Edmund Burke and Contemporary Nigerian Politics: Tradition, Reform, and the Limits of Revolutionary Change

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ABSTRACT

This article applied the political philosophy of **Edmund Burke** to African political theory, with a specific focus on contemporary Nigerian politics. Burke's skepticism towards abstract rights, radical egalitarianism, and revolutionary change offers valuable insights into postcolonial governance challenges in Africa. The paper discovered that despite the relevance of Burke's political thoughts, that it has a problem regarding its applicability, moral foundation and the potential for perpetuating injustice. By applying phenomenological method, the paper found out that by emphasizing tradition, gradual reform, moral law, and constitutional continuity, Burke provided a framework for understanding Nigeria's persistent struggles with state legitimacy, democratic instability, ethnic pluralism, and institutional weakness. The paper therefore argued that many African political crises stem not from insufficient reform, but from reforms detached from indigenous social realities and historical continuity and concludes that by framing democracy as care, Burke's conservatism unexpectedly converges with African political thought, offering a model of governance rooted in responsibility rather than radical autonomy.

Keywords: Edmund Burke, Nigeria, African political theory, democracy, tradition, reform

INTRODUCTION

African Politics and the Crisis of Political Meaning

Postcolonial African states, including **Nigeria**, continue to confront profound political challenges: weak institutions, contested legitimacy, ethnic fragmentation, constitutional instability, and recurring demands for radical reform. Despite repeated democratic transitions and constitutional experiments, political stability remains elusive.

This enduring instability has led scholars such as Claude Ake to argue that Africa's crisis is not merely institutional but philosophical—a crisis of political meaning. States exist legally, yet lack moral legitimacy. Citizens obey laws instrumentally rather than loyally.

Burke raised a similar concern in eighteenth-century Europe. Writing against the **French Revolution**, he warned that societies attempting to rebuild themselves on abstract principles inevitably destroy the moral foundations that make political order possible. His famous assertion that society is a "partnership not only of the living, but of the dead and the unborn" captures a conservative vision strikingly relevant to African political realities.

African political systems, largely inherited from colonial rule, struggle because they remain detached from indigenous norms, moral authority, and social structures. Burke's philosophy provides a language for articulating why these disconnections persist—and why reform has often failed.

Burke, Tradition, and African Political Thought

African political theory is deeply rooted in **communalism, tradition, moral obligation, and continuity**. Precolonial African societies did not conceive politics as a contractual bargain among autonomous individuals, but as a moral system embedded in kinship, religion, and custom.

Thinkers such as **Kwasi Wiredu** and **John Mbiti** emphasize that African societies understood personhood relationally. Mbiti's famous dictum— *"I am because we are"*—echoes Burke's rejection of atomistic individualism.

Burke's conception of society as an **organic inheritance** resonates powerfully with African worldviews. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he writes:

"We fear God; we look up with awe to kings; with affection to parliaments; with duty to magistrates; with reverence to priests; and with respect to nobility."

Though written in a European context, this reverence for inherited authority mirrors African respect for elders, chiefs, and sacred institutions.

Both Burkean conservatism and African political philosophy reject the idea that political legitimacy can be engineered overnight.

The Social Contract and the Nigerian State

Burke rejected the Enlightenment conception of the social contract as a temporary agreement revocable at will. For him, the social contract was **sacred, moral, and intergenerational**.

Nigeria's constitutional history—1960, 1963, 1979, 1999—reveals repeated ruptures rather than continuity. Military interventions suspended constitutions, dismantled institutions, and re-imposed political order through force.

From a Burkean standpoint, this pattern explains Nigeria's weak constitutional culture. Citizens obey the constitution legally but not morally. There is little sense of constitutional reverence.

Burke warned explicitly against this danger:

"A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation."

Nigeria has pursued **change without conservation**, producing constitutions that lack historical depth and popular attachment.

