

CHAPTER 4

Searching for Traces of Democracy in the Students' own Culture

Suggesting how to work with this challenge

By Odd R. Hunnes

Democracy is government of the people, meaning that the government is not alien to the people's way of life. Democracy is supposed to be in line with the values, attitudes and ways of the people. These ways may be reflected in the constitution, laws, regulations, procedures of government and they are certainly reflected in the general culture of the people. This implies that in Malawi as well as in Norway, there are many ideas, views, values, mindsets, procedures, rules and regulations that may be positively associated with democracy.

So the exercise presented in this chapter is mainly about searching for all sorts of traces of democracy in the students' own culture. The aim is to familiarize the students with the concept of democracy not only intellectually, but also culturally. Hopefully this work will help the students identify their own relation to democracy as a starting point for a learning process where they may further develop their understanding and their attitudes in this field.

This presentation has the following structure:

1. Working on a list of traces
 - a. From scratch
 - b. Checking existing list

2. Written assignment

The teacher may of course take parts of the methods here presented and combine them in ways s/he sees fit for own use.

Working on a list of traces

Two approaches are suggested:

- a. From scratch. Here a process including activities at home as well as at school is suggested. This approach should be possible to use in Malawian and Norwegian schools both.
- b. Checking an existing list. This is an approach which is intended for Malawian students. A list of traces of democracy is presented and the students are invited to check whether or not they are familiar with the entries on the list.

From scratch

In the classroom

This approach starts with the students in the classroom, giving them the following assignment conducted as a classroom discussion:

‘Let us make a list of as many traces of democracy in our own culture as possible.’

We organize the work in three phases:

1. Brain storming
2. Sharing
3. Prioritising

Brainstorming

The main challenge for this phase is to bring forth all sorts of ideas that may be relevant to the present theme. The more ideas, the better it is.



FIGURE 1: Brainstorming: The more ideas that we may come up with, the better.

This work may be organized

- Either as an individual work, where each student during 15 minutes writes down own ideas
- Or as a group work where the group of learners during a similar period of time writes down all the ideas the group participants can come up with. During this work no discussions and no criticism of any idea or suggestion may take place in the group. The slogan is: Let us get most ideas possible on the list!
- Or as a plenary discussion in the class. In this case the brain storming phase and the sharing phase are combined. (See about the sharing phase below).

It may be a help during the brainstorming to focus on one area at the time (for instance 3 minutes on each of the following):

- at home
- at school
- in organizations like church, sporting club, NGOs etc.
- in the village
- in politics

During this phase it is important that the teacher does not disturb or intervene with the students' work, but rather encourage them to fearlessly bring forth any idea that crosses their minds.

Sharing

The students in the class are now asked to share with each other the ideas and suggestions that have come up during the brainstorming phase. The students suggest and the teacher (or a selected student) writes the ideas on the blackboard (or a transparency film or a flip over sheet).

The suggestions that come, will give an impression of the students' conceptions of democracy. So here the teacher may take the opportunity through questions to gently lead the students into fields where they up to now have not thought of as relevant to democracy. Through her/his own understanding, the teacher thus may help the students expand their associations and enlarge their understanding through connecting their own culture to democracy.



FIGURE 2: The groups should share the ideas that they have come up with to the benefit of all.

Prioritising

Surely, not all the suggestions that come forth during the sharing will be equally relevant to the theme 'democracy'. The challenge during the prioritising phase is to place each idea in one of the three following categories: 'of large relevance', 'of relevance' and 'of little relevance'. There is of course no 'correct' answer into which category each suggestion should be included. What is important is the discussion in the class *where* to put the different ideas and *why*. Therefore there may be room for writing comments to each idea. A form like the following may be used:



Suggestions / ideas	Comments
Of large relevance	
Of some relevance	
Of little relevance	

Home work

After having concluded the classroom exercise described above, the students may be given an assignment as home work. For day students this assignment should last for at least a week, for boarding students the assignment has to be performed during a school break upon their return home.

