

## Rethinking African Development: The Place of Philosophy

AJIBOLA MORUPH SURAKAT  
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria

**Abstract.** This paper aims at appraising the problem of development in Nigeria through critical philosophic reflection and discourse. We shall point out that, the internal, external and the genetic factors are not the absolute cause of underdevelopment in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Development will be viewed within the context of self-reliance and human development. Philosophical tools shall be used to prosecute the problems of development and for charting out the way for progress. We shall point out that if development is couched in strict deterministic and scientific terms, then morality can be easily undermined. And if it is based on sheer material and economic terms it may breed avarice and widening the gap between the poor and the rich. The major purpose of this study is to propose philosophy as a necessary instrument for development and must not be neglected if any meaningful development is to take place and therefore recommend philosophy to all levels of education.

**Keywords:** Africa, Philosophy, Development, Technology

### 1. Introduction

Nigeria and indeed Africa is in a very difficult situation in terms of development. Instead of striving for the emergence of viable institutions and policies, the political leadership continues to prioritise a programme of social reform which has a very narrow economic focus. It neglects those social institutions; and values through which a conducive social order can be attained in the country. In order to tackle this problem, Nigeria needs an intellectual orientation that is critically passionate and disinterested. Such intellectual tradition “leaves no valuations and aspirations unexamined and no piece of knowledge isolated, seeks and ground for the validity of, what is called”. Thus, this dissertations will advance critical philosophy to justify why Nigeria is the way it is today and the way out of the quagmire. Deregulation,

Privatisation Devaluation of currency, among others are good policies but it must be noted that they cannot transform the nation until the political leadership accepts the substance of critical inquiry which could lead to positive result. This paper is structured as follows: Meaning of philosophy, meaning of development, why Africa is underdeveloped, rethinking African development: the introduction of Philosophy and lastly conclusion.

### 2. Philosophy Defined

Philosophy is an unusual field of study, in that it does not concern any particular subject-matter as we have in fields like biology, economics, geography among others but rather it consists in a kind of activity.

Philosophy is the activity of reflective critical thought, applied to fundamental concepts and systems of thought and behaviour individual philosophers pursue this activity while drawing on distinctive view of human beings and the natural world, as well as certain beliefs about the nature of human beings, their ideas and values, their social existence, and the world. (Adrian, 2005:1).

One crucial point that deserves attention is that there are diverse approaches to analysing philosophy with reference to this essay we shall employ critical consideration on working definitions and the general nature of philosophy. Prominently, the kind of wisdom furthered by Philosophers is a critical one. John Herman Randall Junior buttresses this point: *Philosophy is the criticism of the fundamental beliefs in any man's great cultural enterprises, science, art, religion, the moral life, social and practical activity when some new idea or some altered experience has impinged upon them and generated intellectual tension and maladjustment.* (Randall (Jnr), 1963: 19).

From this point of consideration, it is evidently clear that argument, criticism and persisting

reconsideration of views are intricately woven the continuum of philosophic scholarship. By nature, Philosophy can be uncompromisingly critical of long established tradition and may at times generate viewpoints that may give philosophers the label of iconoclast. Philosophy is basically love of wisdom and a quest for truth. It is a fundamental research that unearths by the rational light of reason. It delves into truth not for the fact that truth is necessary but because the truth which is known is minimal. By nature, truth is infinite and transcendental but Philosophy tends to unravel it through critical reflection.

Resulting from the above is the fact that philosophy is primarily an activity to gain a better understanding of the world among us and a better understanding of us. This is a reflective insight into the problem and meaning of existence. Engagement with this type of activity is what Plato called "examined life".

### 3. Development

Development as a concept has different definitions. This difference in definitions depends on who is attempting to define it based on intellectual discipline. Development is seen as one in which the Gross National Product (GDP) or Per Capital Income experience sustainable growth (Iyoha, 1996). The classical economist see development as growth in income and infrastructural facilities. Other definitions see development as people's ability to live modern or civilised life through access to such facilities as good road, qualitative health care services, pipe bore water, qualitative education and even abundance of food and for others it involves equitable distribution of goods and services (Izibil & Enuogho, 2002-2003: 27).