Democracy, Representation, and Political Elites in Nigeria

Burke supported representation, but not populism. His model of the representative as a **trustee**, not a delegate, is particularly relevant to Nigeria's democratic experience.

Nigeria's elections are often characterized by:

- Ethnic mobilization
- Vote-buying
- Elite recycling
- Weak ideological differentiation

Burke warned that democracy without virtue degenerates into demagoguery. In Nigeria, political elites frequently appeal to ethnic and religious sentiments rather than national interest, reinforcing division.

Burke's theory suggests that Nigeria's problem is not democracy per se, but the **absence of morally grounded leadership**.

Equality, Hierarchy, and Merit in African Contexts

In the political thought of Edmund Burke, equality was not understood as abstract sameness but as moral equality under a framework of differentiated social roles. Burke rejected ideological egalitarianism that sought to flatten

inherited institutions in the name of rational symmetry. For him, hierarchy was not inherently unjust; rather, it was a natural feature of social organization — provided it was restrained by moral duty and reciprocal obligation.

Hierarchy as Moral Reciprocity in African Societies

Many precolonial African societies institutionalized structured hierarchies through:

- **Eldership systems**, where age conferred authority grounded in wisdom and communal responsibility.
- **Age-grade institutions**, which organized civic duties, security, and communal development across generational lines.
- **Chieftaincy and kingship systems**, where rulers were custodians of tradition, land, and spiritual legitimacy — not merely wielders of coercive power.

These structures often operated as reciprocal moral systems. Authority implied obligation. A chief who ruled unjustly risked ritual sanction, removal, or loss of legitimacy. Elders were custodians of memory and mediation, not autonomous despots. In this sense, hierarchy functioned less as domination and more as ordered responsibility embedded within communal life.

Confronting the Critique: When Hierarchy Becomes Oppression

However, a serious engagement with African political history must also acknowledge that not all hierarchies were benign. Some institutional arrangements reinforced:

- **Gender hierarchies** that excluded women from formal political authority or property rights in certain societies.
- **Systems of slavery**, both domestic and trans-Saharan, that commodified human beings.
- **Caste-like distinctions**, particularly in some West African societies, where occupational or lineage groups faced inherited social limitations.

To romanticize all precolonial hierarchy as purely reciprocal would be historically inaccurate. While many systems contained internal mechanisms of accountability, others entrenched inequality in ways that cannot be morally defended today.

This is precisely where Burke's concept of *prudence* becomes relevant.

Prudence as a Standard for Reform

For Burke, prudence was the highest political virtue — the disciplined judgment that weighs history, experience, and moral consequence before instituting change. Prudence rejects two extremes:

1. **Abstract egalitarianism**, which seeks to erase inherited structures without regard for social cohesion.
2. **Blind traditionalism**, which defends every inherited practice simply because it exists.

A Burkean approach to African hierarchy would therefore ask:

- Does this tradition sustain social trust and responsibility?
- Does authority remain tied to moral obligation?
- Does the structure enhance human dignity or undermine it?

Traditions that foster communal solidarity, intergenerational responsibility, and accountable leadership may merit preservation and adaptation. Traditions that institutionalize injustice, deny basic dignity, or entrench arbitrary exclusion require reform — but reform carried out gradually, with respect for continuity and social stability.

Prudence does not mean passivity. It means reform that grows organically from within a society's moral imagination rather than being imposed through ideological abstraction.

Nigeria's Federal Uniformity and Political Abstraction

Nigeria's centralized federal structure attempts to impose uniform constitutional equality across regions with deep historical, economic, and cultural asymmetries. From a Burkean perspective, such uniformity risks becoming political abstraction — treating unequal social realities as though they were identical.

True justice, in this view, lies not in mechanical sameness but in prudent governance that acknowledges historical difference while promoting fairness and dignity

Toward a Balanced Vision

A Burkean reading of African political tradition therefore offers neither nostalgic restoration nor radical demolition. It offers a framework for discernment:

- Preserve what sustains communal moral order.
- Reform what contradicts human dignity.
- Avoid ideological shortcuts that destabilize fragile social fabrics.