The assignment is to find all sorts of traces of democracy that may be detected in their home area: at home, in the village, in their church and other relevant places. Their investigation will include observing what is taking place in their home area and interviewing parents, relatives, age mates, village dwellers, teachers, local politicians and so on. They will make a list of what they find. The list will consist of a description of each example.

Once back at school, the students report their findings to the class. All the examples are collected in a folder which may be included in the school's teaching material for later occasions.

Checking an existing list on Malawian culture

Sometimes it is stated that democracy is a Western concept and thus alien to African societies and culture. This is not necessarily so. Mr Amos Chauma, Mr Matthew Chilambo and Mr Robert Chonzi have therefore made a list of traces of democracy in Malawian culture.

Malawian students may use this list as a bank of examples or they may mark and comment upon their own familiarity of each of the examples (mark with 'yes' or 'no' in the relevant column in the table). The challenge for the students is then to add examples to the list from their own home, school, church, NGOs, village and what they know from politics, newspapers and more.

Example	Known from own experience Yes / No	Comment
Getting married or preparing to marry: Communication between the two partners verbal or otherwise. The proposed partner has the obligation to respond either positive or negative.		
Getting married or preparing to marry: Communication from parents of either partner on their wishes for their children to marry.		
Getting married or preparing to marry: Kind services offered willingly to the parents or relatives of the possible marriage partner.		
Getting married or preparing to marry: Formal discussions on marriage arrangements where representatives of both parties meet, hear and agree.		
The parents of the betrothed boy and girl formally report to the chief in good time about the marriage agreements.		
Indaba of elderly women to select a village head.		
The selected successor for a chief is usually taken unawares on the day of installation with the approval from the senior chiefs. On the main day of enthronement the group village head calls for a meeting of the citizens including those from neighbouring villages to celebrate.		

Promoting peaceful coexistence among ethnic groups for example tobacco tenants as well as land re-settlers from congested parts of the country, are given land and allowed to inter-marry.		
Voluntary communal labour for common good.		
Consultations and open discussions in times of disputes / problems such as land disputes and epidemics (to the extent of fasting to seek a solution).		
As a principle, equity is upheld in Malawian culture as demonstrated in equal/fair distribution of land and other resources administered by the chief. Even the chiefs' titles demonstrate this for example Gawa undi, make Wana, Chalo.		
Handling of calamitous situations such as witchcraft practices including training of youngsters as wizards. The suspect is brought before a council of elders to be heard and brought before the chief for further action. Decisions are made by consensus.		
When accused, there is a right to be heard before councillors and witnesses.		
Settlement of serious disputes where the accused, who might have killed someone, has a chance to confess to the chief (kugwira mbendera) and is punished accordingly.		
Settlement of serious disputes where the offended has the right to appeal to the same chief and is compensated or appeased appropriately.		
The right to appeal is upheld in all disputes.		
In the chief's court the right to remain silent is not granted because of the belief in contact and dialogue		
Councillors consult and discuss after hearing from both compliant and defendant before making judgement.		

Councillors related to the accused excuse themselves from handling the case to avoid bias.		
The accused also consults on the judgement before appealing.		
Respect of authority of the chief by being given a seat of honour at civic meetings, funerals and festival meetings. In return the chief respects the views and needs of the citizens.		
Family disputes between husband and wife are settled through consultation and discussion by marriage councillors from both families. With the advent of Christianity, if the partners belong to a church, church elders are consulted and they may settle the dispute. The right to appeal to the chief's council is still respected where the parties are not reconciled.		
In connection with death: Cooperation, consultation and team spirit particularly relating to preparation of the grave and coffin or linen.		
In connection with death: Women donate flour, firewood and cash / relish for the meals during the funeral ceremony.		
In connection with death: The bereaved family's house is cleaned or floors smeared.		
In connection with death: Close relatives give company to the bereaved family for at least seven days.		
My own additions to the list:		

Written assignment

This theme may be concluded as the students are given the assignment to write a paper on the following topic: 'Is democracy a concept alien to our culture?'