On the other hand, the Marxists see development as a multi-dimensional process which transcends economic progress. It focuses on man and his well-being. Rodney posits that, development in human society is a many-sided process. At the level of individual, it implies increased skills and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, discipline, responsibility and material well-being... At the level of society or groups, it implies an increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relations... In the past, development has always meant the increased ability to guard the independence of social group (Rodney 1972:62).

Rodney's view on development can be summed up in three stages, the individual, the group and the mode of production. The Marxists listed the following as necessary for real development:

- (i) Free, compulsory and universal basic Education
- (ii) Improvement in the education and training of the working population.
- (iii) Raising the standard of living of the people
- (iv) Improvement in health of the people, by all round provision of health facilities
- (v) Making sure that levels of consumption of material, social and spiritual goods and services are raised.

The belief of the Marxist is that, if the above listed conditions are met, it will definitely produce all round individual with the capacity to contribute to development. However, the multidimensional aspect of development such as, economic, political, social, religious, technological, among others need human development for others to transmute into real development because Man is at the center of development process. The development process must therefore promote dignity. The ultimate aim of development is the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population on the basis their full participation in the process of development and fair distribution of the benefits therefrom.

Development is a process that translates human integrity from potentiality to actuality. This implies the commercial and effectual relationships among human beings and it involves the identity of 'who develops' with 'what is to be developed'. According to Iroegbu, this process correlatively involves three orders: the existentialists, the essentialists and the progressive/becoming with self-contradiction (Iroegbu, 2005: 123).

Emanating from the above, the three orders represent man, what to be developed or availability of resources of nature that are meant to be tapped for development and the critical insight into how they can be harnessed positively for ideal development i.e. for betterment of humanity, Man is at the center of any development plan.

### 4. Why Africa is Underdeveloped

Africa is the largest second continent in the world with a land mass of 3.3 million Kilometer square and population of over one billion people. But sad enough, the continent is still home to the largest number of least developed countries. "whereas standard of living in other continent has risen over time, in Africa, present standards of living are not better than what they were two decades ago. High level of unemployment, inflation, poverty, among

others, appear to be the only legacy the continent is capable of passing on from one generation to the other” (Mugabe 199:1:22). As a matter of fact, Mugabe made this analysis over twenty years ago, but it is an apt description of Africa even in 2021. Going by specific instances, a nation like Nigeria turned out graduates every year but 75% of the graduates’ population is regarded as unemployed while about 70% of the entire population live below poverty line. Epileptic power supply, infrastructural decay, high debt profile, political crisis, sectional violence, militant outburst and ethnic agenda that threaten peaceful existence are some of the ills that pervades the polity.

“African situation is made more complex by the problem of bad government and political instability”. (Okunade 1998:128). This is traced to lack of good leadership. The leadership scene in Africa is a brazen disregard for the constitution, authoritarianism, kleptocracy among other things that prevail. Modestus describes this challenges in following words:

*Leadership in Africa in the contemporary time is besieged by two direct neo-colonial forces that work against the interest of the common good in Africa. The first is the indirect and but present grip of those same colonial powers on Africa countries. In this wise, the colonial powers have not given up any real power it had over its colonies. They overtly manipulate them. The second is the home made and self-influenced woes. In this sense, the African leaders exhibit self-interested values, materialistic sentiment and insensibility to the woes of the public... Head of government become presidential monarchs who use their office and state power to steal the national wealth, exercise excessive powers, exercise self-interested politics* (Modestus, 2008:285)

There is enormous problem with leadership in Africa. This has manifested in several other problems that hinder the development of the continent. The intensity of the problem generated by bad leadership reflects in Achebe’s thought that, the trouble with Nigeria, is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land, the Nigeria problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility of the challenge of personal examples which are the hail mark of true leadership,” (Achebe 1938:1) specifically; Oladipo posits that:

*Nigeria today is far from being a viable state. “Not only are the social institutions that should regulate social life and strengthen the capacity of the individual and the society for coping with challenges of life weak and pathological also the worst human*

*instincts predominate in individual conduct and human relations in consequence, the task of nation building has floundered and national development has become a mirage* (Oladipo, 2008:86).

The quest for development has been a difficult one and scholars have analysed severally but the problem still persists. In some such as Daniel Effiong, Bayo Okunade, Milton Obote, etc. Slave trade and colonialism created the problem. As expressed by Olufemi Mimiko:

*The nascent, autonomous and autonomous economy system of the people were completely stifled, then the political and economic autonomy of the ruling group in the continents were destroyed. This is debased the African person and his wrought to progress...* (Mimiko, 1999: 270).