Equality, then, is not the denial of hierarchy but the moral regulation of it. And merit, properly understood, arises when authority is tied to responsibility, competence, and service — not merely inheritance.

Such a framework strengthens the argument by showing that conservatism, rightly understood, is not an uncritical defense of all tradition. It is a disciplined commitment to reform through continuity, guided by prudence rather than abstraction.

Human Rights, Universalism, and Cultural Legitimacy

In his critique of the Reflections on the Revolution in France, Edmund Burke rejected the abstract language of the "rights of man" when severed from history, custom, and inherited institutions. He did not deny human dignity; rather, he insisted that rights gain practical force and legitimacy only when embodied in law, tradition, and concrete social arrangements.

Applied to Nigeria, this perspective does not require rejecting universal human rights norms. Instead, it calls for contextualization—translating rights into forms that resonate with Nigeria's plural legal and moral order, which includes statutory law, customary law, and Islamic law.

Below are concrete illustrations of what such contextualization might look like in practice.

The Right to Property and Communal Land Tenure

The Tension

Modern constitutional rights discourse typically frames property as an individual entitlement. Yet across many Nigerian communities, land is historically held communally—by lineage, village, or traditional authority. The legal framework under the Land Use Act already reflects a hybrid model: ultimate title vested in the state (through governors), but customary interests recognized in practice.

Contextualization in Practice

A Burkean approach would not abruptly abolish communal tenure in the name of individual property rights. Instead, it would:

- Recognize communal ownership as a legitimate form of property, not as an archaic obstacle to modernization.
- Strengthen documentation of communal claims to reduce elite capture and arbitrary dispossession.
- Introduce gradual reforms allowing voluntary individual titling within communities, rather than compulsory fragmentation.

- Ensure compensation regimes for compulsory acquisition reflect both individual and collective loss.

For example:

- In oil-producing communities, rather than treating compensation solely as a payout to titled individuals, governance structures could route benefits through accountable community trusts.
- In urbanizing peri-urban areas, customary authorities could be integrated into formal land registries to prevent informal dispossession.

Here, the "right to property" is not denied—but expressed through the moral and historical structure of communal tenure.

Burkean prudence would ask: What reforms protect security and dignity without dissolving the social fabric that gives land its meaning?

Freedom of Religion and Islamic Law in Northern Nigeria

The Tension

Nigeria constitutionally protects freedom of religion, yet several northern states apply aspects of Islamic law in personal and, in some cases, criminal matters. This creates friction between universalist rights claims and religious autonomy.

Contextualization in Practice

A Burkean middle ground would involve layered accommodation:

1. Voluntary Jurisdiction:Islamic courts could exercise jurisdiction primarily over Muslims who voluntarily submit to them, especially in personal law (marriage, inheritance).
2. Minority Protection: non-Muslims must retain clear access to secular courts without coercion or discrimination.
3. Procedural Safe guards: Even within Islamic courts, procedural rights (fair hearing, legal representation, appeal) should align with constitutional guarantees.
4. Gradual Harmonization: Rather than confrontational federal overrides, constitutional courts could incrementally harmonize areas where fundamental rights conflicts arise.

In this model, freedom of religion is neither absolute nor suppressed. It is mediated through institutional safeguards that protect minorities while respecting majority religious commitments.

Burkean prudence would resist both:

- Radical secular homogenization, and
- Theocratic absolutism.

Instead, it would favor negotiated balance and incremental refinement.

Policing, Protest, and Public Order

Recent tensions surrounding protest movements (for example, during nationwide anti-policing demonstrations) highlight another dilemma: the right to assembly versus the state's duty to maintain order.

