



A Freirean Approach to Governance as Praxis Via Interculturality, Shared Authority, and the Democratic Crisis in Africa

Abstract

Democratic governance in culturally plural societies confronts a paradox regarding the locus of the authority as it is presumed to belonging to 'the people'. Where cultural, linguistic, and religious differences mark the polity, who authorises whom and on what grounds becomes democracy's central problem. This paradox is particularly acute in Africa, where three decades of multiparty constitutionalism have produced elections without accountability, constitutions without constitutionalism, and states whose formal democratic architecture coexists with exclusion, predation, and civic abandonment. This paper argued that Paulo Freire's concept of praxis, the iterative unity of reflection and transformative action, offers a resource for considering how shared authority is generated rather than merely distributed. Reading Freire alongside intercultural philosophy, particularly the critique of monological reason, it develops the concept of dialogical authorization which is authority becoming shared through sustained, reciprocal, structurally egalitarian communicative practice. Three claims follow and they are: First, Freire's pedagogy is best understood as a theory of democratic authorisation, in which the capacity to name the world is inseparable from the capacity to govern it. Second, the 'banking' model has a precise institutional analogue in the technocratic postcolonial African state, explaining much of the continent's democratic deficit. Third, Freirean praxis supplies the missing generative dimension in deliberative and intercultural democracy, which specify conditions of legitimacy but not how the capacities for it are produced, still less under conditions of material scarcity and external dependency. The paper addressed objections concerning vanguardism, the romanticisation of the oppressed, inattention to institutional design, and the charge that Freire's Latin American framework travels poorly. It concluded that shared authority is not a constitutional artefact but an educational achievement, and that democratic consolidation in Africa depends less on electoral engineering than on cultivating conscientização.

Keywords: Praxis, interculturality, democratic governance, shared authority, conscientização, pluralism.

Solomon Ojoka Ojomah

Department of Philosophy

Faculty of Arts

Federal University of Lafia

ORCID ID:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3042-0714>

07060782243

Corresponding Authors Email:

ojoka.ojomah@arts.fulafia.edu.ng

Date Received: 27th September, 2026

Date Accepted: 28th September, 2026

Introduction

It is a common notion that the authority of democratic government primarily belongs to the governed, though the governed, in terms of culture, are not always homogeneous but heterogeneous.

The vocabulary of popular sovereignty conceals this difficulty by positing a unified demos that exists prior to the institutions that claim to represent it. In societies shaped by histories of colonialism, internal migration, and the

ongoing politicisation of cultural difference, that imagined unity is precisely what cannot be assumed. Across Africa, this difficulty has assumed a distinctive and persistent dimension since the wave of democratisation that swept the continent between 1989 and 1995, most African states have adopted multiparty constitutions, regular elections, term limits, and formal bills of rights. Thus far, the results have been paradoxical: elections are held, but they frequently ratify rather than constrain power. As Fombad (2021) observes, “It is a paradox that the steady decline in the quality of African elections in the last decade has coincided with an increase in the number and frequency of elections on the continent” (p. 480). Constitutions are promulgated, but their provisions are often honoured in the breach rather than implemented in practice. Indeed, Fombad (2021) argues that “The non-implementation of constitutions lies at the heart of the failure of democracy and constitutionalism in Africa” (p. 491). Civil society may be vibrant and formally active; conversely, it often lacks sufficient institutional capacity to transform participation into meaningful constraints on state power. As Fombad further notes, the legislative and constitutional framework for sustainable democracy in Africa remains weak, while civil society is frequently “unable to mobilize to protect the laws, rules, and regulations that are in place” (2021, p. 463).

This paper approaches the African democratic crisis through an uncommon

union, it reads Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018), a text formed in the context of Brazilian literacy campaigns and the political struggles of Latin America, alongside the concerns of intercultural philosophy and African democratic theory. This combination is uncommon only at first glance, Freire’s central preoccupation, how the dispossessed come to name their world, and how naming becomes a form of power, speaks directly to the problem of authority in pluralistic polities and to the specifically African experience of a postcolonial state that was *named* by others and that continues to be governed through logics inherited from that naming.

The concept that systematises this argument is shared authority. By this is meant neither the delegation of authority by those who hold it nor the formal distribution of authority across institutional levels, but rather a condition in which authority is genuinely *co-authored*, that is, one in which those subject to decisions have participated in forming the premises on which those decisions rest. The argument of this essay is that shared authority, so understood, is neither a constitutional artefact nor a procedural guarantee, but an *achievement of praxis*: something that must be continually constituted, reconstituted, and sustained through practice. And it is an achievement that African polities have, for specific historical reasons, found extraordinarily difficult to realise.

