

Freedom Denied: Unravelling the Paradox of Zimbabwe's Post-Independence Struggle for Liberty

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Received: 15 July 2024

Revised:

Accepted: 21 November 2024

Abstract

This paper delves into the absence of freedom in post-independent Zimbabwe, questioning prevailing notions of freedom. Motivated by recent social movements in Zimbabwe, it explores the realities of freedom in this context. The main research question is, “To what extent can the freedom of Zimbabweans in the post-independence era be assessed?” The study draws on Western and non-Western political philosophy and includes narrative interviews with Zimbabweans. While existing literature debates the nation’s freedom status, this study, grounded in pan-African perspectives, asserts that Zimbabwe, like other African nations, has yet to achieve genuine freedom despite the presence of freedom-enabling elements. The crux lies in the predominantly Western lens through which freedom is viewed. Western conceptions, insufficient in an African context, overlook key aspects of African culture—communality and economic freedom. The paper challenges the universal applicability of Western notions of freedom in Africa, positing that understanding freedom requires appreciating Zimbabwe’s distinct cultural and economic paradigms. The article concludes that without a representative definition, freedom in Zimbabwe cannot be accurately assessed. To move towards true freedom, Zimbabwe and other African countries must decolonise the concept of freedom, focusing on reducing social and economic gaps to enhance communal and economic freedom.

Keywords: Freedom, Zimbabwe, Pan-Africanism, Political Philosophy, Decoloniality, Economic Freedom.

Introduction

Zimbabwe attained independence from the British Empire on April 18, 1980, marking a significant milestone accompanied by aspirations for heightened freedom. However, reflecting on the past forty-four years, it is evident that Zimbabwe has not fully realised a state of complete freedom. This observation is substantiated by an examination of the actions undertaken by the independent government and the subsequent reactions manifested through protests or social movements in Zimbabwe. Considering freedom is universally regarded as one of the most important human principles, it is worth exploring why Zimbabwe has struggled to attain true freedom and how this can be remedied. The central argument of this paper posits that the ongoing struggle for genuine freedom among Zimbabweans is rooted in the inherent definition of freedom itself. Following independence, Zimbabwe instituted political systems grounded in Western philosophies, with freedom being a cornerstone. However, the application of these Western ideologies has proven incongruent within the African context because these ideologies are rooted in Western liberalism. Consequently, Zimbabwe, along with other African nations, grapples with advancing freedom

while attempting to conform to a framework ill-suited to the unique social, cultural, economic, and historical contexts of these countries. Driven by the limitations imposed by prevailing and normative definitions of freedom, the primary research question guiding this paper is “To what extent can the freedom of Zimbabwe in the post-independence era be assessed?” To address this inquiry, this article will explore the promised and granted freedom at the time of independence, delving into the Western paradigms that influenced Zimbabwe. The analysis will reveal that the contemporary evaluation of freedom in Zimbabwe is hindered by the persistent application of Western perspectives. In dissecting the deficiencies of the existing notion of freedom, the paper will draw insights from Pan-African literature to identify more pertinent conceptualisations of freedom for Zimbabwe. These alternative notions will account for Africa’s communal nature and its strong emphasis on economic security.

This article begins by elucidating the relevance of this topic within broader African philosophy and politics. It then details the approach employed to address the central research question. Subsequently, the article presents evidence that freedom is indeed lacking in Zimbabwe. The discussion then transitions to an analysis of the current understanding of freedom, highlighting its strong roots in Western liberalism. Through an examination of prominent Pan-African literature, the need for a decolonial definition of freedom is articulated, along with what such a definition might entail in the context of Zimbabwe. Finally, the article concludes that freedom cannot currently be adequately assessed in Zimbabwe due to the absence of an appropriate understanding of freedom. It recommends that to advance the quest for freedom, African countries like Zimbabwe must decolonise their philosophical frameworks.

Approach

This article uses two methodological frameworks to tackle the question at hand. The first is a desk-based review of existing literature. This method was split into two fields: academic literature on political-philosophical conceptions of freedom and African political literature on freedom and identity. The second method used is supplemental to the research collected and qualifies as a qualitative research method in the form of informal open narrative interviews. These interviews were conducted as semi-formal conversations with Zimbabwean citizens to understand their perceptions of freedom in the country. The interviews were conducted with a small sample of six Zimbabweans of different races, genders, social classes and ages. Although a small number of Zimbabweans (no matter how diverse the group) cannot represent the perceptions of the entire population, due to the contemporary nature of this topic, there was value in acquiring input from Zimbabweans. All interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical standards approved by Utrecht University (UCR). Each participant provided informed consent, and anonymity was ensured to protect their identities. All collected data has been securely and confidentially stored. These interviews supplement the main premise of this paper, that Zimbabwe is not in a state of freedom.