A contextualized approach would include:

- Recognizing protest as legitimate political expression.
- Structuring protest regulations around public safety rather than prior suppression.
- Reforming policing institutions through training and oversight mechanisms rather than episodic crackdowns or wholesale dismantling.

In Burkean terms, authority must be strong enough to maintain order—but morally credible enough to command obedience.

Rights endure when institutions are trusted.

What Would Burkean "Prudence" Recommend?

Across these examples, prudence implies:

1. Gradualism over rupture – Reform institutions step by step.
2. Moral authority over coercive imposition – Secure buy-in from traditional and religious leaders.
3. Institutional continuity – Build upon existing structures rather than replacing them wholesale.
4. Context-sensitive universalism – Accept universal principles while allowing culturally embedded expressions.

Prudence asks not, "Is this right abstractly pure?" but "Will this reform preserve order, dignity, and social trust?"

Limitations of the Burkean Framework in Postcolonial Contexts

A serious objection arises in postcolonial societies like Nigeria: tradition itself was reshaped, distorted, and sometimes invented under colonial rule. Appeals to "custom" may mask:

- Colonial-era administrative distortions,
- Elite capture of chieftaincy institutions,
- Politically motivated reinventions of religious or ethnic norms.

In such contexts, simply deferring to "tradition" can entrench injustice.

Moreover, some customary practices may conflict sharply with contemporary understandings of gender equality, minority rights, or democratic participation.

A Self-Reflective Burkean Response

However, Burke's thought contains internal correctives:

- He emphasized reform through moral reasoning, not blind obedience to precedent.
- He supported gradual correction of abuses within inherited systems.
- He warned against power exercised without moral responsibility.

Thus, a Burkean approach in Nigeria would require:

- Historical scrutiny of what counts as "authentic" tradition.
- Democratic participation in defining customary legitimacy.
- Measured reform of traditions that undermine human dignity.

In other words, tradition is not immune from critique—but critique should aim at renewal rather than destruction.

Human rights in Nigeria need not be framed as a choice between abstract universalism and rigid traditionalism. A Burkean lens suggests a third path:

- Rights are universal in aspiration,
- Legitimate in practice only when institutionally embedded,
- Sustainable when adapted to moral and cultural realities.

In plural societies, durability—not ideological purity—is often the truest test of justice.

Religion, Moral Law, and Political Authority

Religion remains central to African political life. Burke insisted that political authority collapses when separated from moral law.

Nigeria's crises—corruption, insecurity, electoral violence—reflect not only institutional failure but moral decay.

Burke argued:

"Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites."

This insight is repeatedly cited in contemporary African political ethics.

Protest, #EndSARS, and the Limits of Revolutionary Politics

The **End SARS** protests revealed deep moral outrage against state violence. Burke would have recognized the legitimacy of grievance but warned against revolutionary momentum detached from institutional reform.

The aftermath of #EndSARS—violence, repression, unresolved reform—confirms Burke's warning that moral passion without structure can destabilize reform.

Federalism, Decentralization, and Burkean Localism

Edmund Burke believed that liberty is best preserved not by abstract constitutional declarations alone, but by a dense network of local institutions—parishes, guilds, municipalities, and provincial bodies—that mediate between the individual and the state. These "little platoons," as he famously described them in Reflections on the Revolution in France, cultivate civic virtue and serve as buffers against centralized tyranny.

From this perspective, federalism is not merely a legal arrangement dividing powers on paper. It is an organic system in which authority grows from below, reflecting historical communities, moral loyalties, and practical realities.

Nigeria's Centralization Problem

Although Nigeria is formally federal, significant powers remain concentrated at the center:

- Control of policing and internal security
- Dominance over mineral resources
- Fiscal centralization through revenue allocation

- Uniform regulatory structures across diverse regions

This over-centralization contrasts sharply with both Burkean localism and many precolonial African political traditions, where authority was layered and diffused through:

- Village councils
- Eldership systems
- Age-grade associations
- Chieftaincy and emirate structures

In many of these systems, power was reciprocal and accountable at the local level. Governance was embedded in community life rather than administered from a distant capital.

