



Introduction Philosophy and Development

Lansana Keita*

These days, Africa is seen as an underdeveloped or developing continent, but this qualification has been with us for many decades, dating immediately from post-colonial times. What is meant by this is that Africa as a whole lags behind other areas in terms of measurable economic output and general ‘quality of life’ indices for its inhabitants. An evident paradox in the attempts made to solve the problem of underdevelopment in Africa is that the vast majority of the research into the causes of Africa’s present condition emanates from research centres and universities located in the West. And what is evident about the majority of such theories is that they tend to focus narrowly on strictly economic issues geared towards ‘alleviating poverty’ and creating piecemeal conditions for ‘sustainable development’. The collection of essays in this issue approach the problem of development from a broader, more holistic perspective with analyses that explore Africa’s present status theoretically, from the standpoint of all the social sciences, not just economics.

The reason for this broader approach is that this collection of papers attempts to explain the issue of development from the standpoint of philosophical analysis, given its evident intractability. One reason for attacking the problem from the standpoint of philosophy is that philosophy, above all, is concerned with critical analysis of all forms of knowledge, and that given the intractability of the problem of development in Africa, attempts to examine this problem from all angles would undoubtedly be more illuminating than employing standard modes of analysis. It is also instructive to note that, merely for reasons of reference, the development of the West was accompanied by important

* Department of Philosophy, Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, University of Arizona, USA.

theoretical inputs from its philosophers and other thinkers. Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, the doctrinal text for modern liberal economics, was a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow. Karl Marx of *Das Kapital* was also a philosopher, and so too J.S. Mill. Theories of social transformation cannot ignore the issues of democracy and governance, and in this regard, Westerners who discuss economics and development cannot avoid reference to the social contract theories of J.J. Rousseau, Hobbes, and others. For Africa, the synthetic theoretical-philosophical approaches of Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, and other theorists have also had much influence.

In this eclectic collection of essays by political economists, philosophers, and sociologists we have the essay of Samir Amin, 'Modernité et interprétations religieuses', arguing that development is essentially about attaining modernity characterized by a secular world view which includes the freedom of individuals to make their own histories, individually and collectively within the context of democracy. What this means is that development as modernity must accept the ability of individuals to challenge and even break with traditions. Amin argues that modern Islam, despite its Nahda renaissance of the nineteenth century, did not pursue the same path as that of the West, which founded its Renaissance on the civilization of ancient Greece. The West was thus able to establish a qualitative distinction between Christianity, which sought its justification in a rational theology, and secularism which was ushered in during the Age of Enlightenment. The Nahda Renaissance did not establish that same kind of distinction between religion and politics. There was no acceptable non-religious past as far as the Nahda Renaissance was concerned. So the question remains: Can development in this form take place without a revolution in the role of Islam in society? According to Amin, modern political Islam has not demonstrated capacities in this regard. This issue is important for Africa given the influence of religion on human affairs on the continent.

For Diagne, the central issue in development is the exploration of the future as a 'prospective' in time. Thus, the exploration of the concept of time as it relates to the problem of development constitutes the theme of Diagne's paper. First, Diagne critically evaluates and finds wanting the theories of time in the African sociological context as formulated by John Mbiti and French colonial theorist Levy-Bruhl. Diagne argues against Mbiti's notion that time in the Africa context is not intrinsically future oriented. With reference to the different plans and programmes for African development, such as the Lagos Plan of Action and the present NEPAD, Diagne attempts to show how the idea of time as it applies to 'prospective'

and a developmental political culture could produce for the youth of Africa a vision of a tomorrow with a future in Africa and not elsewhere.

Gordon approaches the issue of development from the perspective of Fanon, in that he argues that the question of development was already amply discussed by Fanon in his two classic works, *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*. In these two works, Gordon tells us, Fanon adumbrated two key aspects of the colonized and immediately ex-colonized: the psychological element which determines the political and economic mentality of the neo-colonized, post-colonial bourgeoisie. Gordon's interest in existentialist thought leads him to make a case for the idea that the logical result of Western normativity with regard to underdevelopment is the creation of 'problem people'. As he put it: 'The problem faced by problem people is how to be actional'. In the ensuing critique, Gordon invokes the ideas of three theorists, Sylvia Winter, Irene Gendzier and Amartya Sen, each of whom approach the problem of development from different angles. Sylvia Wynter's approach to the problem of development is to engage in epistemological analysis rather than a purely economic one in order to dissect the Western concept of the idea itself. The reason is that Western normativity necessarily implies African liminality. Only culture-systemic analysis offers a way out. Gordon's discussion of Gendzier informs us that this author has noted that development studies rarely produce alternative conceptions of the term or how to really tackle the problem itself. Gordon summarizes Wynter's critique with the observation that the latter is led to conclude that development theory is more a symptom of Western narcissism than otherwise.