Using both methods, the paper confronts the use of dominant political theoretical understandings in academia with a more embedded understanding of these notions’ characteristics in Zimbabwe. The combination of approaches, varying from analytical-conceptual to political-historical and semi-formal conversations, helps balance the tensions between what has been experienced in the post-independence context and the promise of freedom in these countries. Upon undertaking an exhaustive review of the extant literature on freedom in political theory, it becomes evident that prevailing theoretical frameworks predominantly emanate from and cater to Western societies. Notwithstanding the normative nature of this paper on how freedom ought to be viewed in the African context, due consideration must be afforded to existing definitions of freedom. This

discernment is indispensable for comprehending the genesis of prevailing systems within African states. Looking back at Western philosophers, a large number of philosophers and political thinkers have debated the concept of freedom. Yet, upon a closer examination of the conceptions that have endured through the epochs, it emerges that negative liberty, positive liberty, and republicanism stand out prominently within the corpus of Western philosophical discourse.

The dichotomy between negative and positive liberty, albeit most notably articulated by Isaiah Berlin in his seminal lecture, “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958), predates this articulation. Aristotle, hailing from the Classical era circa 350 BCE, propounded a form of positive liberty tethered to the acquisition of knowledge and the advancement of individual reason, thereby constituting a paradigm grounded in the autonomy of self. This Aristotelian conception has been echoed by other philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1807), T.H. Green (1882, 1883), John Christman (1991), and the very articulator of the dichotomy, Isaiah Berlin (1958).

The trajectory of Rousseau and Christman’s philosophies is particularly noteworthy, however, as both scholars transitioned from a purview of positive liberty rooted in personal progression to a later conceptualisation aligned with political choice. They argue that, since governmental decisions and policies exert an inordinate influence on an individual’s life, veritable freedom can only be realised through an agency that exercises control over the shaping forces of governance. The alignment of these perspectives, manifested in a Platonian or Hegelian philosophical orientation, underscores the necessity for an intimate nexus between personal values and collective rationality within the framework of a politically liberated existence (McDonald & Hoffmann, 2010 and Christman, 2009). The development of this thought will provide the basis of the republican understanding of liberty.

Republican liberty, popularly supported by Philip Pettit (1997), is a concept of freedom that emphasises participation in self-governance and the absence of arbitrary domination. Unlike negative liberty, which focuses on the absence of interference, republican liberty insists that true freedom requires a political community where citizens have a say in the laws and policies that govern them (Pettit, 1997). This form of liberty is rooted in the idea that individuals are free when they are not subject to the will of another, whether through laws imposed without their consent or through unchecked power. As Pettit (1997) explains, a structural feature of republican thought is that these elements of collective protection are seen not as opposing but as related elements of the dynamic of freedom.

In parallel, negative liberty is defined as the absence of external constraints or interference on an individual’s actions (McKinnon, 2019). In this context, freedom is realised when individuals are free from coercion, interference, or restrictions imposed by others, particularly by the government or other institutions (McKinnon, 2019). Advocates for negative liberty are prominent figures such as Montesquieu (1748), John Stuart Mill (1859), and Isaiah Berlin (1958).

Further elaboration on these three branches of liberty will be presented later in this essay, as they form the foundational understanding of freedom in the Western world and, by extension, in their ex-colonies. However, while these concepts may be considered all-encompassing in a Western context, they fall short in an African context. As articulated by Martin Asiegbu (2016), contemporary African philosophers have introduced innovative perspectives in their approach to philosophical inquiries. Diverging from their predecessors, a distinct school of African philosophers has emerged, emphasising dependent and culture-oriented philosophical frameworks. This paper centres its focus on scholars belonging to this paradigm, who assert that

philosophy is inherently rooted in cultural backgrounds, rendering all philosophical conclusions contingent upon cultural contexts.

Therefore, this essay also incorporates arguments presented by prominent Pan-Africanists on the concept of freedom, who argue for a culturally informed understanding of freedom. Scholars focusing on Pan-African approaches in general, such as Kwame Nkrumah (1964), Franz Fanon (1963), and Achille Mbembe (2001), contribute to the discourse that explores why an African conception of freedom is necessary. It is generally explained by these and other Pan-African scholars that an African understanding of freedom is needed because Western philosophical conceptions fail to include the unique historical, cultural and social contexts of African societies (Oyedola, 2016). Consequently, as Oyedola (2016) explains, the failure of African leaders to foreground African political thought has resulted in the continued colonisation of concepts such as freedom. This highlights an urgent need for decolonising ideas to ensure Africa's future development. Pan-African thinkers, including those mentioned above, argue that philosophy serves as a powerful tool to liberate the African mind and foster self-determination.