Freire provides the theoretical tool for the aforementioned claim, his notion of *praxis*, defined in the *Pedagogy* as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2018, p. 51), is simultaneously a theory of knowledge, a theory of learning, and an implicit theory of politics. The notion of *conscientização*, which Freire describes as the “deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence” (2018, p. 109), names the process by which subordinate groups develop the capacity to perceive the structures that constrain them and to act upon that perception. Both notions, the essay argues, have direct bearing on the question of how authority is constituted in democratic societies and on why it has so often failed to be constituted appropriately in Africa.

The argument proceeds sequentially in the following order; the first section situates Freire within intercultural philosophy and African democratic theory, the second re-establishes Freirean praxis as a theory of authorisation instead of instruction, the third develops the concept of dialogical authorisation and specifies the conditions under which it occurs. In the fourth order, it diagnoses the African democratic crisis through the lens of banking governance. The fifth order of the argument considers objections to the Freirean approach, including charges of vanguardism, romanticisation, and the inapplicability of a Latin American framework to African conditions. In the sixth order of the argument, it draws implications for

constitutional design, civic education, and deliberative practice on the continent. While the seventh considers the Nigerian case in some detail, the eighth concludes the order of the arguments.

Freire in the History of Political Thought

Freire is predictably categorised as a philosopher of education, and his reception has accordingly been concentrated in the fields of pedagogy, adult literacy, and critical pedagogy. This categorisation, while it may seem accurate, is associated with certain limitations. It has meant that Freire’s political theory, his account of how power is constituted, reproduced, and potentially transformed, has been read primarily through pedagogical lenses, with the result that its implications for governance have been underexplored (Mayo, 1995, p. 363). It is worth noting that the political character of pedagogy was emphasised by Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, education is presented in terms that are unambiguously political: it is either “an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system” or “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women “deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Freire, 2018, p. 34). The choice between these alternatives is not merely pedagogical in any narrow sense; it is also a decision about how authority is constituted and who participates in its constitution.

Freire's political thinking was developed within a particular historical context.

Freire's work in the Brazilian Northeast in the early 1960s, his involvement in the literacy campaigns of the João Goulart government, his imprisonment following the 1964 coup, and his subsequent exile, first in Bolivia, then in Chile, and later in the United States and Switzerland, gave his thought a concrete and often bitter edge (Gadotti, 1994, pp. 27–56). His philosophy was not elaborated in the seminar room but in conditions of political repression and exile. This trajectory has an African dimension that is often overlooked. Freire spent part of his exile working with liberation movements in Lusophone Africa, advising on literacy programmes in Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe following their independence from Portugal. His *Pedagogy in Process* (1978) is a sustained reflection on this engagement and contains some of his most sober and self-critical writing, including his acknowledgement that pedagogical methods cannot simply be transplanted across contexts and that the material and political conditions of postcolonial Africa placed constraints on dialogical practice that his earlier work had not adequately recognised (Freire, 1978, pp. 14–37). The Africanisation of Freire is therefore not merely a speculative extension of his thought but also a return to a path that he himself had travelled.

Interculturality and the Politics of Naming

The question of naming is significant to both Freire and intercultural philosophy, and it is particularly relevant to the African political experience. In Freire's view, to name the world is to exercise a fundamental human capacity, while the denial of that capacity through the imposition of names by others constitutes a form of oppression. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he writes that "to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it" (Freire, 2018, p. 88).

The African postcolonial condition was established through precisely such an imposition of names. Colonial map-making created borders that divided existing political communities; colonial rule transformed ethnic groups into fixed categories that had not always been clearly defined previously; and colonial education imposed new languages and ways of thinking that marginalised or displaced local ones. The independent African state inherited these categories and, in many cases, reproduced them, not necessarily because postcolonial elites wished to perpetuate colonial forms of knowledge, but because the apparatus of government had been constructed to operate through them (Mudimbe, 1988, pp. 1–23; Mamdani, 1996, pp. 16–39).

Intercultural philosophy approaches the question of naming from a different perspective. Wimmer's (2004, pp. 67–89) critique of monological reason focuses, among other things, on the problem of

naming itself: the manner in which one tradition may impose its categories and standards upon others, thereby determining what counts as right or wrong. Wimmer proposes the alternative of the polylogue, understood as a form of communication in which different traditions are able to articulate and interpret their own worlds (Wimmer, 2002, pp. 51–70). This idea shares important affinities with Freire's work, even though the two thinkers developed their respective approaches independently and appear to have had little direct engagement with one another. This convergence suggests that the problem of naming has both pedagogical and political dimensions and that these dimensions are inseparable.

Stripping a group of the power to name its own world constitutes a double deprivation: it is simultaneously an educational and a political loss. Conversely, building the capacity to name one's world, which is precisely one of the aims of Freirean literacy education, represents both an educational accomplishment and an act of political empowerment. In Africa, where the naming and categorisation of the polity constituted a foundational dimension of the postcolonial state, this convergence is not merely an abstraction. It describes the actual terrain upon which democratic authority must be constructed.

