

THE REFLECTION OF PLATO'S IDEAL SOCIETY IN THE TRADITIONAL - POLITICAL SYSTEM OF THE BEMBA PEOPLE OF ZAMBIA.

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Abstract: This article intends to demonstrate that throughout his career, Plato was deeply concerned with a range of political problems for which he is commonly not given credit. Basically, we shall argue that Plato was serious about implementing the ideal state outlined in the Republic, and that in his works we find a realistic assessment of the political obstacles that stood in the way of establishing it. However, not only is Plato frequently not cited for exploring these questions, but often, when his ideas along these lines are examined, they are discussed in a superficial fashion, while an increasing number of commentators has set about to dismiss them altogether. And so the task here is to show that in Plato's analysis of the question of implementing the ideal state can be found a political side to his political theory that is frequently overlooked, and what is more, that in his treatment of these questions Plato touches upon fundamental political truths, basic to any theory of radical reform.

Keywords: Ideal, Political, Philosophy Reflection, Society

Introduction

Man is naturally a social and political being. Plato is among many thinkers that are in agreement with this attribute of man who lives with and among others in a particular society. Plato's society is a natural institution where people live, and this society requires a governance system which at the same time determines its quality. Plato argues that there is a logical structure that constitutes the relationship between individuals and the State. In his dialogue '*The Republic*', he states that "the best way to understand the just State is to analyze the nature of its citizens". Thus, Plato's political writings and theories aimed at emphasizing the view that every kind of civil strife could be ended by a good governance system, and to describe and justify such a system was one of his focal aims. The issue of governance calls for rulers to be in charge of the affairs of the society. With this perception, this article discusses Plato's 'ideal society' as it is reflected in the Bemba society. The ideal society theory can be used as a mirror to see through the socio-political life of the Bemba people of Northern Zambia. This is done by critically reflecting on Plato's political thoughts such as; (i) *justice* linked with the principle of specialization whereby each individual does the function he is best suited, either naturally or through appropriate education, (ii) *philosopher-king* theory; which allows only capable and competent rulers to be in charge because they are endowed with the knowledge of the 'Good', 'Happiness and 'Justice'.

Plato's Political Philosophy

Plato's political theory is closely connected to his theories of morality and knowledge in the sense that he sees the different classes of people in the State being reflected in the soul of an individual. For him, the different types of States, with their characteristic virtues and vices, are analogous to different types of people, also with their virtues and vices. Such that everything individuals are and have, come from the society. He affirms that "the only way people can assert and distinguish themselves is through excellent performance of a public duty (Ophir, 1991)." Plato's view is that an individual and the State are one, reflecting each other. In this regard, he holds that "the State is like a giant person with the perception that the stability of both the State and the person is analyzed in terms of whether the classes or parts are performing their functions well and have the proper relationships to one another (*Rep.* II, 368e)." When this occurs, justice of the State is achieved. This justice is regarded as a general virtue of the moral person, which at the same time characterizes the good society. Hence his conception that, "analyzing the nature of the State leads to an understanding of the just person, leading further to the understanding of what justice means both in the person and in the State (Rachael, 2006).

Plato's proposals concerning the implementation of the ideal state have been interpreted in a variety of ways through the years. To begin with, it seems that the traditional view, advanced in many familiar works on Plato's political theory and in many of the standard studies on other aspects of his thought as well, is that Plato is serious about implementing his ideal state, and though he does not have any great hopes that it will ever be realized, he does not think that it is absolutely impossible. This would seem to be the most obvious position on the question, since, as we shall see, this is basically what Plato says on the matter in the Republic itself, and the following scholars can be numbered among those holding this general view (which we can call the "traditional" view): Nettleship, Cornford, Barker, Sinclair and Raeder.'

However, none of these authors goes into the matter in much detail or carries his analysis much beyond the specific claims advanced by Plato in his fullest discussion of this problem, in Republic V-VI (473-502). It seems to me that there is a context, a series of basic themes in Plato's political thought, in light of which this important section of the Republic must be interpreted. Because this context has been generally overlooked in traditional interpretations of this question, we find these accounts unsatisfactory. Moreover, it seems to me that the traditional view, as it has been traditionally expounded, is unable to offer an adequate response to scholars who contest this position, which, it seems, an increasing number has been doing. (For convenience, we can refer to their view as the "revisionist" view.) What I think can be shown is that if properly fleshed out and elaborated in light of the appropriate context in Plato's works, the traditional view is basically correct, and that modern "revisionist" interpretations of Plato's ideal state are based on various misconstrues of the Republic.

