought, the individual is usually seen as existing within a network of social relations, and this makes communal wellbeing more central than isolated personal preference. For this reason, communitarian theory provides the most suitable lens for explaining how consensus emerged as a valued political principle in many African societies.

Communitarian theory opposes the extreme individualism often found in liberal political thought. It holds that human beings are socially formed and morally sustained within communities. This means that rights, duties, identity, and justice are not understood only from the viewpoint of the separate individual, but also from the standpoint of the common good. In practical terms, communitarianism places emphasis on solidarity, mutual responsibility, belonging, and shared moral purpose. These features make it useful for this study because consensus democracy also depends on dialogue, accommodation, and the search for decisions that preserve social harmony.

Within African political thought, communitarianism has special relevance because many traditional societies were organised around collective life, kinship ties, age grades, councils of elders, and public assemblies. Political action was not meant to produce sharp division between winners and losers. Rather, it aimed at restoring balance and maintaining the unity of the community. This does not mean that there were no disagreements. Disagreements existed, but they were often handled through discussion, mediation, and gradual reconciliation. The value placed on consensus was therefore connected to the belief that the community must remain morally intact even after political decisions are made. The framework helps this study in three important ways. First, it explains the moral basis of consensus democracy. Second, communitarian theory helps in assessing the weakness of imported adversarial democracy in Nigeria. Third, the theory offers a basis for considering

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how indigenous ideas of dialogue, shared responsibility, and inclusion may contribute to political development in the present.

Methodology

This study goes with a qualitative research method based on the nature of the subject under investigation. The study is concerned with ideas, values, political practices, and philosophical assumptions that shape consensus democracy in African traditional thought and its relevance to Nigeria's political development. Since these issues cannot be measured adequately through numerical data, a qualitative approach is more suitable. It allows for close examination, interpretation, and critical reflection on meanings, arguments, and social realities.

The study relies solely on secondary sources of data. These include books, peer reviewed journal articles, academic essays, and other scholarly materials that deal with African traditional political systems, consensus democracy, communitarian thought, and Nigeria's democratic experience. The use of secondary data is appropriate because the study is not designed to gather field responses or statistical evidence. Its purpose is to examine existing knowledge, compare scholarly positions, and draw reasoned conclusions from already available materials.

The method of analysis used in this study is textual and interpretive analysis. Relevant texts are carefully read and examined in order to identify key themes, recurring arguments, and points of agreement or disagreement

among scholars. Through this process, the study analyses how consensus democracy has been explained in African traditional thought, how it has been criticised, and how it may relate to the challenges of political development in Nigeria. The interpretive nature of the study makes it possible to go beyond surface description and engage the deeper assumptions behind both traditional and modern democratic models.

In carrying out this analysis, the study also adopts a philosophical approach. This is important because the subject of consensus democracy is not only historical or descriptive. It also involves normative questions about legitimacy, inclusion, justice, participation, and the common good. A philosophical approach helps the study to examine whether consensus democracy offers a meaningful alternative or complement to the majoritarian model that dominates Nigeria's present political structure. It also helps in assessing the moral claims that underlie African communitarian political thought.

Findings and Analysis

i. Consensus, Inclusion, and Political Legitimacy

Decision making in many African traditional settings was tied to the moral demand that public action should not leave parts of the community feeling conquered. That point matters for this study because the value of consensus was not simply procedural. It was connected to legitimacy, social balance, and the expectation that authority should emerge from deliberation that

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allowed broad acceptance. Recent scholarship helps to clarify this. Obi (2024) argues that Wiredu's alternative to majoritarian democracy grew out of the damage caused by adversarial politics in Africa and the need for a political order that reflects African social realities rather than inherited colonial forms. This line of thought supports the finding that consensus democracy was rooted in a search for inclusion rather than numerical victory alone.

The real strength of this model lies in the fact that it tries to reduce political exclusion before it hardens into conflict. In a setting like Nigeria, where electoral competition easily takes ethnic and regional form, a democratic method that pays attention to accommodation has clear relevance. Ibanga (2024 p.8) makes this concern very clear when she observes that "the goal is not the defeat of an opponent but the inclusion of all in a decision that can be lived with". That insight helps explain why consensus in African traditional thought should not be dismissed as a vague ideal. It shows that the process was directed at preserving communal legitimacy after disagreement, not merely ending debate.