In exploring Pan-African perspectives on freedom, the concept of Ubuntu emerges as a central and distinctive element within African philosophy. Ubuntu, which translates to "I am because you are," encapsulates a communal ethos that contrasts with the individualism often emphasised in conceptions of freedom. As scholars like Colin Chasi (2014) and Elspeth Huxley (1960) argue, Ubuntu represents the collective aspect of freedom that has historically underpinned African societies. This communal framework, as explained by Gyekye (2002), suggests that an individual's fulfilment comes from the well-being of the community as a whole. In this sense, Pan-African thinkers argue that freedom in an African context must be prioritised, recognising that individuals are deeply interwoven with the social fabric. Thus, understanding freedom through Ubuntu reflects the unique ways African societies organise themselves, underscores the importance of decolonising communal well-being as essential to Africa's socio-political future.

Additionally, the perspectives of authors such as Tetteh Kofi (1967) and Julius Nyerere (1987) shed light on the concept of African Socialism, which they argue is essential to a comprehensive understanding of freedom in Africa. These thinkers illustrate how African Socialism, though variably defined, offers a framework focused on collective well-being and shared responsibility. This essay draws upon their views and those of others to underscore the importance of African Socialism in contexts like Zimbabwe, where communal values are central. Despite differences in approach on the argument of African Socialism—ranging from Kwame Nkrumah's Marxist, anti-colonial stance to Nyerere's *Ujamaa* model—Pan-African thinkers converge on the belief that African economies should prioritise communal welfare over individual gain. This shared foundation of African Socialism guides the analysis presented in this essay, highlighting it as a vital lens through which to examine economic and social structures in Africa.

Zimbabwe serves as a compelling case study in this analysis, illuminating the tangible manifestations of freedom within ex-colonial states. As a result, extensive consultation of the literature about Zimbabwe is a cornerstone of this study. This study draws upon a wealth of secondary sources, including reports, journal articles, and book chapters. The scholarly insights harnessed for gauging the state of Zimbabwe emanate from respected voices in the academic discourse, such as Martin Adelman (2004) and A.S Mlambo (1998, 2013, 2014). Though spanning different contexts, these scholars converge on a central theme—political decay and the imperative for transformative change in Zimbabwe. Both authors provide a historical and contemporary picture of the manifestations of freedom in Zimbabwe.

This comprehensive exploration has traversed the landscape of freedom, transcending temporal and cultural boundaries. From the foundational theories of Western philosophers to the emergence of distinct African philosophical perspectives, the discourse on freedom is revealed as multifaceted, evolving, and context-dependent. In contemplating the future trajectory of this discourse, there is a call to further investigate and embrace the African philosophical foundations of freedom. The complexities and intricacies uncovered in this exploration pave the way for continued research and dialogues that engage with the intersections of culture, politics, and freedom, not only in Zimbabwe but across the diverse landscape of the African continent.

Zimbabwe and the Quest for Freedom

Post-independence Zimbabwe has not progressed as anticipated in terms of freedom. The initial hope that Zimbabweans would experience genuine freedom was quickly overshadowed by reports of significant freedom violations starting as early as the 1980s. These violations primarily concerned freedom of expression and democratic governance, manifesting in politically motivated massacres. These events underscore the urgent need for a more contextually suitable conception of freedom that could better address the specific needs of Zimbabweans, guiding both political leaders and scholars in their efforts. By examining the current state of freedom in Zimbabwe, it becomes clear which aspects of freedom are currently lacking. The following sections will demonstrate how existing frameworks fail to encompass these critical considerations. All six interviewees of this study answered negatively to the question “Do you currently feel free in Zimbabwe?” While they all stated slightly different reasons as to why they did not feel free in Zimbabwe, there were clear themes that are impeding freedom in Zimbabwe. These themes are economic capabilities and political freedom. Each of these themes will be discussed in greater detail below.

The Economy

As mentioned by John Friedman (2011), in many parts of Africa, “conversations about food are often conversations about politics.” This is the exact case in Zimbabwe, where the availability of food is a conversation about good governance and freedom. At independence, Zimbabwe inherited an advanced economy, with strengths in agriculture, mining, and a robust manufacturing sector (Mlambo, 2014). The black majority sought equitable economic benefits while hoping to maintain the economy’s strength from the colonial era. However, as early as 1997, there was an economic crisis ensuing, where the currency was losing 74% of its value per day (Adelmann, 2004). Economic crises severely impede freedom by exacerbating unemployment and poverty. As of 2024, Zimbabwe’s extreme poverty rate stands at 44% (African Development Bank Group). Additionally, hyperinflation peaked at an astronomical 80 billion per cent in 2018, accompanied by rampant unemployment (BBC, 2018).