Those scholars we call "revisionists" believe that the Republic is not meant to contain practical political proposals, that Plato is not really serious about implementing the ideal state. They argue for this position on two basic grounds: (a) the apparent structure of the argument in the Republic; and (b) the wild impracticality of many of Plato's suggestions for his ideal state. These objections can be discussed in turn, though we shall see that the questions raised by (b) are far more interesting than those centering on (a), and cut right to the heart of Plato's political theory. To begin with (a), there can be no question but that the Republic is, at least ostensibly, a discussion of justice, and that this discussion informs the structure of the work. Glaucon and Adeimantus open Book II by demanding to be told the nature of justice and that it "pays", and it is in order to satisfy their demands that Socrates raises the question of the ideal state. Because justice in the city is easier to discern than justice in the soul, Socrates' strategy is to discuss the latter by means of the former (368c-369a). And so, because the Republic is an inquiry into the nature of justice, and it is ostensibly only to further this inquiry that the subject of the ideal state is raised, commentators have argued that Plato is not completely serious about the Republic's political proposals, that the theme of the Republic is justice, not political reorganization. We believe that this argument is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. To begin with, it seems somewhat strained to argue that a given Platonic dialogue must have one theme, and so that because no other theme is the theme of the work, that these other themes are not to be taken completely seriously. Plato is notorious for not compartmentalizing the topics discussed in the different dialogues. To give the clearest example, the Gorgias is not about either rhetoric or the moral life, but about both. And in the Gorgias, as so often in the dialogues, Plato's discussion of one of his themes works to broaden and deepen his treatment of the others. This kind of reciprocal enhancement is basic to Plato's technique.

According to Plato, an individual comes logically prior to the State. People have different needs such that the reflection of their needs is the origin of the State. In his conception, "a city comes to be because none of us is self-sufficient, but we all need many things (*Rep.* II, 369b)." Therefore, it suffices to say that human needs require many skills. However, there is no individual person who possesses all the skills required to satisfy all his needs. The harmonization of this comes as a result of division of labour, whereby every individual does at the right time what he is naturally fitted, so that there is more production because the work is easily and better done. In this way, Alban Winspear agrees with the platonic position that "the State comes into being for the sake of life, and it exists for the sake of the Good Life" (Winspear, 1956).

From the above analysis, we notice that the relationship between an individual and the State becomes apparent. The basis is that the three classes in the State are an extension of the three parts of the soul. Accordingly, Plato mentions three classes of people in the State as; the Artisans, the Guardians and the Rulers. In relation to the human soul, Gerasimos Santas writes that "for Plato, the Artisans as a class, is the lowest part of the soul, represents the appetites. The Guardians embody the spirited element of the soul, while the highest class, the Rulers, represents the rational element" (Santas, 2010).

Theory of Ideal Society

Among the central themes of Plato's political theory is the concept of the 'ideal society' (Reeve 1988). For him, a society becomes ideal only if competent people are in charge. Reeve affirms Plato's belief that "competence is the qualification for authority. The ruler of the State should be the one who has the peculiar abilities to fulfill that function, (Reeve, 1988)." Mostly, stability of the society is disturbed when leadership issues are not handled well. Therefore, the rational element must be in control. This entails that in the individual, reason should take charge while in the State, the educated whom he calls the 'Philosopher-King' should rule. To describe Plato's Philosopher-King, Reeve writes:

The Philosopher-King is the one who has been fully educated and has come to understand the difference between the visible world and the intelligible world, between the realm of opinion and the realm of knowledge, between appearance and reality. He is one whose education has led him, step by step, through the ascending degrees of knowledge of the Divided Line until at last he has knowledge of the Good, that synoptic vision of the interrelation of all truths to each other. To reach this point, the Philosopher-King would have progressed through many stages of education, (Reeve, 1988).

When Plato talks about this issue concerning the philosophers' attitude towards ruling, his argument is that "they are specially and well qualified to rule because they have a single goal in their life. This goal is for everyone to aim at in doing everything that one does in private or in public life" (*Rep.* VII, 519c).

The Philosopher-King is one capable of undertaking the task of governing the State for it to emerge as an ideal one. An ideal society is realized if philosophers become kings or kings become philosophers, and establish a perfect education system. This is Plato's imaginative vision with an ideal society foreseen in it. Given that justice and the well-being of the State depend on the ruler; it is imperative that the ruler, the Philosopher-King comes close to the knowledge of the 'Good' by harmonizing his other virtues of temperance, courage and wisdom which also shape his character.