Gordon then engages in an analysis of Amartya Sen's attempt to work the idea of freedom into the paradigm of development studies as an aspect of neoliberal economics. He engages in a critique of Sen's definition of freedom as being constructed within 'the philosophical language that fostered that unfreedom in the first place—namely, modern liberal political philosophy and political economy'. In response, Gordon articulates what he perceives as a 'postcolonial phenomenology'. His thesis has as its central argument the idea that development requires an existential and actional stance.

Hountondji's contribution adds some variety to this issue, in that it takes the form of a question-answer format. Hountondji tackles questions on the question of the relationship between philosophy and development as it applies to contemporary and historical African thinkers. He also discusses the contributions that thinkers such as Fanon and Nkrumah have made to the issue of African development. And he also expounds on his definition of contemporary African philosophy, its relationship to science,

and how it applies to the question of development. Of much interest too is how Hountondji deals with the pressing issue of the dependent but marginalised relationship between intellectual research in Africa and that of the European world.

Messay Kebede's thesis on development is that the problem of development exists because of the mental architecture of the post-colonial African. To prove his point, Kebede engages in a critique of what he describes as the three schools of contemporary African philosophy: ethnophilosophy, professional philosophy and African philosophical particularism. The key example afforded by ethnophilosophy is that of negritude, the intellectual product of the poet-philosopher Leopold Senghor and poet—*homme de lettres*, Aimé Césaire. Kebede rejects negritude because it 'leads to nothing else than the acceptance of marginality', despite its attempt to solve the African condition by appeal to cultural relativism. The modernist particularizers such as Hountondji and Towa are discussed by Kebede as following the Western model of philosophy as a historical tradition that requires writing and discursive analysis. Kebede's appraisal is that Hountondji's approach relegates African thought to a status of progressing only by assimilation of the intellectual traditions of the West. This, of course, runs counter to Kebede's thesis that the a priori condition for development is mental decolonisation by first positing the relativity of the historical path of the West. This leads Kebede to engage in a discussion of Mudimbe's deconstructive approach to the Western episteme and the attempt to establish a genuine African episteme instead of just another set of inventions. Kebede's solution is to modify Africa's programme to one of a 'divergent conception of evolution'. The result of this approach is that 'when the West is relativized through divergent conception, it becomes an object of utilitarian, pragmatic inquiries'. But freedom and development cannot eventuate according to Kebede unless there is the 'prior decolonization of the African mind'.

Keita attempts a holistic and diachronic approach to the question of development. His approach derives from the fact that the conventional wisdom seems to uphold the view that Africa constitutes a special case in terms of development because the continent has never been developed. Keita argues that in historical terms, Africa was, for most of human history, the centre of technological development for the whole world. This situation has changed only in the last five hundred years or so. Keita then proposes an evaluation of the idea of what the contours of a developed Africa might be from the standpoints of economic and political analysis. Current theories of development such as dependency theory and neoliberal economic theory

are also discussed within the context of their background theories of Marxism and neoclassical economics. Keita's ultimate statement is that development in Africa could only take place when the conversation itself is predominantly that of African theorists within the context of African universities and research centres. Thus maximal and concerted African agency is a necessary condition for progress in this regard.

Nyamnjoh's paper is an attempt to point out that the problem of development stems to a large extent from the alienating education bequeathed to Africa as a result of the colonial interlude. The European presence in Africa was accompanied by a Western epistemology that focused principally on a strictly empiricist and material approach to phenomena. For Nyamnjoh, this epistemology is too constraining in that on the basis of its modeling on modern science, it is preoccupied only with discovering *what* the universe is rather than *why* the universe is. Nyamnjoh argues that this limited ontology has 'serious weaknesses when compared with the popular epistemologies of the African continent'. On the contrary, 'popular epistemologies in Africa are different. They create room for *why* questions...' The problem with all this is that this Western approach to knowledge has been exported to Africa, and when 'translated into educational systems and curricula, takes the form of science as ideology and hegemony'. Nyamnjoh demonstrates how the imbibing of the Western epistemological export to Africa has had a deleterious effect on the minds of Africa. This is worth a set of critiques of the Eurocentric educational institutions that dot the continent. Nyamnjoh's solution is a vigorous effort to make more indigenous Africa's educational programmes, especially in the social sciences. He argues finally that paradigm change in educational criteria and orientation are obviously necessary for African development.

Critical analysis of the idea of development reveals that development entails not just economic ministrations about 'alleviating poverty' but also psycho-sociological analysis in the form of the examination of mental structures, beliefs, and attitudes conditioned by the colonial experience, sociological analysis in the form of examining the role that religion plays in facilitating or retarding development, and historical analysis in the form of evaluating the historical contingency of economic, political, and sociological ideas of Western provenance that are now viewed as universal and necessary for development. An examination of role of the concept of time in Africa's precolonial sociology also demonstrates that the essentialist and qualitatively different notions of time attributed to Africa cannot be supported, and hence play no role in formulating dynamically prospective theories of development.