

# AN APPRAISAL OF THE CRITICAL ROLES OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHERS IN THE QUEST FOR DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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## **Abstract:**

The debate concerning the relevance of philosophy and philosophers has been a perennial discourse in the history of mankind. It has indeed set philosophers and other scholars into opposing camps as the debate is still on-going. Some are of the view that philosophy is of no practical use to man, because they see it as mere speculations and a matter for mental or cerebral agilities. Another group vehemently considers philosophy to be the core and bedrock of any human development. This second position springs from the fact that philosophy is inherent in every other discipline adjudged vital to human well-being. Yet, another opinion maintains that it is only some branches of philosophy that are practically useful to man and the society. Each of these positions is premised on one's conception, definition and understanding of philosophy and its essence. Therefore, this paper tries to argue that the involvement of philosophy and philosophers in social, moral, political and economic issues have contributed immensely to human development and the society at large. And in fact, still has a lot to contribute to development in every human society particularly, Africa. This paper therefore through the instrument of analytic methodology situates the roles of philosophers within the context of; evolution and clarification of ideas, scrutinizing the international organizations' policies, re-orientating the African Leaders' mind towards self-reliance and liberation of African minds from Western imposition and culture of disdain for African thing.

**Keywords:** Development, African Philosophy, Society, Self-reliance and Liberation

## **Introduction**

The quest for development and relevance in the world order today has been the paramount preoccupation of most African countries since the advent of modernity or the new version called globalization. Accordingly, the doggedness of this quest is indicative of certain psychological hangovers, which presupposes certain definition and unpleasant experience traceable to Africa's historic origin of slavery and colonization" (Okore 9). The effects of this period of aberration have reached an epidemic dimension such that when the African personality is interrogated, it often reflects the reality of a people in constant need of help due to exorbitant debt burdens, chronic poverty and hunger, as well as chronic unemployment and infrastructural decay in most African countries. Therefore, Africans are left to struggle for survival despite the technological advancement recorded in the continent around new Stone Age era. Even in the wake of globalization, according to Nkrumah, "Africa still did not succeed in keeping pace with the rest of human race in western world in the momentous match towards development" (79).

In fact, with the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the continent was disposed of her able bodied, healthy young men and women who could have contributed to the developmental Stride in Africa. This caused a heavy blow from which Africa is yet to recover from. Seemingly, even after independence, the new global economic arraignments are tailored towards maintaining already widened gap between the West and Africa. This explains why in most

cases the international economic policies tend to favour the advanced nations and often stifle development in Africa. It is therefore in view of this that this paper tries to analyse the vital roles of philosophers in the perennial quest for development in Africa. The attempt is to situate the roles of philosophy and Philosophers within a context.

### **Philosophy and the Question of Relevance**

The question regarding whether or not philosophy is useful to man has been a perennial concern. While some are of the opinion that philosophy has no practical use to man and see it as the core of any human development, some believe philosophy is merely a matter for mental and mere speculations for cerebral engagement. Therefore, according to Omoregbe, "each of these positions is premised on one's conception, definition and understanding of philosophy and its essence" (1). This argument stems from the fact that the involvement of Philosophy and Philosophers in social issues is not a widespread practice like the Political scientists. Purportedly, philosophy is seen to either transcend question of development or has no competent deal with a topic requiring the attention of positive sciences, such as economics, sociology and politics. Nevertheless, one should not forget that the discordance between the human aspirations and the objective world has always provoked philosophical reflections. And so, African developmental crisis is not completely devoid of philosophical discourse. It is against this background that the question of social change and policy transform into philosophical categories.