Interviews with Zimbabweans reveal a common sentiment that poverty equates to unfreedom. One upper-class Zimbabwean articulated, “My idea of freedom is being allowed to work, contribute and be provided with resources to do that. That to me, is freedom” (Interview 05, 493 - 495). This perception was echoed by the other Zimbabweans who were interviewed. This points to the fact that the economic turmoil in Zimbabwe has left people in a state of unfreedom.

Political Freedom

Adelmann (2004) elucidates that economic crises in Zimbabwe have also precipitated severe violations of political freedoms. The widespread discontent stemming from economic decline fostered the rise of political opposition, most notably the Movement for Democratic Change

(MDC). Founded in 1999 by Morgan Tsvangirai, the MDC aimed to restore democracy in Zimbabwe, countering the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of ZANU–PF. By the early 2000s, the MDC posed a significant electoral threat to the Mugabe regime, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the socio–economic state of the country. This political threat precipitated a severe breakdown in the rule of law and political freedoms.

As the 2002 elections approached, it became apparent that ZANU–PF risked losing power. In response, the government resorted to voter intimidation and electoral fraud, effectively stripping citizens of their freedom to engage in civil and political processes. Teachers, in particular, were targeted and accused of “corrupting the minds of the children.” A stark illustration of this repression was provided in a 2000 meeting of the U.S. House of Representatives: “Teachers have been dragged from their classrooms. Teachers have been stripped naked in front of their students and forced to chant pro–ZANU slogans. Teachers have been beaten unconscious” (Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 2000). ZANU–PF supporters were systematically attacking and beating individuals perceived as opposition sympathisers.

In recent times, the government has resorted to cutting the internet to prevent citizens from practising their rights to free speech and prevent protest movements from spreading (Al Jazeera, 2019). Not only has this silenced the voices of the people, but it has also taken away their autonomy in their own country. Other forms of silencing citizens under the current regime have included extreme torture and incarceration.

The expectation in a representative democracy is that free and fair elections allow citizens to collectively authorise the exercise of executive power. This power, in turn, is supposed to uphold laws that protect citizens from arbitrary domination and safeguard their personal, social, and political liberties. However, in Zimbabwe, political liberties have been systematically undermined, preventing citizens from freely expressing their political views or participating in civic life. These ongoing violations underscore the critical need for comprehensive political reforms to restore democratic governance and protect citizens’ freedoms.

Zimbabwe’s journey towards genuine freedom remains fraught with significant challenges, despite the initial promise at independence. The interplay of economic turmoil, political repression, and severe human rights violations has perpetuated a state of unfreedom for many Zimbabweans. The economic crises have not only impoverished the population but have also been intertwined with political manipulations to suppress democratic freedoms and human rights. This state of affairs highlights that freedom is more than a philosophical concept as understood in Western societies. Removing colonial domination was not enough to ensure freedom for African countries like Zimbabwe, indicating the need to re–examine and reconceptualise freedom in the African context.

The Western Blueprint: Imposed Concepts of Freedom

Zimbabwe, a former British colony for 90 years, is deeply influenced by Western ideologies. The initial foundations of Zimbabwe’s ‘new order’ were rooted in Western ideals of freedom, independence, and democracy. Since Zimbabwe inherited British ideologies in the wake of independence, the conception and expectations of freedom were framed on Western ideologies. Therefore, this essay will delve into the nuanced Western understanding of freedom during this period to understand the expectations of freedom in Zimbabwe in 1980. In 1958, Isaiah Berlin delivered his renowned speech, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” which expounded upon the dichotomy between negative and positive liberty, encapsulating the prevalent Western perspective on freedom at the time. It is imperative to acknowledge that both notions of freedom were inherently tethered to Western liberalism.

Negative liberty, as articulated by Berlin, denotes freedom from external impediments and the absence of constraints impeding individual actions (Berlin, 1958). This encompasses safeguarding individual rights, privacy, and upholding the rule of law. The complexity arises in striking a delicate balance—affording a sufficiently broad area of freedom for personal development while avoiding encroachment upon the freedom of others (Berlin, 1958). Principles of negative liberty have been used to build numerous Western and ex-colonial political systems. For example, Montesquieu's (1748) exploration of the separation of powers and the idea that political liberty is best preserved by dividing governmental powers into different branches greatly influenced the design of modern democratic systems. Yet, the interwoven nature of human lives makes it challenging to lead a 'free' life without inadvertently affecting others. In the context of Zimbabwe, negative liberty faces unique challenges. Societal progress often takes precedence over individual liberty, highlighting a departure from the individualised and minimalistic understanding of freedom grounded in Western liberalism. This deviation raises questions about the applicability and relevance of such concepts within the Zimbabwean context.