Organic vs. Mechanical Federalism

A Burkean understanding distinguishes between:

Mechanical federalism

- Constitutionally declared but administratively centralized
- Uniform policies imposed across diverse cultural and economic regions
- Weak local autonomy in practice

Organic federalism

- Rooted in historical communities
- Responsive to local customs and economic structures
- Empowering of subnational institutions as genuine decision-makers

In Nigeria's case, organic federalism would mean more than constitutional rhetoric. It would require structural adjustments that allow states and local governments to act as meaningful political communities rather than administrative outposts.

Practical Applications of Burkean Federalism in Nigeria

Security and Policing

Nigeria's centralized policing structure often struggles with local intelligence and trust deficits. A Burkean model would recommend:

- State or regional policing systems accountable to local populations
- Community-based security structures integrated into formal oversight frameworks
- Safeguards against abuse through judicial and constitutional checks

The aim would not be fragmentation, but responsiveness. Security institutions gain legitimacy when communities see themselves reflected in them.

Fiscal Federalism

Revenue allocation heavily favors the federal center, particularly regarding oil resources. Organic federalism would encourage:

- Greater derivation principles for resource-producing regions
- State-level taxation authority expansion
- Incentives for internally generated revenue

This aligns political responsibility with fiscal responsibility. Burkean prudence warns that dependency breeds instability; self-governing units must also be financially empowered.

Cultural and Educational Autonomy

Uniform national policies often overlook regional educational, linguistic, and cultural differences. A more decentralized approach would allow:

- Curriculum flexibility reflecting local history and traditions
- Greater state-level authority over education management
- Cultural preservation within a national framework

Unity, in this model, is preserved not by sameness but by structured diversity.

Federalism as Moral Architecture

For Burke, political institutions are not merely instruments of administration; they are moral architectures that shape civic character. When governance is too centralized:

- Citizens become distant from decision-making
- Political responsibility shifts upward
- Local initiative weakens

But when authority is layered and proximate:

- Accountability strengthens
- Civic participation deepens
- Political conflict is diffused across multiple levels rather than concentrated at the center

Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity makes this diffusion particularly important. Decentralization reduces the "winner-takes-all" stakes of national elections and channels competition into manageable arenas.

Burkean Prudence and the Limits of Decentralization

However, Burkean localism does not imply unchecked regional autonomy. Prudence requires:

- A strong constitutional framework protecting minority rights within states
- National courts capable of resolving intergovernmental disputes
- Gradual reforms rather than abrupt restructuring

Decentralization must not entrench local tyranny or reproduce inequality at subnational levels.

Thus, true federalism is a balance:

- Strong enough center to preserve unity and rights
- Strong enough local institutions to preserve liberty and legitimac

From a Burkean lens, federalism is not simply a structural formula—it is an expression of historical continuity, moral responsibility, and social trust.

Nigeria's challenge is not whether to be federal in name, but whether to cultivate federalism as a lived political culture: one where authority flows upward from communities rather than downward from a distant center.

Such a transformation would align both with Burkean political thought and with many indigenous African traditions of layered, reciprocal governance.

Burkean Conservatism as an African Reform Strategy (Summary Expansion)

In the thought of Edmund Burke, reform is not the destruction of inherited order but its preservation through careful improvement. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he argued that a state without the means of change lacks the means of its own conservation. Reform, therefore, is not revolutionary rupture but prudent correction.

Applied to Nigeria, a Burkean approach would emphasize:

- Incremental constitutional amendment rather than wholesale constitutional replacement. This means addressing structural weaknesses step by step—fiscal federalism, state policing, local autonomy—without destabilizing national cohesion.
- Strengthening traditional institutions such as chieftaincy councils and community-based governance structures, integrating them responsibly into modern democratic frameworks rather than sidelining them as relics of the past.