### **Philosophy and Human History**

Philosophy as a discipline emanated from wonder and man's quest to comprehend and explain reality in the world. It has helped man to discover the essential wonders that necessitated the exploration of the world and meaningfulness of life. Thus, in the light of the above, philosophers of all ages and cultures share in common the problem of the utility of their enterprise in human affair (Oguejiofor xvi). Though, as earlier observed philosophy seems to be an abstract and abstruse enterprise but it has much to offer. The reason is that all efforts in philosophical enterprise are aimed at unraveling, understanding and conquering the problematic endangering human existence. Such problems includes; poverty, sickness, hunger, suffering, death, war, conflict and injustice etc.

However, in philosophical realm, it is believed that anything done without purpose is meaningless and so, philosophy though theoretical, a deep critical inquiry into its essence and nature would reveal its practical aspect in terms of what it can offer. It is in view of this perspective that this paper seeks to briefly examine some Philosophers, whose Philosophical ideologies have contributed to development of their society in the past. Socrates makes a distinctive remark and landmark in educating the people (the youths) of Athens on the need to detest corruption and embrace good and moral life. His relentless quest for stable and constant moral order and self-motivational thought brought about a great deal of change in Athens though this led to his death. More so, Plato's idea of government in his Book; *'The Republic'* also had a great deal of impart in changing the system of governance in Athens during his own time too. The list goes on with regard to philosophers who have with their philosophical ideas made practical and positive changes in their various societies. Like, Socrates and Plato, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke's notion of democracy and social contract theory has great influence on the constitutions of Europe and America, as well as the democracies of the world (Omoregbe 1-4). Therefore, the philosophical ideas and postulations of these great philosophers are still of immense importance and as such, relevant to any nation that strives towards development. This stems from the fact that, most of their philosophical ideas are geared towards maintaining good moral conduct, social justice, and good governance in human societies.

## **The Critical Roles of Philosophers in African Development**

### **i. Evolution and Clarification of Ideas**

Indication from the above analysis shows that philosophers have vital roles to play in Africa's crisis of development. These roles can therefore be viewed in relations to propagation and clarification of ideas and values that guide the thought of development plans and policies just as western philosophers did in their various societies. It therefore implies that African philosophy should not just remain at theoretical and argumentative level alone because, it has enormous roles to play in the contemporary African society which is presently confronted with multifaceted problems both natural and man-made (Ujomu 62). The task of African philosophers therefore, is to first and foremost promote and re-evaluate the nature of Africans' reasoning so as to nurture the scientific spirit of the West. This will provide a useful guide on how viable social order can be achieved in Africa. The fundamental question that stems from the above explanation therefore has to do with whether or not African philosophers can impart any positive effect in the developmental process of Africa. This question needs answer in order to ascertain the authenticity and the viability of African philosophy and philosophers in the developmental strive of the continent. In view of the quest the roles of African Philosophers must be seen as an attempt aimed at redirecting Africa towards development. In this way, the critical task of reassessing the African socio-political economic policies must be the focus in order to enable us revive those ones that foster development.

In addition, the role of philosophers cannot be assessed without taking into consideration the crisis of identity which is the basis of developmental problem of Africa. With this, one can now understand that African philosophy and Philosophers have the important role of provoking the awareness and revival of abandoned traditional values such as; communalism, brotherhood and the sense of value that places the human person development over material gain. These were what promoted common sense of development and equity in traditional African societies. By extension, African Philosophers saddled with the task of evolving ideologies suitable to counter the inferiority complex, over-dependency culture and absolute reliance on external aids which have overshadow African socio-economic space. As Okolo rightly opines:

What indeed makes philosophy in Africa is the fact of the African self and world. Thus, the truth of the African and his world constitute the essential role it seeks to understand, clarify, and explain every aspect of African experience, of the total reality of the African (23).