Examining the post-colonial transition, one could argue that negative liberty was a pertinent theoretical framework for the black majority, given the dismantling of racial barriers imposed during the Rhodesian regime. Theoretically, independence removed these obstacles, granting Zimbabweans the ability to engage in actions previously impeded. However, citizen perspectives reveal a nuanced reality; the absence of interference by the colonial regime alone does not equate to a sense of freedom. For example, as explained by a 50-year-old Zimbabwean woman who was interviewed, she felt that her overall quality of life was better before 1989 because the colonial government provided citizens with more free goods, e.g., food and school supplies (Interview 01, 62–76). Another Harare-born middle-class woman's perspective also sheds light on this disparity, defining freedom as the ability to access necessities such as healthcare, food, and shelter. While the current government may not impose overt barriers akin to racial segregation, its failure to provide conducive conditions for citizens to easily access these necessities undermines the perceived freedom of the majority.

The concept of positive liberty offers a nuanced perspective, focusing on the capacity of individuals to realise self-fulfilment through the pursuit of their aspirations. Distinguished from negative liberty, positive liberty centres on the presence of opportunities and resources enabling meaningful choice and control over one's life (McKinnon, 2019). This seems more aligned with Zimbabweans' sentiments above. However, Rousseau's early formulation of positive liberty underscores a tension between the state and individual freedom, as state actions may both limit and secure personal autonomy (Rousseau, 1762). While this dynamic is present across both Western and African contexts, African perspectives often emphasise the state's role in promoting communal freedom alongside individual aspirations. In Zimbabwe, for example, state involvement is often perceived as integral to achieving collective progress and addressing socio-economic disparities. Thus, while the state is critical to the realisation of freedom in both contexts, African ideologies may frame this relationship more directly in terms of communal and cultural responsibilities. Therefore, a solely liberal positivist definition of freedom would not work in an African context. In addition to this, as most African countries are marked by socio-economic disparities, positive liberty becomes contentious. While higher classes may perceive themselves as positively free due to material autonomy, lower classes lack access to essential resources such as education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, hindering their ability to flourish.

The last major Western conception to be considered is Republican liberty. Republican liberty captures a form of freedom which encapsulates both negative and positive liberty because it rests on a dual approach which focuses on different aspects of freedom. The first (negatively) understands

freedom as the antithesis of slavery, and the second understands freedom (positively) as political participation and civic virtue (Pettit, 1997). The first branch can be traced all the way back to Cicero, who states that liberty was life without a master (Sellers, 1998). According to Philip Pettit as well, as long as an individual has to consider another's arbitrary power in decision making or has to consider the doings of a 'master', then he or she is not free (Pettit, 2000). This is one of the two elements of the basic philosophical understanding of this branch of republican liberty. Ian Carter articulates the second element. For citizens to be free in the republican sense, they need to "participate in institutional arrangements that guarantee non-interference" (McKinnon, 2019). This element is focused on the active democratic participation of citizens. Cicero also considered this an important aspect of republican liberty in that he mentioned people can only be free if they have virtuous magistrates and laws (Sellers, 1998). Thus, a just and chosen leader is needed to secure the freedoms of all citizens. While this idea may have been hinted at in the theory of positive liberty, the difference is that with positive liberty, democratic participation is for the benefit of the autonomous individual rather than the society as a whole. Therefore, this understanding is more in line with the Zimbabwean case because of the communal nature of Zimbabwe. The addition of the importance of institutional arrangements in the republican understanding of freedom also makes it a more applicable understanding. As gathered from the various interviews, Zimbabweans believe in the importance of the rule of law, governmental organisation and institutional frameworks, and they believe that freedom can only be achieved when these institutional arrangements serve and benefit the people (e.g., Interview 03, 271-274).

While republican liberty offers a broader scope than other Western conceptions of freedom, it still falls short in the African context for two key reasons. First, republican theory does not account for economic conditions and the standard of living. Though it includes positive elements such as civic and political participation, it overlooks economic security as a component of freedom. This omission creates a gap, particularly significant in African societies, where economic stability is essential to a comprehensive understanding of freedom. For example, interviewee number 3 understands freedom in Zimbabwe as encompassing socio-economic capabilities, specifically "the ability to get healthcare, food, and shelter" (Interview 03, 210-213). Other interviewees echoed this socio-economic basis for achieving freedom in Zimbabwe. Thus, without addressing these fundamental needs, republican theory cannot adequately serve as a framework for freedom in an African context.

Secondly, despite its broader considerations, republican liberty is still based on classical Western liberalism. Ultimately, all Western conceptions of liberty, including positive and republican forms, are rooted in liberalism, which prioritises individual rights and limited government intervention. However, these principles often clash with African cultural norms, emphasising communal well-being over individual autonomy. As such, Western conceptions of liberty do not provide suitable frameworks for understanding and promoting freedom in African contexts.