Democracy and the Question of Authority

Democratic theory has long framed authority as a question of legitimacy: power is authoritative when it rests on the consent of those who are subject to it. How that consent is produced and expressed, however, has been continually contested. Liberal theorists locate it in representation and elections; deliberative theorists in participation in reasoned public discourse; and participatory theorists in direct engagement with the decisions that shape one's life (Pateman, 1970, pp. 22–44; Habermas, 1996, pp. 287–328; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, pp. 1–28). Despite their differences, these accounts rest on a shared premise: a distributional view of authority. Authority is treated as a good to be allocated, something citizens either hold or delegate, and something institutions either concentrate or disperse. The governing questions therefore become how much authority exists, who holds it, and through which mechanisms it is exercised.

This paper proposes a different framing, it argues that authority is not only distributed but also generated. Authority is brought into being through processes that either produce it or fail to do so. The authority of a democratic decision does not hinge merely on whether the appropriate procedures have been observed; it also depends on whether those involved possess the capacity to participate meaningfully and whether the process itself produces the shared

understanding that legitimate authority requires. It is precisely this generative dimension that Freire's notion of praxis brings into view, and precisely the dimension that African democratisation, conceived largely as an exercise in institutional transfer, has too often overlooked.

Freirean Praxis as a Theory of Authorisation

Freire's concept of praxis is explicitly dialectical. Praxis is neither action alone nor reflection alone, but their unity: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2018, p. 51). Each moment, considered in isolation, is deficient, action without reflection becomes mere activism, "action for action's sake", which Freire associates with a form of naïve and ultimately self-defeating politics. Reflection without action, by contrast, becomes mere verbalism that changes nothing (Freire, 2018, pp. 87–88).

The dialectical structure of praxis has significant implications for how authority is understood. Authority, understood through a Freirean conception of praxis, is not simply conferred through institutional fiat or procedural authorisation; it is continually constituted through the dialectical relationship between reflection and transformative action (Freire, 2018, p. 28). This constitutes a dynamic and provisional view of authority: it is perpetually in the making and can be undermined when the conditions that sustain it are withdrawn.

Freire's insistence on the unity of reflection and action also entails a critique of certain forms of political participation. Consultative exercises in which citizens are invited to reflect on decisions that have already been taken, but are given no meaningful power to alter them, fail the test of praxis: they offer reflection without action. Referenda can fail in the opposite way when citizens are required to act without adequate opportunities for reflection, particularly when complex questions are reduced to binary choices under conditions of information asymmetry. Praxis demands that reflection and action be genuinely integrated, so that understanding shapes intervention and intervention, in turn, reshapes understanding. Hence, central to the legitimacy of authority is the principle of accountability.

Bratton and Mattes (2000) approach democratic accountability chiefly through the prism of popular attitudes rather than institutional design. Drawing on Afrobarometer surveys of more than ten thousand respondents across six African countries, they find that Africans overwhelmingly endorse democracy and reject authoritarian alternatives (Bratton & Mattes, 2000, p. 1), and that they conceive of democracy predominantly in procedural terms, civil liberties, participation in decision-making, and voting, rather than as socioeconomic transformation, with almost seven in ten positive definitions referring to political procedures (p. 3). Crucially, they argue that support for democracy rests on both

intrinsic and instrumental foundations: satisfaction with democracy declines when citizens are dissatisfied with the content and consequences of official economic policy (p. 23). From this, they draw an explicitly accountability-centred conclusion: while democracy “puts in place the procedures for holding state elites accountable”, and responsive governments should prove “relatively more effective at alleviating equity concerns”, the very survival of these infant democracies “requires that elected leaders attend closely to the popular demand for social justice” (p. 23). Accountability, on this account, is not exhausted by the holding of elections; it is sustained only where elected leaders remain responsive to citizens' substantive demands.

Conscientização and the Emergence of Political Capacity

The concept of *conscientização* is Freire's term for the process through which the oppressed develop critical awareness of their situation. The term is often translated as ‘critical consciousness’, but this translation loses something important. *Conscientização* is not a state but an activity; not a possession but a process. Freire describes it as the “deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence” (2018, p. 109), and elsewhere as the process through which human beings “not only make their presence felt in the world but become conscious of their presence” (Freire, 2018, p. 110).

Crucially, *conscientização* is not the achievement of individual enlightenment but the product of collective engagement. It arises through dialogue and through encounters with others who share one's circumstances but may perceive them differently. This is why culture circles, Freire's preferred pedagogical form, in which people come together to discuss issues arising from their own lives, are not merely one component of his approach but constitute its core. The circle is a space in which participants develop a shared understanding and, through that process, cultivate the capacity to work together towards common goals. The political implications are immediate, if *conscientização* is the process through which subordinate groups acquire the capacity to perceive and act upon their circumstances, then it is also the process through which they acquire the capacity to exercise authority. A group that understands its situation and acts upon it is already, in a meaningful sense, claiming authority over its own life. Shared authority in a democratic polity, on this view, presupposes a citizenry that has undergone something akin to *conscientização* and has developed the critical capacities that meaningful participation requires.