It can therefore be implied from Okolo's hypothesis that it is the responsibility of African philosophers to provide answers to some fundamental questions arising from developmental crisis in Africa. That is, answers to questions like: 'What are the causes of insecurity in many African nations?' 'Why wars?' 'Why is African continent not developing at the same pace with Europe, America and Asia?' 'Which way forward for Africa?' These are fundamental questions posed by philosophical reflection on the African crisis, and it is only African philosophy and Philosophers who can profoundly answer these fundamental questions by formulating sustainable ideologies and strategies that can match the African peculiarity

### **ii. Scrutinizing the Policies and Strategies of the International Organizations**

African Philosophers are of paramount importance in the area of evaluation and scrutinization of ideologies, economic plans and strategies that the International Organizations impose on Africa in the name of globalization and modernism. This is necessary because, most often these ideas, values, economic plans and strategies are not

well articulated and scrutinized by our leaders and policy makers before imbibing them and as such, they often compound Africa's problems the more. For example, the Structural Adjustment Programmes that plunged Nigeria and most African nations into long term debt was due to poor articulation and implementation. Thus, since Africa cannot avoid contact with the rest of the world in terms of economic and socio-political relation, it then beholds on African philosophers to evaluate this unavoidable relation in order to promote ideological synthesis and balance.

### **iii. Re-Orientating the African Leaders' Minds towards Self-Realization**

Philosophers are always regarded as intellectuals and an intellectual in this context means a frontier or a light in the crusade towards the liberation of Africa from the shackles of all forms of sub-human conditions. Therefore, to belong to this group is to be involved in the movement towards African liberation. That is, a movement that is aimed at liberating Africans from the most endemic problems such as; underdevelopment, social and cultural alienation, inferiority complex and low self-esteem as well as over dependence on foreign aid. From the above understanding therefore, the African intellectuals or philosophers ought to be educators of the contemporary African society towards self-reliance and self-awareness. And in this task of creating awareness, Ekwuru emphasizes three basic important points, "conscientization for the change of mental attitude, conscientization for peace and social justice, and conscientization for a new framework of civilization" (242).

The above assumption shows that the whole process of conscientization is indispensable if Africa must conquer the dependency culture, western ideological imposition and economic domination all of which have done great deal of damages to her economic growth and development. Undeniably, the first task of conscientization programme is to promote a total change of mental attitude so as to achieve the true spirit of African culture of self-reliance shattered by colonization. Second, it beholds on the African Philosophers to be the frontiers and advocators of peace, mutual benefits and social justice between the developed and developing nations. And the third task calls for a new trend of civilization history and brand which will be such that promotes integral development in Africa. Hence, these must be the concern of African Philosophers or intellectuals. But, to achieve all these; they too must embark on self-decolonization by freeing themselves from the negative influences and forces they attempt to debunk.

However, one cannot deny the fact that Africa is endowed with great intellectuals of excellent mental capabilities and high reasoning abilities, but nothing seems to be working in Africa in this regard. Basically, unlike the Politicians, there is always high gulf between the common man and the Philosophers in most African societies and this hegemony has not in any way encouraged good learning relationship. In other words, there is lack of an atmosphere where cordial relationship that can create the forum where the needs, plights, aspirations and problems of the common man can be articulated to form the basis of Philosopher's postulations and ideologies. For instance, Philosophers like Plato, Socrates, Aristotle and others had a cordial connection with the commoners and this enhanced their philosophies, ideologies and postulations which are still very relevant in our contemporary world today. Therefore, contemporary African Philosophers or intellectuals must imbibe this same spirit to enhance good understanding of general Africa's predicaments.

Furthermore, with particular reference to the leadership failure, corruption and political instability in most African nations, Philosophers must play an active role in the political process of their respective countries. Implying that, African Philosophers should be actively involved in the formation of political structures, rules and regulations that can or will promote transparency, fairness, honesty, accountability and selflessness. In fact, they should be prepared to contest for political posts in order to effect changes that will

educate the people on the need to despise corruption and embrace honesty and transparency. As suggested by (Osudibia 93), the socio-political situation of the continent can be stabilized through philosophical perspicacity,” and the utmost participation of Philosophers in the democratization process and political transformation of the continent. Plato asserted that: just as asserted by Plato:

Until philosophers are kings or the kings and princess of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoners' natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils---no, nor human race” (The Republic 203).