The African Philosophical Perspectives

The persistence of the concept of freedom in African discourse reflects a historical struggle for identity dating back to the era of colonisation. Despite the dominance of Western liberal conceptualisations, exemplified by Zimbabwe's adoption of such frameworks, prominent Pan-African thinkers, including Kwame Nkrumah (1964), Franz Fanon (1963), Kwasi Wiredu (2010), Achille Mbembe (2001), and W.E.B. Du Bois, advocate for context-specific interpretations of philosophical and political terms within African states. This essay delves into the exploration of freedom, particularly focusing on the suitability of Pan-African conceptions within an African context.

Employing paradigms of positive liberty, negative liberty, and republican liberty, it appeared unequivocal that independence would yield greater freedoms for Zimbabweans. However, the reality belies these assumptions, prompting an examination of the very concept of freedom and the frameworks necessary to actualise enhanced freedom for Zimbabweans. Franz Fanon's seminal work, *The Wretched Earth* (1963), elucidates the genesis of the dilemma. During decolonisation, the colonisers sought alliances with African elites to perpetuate Western ideals. These ideals, rooted in Western liberalism, were entrenched in the post-colonial landscape, facilitated by collaborations with the political elite. Fanon highlights that the masses, preoccupied with tangible changes like land redistribution, overlooked philosophical ideals, enabling the political elite to institutionalise Western philosophical tenets.

All that the native has seen in his country is that they can freely arrest him, beat him, starve him: and no professor of ethics, no priest has ever come to be beaten in his place, nor to share their bread with him." – the only slight moral concern is getting out of a cycle of abuse with the colonizer; however, not much thought is given to how each citizen will relate to one another after independence (Fanon, 1963, p. 43).

The absence of concern for philosophical ideals during decolonisation underscores the urgency for African scholars to proffer indigenous philosophies reflective of unique cultural contexts. While acknowledging the diversity of individual interpretations of freedom, a collective conception tailored to Zimbabwean cultural and historical backgrounds is imperative for societal progress. As posited by Asiegbu (2016), philosophical notions should inherently be culturally specific and context-dependent because philosophical beliefs are formed under the guise in which the philosopher lives. Philosophy is an extension of human thought and, by definition, context-dependent. When looking at the cultural dependence all philosophical thought has, it seems shocking that African countries are still trying to fit into the mould of Western development ideologies.

While Fanon describes how African elites upheld Western ideals after decolonisation, Achille Mbembe (2010) further elucidates the psychological and cultural effects of this inheritance. In *'Out of the Dark Night'* (2010), Mbembe contends that colonialism left enduring legacies that continue to shape African societies, limiting their ability to fully break free from Western frameworks. He argues that despite political independence, African nations like Zimbabwe are still profoundly influenced by colonial modes of thought and governance, which do not align with indigenous cultural realities. According to Mbembe, ideal African freedom would mean a complete transformation, enabling societies to reclaim their cultural autonomy and foster ways of life that prioritise communal flourishing and self-creation. This continuation of Western structures links to Fanon's observations of elite complicity, revealing how deeply ingrained these systems remain. Mbembe's insights also pave the way for Nkrumah's call for a distinctly African conception of freedom—one that transcends colonial impositions and emphasises collective well-being and economic autonomy as central to genuine African liberation (Nkrumah, 1962). By examining the necessity of shedding colonial frameworks, Mbembe underscores the urgency of Nkrumah's vision for a unified and self-determined Africa.

In exploring these African cultural and philosophical landscapes by the above authors, however, two pillars emerge as foundations for African philosophical evolution in the concept of freedom: Ubuntu and African socialism. These frameworks offer pathways to reimagining freedom within African contexts.

Ubuntu

A fundamental contrast between prevailing Western ideologies and predominant Pan-African perspectives, elucidated by Okaneme (2013), lies in their ideological foundations: Western liberalism versus Pan-African communal values, epitomised by the concept of Ubuntu. Ubuntu, a moral philosophy originating from Bantu-speaking Africans, encapsulates the essence of communal identity, as encapsulated in the isiZulu axiom, “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,” translating to “a person is a person through others” (Chasi, 2014). This axiom underscores the intrinsic interconnectedness of individuals within society, positing that one’s significance derives from their communal ties. Central to Ubuntu is the conviction that actions are morally judged by their ability to foster cooperation and solidarity among community members (Chasi, 2014).

The concept of Ubuntu derives its principles from longstanding cultural norms prevalent across many African societies. While its origins trace back to Bantu-speaking Africans, its principles resonate universally throughout the continent. Wiredu (2010) illuminates this through the lens of the Akan people of Ghana, where communal bonds supersede individual pursuits. Emphasising the interconnectedness of humanity, African cultures often espouse a belief in a shared origin from a divine source, fostering a collective consciousness referred to as the “life principle” (Wiredu, 2010). Additionally, kinship ties, embodied in the “blood principle” and the “charisma principle,” further reinforce communal cohesion by delineating societal roles and obligations based on familial lineage (Wiredu, 2010). These principles elucidate the foundational elements of Ubuntu and underscore African societies’ prioritisation of communal advancement.