- Moral renewal in leadership, rooted in accountability, public virtue, and service. For Burke, political authority is a moral trust, not merely a legal mandate. Leadership reform must therefore be ethical as well as institutional.
- Decentralized governance, reducing overconcentration of power at the center and empowering states and local communities to respond to their unique social realities.

Such an approach aligns closely with African political pragmatism—historically adaptive, community-oriented, and experience-based—rather than imported ideological blueprints that prioritize abstract theory over lived social complexity.

In this sense, Burkean conservatism offers Nigeria not stagnation, but disciplined, culturally grounded reform: change that strengthens continuity rather than fractures it.

CONCLUSION

Burke's political philosophy provides African political theory with a powerful diagnostic tool. Nigeria's crisis is not a lack of ideas but a loss of continuity, moral authority, and historical grounding.

Sustainable democracy, Burke reminds us, is **cultivated—not constructed**. To state that *sustainable democracy is cultivated rather than constructed* is to strike at the very heart of **Edmund Burke**'s political philosophy. Burke rejected the notion that political systems could be rationally designed and successfully imposed through abstract reasoning alone. For him, democracy was not a mechanical arrangement of institutions, but a living moral order that grows gradually within a society's historical, cultural, and ethical soil.

Burke's opposition to the idea of political "construction" stemmed from his skepticism toward Enlightenment rationalism. He believed that human reason, though valuable, is limited and prone to arrogance when detached from historical experience. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke famously warned against the "armed doctrine" that seeks to remake society according to theoretical blueprints. Political orders born of such abstraction, he argued, lack moral depth and social legitimacy and are therefore inherently unstable.

Cultivation, in Burke's understanding, implies **time, patience, inheritance, and restraint**. Just as a farmer does not manufacture crops but nurtures them through careful stewardship, political leaders cannot manufacture democracy through constitutions, elections, or declarations alone. These instruments matter, but only insofar as they are supported by pre-existing moral habits, social trust, and institutional memory.

Applied to **Nigeria**, this insight helps explain why repeated democratic transitions have failed to deliver stable governance. Nigeria has constructed democratic institutions—constitutions, legislatures, courts, and electoral bodies—but has struggled to cultivate the moral and cultural conditions that allow these institutions to function effectively. Electoral competition often exists without democratic virtue; constitutional rights are proclaimed without corresponding civic responsibility; and political participation is mobilized without a shared sense of national purpose.

Burke insisted that liberty cannot survive without moral discipline. His assertion that *"men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites"* underscores a fundamental truth: democracy collapses when citizens and leaders alike lack self-restraint. In Nigeria, democratic breakdowns frequently occur not because institutions are absent, but because political actors exploit them without ethical constraint.

Cultivated democracy also depends on **continuity**. Burke viewed society as a partnership between generations, and political stability as the product of accumulated wisdom. Nigeria's frequent constitutional ruptures, military interruptions, and radical reform agendas have disrupted this continuity. Each political reset weakens institutional memory and erodes public trust, making democracy appear provisional rather than enduring.

Furthermore, cultivation emphasizes **local adaptation**. Burke opposed uniform political models imposed without regard for social context. Democracy must reflect the customs, values, and lived experiences of a people. Nigeria's diversity—ethnic, religious, and cultural—requires a democratic practice that grows from plural

traditions rather than suppresses them under centralized abstraction. Federalism, customary institutions, and community-based governance are therefore not obstacles to democracy but essential nutrients for its growth.

In this sense, Burke offers a profound corrective to postcolonial political engineering in Africa. Democracy cannot be imported fully formed, nor sustained through legalism alone. It must be cultivated through ethical leadership, civic education, respect for tradition, and gradual institutional reform. Where these conditions are absent, democracy becomes fragile—procedural rather than substantive, legal rather than legitimate.