Here, Plato's observation becomes relevant to African situation because, Africa can only move forward if the Philosophers become active players in political and democratic terrain of the continent just as Socrates, Plato, John Locke and others did in their respective societies during their own time. As such, a good socio-political philosophy will be a great tool to move Africa forward.

#### **iv. Liberation of African Minds from Western Imposition**

Critical reflection on how colonial influence has permanently battered Africa and how modernity has succeeded in breeding up confuse ideological thought in all facet of African existence, one would agree that Philosophers have a great task ahead. Particularly, they are confronted with the enormous task of formulating educational, economic and political edifices that will match up with the western model in order to curb all forms of domination, unfruitful and unnecessary alignment. Thus, with Philosophers' involvement in governance affairs, the overall assumption of the dependency theory that presents Africa as a continent at the cross-road, as far as she continues to borrow ideas and monetary assistances from the west will be thrown overboard. In addition, critical philosophical disposition and knowledge will provoke the awareness in Africans' minds the urgent need to reassert some abandoned traditional developmental values because “knowledge” according Francis Bacon, is power” (Omoregbe 2). This qualitative education is multi-dimensional and inestimable in nature because it is such that frees the mind from back seat. As such, this can be attained only when the African philosophers use the knowledge they have acquired to impart on attitude and character formation of the younger generations. And if this is done, the youth will begin to appreciate the urgent need to embrace the culture of honesty, transparency, uprightness and accountability. In addition this, trustworthy and selfless leaders will begin to emerge in Africa as well as a better African society where development becomes a non-issue.

#### **v. Stimulating Respect for the Principle of Affirmative Action and Social Justice**

With our exposition of how the West have contributed to the underdevelopment of Africa through colonial dogmas and inhuman disposition towards African people, African Philosophers must be at the fore front in challenging the West to play vital roles in the development of Africa. This is necessary because, the principle of affirmative action and social justice owes it that the West should pay for their actions in Africa by way of structural adjustment. The framework of the international economy must change to permit exports from developing countries. This simply implies that, the West must strategically give the developing Countries free entry to their markets to allow for better integration of Africa into global economy policies and systems. As a matter of fact, removal of trade barrier between Africa and other developed countries of the world will offer more inflow of capital many times than the amount external aids give to Africa by the international organizations and other worlds (Bhagwati 231). It will be more helpful for her development than giving aids in forms of money which eventually ends up in the personal accounts of some few privileged.

In addition, another vital role of contemporary African philosophers is to use their intellectual and reasoning power to demand for debts forgiveness or cancellation for most African indebted nations. This will help a great deal in saving resources that could be expended on productive investments to promote development and improve living conditions of the masses, rather than long term servicing of external debts. As noted earlier, the uneven waves of resources and economic capabilities is what gave birth to the reality of wide gap between nations, it is therefore the role of African Philosophers to offer reason why advanced nations should “condemn this pervasive mechanism that impede the development of the less advanced countries” (John Paul II *Sollicitude Rei Socialis* n. 16) He suggested this because justice demands that Western nations be gravely responsible towards revitalizing the economy of African nations, from which they derived the initial resources through slavery and colonialism.

#### **vi. Revitalization of Traditional African sense of Self-Reliance**

In the quest for development in Africa, African philosophers are also saddled with the task of revitalizing the traditional African sense of autonomous development. Autonomous development in this paper signifies self-reliance in terms of economic growth, scientific and technological advancement, democracy and educational model in African context. The traditional African development initiatives should be predicated on ideology of renaissance, of the spirit of Negritude, Black Consciousness, Unity, Nationalism and Socialism. Thus, renaissance in this context has a lot to do with development process because it is the revival of tradition autonomous sense of development of Stone Age era which was the basis of African cultural self-reliance and economic independence. However, this revival will again provoke the spirit of self-development as against the dependency tendency common in Africa. Moreover, the issue of renaissance of development is also the issue of the search for self-identity and continental transformation from backward stage to progressive stage. But, it should be stated here that autonomous development does not in any way suggest an absolute “isolation of the continent from the rest of the world, it is gradual and does not also suggest automaticity of success” (Owusu 44).