Consequently, an ideal society is characterized by the following:

a) Justice

The theme of justice cannot be separated from the discussion on the ideal society. The definition of justice is supported by the analogy of the soul and the State, such that the nature of justice therefore would consist in the purpose of living in cities; this purpose is to enable people with different skills to supply each other's needs by an appropriate division of labour. Ideally, "if people were to be content with the satisfaction of their basic needs, a very simple community would suffice" (Kenny, 2004).

With this view, justice becomes an essential component of happiness such that it turns out to be impossible for a person to be really happy without being just. This follows then that in a just society every citizen and every class does that for which they are most suited, and there is harmony among the classes of people. In the same line of thought, John Rawls, in his discussion on the role of justice, holds that "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, hence, justice is a virtue of the society, designed to make all its members as happy as possible" (Rawls, 1999)."

b) Happiness

Both Socrates and Plato explain their views about how a man should live by referring to what benefits him or what contributes to his happiness. For instance, the Socratic teaching holds that "happiness comes from goodness, from having a good self, and it cannot just happen, it is chosen....we are responsible for our own happiness, we always seek our own good and not our own harm. We always seek happiness." (Kreeft, 2003) Additionally, the notion that morality is what promotes happiness of the agent is supported by both Socrates and Plato.

Happiness is attained through the virtues of temperance which requires endurance of the soul, and fortitude which requires an agreement of its parts, as the conditions aimed at it. This happiness concerns the complete soul and can

be analogously found in the State. To support this claim, Irwin holds that “happiness is a result of a just order realized in the just State in which everyone does his own that he is naturally fitted” (Irwin,1977).

Furthermore, Plato upholds that “the closer you are to being completely just, the closer you are to being really happy, and the further you are from being completely just, the further you are from being really happy” (*Rep.* I, 354a). Therefore, a completely good virtuous society is one that really satisfies the needs and desires of its members, thereby ensuring that they are as happy as possible.

c) Good Life

Plato’s absolutism describes the ‘Good’ to be even greater than justice. This perception holds that “goodness cannot be defined like justice, because it is infinite, like absolute perfection” (Bloom, 1968).According to Plato “the Good is something greater than the virtues, and a complete account of virtues must relate them to it” (*Rep.* IV).With this definition of the ‘Good’, something is beneficial depending on its contribution to the ‘Good’. So individual ‘goods’ require knowledge of the Absolute or Final Good and are known to be so through their contribution to the ‘Absolute Good’ (McCabe, 2005).

Basically, in Books I and II of the *Republic*, the ‘Good’ is understood as that which a man is concerned for his own good and would choose it for itself.

Therefore, Good Life is as a result of human virtue which consists in excellence and moderation. This view goes back to the idea of every individual performing well his characteristic activities of being human, as Socrates puts it that “a good man is considered as such when he has an excellence and does well his characteristic activity of living,” (*Rep.* I. 353e). As man lives, he directs all his desires towards the Final Good; his intentional actions are aimed at this ‘Good’ that he pursues – thus leading a ‘Good Life’.

Therefore, the above description of an ideal society characterized by justice, happiness and Good Life, reveals that a good and just person is one who moderates his virtues and as a result is a happy person.

Bemba Identity

Firstly, we look at some relevant information about the Bemba people for our preliminary understanding of who they are. We are often referring to the ‘Bemba society’ as ‘*uluBemba*’, the ‘Bemba people’ as ‘*abaBemba*’ and ‘*being Bemba*’ as ‘*ubuBemba*’ as is the obvious case in the *Zambian* context.

Who are the *abaBemba*? This term denotes the name of the ethnic group and it has a binomial arrangement: *aba* + *Bemba*. The first part, *aba-*, is a grammatical morpheme. This morpheme, or its variant *ba-*, is a plural prefix that, in this instance and similar ones, distinguishes the inhabitants of a country or members of an ethnic group, (Schoeffler & Madan, 1907). The second part, *-bemba*, is a lexical morpheme. This morpheme is the base word that has the following semantic value: ‘a water body’ in general or a ‘lake’ or ‘ocean’ in particular. Therefore, ‘*abaBemba*’ means ‘the water people’ or, by semantic extension, ‘the people ruled by water-aligned clans’ (Schoeffler & Madan, 1907). For this reason, the water bodies in the Bemba society known as ‘*uluBemba*’ and the statecraft of *uluBemba* are highly spiritual. The Bemba statecraft is sacral kingship (*mulopwe*) which is anchored on the belief that it is God who rules *uluBemba* through Bemba kings. The paramount Chief of the Bemba is known as Chitimukulu, and he is the supreme king (*mulopwe* par excellence) of *uluBemba*.