Ultimately, to cultivate democracy is to accept that political development is **slow, imperfect, and generational**. Burke reminds us that stability is achieved not by revolutionary acceleration, but by prudent reform rooted in history. For Nigeria, this means shifting the focus from constructing democratic forms to nurturing democratic character—within institutions, leaders, and citizens alike.

Sustainable democracy, therefore, is not an act of invention. It is an act of care. To conceive sustainable democracy as an act of care rather than an act of invention is to fundamentally reject the technocratic and revolutionary assumptions that have shaped much of modern political reform. In the thought of Edmund Burke, political order is not the product of sudden insight or rational design, but the outcome of long-term stewardship exercised over inherited institutions, moral habits, and social relationships.

Invention implies novelty, rupture, and mastery. It assumes that political life can be redesigned at will, that societies are malleable materials awaiting the application of superior reason. Burke regarded this assumption as both intellectually arrogant and politically dangerous. He argued that when political actors treat society as a blank slate, they inevitably destroy the subtle moral ecosystems that sustain order, legitimacy, and trust. Care, by contrast, assumes fragility, limitation, and responsibility. It acknowledges that political institutions are vulnerable achievements that require constant attention, moral discipline, and intergenerational loyalty.

For Burke, care is inseparable from prudence, the highest political virtue. Prudence restrains ambition, tempers idealism, and insists that reform be guided by experience rather than abstract theory. A caring democracy does not pursue perfection; it seeks preservation through improvement. This is why Burke insisted that reform must proceed slowly, respecting inherited practices even while correcting their abuses. Democracy, in this sense, survives not by eliminating its imperfections through radical reconstruction, but by managing them through patient adjustment.

Applied to Nigeria, the language of care offers a powerful reinterpretation of democratic failure and possibility. Nigeria has repeatedly attempted to invent democracy through constitutional drafting, electoral redesign, and institutional proliferation. Yet these efforts have often neglected the quieter, more demanding work of care: cultivating ethical leadership, strengthening civic trust, nurturing constitutional loyalty, and embedding democratic norms within everyday political practice. The result has been a democracy that exists formally but struggles morally.

An ethic of care also emphasizes continuity. Burke understood society as a moral inheritance, entrusted to each generation as a steward rather than an owner. Democratic institutions, once inherited, must be preserved and improved—not discarded—because their legitimacy rests on accumulated trust and memory. In Nigeria, frequent constitutional ruptures and abrupt political transitions have disrupted this chain of care, weakening citizens' sense of belonging to a shared political project. Democracy becomes fragile when it is treated as replaceable rather than inheritable.

Care further demands moral responsibility from political elites. Burke rejected the idea that leaders merely reflect popular will. Instead, he argued that leadership entails judgment, restraint, and sacrifice. A democracy sustained by care requires leaders who see power not as an entitlement but as a trust—one exercised on behalf of both present and future citizens. In Nigeria, where political office is often approached as an avenue for extraction rather than service, Burke's ethic of care offers a sharp moral critique.

Importantly, care extends beyond institutions to citizenship itself. Democracy cannot survive on rights alone; it depends equally on obligations, habits, and virtues. Burke insisted that liberty without discipline becomes license, and participation without moral restraint degenerates into chaos. A caring democracy therefore invests

in civic education, moral formation, and social responsibility. It recognizes that democratic culture is cultivated not only in parliaments and courts, but in families, religious communities, schools, and local associations.

In African societies, this ethic of care resonates deeply with indigenous political traditions that emphasized guardianship, moral authority, and communal responsibility. Authority was not absolute but conditional upon care for the community. By framing democracy as care, Burke's conservatism unexpectedly converges with African political thought, offering a model of governance rooted in responsibility rather than radical autonomy.

Ultimately, to say that sustainable democracy is an act of care is to insist that democracy survives only where political actors resist the temptation of invention and embrace the humility of stewardship. It is maintained not through dramatic reinvention, but through constant moral attention—repairing what is broken, preserving what works, and transmitting political inheritance intact to future generations.

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