This finding also aligns with the communitarian framework of the study. Consensus was possible because the community was treated as morally prior to partisan triumph. In that setting, political judgment was expected to keep relationships intact. This is why the study finds that consensus democracy cannot be understood apart from the communal ethic that sustained it.

ii. Limits of Majoritarian Politics in Nigeria

Nigeria's democratic experience has made the weakness of adversarial politics more visible. Elections often produce rulers, but not always legitimacy. Institutions exist, but public trust remains thin. The issue is not only electoral misconduct. It is also the structure of politics itself, which often turns public office into a contest of domination. Jatula (2024 p.74) captures this problem clearly in his study of the 2023 presidential election when he states that Nigeria's democratic culture is shaped by "ethnicised politics, class, institutionalised loyalty and money politics". That formulation is important because it shows that democratic crisis in Nigeria is not just technical. It is cultural and structural.

From this point, the study infers that the attraction of consensus democracy lies in its challenge to the winner takes all logic that defines much of Nigerian politics. If democratic participation repeatedly ends in exclusion, then the process itself begins to lose moral force. This helps explain why consensus oriented values remain relevant. They offer a corrective to a political system in which formal competition often deepens distrust instead of producing shared commitment to public decisions.

At the same time, the study does not treat consensus democracy as an automatic replacement for liberal democracy. Olanipekun ideas (2020 p.9) are useful here because he warns against a romantic reading of traditional consensus. He argues that "democracy and consensus are not mutually

exclusive". That point is valuable because it prevents a false opposition between African traditional thought and modern democratic practice. The implication is that Nigeria may not need to abandon electoral democracy completely. What it needs is to rethink it through values of wider consultation, accommodation, and substantive inclusion.

ii. Traditional Insight and Modern Difficulty

The findings also show that consensus democracy has practical limits when moved from relatively small traditional communities to a large and complex state like Nigeria. Traditional systems often worked within more bounded social settings, with stronger shared norms and more direct forms of accountability. Modern Nigeria is different. It is deeply plural, heavily bureaucratic, and politically centralised. This difference creates a serious problem for any direct transfer of precolonial methods into present institutions.

That problem has been noted in recent scholarship. Olanipekun (2020 p.1) argues that Wiredu's proposal does not automatically become "a workable means of decision making in present African society". This criticism is important, and the study takes it seriously. Consensus democracy cannot simply be imported from traditional life into a modern constitutional state without adaptation. The scale, diversity, and intensity of political competition in Nigeria make that impossible.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the relevance of consensus democracy to Nigeria's political development lies first in its response to exclusion. That issue has remained central across the earlier sections of this work. The abstract identified the failure of majoritarian politics to reflect indigenous socio political realities. The statement of the problem further established that electoral democracy in Nigeria has not sufficiently reduced distrust, elite domination, or the alienation of many groups from the state. What emerges in this discussion, therefore, is that consensus democracy becomes important not because it promises a perfect political order, but because it raises a serious alternative to the adversarial culture that has shaped Nigeria's democracy.

The Nigerian state continues to struggle with the problem of legitimacy in spite of repeated elections and constitutional procedures. This is not only because of fraud or institutional weakness. It is also because political competition often appears as a struggle for access to state resources rather than a shared search for public good. In this context, the findings support Obi's (2024) position that Wiredu's proposal should be read as an effort to rethink democracy from African social experience rather than from inherited Western political assumptions. That point deepens the meaning of the findings suggesting that the democratic question in Nigeria is not simply whether elections hold, but whether the method of democratic choice itself can generate belonging,

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recognition, and moral acceptance across social divisions.

This is where the communitarian framework of the study becomes useful. The theory does not deny individuality, but it insists that political life must be judged in relation to the wellbeing of the community. Consensus democracy reflects this orientation because it treats public decision making as a process that should preserve social relationships while resolving disagreement. The importance of this to Nigeria is clear. Where politics is heavily ethnicised and polarised, procedures that merely produce winners may fail to produce legitimacy. Ibanga (2024 p.8) captures this well when she explains that traditional African democratic practice sought an outcome in which "all can be lived with". Though brief, that expression is important because it shifts attention from victory to coexistence. The implication for Nigeria is that a stable democratic system must do more than count preferences. It must also manage difference in ways that reduce long term resentment.

The findings also show that consensus democracy should not be interpreted as a call for a complete return to precolonial political structures. That would be historically and institutionally unrealistic. Nigeria is far removed from the relatively small scale communities in which many traditional decision making processes operated. The state now functions through constitutional law, bureaucratic administration, political parties, national elections, and complex struggles over representation. These realities make direct transfer impossible. The study also contributes to the

broader debate on whether majoritarian democracy can adequately serve deeply plural African societies. Nigeria offers strong evidence that numerical victory often does not settle political disagreement. Instead, elections sometimes deepen hostility by making state power appear monopolistic. The findings therefore support the argument that majoritarian democracy, while formally democratic, may still produce practical exclusion in divided contexts.