Writing in the same vein, Daniel Offiong posits that “the beginning of Africa under development can be traced to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the legitimate trade and the eventual partitioning of Africa” (Offiong, 1980:14). In further intensification of this position, Okwudiba Nnoli argues that “the colonial economy destroyed the independence of the local population rendering the people powerless to re-organise their internal and external economic activities (Nnoli 198:1:122) A crucial aspects of the historical development of Nigeria whose implications we need to understand is that, the nation started as a colonial creation:

The purpose of its creation was not to enhance the capacity of the people to achieve a better life for themselves. Rather the country was invented in other to maximise returns from colonial enterprise hence, the Nigerian states evolved not as an instrument for the provision of public benefits but as a weapon of exploitation. (Oladipo, 2000:30).

Since the states is an instrument of control and dispossession, then it could not enhance the capacity of the people for self-development nor engender the intuitional framework that will facilitate social development. The problem of under development still persist to this very moment in Nigeria. Under development has been institutionalised in the form politicians and armies of liberation all over Africa. Bad leadership, corruption, wrong ideology, low level of technological development, ethnicity among others have further worsened the spate of underdevelopment. Now in a review, there is a need to balance Rodney’s text. “How Europe underdevelopment Africa” by writing How Europe and Africa underdeveloped Africa.

In the midst of these diverse researches, the problem of Africa remain intractable especially, when compared with the historic advancement in other continent, Africa is yet to key into the prevailing trend of development. Oguejiorfor substantiates that:

Africa's problem appear all the more acute in our days given the progressive changes taking place in other parts of the world which were formerly grouped within the awkward club of third world. Despite its long years of economic stagnation, Latin America is rising to challenges of its difficult history. In politics, it has almost thrown dictatorship overboard and installed a fledgling democracy... partly as a side effect of this fact, its economy, despite the apparently intractable injustice is generally growing from strength to strength... Brazil, the erstwhile notorious international debtor has almost miraculously curbed the galloping inflation of the 70s... (Ogujiorfor, 2001: 23).

However, in spite of the fundamental progress in countries like South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, China among others. Africa and indeed Nigeria is intricately mired in the net of under development. Until 1961, a nation like Korea was a poor and materially deficient third nation. It lacked political stability but "overall today Korea has the ninth largest economy in the world. In 1996, the country was the sixth largest producer of crude steel products and automobiles; the second largest ship-building nation after Japan and the highest consumer of fertilizer products". (Mimiko, 1996: 28-32). If Korea could be so transformed then before splitting into South and North Korea, why is Nigeria still tied to the inglorious spot of underdevelopment and how will the country be rescued from the bane of development?

There is no doubt that many African nations have put in place programmes and policies for development, but in most cases these policies fail to generate the expected result due to corruption, inconsistency and ineffective implementation. In many cases, the programmes do not capture the prevailing cultural reality on ground, neither do they match the existential experience of the people. Above all instead of giving a total or holistic appraisal of the problem, most analyses are couched in economic and technological terms alone. This material consideration of development neglects the moral dimension and brings about proliferation of negative consequences like selfishness, overt individualism, unhealthy rivalry and divisive competitiveness among citizens which could be term "African mentality". We cannot doubt the fact, the human

society is experiencing fast advances in education, science and technology but at the same time there are serious social upheaval and moral failures that need serious attention. The point that must not be missed is that material reductionism as a defiling principle of progress degrade the human person and elevate material pursuit far above other things.

However, sequel to the above paragraph, there is a wide gap between the technical and the ethical in the formulation and implementation of Africa's development agenda. Wiredu asserts that:

*Scientific and technological advancement do not of themselves ensure the attainment of humanistic ideal. Science and technology lead to industrialisation, which in turn is apt to lead to extensive urbanization, which in turn, is apt to manifest itself in the form of crime and all sorts of social inclemency... a technologically advanced country can be severally, underdeveloped morally.* (Wiredu, 1993: 56).