The language of the Bemba people is *IciBemba*, while the Bemba identity is called *ubuBemba*. They are predominantly found in Zambia though there are also a small number of them in the Katanga Region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The core of *uluBemba* is in Northern and Muchinga Provinces of Zambia. Traditionally, the Bemba people are the ‘natives’ of the entire Tanganyika Plateau, marked by Lake Tanganyika in the north, Lake Mweru in the west, Lake Bangweulu in the south, and Muchinga Escarpment in the east. This is the land between the southern latitudes 8° to 13° and eastern longitudes 29° to 33°.

According to the 2010 Population Census of Zambia the Bemba people are the largest ethnic group in Zambia and the language (*IciBemba*) is used by half of Zambians as the primary language of communication in both rural and

urban areas. In five of the ten provinces of Zambia, the Bemba people are the majority statistically. The Bemba cultural outlook permeates the Zambian national beliefs and values.

The Bemba Political Society

Bemba as a political society has got a governance system like any other. At the top of its leadership is the Paramount Chief Chitimukulu who appoints all the rest of the Bemba chiefs in consultation and sitting with his cabinet (*Bashi-Lubemba*). Bemba council grievance mechanism has the following levels;

- (i) The village committee
- (ii) Combined villages' cluster known as '*ulucebu*'.
- (iii) Chiefs' traditional council called '*incenje*'.
- (iv) The *Ilamfya* supreme council of the royal family.

These levels and the people involved work together to form the political governance system of the entire Bemba kingdom. This leadership system calls for each class to remain in their place for peaceful and harmonious ruling in *uluBemba* for it to be regarded as an ideal society in platonic sense.

Traditionally, the royal government of the Bemba society or *uluBemba* is a theocracy characterized by sacral kingship or *ubulopwe*. The Chitimukulu is a sacral king or, in the language of early anthropologists, a divine king, (Audrey, 1968). As noted earlier, the Bemba people call sacral kingship *ubulopwe* and the sacral king, *Mulopwe*. There are over eighty hereditary officials who support the sacral kingship of the Chitimukulu.

With the foregoing councilors or *bakabilo*, the Chitimukulu is able to exercise his political, economic and religious functions. The ideal Bemba king, as evidenced by historical accounts, is one who has three salient characteristics, these are courage, wisdom and generosity. Tanguy explains that:

The ideal Bemba King has three major characteristics: 1) *umukali*, one who rules with firmness; 2) *uwamano*, one who displays wisdom in his judgment and conduct; and 3) *uwabupe*, one who is generous with material goods. The past kings who are praised for their firmness (*ubukali*) are those who authoritatively punished the enemies of the kingdom and those Bemba people who displayed abnormal behaviours: some were killed; some were sold into slavery; some were mutilated by the removal of eyes or the cutting off of hands, noses, or breasts; or a combination of these, (Tanguy, 1948).

In the same line of thought, Cordrington writes that, What the Bemba people valued as firmness was often perceived by visitors as 'cruelty'. The past kings who are praised for their wisdom (*amano*) are those who judged cases fairly, judged situations with appreciable discernment, or those who were able to intelligently navigate a difficult situation. The past kings who were praised for their generosity (*ubupe*) are those who helped their people with food and goods. A person that went to the palace to pay homage on a king would always come back with something of value: a gourd of beer, meat, fish, salt, clothes, and many other gifts, (Cordrington, 1900).

Interpretation and Application of Plato's Theory

There are political concepts from Plato's political thoughts, which are clearly reflected in the Bemba political society, beginning with the virtues in so far as they can be perceived as fundamental factors and pillars of a political society. For instance, the discussion on the theory of justice is so pertinent to any attempt to emphasize the reflection of Plato's 'ideal State' theory in the Bemba traditional-political society.

Following this interpretation, we see that Plato's view proposes the existence of an appropriate virtue for each thing that has a function, and characterizes the appropriate virtue of a thing with a function as that by which it performs its function well, and its vice that by which it performs it poorly, (*Rep.* I.353b-c). Thus, the Bemba society reflects this reality in the way the virtues of wisdom, courage and temperance are embodied in justice and are all upheld in the governance system

For example, the Bemba definition of ‘wisdom’ seems to be close to the view that rulers need to have knowledge of the common good in order to govern well, and for Plato, this knowledge of the good is possible only for the elite, the few talented and highly educated individuals called philosopher-kings. In the same way, courage is understood as the quality that enables the society to defend itself well, with the assumption that not all of the members of the society defend it or can defend it equally well, but specifies that courage must reside in those individual members who are best suited by inborn ability and appropriate education to defend the society well. With this position, Plato justifies the implication that the control of the military class or soldiers by the rulers of the society is indispensable because “the courage of the soldiers is directed by the wisdom of the rulers,” (*Rep.* IV. 430d-432b).