Citizens have frequently experienced the postcolonial state not as an extension of their collective agency but as an alien power, one that extracts, regulates, and disciplines without inviting participation. Institutions of African constitutionalism

may, on the surface, presuppose a citizenry ready to claim authority as a right, however such a disposition can emerge only from the political counterpart of the culture circle: spaces in which ordinary people interrogate the structures that govern their lives and discover, through dialogue, that those structures are neither natural nor immutable. Seen in this light, the continent's indigenous traditions, exemplified by the village assembly across several African societies, are not relics to be mourned but resources of precisely this kind.

Problematicization and the Rejection of Deposits

Freire's critique of the banking model of education is well known, but comparatively little attention has been given to its broader implications. In the banking model, the educator 'deposits' knowledge in passive students, who receive, memorise, and reproduce it. The relationship is hierarchical, monological, and fundamentally anti-dialogical (Freire, 2018, pp. 72–75). Against this, Freire proposes problem-posing education, in which the object of study is not a fact to be transmitted but a problem to be posed, and in which the educator and the educated engage together in a process of inquiry.

The banking model's structure is not specific to education, it represents a general form of relationship characterised by a one-directional flow of authority from the active to the passive, from the

knowing to the ignorant, and from the directing to the directed. Freire traces this structure through a series of binary oppositions that structure oppressive relations: the teacher knows, while the students do not; the teacher thinks, while the students are thought about; the teacher chooses, while the students comply; and the teacher acts, while the students have the illusion of acting through the teacher's action (Freire, 2018, pp. 73–74). What is significant for the present argument is that these binaries can be transposed almost directly into the register of governance.

Banking Governance and the Eclipse of Shared Authority in Africa

The argument now turns to the institutional form that Freire's banking model assumes when it leaves the classroom and enters the apparatus of the state. Banking governance may be understood as a mode of governing in which decision-making resembles the 'banking' model: authorities formulate and deposit solutions into a relatively passive public, which is expected primarily to receive, accept, and reproduce them rather than participate in their critical formulation (Freire, 2018, pp. 72–73). The logic has several recognisable features. The state, or the relevant agency, is conceived as the locus of knowledge and competence; citizens are conceived as recipients of policy, whose needs must be diagnosed by experts and whose compliance must be secured. Communication is predominantly one-directional: from the institution to the

public through announcements, campaigns, and propaganda. Feedback loops, where they exist, are designed to measure compliance rather than enable participation. Where consultation occurs, it typically takes place after the substance of the decision has already been determined.

This logic is not confined to authoritarian regimes, in many democratic states, it is a common way in which government agencies operate, especially in areas where specialised knowledge is regarded as particularly important, such as public health, infrastructure, monetary policy, and, more recently, climate policy. Even when a country as a whole is democratic, specific government departments can function in ways that are far from democratic. In Africa, however, banking governance has a particular genealogy that makes it especially tenacious. The bureaucratic apparatus of the postcolonial state was inherited, largely intact, from colonial administration. Colonial administration was not designed to be dialogical. It was designed to extract, regulate, and secure compliance. By construction, it was a system of rule in which the governed were objects rather than participants. Independence changed the personnel of that apparatus and, in some places, changed it only partially but it did not fundamentally alter its orientation. The state that took over the machinery of colonial administration inherited its operating logic along with it (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 37–61; Cooper, 2002, pp. 156–180).

The Structural Deficits of African Democracy

The colonial inheritance helps to explain several features of the African democratic crisis that purely institutional accounts struggle to comprehend. First is the coexistence of elections with low accountability. African elections have become increasingly regular, but regular electoral competition has not consistently produced alternation in power. Incumbency advantages remain substantial, while some presidents have sought to prolong their tenure through constitutional amendments, reinterpretations of term limits, and institutional mechanisms involving courts and other state bodies (Cheeseman, 2010, pp. 139–142; Tull & Simons, 2017, pp. 81–88). Where citizens experience the state as an external power rather than as an extension of their own agency, they may vote, but they are less likely to demand responsiveness. The banking relationship between ruler and ruled therefore persists beneath the democratic façade.

Second is the dominance of the ‘big man’ and patron–client politics. Where conscientização has not developed, political competition is organised around personalist patronage rather than issues or programmes. The citizen is addressed as a client who receives benefits rather than as a co-author who participates in decisions. This is banking governance in its most elaborate form: the patron ‘knows’, the client ‘receives’, and the illusion of participation is preserved

through the ritual of the rally and the distribution of largesse (Chabal & Daloz, 1999, pp. 30–60).