In African conceptualisations, the primacy of relationships and community transcends individual interests, shaping the perception of freedom as a collective endeavour rather than an individual pursuit. This perspective emanates from the conviction that societal well-being directly correlates with individual fulfilment. Thus, the attainment of freedom in African societies is contingent upon ensuring its equitable distribution among all members of a society. As Okaneme (2013) asserts, embracing Ubuntu acknowledges that true freedom in African contexts necessitates the fulfilment of basic freedoms for every member of society. As has been mentioned in the case of Zimbabwe, the state of rampant poverty in the country has led to huge socio-political rifts, where this vision of communal freedom cannot be realised. In addition to this, targeted human rights violations also point to the fact that the communal good is not being seen as the paramount concern in Zimbabwe’s strive for total freedom.

However, Zimbabwean perspectives underscore the paramount importance of communal well-being over individual liberties. For example, some Zimbabweans even express willingness to tolerate a dictatorship if it ensures a basic standard of living for all citizens (Interview 03, 265-278). Even among those with more Westernised outlooks, such as an upper-class white Zimbabwean interviewee, freedom is defined within the parameters of societal harmony and cohesion (Interview 04, 198-201). The concept of Ubuntu illuminates the intricate interplay between communal values and individual freedoms in African societies. Its emphasis on interconnectedness underscores the collective pursuit of freedom, challenging conventional Western paradigms centred on individual autonomy. Acknowledging Ubuntu’s significance fosters a more nuanced understanding of freedom in African political discourse, highlighting the imperative of prioritising communal well-being in the quest for societal liberation.

African Socialism

Economic freedom holds significant importance within the African context. African societies must reconsider their economic systems on two levels. First, at a granular level, they should embrace

socialist principles to ensure the economy meets communal needs rather than individual ones. Second, on a systemic level, they must challenge the dominant Western capitalist hegemony and adopt socialist economic principles to achieve economic success on a global scale. Given the communal nature of African societies, African economic ideologies are inherently incompatible with capitalist thinking and instead should adopt a socialist orientation. As Losch (1990) notes, many Africans see socialism as the most suitable model for African development due to its emphasis on collective economic activity and grassroots democratic decision-making. This perspective argues that pre-colonial African societies embodied these socialist values and that post-independence, Africans should return to these roots. Losch (1990) suggests that socialism has always been intrinsic to African ways of living, with the term 'socialism' merely borrowed from Europe. African socialism, therefore, reflects and promotes values of communality and egalitarianism, essential for true freedom in African states.

Furthermore, widespread poverty across African states must be addressed when considering the state of 'freedom' in Africa. Living in extreme poverty undeniably strips individuals of their freedom. The current social arrangements in African states, which align with capitalist and individualistic values, are often cited as contributing factors to rampant poverty. These arrangements lack principles to protect citizens from impoverishment and ensure fair distribution of resources. Adopting African socialist principles could be a crucial strategy to overcome these challenges to freedom. Kofi (1976) asserts that Africa must extricate itself from the Western economic system to forge its own path. Under the Western capitalist framework, African states have historically and will continue to be subservient. The continent has consistently been disadvantaged by capitalism. As world systems theory posits, African countries are peripheral nations exploited by Western states for wealth accumulation. Thus, it is untenable for African countries to model their societies on liberal, capitalist ideals.

This perspective is vividly captured by a Zimbabwean interviewee: "It would be one thing if the West were coming in and taking, but the country was gaining, but they're taking and exploiting without any benefit to us. I feel like we're still trying to run according to a Western system when they have economies that we don't. The influence is there, but the current state of our country doesn't align with the way they function" (Interview 03, 332 - 337). This statement underscores that Zimbabwe, and other African nations, are constrained by a system that does not serve their interests, reinforcing the necessity for a non-capitalist development trajectory. For African nations to attain true freedom, they must embrace "African Socialism." Despite Western disapproval, most African countries resonate more with communist principles, such as freedom from economic and social inequalities, than with capitalist ones. For example, in its post-independence era, Zimbabwe's government made economic decisions rooted in communist ideologies while attempting to conform to the international capitalist framework. This ideological dichotomy led to significant economic turmoil, primarily because Zimbabwe could not fully detach from the capitalist system, resulting in a detrimental mixed approach. This led to the many economic issues mentioned above that Zimbabwe still faces now. Hence, it is imperative to explore how a distinctly African economic ideology could better serve Zimbabwe's populace.