With regards to the virtue of temperance, Socrates made it clear that in individuals, temperance combines self-mastery and inner psychic harmony (*Rep.* V, 432a). This notion assumes that the human mind or soul has at least two parts, one of which can be in control of the other. However, the mastery of one over the other must be harmonious. This same concept is vivid in the Bemba political society whereby each part or group of people is to remain in its position without interference of any kind. This entails that in this society, temperance is taken as the (society’s) virtue, whereby one part of the society must control the other(s), and that part must be superior or better than the other(s), and yet the control must be harmonious. The same control in question must be political, meaning a control of ruling. This therefore entails that the better part must be the rulers since they have another virtue (wisdom) that is relevant to ruling well. This therefore can be interpreted that the inferior part (in the sense of ruling) comprises of the soldiers and the artisan classes; and the harmony in question must be agreement among all three classes that those with the inborn talents, appropriate education, and the virtue of wisdom, are the best at ruling, (Reeve, 1988). We see an indication of this kind of specialization in the Bemba society where not everyone can ascend to the royal throne and the traditional leadership qualifications are very specific on this. The emphasis is that each citizen performs that social function which he or she is best suited by nature and education, bearing in mind the three main social functions of citizens in the society which are; provision, defending and ruling the society.

Therefore, in relation to the Bemba society, this theory is reflected at points when it is so organized that those of high intelligence and with appropriate education, as far as their possession of its traditions is concerned, are assigned to rule, those of high spirit (and appropriate education) take the role of defending, and those of artisan abilities (and appropriate education) to provide for the society. This is the full definition of the just society which at the same time envisions the reality of an ideal society.

Bemba as an Ideal Society

The Ruler: The Philosopher-King

Another concept that reflects Plato’s ideal society theory in the Bemba political society is that of the ‘Philosopher-King’. The first premise towards this reflection of this reality in platonic terms is; “unless philosophers become kings or those now called kings and rulers genuinely and adequately philosophize, political power and philosophy are merged, realization of an ideal society is impossible” (Reeve, 1988).

Key in this process of realization of an ideal society is the proper identification of a philosopher-king, one capable of ruling, one with adequate or appropriate (Bemba traditional) education. This points to the criteria used to identify and choose heirs to the throne. This process of identification calls for the right composition of persons who form the Bemba Royal Establishment as the body mandated to do this work, as well as competent candidates vying for royal thrones. It is through education in the Bemba context that such candidates are scrutinized to see whether they have what it takes to preserve *uluBemba* as an ideal society by executing leadership duties for the good of the people and not for their own personal gains.

Furthermore, the identification of the (Bemba) philosopher-king lies in his name ‘philosopher – lover of wisdom’. As noted earlier, one of the major characteristics of an ideal Bemba king is *uwamano* – one who possesses wisdom, and displays it in his judgment and conduct, one capable of judging cases fairly, judging situations with appreciable discernment, as well as one who is able to intelligently navigate a difficult situation. In the Bemba concepts of judgment, such a one can only be a philosopher-king, a lover of true wisdom as opposed to lovers of opinion. The philosopher-king’s desire is focused solely on wisdom and truth; it is not interested in the pleasures of the body or

those of personal gains like making money, becoming popular and the like. One who uplifts people's search for happiness and common good.

Accordingly, in this work, agreeing with Plato's conception, in the society the virtues of wisdom, courage and temperance culminate in justice and all of them function in the people. This is to ensure that their particular practical activities effectively establish the political community as a whole, that productive work is put to "good use," and that the three "classes" work together, as well as separately. This therefore assures that each does its own in the fullest possible sense, avoiding "interference" but promotes stability that results into harmony in the whole society. This harmony is the basis for happiness and the common good. This clearly shows that happiness and common good are attainable with the help of virtues.

Conclusion

Plato's political thoughts are reflected in and applicable to the Bemba traditional-political system with emphasis on his 'ideal State' theory linked with discussions on virtues (wisdom, courage, temperance and justice) and the concepts of happiness and common good in so far as they contribute to the reality of an ideal society. These concepts apply relevantly if they originate as ideas in the minds of philosopher-kings, who are capable of executing leadership skills with competence and appropriate education. Until now, the election or appointment of any Bemba chief depends on qualifications which confirm Plato's notion that "some people are born to rule, while others are born to be ruled". Not everyone can become a King or Chief in the Bemba kingdom, except those qualified and belonging to the Bemba Royal Family.

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