Genuinely dialogical public spheres require, at a minimum, that participants can speak to one another across differences and that their claims be assessed on their merits. Where the state monopolises broadcasting, where opposition media are precarious, and where civil society derives its resources externally rather than from its own members, the conditions for dialogical authorisation are absent. Consultation replaces deliberation; the state's own account of the public interest stands in for a publicly reasoned one (Gyimah-Boadi, 2004, pp. 92–118).

Fourth is the recurrence of constitutional revision without constitutional deepening. African constitutions are frequently rewritten, so frequently that constitutional instability has been identified as a distinct pathology. However such rewriting typically involves elite negotiation under the shadow of the executive rather than a polylogical process. Constitutions are replaced, but constitutionalism does not necessarily take root. The constitutional order can therefore assume a 'banking' character when elites formulate constitutional arrangements and citizens are positioned primarily as passive recipients rather than as active co-authors of the authority under which they are governed (Ojukwu, 2016, p. 81; Prempeh, 2007, pp. 473–475).

Conscientização Interrupted

Banking governance has a specific effect on the development of political capacity. Where governance is conducted in the banking mode, citizens are denied the practice through which conscientização is achieved. They are not invited to problematise the issues that affect them; instead, they are presented with problems that have already been defined and solutions that have already been determined. The consequence is a kind of arrested development: citizens remain in the state of 'semi-intransitivity' that Freire describes as characteristic of those whose consciousness is dominated by a reality they perceive as immutable (Freire, 2018, pp. 105–107).

This diagnosis helps to explain an apparent paradox in African politics: the coexistence of democratic institutions with widespread civic disengagement and low political efficacy. Where engagement is not practised, the capacity for engagement fails to develop. When citizens are systematically addressed as recipients of policy rather than as its co-authors, they may reasonably conclude that their participation counts for nothing. Such a conclusion reflects not a deficiency of civic character but a rational response to the way institutions have been designed.

Expertise, Dependency, and the Denial of Authority

Banking governance often justifies itself by appealing to expertise. Complex problems, it is argued, require specialised

knowledge; to insist on broad participation is to risk decisions that are uninformed or demagogic. The argument is not without force, and it would be a mistake to deny that expertise has a role in governance. Conversely, appeals to expertise can function as a denial of authority rather than as a specification of competence. There is a difference between saying that a particular technical determination requires specialised knowledge and saying that the entire framing of a policy problem is the exclusive province of experts.

In the African context, this distinction has an additional dimension: the expertise invoked is often external, derived from international financial institutions, donor agencies, and foreign consultants. Consequently, the denial of citizen authority is compounded by a denial of national authority. The structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s, which reorganised African economies according to formulas negotiated between governments and lenders without meaningful public deliberation, remain a paradigmatic instance of banking governance on a continental scale (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999, pp. 15–46).

Freire's account of dialogue offers a way of thinking about how this might be otherwise. In problem-posing education, the educator brings specialised knowledge to the dialogue but does not thereby monopolise it; the educator's knowledge becomes a resource for

common inquiry rather than a deposit to be received. Translated into the sphere of governance, this suggests an ideal role for expertise. Whether domestic or foreign, expertise ought to function as an epistemic resource for democratic deliberation rather than as a substitute for democratic judgement. Its proper role is to inform citizens, clarify the range of available evidence and possibilities, and thereby enhance their capacity for reasoned collective judgement. This conception accords with Pearse's (2020) argument that the role of experts is "simply to inform and enlighten, to create conditions in which lay participants can improve their judgements" (p. 574).

Objections and Replies

The Vanguardism Objection

Freirean pedagogy has been criticised for harbouring a vanguardist logic. The charge, in its sharpest form, holds that the theory requires a revolutionary leadership that has achieved conscientização on behalf of the oppressed and that this leadership inevitably substitutes its own judgement for that of the people it claims to serve (Elias, 1994, pp. 97–120; Facundo, 1984, pp. 45–67). The charge is not baseless, since Freire's early work sometimes speaks of revolutionary leadership in terms that suggest a vanguard role. Nonetheless, his mature formulation of dialogue in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* explicitly forecloses vanguardism. Dialogue, Freire insists, requires that revolutionary leadership "not consider itself the owner of the revolutionary process" but engage with the oppressed

as co-authors rather than as beneficiaries of liberation (Freire, 2018, pp. 128–130).

In Africa, the vanguardist temptation has been historically powerful. Former liberation movements have sometimes equated their historical legitimacy with popular will, resisting electoral defeat and political alternation. As Melber (2009) observes, liberation movements in government can come to regard themselves as having reached an “‘end of history’”, such that “any political alternative that does not emerge from within them will not be acceptable” (p. 453). More pointedly, he notes that former liberation movements may show “no inclination in any circumstances to vacate the centres of political power” even when an electorate votes for an alternative (p. 455). The Freirean framework supplies resources for resisting this temptation, and the route is precisely the one Freire insists upon: leadership must not consider itself the owner of the process. Liberation is not delivered; it is co-authored.