Prominent Pan-African thinkers like Blyden, Dubois, Nkrumah, and Padmore have long championed an African economic ideology (Kofi, 1976). They contend that Africa must reject Western economic models and cultivate its own, reflecting the unique cultural context of African societies. Blindly adhering to a capitalist system without considering what best suits their societies is a strategic misstep. Leopold-Sedar Senghor offers a distinctive Pan-African perspective on African socialism. He asserts that socialism in Europe emerged to address issues in industrialised societies, whereas in Africa, socialism should serve pre-capitalist societies lacking strong economic infrastructures

(LeMelle, 1965). Senghor contends that European socialism and other Western systems address European-specific challenges; hence, African nations must establish structures rooted in African traditions. While Senghor emphasises an African tradition-based socialism more than his Pan-African contemporaries, he concurs that prioritising collective over individual progress should be foundational to African Socialism. In line with this argument includes other Pan-African thinkers like Sékou Touré, who also argue for an anti-colonial, self-reliant African socialism based on African traditions of communality (Schwab, 2004).

Although I am not an economist and cannot expound on the specificities of African socialism, it should be predicated on principles such as communal economic security, cooperatives, price controls, robust business regulation, and societal equality (Losch, 1990). Embracing African socialism can liberate nations like Zimbabwe, fostering both individual and collective prosperity on the global stage.

The pursuit of genuine freedom in African nations such as Zimbabwe necessitates a profound re-evaluation of inherited Western frameworks and a reorientation towards African philosophies and economic systems. By embracing Ubuntu and African socialism, African states can foster a more equitable and interconnected society that prioritises communal well-being over individual gain. The arguments presented by Pan-African thinkers underscore the importance of culturally specific ideologies that reflect the unique historical and social contexts of African nations. For countries like Zimbabwe, true liberation and economic prosperity will be realised only by disentangling from Western capitalist paradigms and cultivating local systems that resonate with African values of solidarity, equality, and communal progress. Through this transformative approach, Africa can chart a path toward a more just and self-sufficient future, ultimately achieving a more authentic and sustainable form of freedom.

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper proposes a normative framework for understanding freedom in the African context. As Hountondji (1976) suggests, Africans possess robust ontological philosophies that inform daily decision-making. However, due to a lack of non-Western educational development, these philosophies have not been formally recognised as African philosophical beliefs. Principles such as Ubuntu and communal economic capabilities are foundational in African societies. These principles can serve as the basis for an African conceptualisation of freedom. As such, this article shows that freedom cannot currently be assessed in Zimbabwe because there is currently no useful framework to do this with. Therefore, it shows that the understanding of freedom needs to be re-worked before freedom can be assessed in Zimbabwe. An understanding of freedom based on the principles mentioned above gives politicians and policymakers a defined direction for what needs to be changed in these societies in order to reach higher levels of freedom. African nations must break free from their structural and cultural dependency on Western notions.

Encouraging the development of African political thought that considers the unique cultural context of Africa is essential. Pan-African scholars should be encouraged to research beyond Western frameworks, paving the way toward understandings that help African nations comprehend and assess their contexts and develop within them, rather than attempting to solve Africa's problems through a Western lens. Although shifting this is challenging after a century of Western dominance over the African psyche, Africa must begin this shift to better serve its people.

It is important to note that while no single country exists in a state of total freedom, some countries are further along in their attainment of freedom than others. This paper contends that countries advancing in freedom do so because the framework utilised considers their unique

histories and cultural contexts. While all African states cannot be generalised as having the same conditions, Pan-African thought argues that African states do share enough basic ontological understandings that they can collaborate on a shared future. To move forward, educational reforms are essential, including decolonising curricula to integrate African political philosophy and history, and promoting African thought by encouraging academic institutions to support research exploring African political and philosophical frameworks.

With regards to recommendations regarding freedom in Zimbabwe, economic policies should focus on equitable resource distribution, recognising economic freedom as essential to overall liberty, and supporting communal economies through initiatives that strengthen communal economic practices rooted in principles like Ubuntu. Political reforms are also necessary, including strengthening democratic institutions to ensure free and fair elections, protecting freedom of expression, and combating corruption, as well as encouraging local governance structures that reflect communal decision-making processes and cultural values. Additionally, international collaboration is crucial, with efforts to build alliances with international organisations and other nations that respect local contexts and avoid imposing external ideologies, while enhancing Pan-African solidarity by fostering collaboration among African nations to share strategies and support efforts to redefine and achieve freedom on the continent. By embracing these recommendations, Zimbabwe and other African nations can construct a framework for freedom that is true to their unique cultural and historical contexts, paving the way for genuine progress and liberation.

Acknowledgement

This article builds on a thesis that was written at University College Roosevelt, supervised by Professor Dr Van den Brink and Professor Dr Friedman.

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