More than anything else, the spirit of autonomous development and African renaissance also suggest going to the root of the African crisis of development, with a view to identifying the causes and solutions. Hence, it is a critical search for the ways and means to improve the well-being of the people, which is the hallmark of development in African perspective. In view of this, Ekwuru's postulation becomes relevant when he asserted that “The decision of turning back with zest in an attitude of love and devotion toward Africa is born out of the event of self-discovery. The self is discovered and rediscovered within a particular cultural context” (Ekwuru, 235).

Therefore, turning back to the root of Africa's past must be in the light of planning and projection towards the reconstruction of the fallen walls of abandoned African values and heritages. That is, a kind of mental decolonization and mind reorientation. Similarly, Irele remarks that:

The African crisis today is as much inward, psychological and moral, as it is structurally related to objective realities, and thus should be tackled at the level of the mind and action” to attain self- discovery (Irele 1.)

This again falls within the enormous roles of philosophy and Philosophers as well because the quest for the revival of autonomous development suggests a situation and time when Africans need to evolve their own unique space in life, in terms of development and modernity. This is needed in order to overcome the new model imposed from the outside

world. Hence, the spirit of African renaissance as explained above concerns the rediscovery of the African values that can be useful for the development and survival of the black race in a globalized world. Cheik A. Diop reiterated this further that:

All this will only be possible the day Africa rediscovers herself. This is to say, the day she stops feeding on all these sordid beliefs that have been methodologically dished out to her, [...] Africa will easily reject as nauseating all these unhealthy beliefs that have atrophied her soul and continued to impede her ability to attain her full potentials (Diop 232).

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

Analysis in this paper has made it clear that only by critical evaluation and re-establishment of Africa's vital place that has been twisted, smeared and concealed in the world history via Colonialism and slavery can Africa begin to move towards self-reliance and development. In other words, when the physical and psychological shackles of colonialism, backwardness and salvage mentality are overcome through philosophical disposition and ideas, only then Africa will be lifted out of her developmental crisis. This paper also suggests that African Philosophers have a vital role to play as the continent searches for a developmental model. From all explanations, this paper has proved that African Philosophers and philosophy are indispensable tools needed to chart a new path to development in Africa instead of making Western trajectories, strategies and policies the imperatives for the continent if it must be developed and modernized. Njoroje emphasizes that the "Modern civilization is in dire need of philosophy to help in the illumination of man's present dilemma and to suggest the new path man has to follow in the pursuit of value, conceived in moral terms" (Njoroje 101).

In other words, this paper admonishes African intellectuals and Philosophers as well as political leaders must not solely hinge our developmental model on the western ideologies and strategies, because African development and modernity must begin from within and by Africans themselves. In view of this, this paper therefore opines that African philosophy and philosophers have been relevant and still relevant in the search for development in Africa.

From the above observation, this paper implores the African intellectuals, philosophers of emergent and renaissance, endowed with the needed intellectual skills and expertise for the contemporary sophisticated world to consider their task to explore African human and natural resources as well as values to promote self-reliance in Africa. In doing this, attention should be given to the revitalization of the desirable traditional values and culture of autonomous development in order to debunk the unending inferiority complex ravaging the African continent. Self-reliance in this study is not advocating for total economic or political separation of Africa from the rest of the world but a kind of regulating her overdependence on external forces for her developmental models. Hence, once this is achieved, Africa will begin to look inward to harness her potentials and recourse for development rather than depending on international directives and ideologies that often hindered her development.

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