The Romanticisation Objection

A second objection holds that Freire romanticises the oppressed, treating ‘the oppressed’ as a unified and epistemically privileged subject. Critics have pointed out that the oppressed are not always virtuous, that oppression can produce complicity and cruelty, and that the category itself may conceal profound differences among those it encompasses (Weiler, 1991, pp. 44–72). Freire himself recognised this tension. He acknowledges that the oppressed can be ‘hospitable’ to

the oppressor's consciousness and that they may internalise the logic of domination and reproduce it (Freire, 2018, pp. 45–48). His point is not that the oppressed are morally superior but that they occupy a distinctive *epistemic* position: their experience of domination gives them access to a dimension of reality that those who dominate may not easily perceive. This is a claim about situated knowledge, not about moral virtue.

The objection nonetheless has implications for democratic authorisation. If ‘the people’ do not constitute a unity, then shared authority cannot mean the unproblematic fusion of a single popular will. It means, rather, the ongoing negotiation of differences within the polity—a polylogue, in Wimmer's terms, rather than a monologue of the popular. Freirean dialogism, properly understood, is compatible with this more differentiated conception, since dialogue presupposes difference rather than unity. In Africa, where ethnicity, religion, language, and region intersect in endlessly varied ways, the multiplication of difference is not an anomaly but the baseline condition of political life.

The Institutional Neglect Objection

A third objection holds that Freire's framework is insufficiently attentive to institutional design. It offers a compelling account of dialogical practice but says little about the constitutional and administrative forms through which such practice might be sustained at scale. This

objection is fair as a description of Freire's own work, which is stronger on the pedagogy of transformation than on the architecture of transformed institutions. However, it is less an objection to the framework than a specification of what remains to be done. Freire supplies an account of how authority is generated; the institutional design literature supplies an account of how generative practices might be stabilised. The two are therefore complementary rather than competing. Africanists have contributed substantially to the second literature—on federalism, power-sharing, and consociationalism—but have drawn less extensively on the first. The generative dimension therefore remains the missing half.

The Transferability Objection

A fourth objection is significant because it concerns the application of Freire's thought to Africa. The objection holds that such an application risks committing a fallacy of faulty transfer: the act of transferring a conclusion or model from one context to another without establishing the relevant similarities between them. Freire's approach was developed in response to particular conditions in Latin America, including widespread underdevelopment, and therefore cannot simply be applied to African contexts without critical adaptation. This objection takes several forms. On the one hand, it points out that African societies are more varied and complex than the relatively specific Brazilian rural communities with which Freire initially worked. On the other hand,

it argues that Freire's ideas were shaped in part by liberation theology, which is rooted in Christian thought, and that these ideas may not readily fit a region in which Islam and indigenous religions are as significant as Christianity. Furthermore, it has been argued that the concept of *conscientização* depends upon a particular conception of the human subject; one centred on an individual who is literate and oriented towards individual agency which may not be common or universal across all cultures.

These objections have some force, but Freire's later work, particularly *Pedagogy in Process* (1978), demonstrates a greater sensitivity to contextual difference. Reflecting on his work in Guinea-Bissau, Freire explicitly rejected the mechanical transplantation of pedagogical models, arguing that “experiments cannot be transplanted; they must be reinvented” (p. 5). He further insisted that experiences from one context must be “explained, discussed and critically understood” before being recreated in another (p. 65). Moreover, African intellectuals have undertaken considerable work of adaptation. The traditions of *ujamaa* in Tanzania, African socialism in its various forms, and the anti-colonial thought of Cabral, Nyerere, and Fanon have affinities with Freirean praxis that subsequent scholarship has developed productively (Cabral, 1979, pp. 119–152; Nyerere, 1968, pp. 1–20). Freire did not claim universality for his method; rather, he argued that it could be adapted to different contexts. The African

adaptations that already exist provide evidence that such adaptation is possible.

Implications for Africa

Constitutional Design and Constitutionalism

The argument has implications for how constitutions are created and, perhaps more importantly, how they are formed through participatory processes. If shared authority has its source in praxis, then moments of constitution-making are not merely occasions for writing down rules; they are opportunities to develop the capacities required for effective democratic governance. A constitution developed through meaningful citizen participation is more likely to acquire public ownership and legitimacy than one whose substance is determined primarily by political elites or technical experts (Negretto, 2020, p. 207). This is not a call for a permanent constitutional convention. Rather, it involves viewing constitution-making as a learning process in which participants develop the skills and dispositions necessary for the kind of democratic society that the new constitution is intended to establish.