Wiredu position is that, the quest for technological advancement must be merged or complimented by ideas that will prioritise human values. Tools and technology do not produce human progress. "Technological advancement frequently brings about unemployment as robots replaces human beings. It causes change in social and moral standards and often involves hazards to people's health and safety" (Eboh, 1996:109) "Technology can liberate man from drudgery, however, they can also have dehumanizing effects and be potentially dangerous if there is no self-discipline and dedication to enduring values." (Titus, 1997: 43). Technological sophistication is an aspect and not the core of development (Wiredu, 1980: 43- 44). An undisputed fact is that Africa and indeed Nigeria has enormous human and material resources which if properly harnessed will effectively bring about development. But, the rich endowment of resources is not enough to ensure economic development. For this to crystallise into development, Mancur Olson gives two criteria. The first is "the paradoxical condition of secured and well defined individual rights. The second one is that "there is no predation of any kind (Olson, 2000: 195-196). However, the political and economic model of Nigeria makes it very difficult for these conditions to be met. A single group can get power to manipulate these conditions to their instances, when the state cannot match its regulative and beneficent function it resorts to the use of force and draconian policies.

## **5. Rethinking African Development: The Introduction of Philosophy**

Sociologist, Economics, Historians, Anthropologist Political Scientists among others have studied and propounded series of solution to the problem of underdevelopment in Africa but most of the recommendations are one dimensional, academically conflicting and in desperate need of a synthesizer. This synthesis is one of the intellectual preoccupations of Philosophers. Partly, the problem of under development prevailed in proposition is problematic because of possible replies: Are there not Philosophers in Nigeria and in government? How do you consider the cynics and philosophical illiterates who see philosophy as the department for academic concerns or noted for armchair reflection and foolish questions? In this prospective, a philosopher is visualised as someone who sits with head in hand pondering on every abstract and abstruse matter which have not practical relevance to life. "(Popkin and Stroll, 1956: xiii). But without much ado, these positions miss the substance of philosophy. There is an urgent need to put philosophy as the foundation of development and as the moderator cum stabilizer of development. Now, this is the moment when the clarion call of Oguejiofor is critically important. According to him, "those who are engaged in the philosophical enquiry in the African continent should review the relevance of their pursuit to continent bedeviled by apparently endless and intractable problem" (Oguejiofor, 2001:13).

Africa is in dire need of applied philosophy which could bring out intelligence solution to the problem of development in Africa. Moreover, the intense controversies over authenticity, content, methodology that previously dominated African Philosophy are no longer the issues at all. The business of Philosophy vis-a-vis development is no more the definition of the disciplinary integrity. This is the time to create a nexus between decolonization of the mind and globalization of the African and economic woes which continue to undermine the status of Nigeria or what can be termed synthetic philosophy. A philosophy, that probe into the workings of other discipline in the remaking of the African continent. This does not suggest total abdication of the theoretical responsibility of Philosophy but the concerns with ontology must be complemented with radical intervention on African situation. Philosophy offers this critical insight. Philosophy is uncompromisingly critical, undeterred by the thralldom of tradition, ignite mental curiosity and teaches that beyond the boundary of what is taken for granted, there are unsuspected and diverse possibilities.

It is true that, Philosophy has its own problems but it is no paradox that it solves the problem of others. It endorses a culture of reasoning that enhances social well-being. Oguejiofor describes this in the following words:

*The contribution that philosophy can make to the ameliorating of the human condition is understood in diverse manner depending on which current a particular thinkers is following... in general philosophy is seen as providing the ability and the knowledge to fulfill the public function of rulership of the political state. It is also pursued for the inescapable vicissitudes of life and also for enriching life in a manner that is different from, and is above the material and the practical... philosophy must have contributions to make both in the understanding and the solution of stupendous problems of Africa (Oguejiofor, 2001:2:1).*

Emphatically, philosophy has a role to play in Africa development but this role is not achievable via intellectual supremacist claim and uncompromising defense of ethno-philosophy. We must note that culture and traditions are amenable to change. A static philosophy that thrives on analysis of the past and applying restricted views is doomed to fail. Infact, the interpretations of reality may differ from culture to culture but this does not totally rule out the possibility of intellectual dialogue and interpretation of mindsets. Mere description or narration of African historical exploit do not translate to development. African needs radical and comprehensive overhaul of culture, ideology and policies for development. In line with this and beyond the boundary of grandiose socio political and economic philosophers, there is a need for critical Philosophy, of the type expatiated by Oladipo. According to him:

*To be significant African philosophy has to be a critical reconstruction which will enable Africans to separate the backward aspects of their cultures from those aspects that are worth keeping. The kind of cultural reappraisal that is being urged does recognise the need to promote an interest in African culture in the contemporary world. However, it also requires that Africans Strive to see the kind of modification in this culture or aspects of it that are required as parts of efforts to promote modern way of thinking on man, society and nature in Africa... the critical engagement with African culture that is being suggested sees culture as a dynamic phenomenon which changes with modification in its environment both social and physical. (Oladipo, 1996:84).*

This idea is also consistent with Wiredu's critique of ideology. He stressed "the need to think critically about the abstracts notions which lies at the base of

ideological discourse” (1980:58). Another aspect of the critique which philosophers should not neglect is the critical engagement with other academic disciplines, whether in the social sciences, the humanities or even the natural sciences, as a way of exposing the ideological underpinnings of received, usually moribund theoretical model or research programmes which are dominant in African academic establishment.

This position equally features prominently in Claude Ake’s *Social Science as Imperialism: The Theory of Development* (Ake, 1980). In Oladipo’s exposition, commitment to this kind of critique is crucial because it provides the theoretical foundation for the technicist approach to development which many African leaders and policy makers cherish. Many African philosophers have criticized the prevailing socio-political and economic systems. They have queried the diverse policies and programmes for developments but the issue transcends this. “We need to recognise that criticism is not enough to be effective, it has to be accompanied by a projection of alternative social theories which will reflect our aspirations and the values inherent in them. To be significant and relevant to African needs such social theories must be based on painstaking study of African societies, proper analysis of the African experience and finally, they have to be based on proper understanding of the set of values which inform the definition of African goals in the contemporary world and future aspiration (Oladipo, 196:87)

Therefore, the challenges facing Nigeria can only be resolved through the employment of our rational faculty. Owolabi substantiates this. According to him:

*I have argued persistently that the philosophical discipline cannot be ignored or relegated. If we refuse and continue to avoid the philosophical perspective in the resolution of our problems, then humanity is heading for a perilous time. (Owolabi, 2011:23)*

Though the tenability of this position can be countered by the fact that all disciplines are relevant and prioritizing philosophy in the midst of other disciplines is unwarranted. The economists, the accountants, the technologist among others all have roles to play in the transformation of the nation. This position is intellectually sound but incomprehensive. Philosophy can be interpreted as a policeman in the knowledge production industry maintaining discipline and order. It is a moderator of other disciplines, a coordinator and adjudicator on the efficiency of other disciplines. It is a medium of inter

disciplinary research. If ideal conditions are provided, philosophy will work as an intellectual catalyst among the academic disciplines, a mediator - between the humanities and the sciences” (Jung, 2002:2)

## 6. Conclusion

Development is therefore in abeyance in a country with leadership problem and anarchic situation. Any war ravage country will not be economically prosperous. For the past ten years now, Nigeria has been battling with the problem of Boko Haram in the Northern part of the country and militant outrage in the Niger Delta. The Herdsmen are also in rampage now in all parts of the country killing and maiming people. Billions of Naira which could have been used to develop the Nation has been spent on procurement of arms and ammunitions, providing succor for the displaced and most leaders have seen this as a way of enriching themselves.

Corruption is like a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabric of our country and has negative values for National Development. As a result of these negative values, politicians see the occupation of high position in government as an opportunity to amass wealth by stealing our collective wealth. Leaders divert funds earmarked for capital project into their private bank accounts and consequently our roads are in bad state, healthcare delivery in comatose, educational system in shambles as government refused to spend money on public education to pave way for their private institutions, developmental policies depressed and the power sector in moribund.

The above negative consequences are result of unethical mind. Being critical of issues/ideas or existing rules does not mean condemning such issues, ideas or rules but an attempt to see whether such can be modified, corrected or replaced with more reasoned ideas. Philosophy therefore seeks to bring to the fore the many unsuspected possibilities in the knowledge production and brings together diverse recommendations and match culture with development.

In other to develop critical mind worth its salt, mind that can be reasonably infer conclusion from number of premises, that can subject itself to independence thought, that can rationally take decision without being guided, that will be critical of ideas, that reasonably reflects on situations projects into the future, that has spiritual might, that can decide between what is rational and irrational, then

Philosophy is recommended to be included in the curriculum of all levels of education and to be thought be seasoned philosophers.

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