Another important implication of the findings is that traditional consensus cannot be praised without attention to internal inequalities. The literature and the findings both show that voice within traditional settings was not always evenly distributed. Age, status, gender, and social location often influenced who spoke and whose views carried more weight. This means that the democratic value of consensus should not be located in a false claim of perfect equality. It should be located in its effort to prevent rigid exclusion and hostile political closure.

This point matters for the present study because it helps refine the meaning of inclusion. Inclusion is not merely the absence of voting. It is the presence of meaningful participation. Where certain groups are present in form but weak in influence, the democratic process remains incomplete. The study therefore interprets consensus democracy critically, not romantically. Its historical forms may have been limited, but its underlying concern with accommodation and social legitimacy remains valuable.

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This also speaks directly to Nigeria's present condition as the modern state cannot draw from African traditional thought responsibly if it ignores questions of gender, minority protection, youth voice, and class power. A contemporary adaptation of consensus must be more self-conscious than some of its historical precedents. It must protect participation in a more explicit and institutional way. Without that, the appeal to tradition may become a cover for reproducing older exclusions under new language.

What follows from the discussion, then, is not a rejection of consensus democracy, but a more careful account of its promise. Its promise lies in reminding Nigeria that democracy should not be reduced to electoral arithmetic. It should also be judged by its ability to produce belonging, reduce hostility, and carry citizens along in the making of public decisions. That idea remains strongly connected to the objectives and research questions of this study. The findings and the discussion together show that African traditional thought still contains democratic resources that can enrich Nigeria's search for a more legitimate and culturally grounded political order.

Conclusion

The central issue examined in this study is not whether democracy is desirable in Nigeria, but whether the present form through which it operates has been able to respond to the country's deep social plurality, recurring exclusion, and weak sense of shared political belonging. The earlier sections of this work showed that the crisis of Nigerian democracy is tied

not only to electoral malpractice or institutional fragility, but also to the dominance of a political culture that rewards numerical victory more than deliberative inclusion. From that standpoint, the study set out to examine whether African traditional thought, especially its consensual orientation, offers a meaningful resource for Nigeria's political development.

What the study has shown is that consensus democracy remains important because it directs attention to a neglected democratic value, namely the need to carry people along in the making of binding public decisions. This concern runs through a number of recent reflections on African political thought. That point is significant for this study because it brings the argument away from nostalgia and into the problem of institutional relevance. The question is no longer whether traditional African societies valued consensus. The more pressing question is how the moral and political insight behind that value can help a state like Nigeria where democratic contest is often experienced as zero sum struggle.

The findings and discussion have already shown that consensus democracy should not be treated as a perfect system. It had its own limitations, especially where hierarchy shaped participation and where historical social conditions differ sharply from those of the present Nigerian state. Even so, the argument of this work remains that indigenous democratic thought should not be dismissed because it is historically distant. This is why the study concludes that consensus democracy is best understood as a

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corrective resource for Nigerian democracy, not as a total replacement for electoral politics. Its importance lies in the principles around it, especially deliberation, accommodation, representation beyond formal voting, and the reduction of permanent winners and permanent losers. These are principles that fit the communitarian framework adopted in the study and respond directly to the research question on whether African traditional thought can contribute to a more legitimate and culturally grounded political order in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The first recommendation of this study is that Nigeria should pursue constitutional and institutional reforms that reduce the winner takes all character of political competition. One practical implication is the creation of stronger power sharing arrangements in executive and legislative processes so that political defeat does not translate into complete exclusion.

The second recommendation is that public decision making at local, state, and national levels should include structured deliberative forums that bring communities, civic bodies, and interest groups into policy discussion before major decisions are finalised. This is important because one of the strengths of traditional consensus was the moral expectation that those affected by decisions should have a meaningful opportunity to speak. Such a recommendation is especially relevant to Nigeria where distrust often grows when policy appears distant from the people.

The final recommendation is that civic education in Nigeria should be expanded beyond electoral participation to include indigenous democratic values such as mutual recognition, dialogue, restraint in competition, and responsibility to the wider community. The current democratic culture often trains citizens to think of politics mainly as partisan struggle. A more grounded democratic orientation would help reframe politics as a shared civic practice. This recommendation follows naturally from the communitarian assumptions of the study, since democratic stability in plural societies depends not only on formal institutions but also on the values citizens bring into public life. Again, traditional institutions should not be ignored in democratic development, but they should also not be carried along and given roles that will see to aggregate cohesion of good governance.

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