The Freirean insight is that participation is not merely an opportunity to demonstrate what citizens already know; it is also a means of developing the capacities required for democratic self-government. In cases where African countries have adopted more participatory approaches, such as South Africa's constitutional consultations in the 1990s and some Nigerian National

Conference processes, participation has contributed to broader public engagement with constitutional questions. Conversely, where such processes are absent, even constitutions that are formally enforceable may lack substantive public influence and meaning. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether a constitution contains appropriate institutional provisions but whether citizens have participated in the processes through which those provisions acquire democratic significance.

Civic Education

The argument also has implications for civic education. If democratic governance depends on citizens capable of dialogical authorisation, then the cultivation of those capacities is a public responsibility. Freire's culture circles offer one model: small groups organised around problems drawn from participants' own lives, in which the capacities to name, reflect, and act are developed through practice.

Contemporary civic education in much of Africa, by contrast, is often oriented towards the transmission of information: the content of constitutions, the mechanics of elections, and the history of institutions. This represents banking education applied to citizenship. It produces citizens who know about democracy without necessarily having practised it. A Freirean civic education would instead be organised around the practice of deliberation itself, treating the classroom, the school, and the community as sites in which shared

authority is rehearsed and developed. It would also engage seriously with the continent's own deliberative traditions rather than treating them merely as backward survivals of pre-modern politics.

Deliberative Practice

Finally, the argument suggests reforms to deliberative practice in governance. The four conditions of dialogical authorisation—reciprocity of speech and hearing, problematisation of the shared world, non-monopolisation of reason, and the unity of reflection and action—provide criteria for evaluating deliberative exercises.

Applied to common African practices, these criteria are demanding. A public hearing in which citizens are permitted three minutes to express pre-formed positions, after which officials withdraw to deliberate and decide, fails to satisfy the fourth condition. A consultation in which the framing of the problem is fixed in advance fails to satisfy the second. A deliberative forum conducted in a language that some participants do not command fails to satisfy the first. The criteria are therefore not satisfied by the mere existence of participatory mechanisms; they require attention to the quality of participation that those mechanisms enable.

The Nigerian Case

Nigeria offers an unusually demanding context for theories of democratic authority in Africa. Its deep ethno-

linguistic, religious, and regional diversity is compounded by persistent horizontal inequalities (McCauley & Heffron, 2022, p. 1). The federal character principle represents one institutional response to this pluralism, seeking to ensure that public institutions reflect Nigeria's "linguistic, ethnic, religious, and geographic diversity" (Adamolekun *et al.*, 1991, p. 75).

These institutional arrangements demonstrate a desire to share political power, but they often operate through negotiations among relatively small groups of political elites rather than through sustained public deliberation. The distribution of federal positions takes account of different ethnic and regional groups but does not necessarily bring citizens together to deliberate on what those positions should accomplish or how office-holders should be held accountable. Rotational presidency arrangements may move political power among leaders from different regions without necessarily strengthening the public's capacity to scrutinise or constrain those leaders. Nigeria's federal system, therefore, does not fully constitute a conversation among multiple voices; rather, it often operates as a form of power-sharing organised around group representation, without generating the sustained deliberation required for shared authority.

The Freirean diagnosis suggests why this matters. Nigeria's recurrent crises of legitimacy, periodic waves of agitation for restructuring, ongoing insurgency in

northern Nigeria, sectarian violence in the Middle Belt, and secessionist agitation in the Southeast should not be understood solely as failures of constitutional engineering. They can also be understood as symptoms of an underdeveloped conscientização: a citizenry that has frequently been governed through deposits rather than dialogue and that has consequently developed forms of political expression that bypass, rather than engage with, the institutions of the state.

What a Freirean approach would recommend is not necessarily a new constitution but a sustained practice of civic education and deliberative engagement at the local level, conducted in languages that citizens actually speak and addressing problems that they themselves identify. Nigeria's own traditions of village assembly, age-grade governance, and community meetings held under the tree constitute resources for precisely this kind of practice. The task, therefore, is not simply to import democracy but to recover and strengthen dialogical capacities that are already present and to build democratic institutions upon them.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Freire's concept of praxis offers a significant and underexploited resource for theorising democratic governance in culturally plural societies and that it speaks with particular force to the contemporary African democratic crisis. Its contribution

is to provide a *generative* account of authority: an account of how authority comes to be shared through practice rather than merely how it is distributed through institutions.

The central concept developed here is dialogical authorisation. Shared authority, on this view, is not simply a constitutional artefact or a procedural guarantee. It is an achievement of praxis, produced through reciprocal communication in which participants retain the capacity to name, reflect, and act together. Four conditions have been specified: reciprocity of speech and hearing, problematisation of the shared world, the non-monopolisation of reason, and the unity of reflection and action.

These conditions are demanding, and their violation is common, not least in the bureaucratic forms of governance that Freire's critique of the banking model enables us to diagnose. The African postcolonial state inherited an apparatus of rule designed for compliance rather than dialogue, and that inheritance continues to shape relationships between governors and governed across the continent. Banking governance denies citizens the practice through which political capacity is developed, with the consequence that democratic institutions may coexist with civic incapacity. The remedy, therefore, is not simply more participation but better participation: participation structured in ways that develop the capacities it requires.

The limitations of this argument should also be acknowledged. It is a work of theoretical synthesis and has not tested its claims against empirical cases in the detail that they would require. Whether dialogical authorisation can be realised at scale under conditions of severe inequality, cultural difference, and external dependency is a question that can be answered only through practice. The argument of this article is that the question is worth asking, that Freire supplies the conceptual vocabulary for asking it, and that the answer may be closer than some pessimistic assessments of the continent's democratic prospects suggest, in the continent's own traditions of deliberative engagement, which the crisis of the postcolonial state has obscured but not extinguished.

References

- Adamolekun, L., Erero, J., & Oshionebo, B. (1991). "Federal character" and management of the federal civil service and the military. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 21(4), 75-88. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.pubjof.a037980>.
- Bratton, M., & Mattes, R. (2000). *Democratic and market reforms in Africa: What "the people" say* (Afrobarometer Paper No. 5).
- Cabral, A. (1979). *Unity and struggle: Speeches and writings*. Monthly Review Press.
- Chabal, P., & Daloz, J.-P. (1999). *Africa works: Disorder as political instrument*. James Currey.
- Cheeseman, N. (2010). African elections as vehicles for change. *Journal of Democracy*, 21(4), 139-153.
- Cooper, F. (2002). *Africa since 1940: The past of the present*. Cambridge University Press.
- Elias, J. L. (1994). *Paulo Freire: Pedagogue of liberation*. Krieger Publishing.
- Facundo, B. (1984). *Freire-inspired programs in the United States and Puerto Rico: A critical evaluation*. Latino Institute.
- Fombad, C. M. (2021). Reversing the surging tide towards authoritarian democracy in Africa. In C. M. Fombad & N. Steytler (Eds.), *Democracy, elections, and constitutionalism in Africa* (pp. 463-518). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192894779.003.0017>
- Freire, P. (1978). *Pedagogy in process: The letters to Guinea-Bissau* (C. St. John Hunter, Trans.). Continuum.
- Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (50th anniversary ed., M. Bergman Ramos, Trans.). Bloomsbury Academic. (Original work published 1970).
- Gadotti, M. (1994). *Reading Paulo Freire: His life and work* (J. Milton, Trans.). State University of New York Press.
- Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. (2004). *Why deliberative democracy?* Princeton University Press.
- Gyimah-Boadi, E. (2004). Civil society and democratic development. In E. Gyimah-Boadi (Ed.), *Democratic reform in Africa: The quality of progress* (pp. 92-118). Lynne Rienner.

- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy* (W. Rehg, Trans.). MIT Press.
- Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton University Press.
- Mayo, P. (1995). Critical literacy and emancipatory politics: The work of Paulo Freire. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 15(4), 363–379. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0738-0593\(95\)00021-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0738-0593(95)00021-T)
- McCauley, J. F., & Heffron, L. (2022). *Ethnic inequality, the federal character principle, and the reform of Nigeria's presidential federalism*. UNU-WIDER Working Paper 2022/113. United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research.
- Melber, H. (2009). Southern African liberation movements as governments and the limits to liberation. *Review of African Political Economy*, 36(121), 451–459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056240903211190>.
- Mkandawire, T., & Soludo, C. C. (1999). *Our continent, our future: African perspectives on structural adjustment*. Africa World Press.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. (1988). *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge*. Indiana University Press.
- Negretto, G. L. (2020). Constitution-making and liberal democracy: The role of citizens and representative elites. *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 18(1), 206–232. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/moaa015>.
- Nyerere, J. K. (1968). *Ujamaa: Essays on socialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Ojukwu, C. C. (2016). Jonathan's constitutional conference in Nigeria: A reflection and a radical critique. *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 8(1), 75–84.
- Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation and democratic theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pearse, H. (2020). Deliberation, citizen science and COVID-19. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(3), 571–577. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12869>
- Prempeh, H. K. (2007). Africa's "constitutionalism revival": False start or new dawn? *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 5(3), 469–506. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/mom016>
- Tull, D. M., & Simons, C. (2017). The institutionalization of power revisited: Presidential term limits in Africa. *Africa Spectrum*, 52(2), 77–102.
- Weiler, K. (1991). Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference. *Harvard Educational Review*, 61(4), 449–474.
- Wimmer, F. M. (2002). *Essays on intercultural philosophy*. Satya Nilayam Publications.
- Wimmer, F. M. (2004). *Interkulturelle Philosophie: Eine Einführung*. Facultas.