

## Retraditionalizing the Quest: A Histori-cultural Case for Contemporary African Developmental Thought Pattern

**Noah Balogun, Toluwalope Oyeniya, Ife Ajepe and Adeyemi J. Ademowo**

### **Abstract**

Critical developmental thinking started as a speculative debate of difference(s) and otherness, metamorphosing through the obstacles of the ideologies of ‘primitive’ mentality, ‘barbaric’ cultures, and ‘uncivilized’ civilizations to its current state. However, it should be stressed that in the process of giving form to the practice of developmental thinking in Africa, philosophers, and cultural studies scholars, especially, have frequently engaged in contentious debates and defensive discourses around the place and pivotal role of culture in development (most especially the role of ethnophilosophic materials). Many perceived this style of thinking as a way of still clinging to the inferior phase of developmental project, instead of ‘moving on’ to modernity with its alluring offers. Sticking with ‘tradition’ or the ‘ethnophilosophic materials’ and all related sorts, such as norms, values, indigenous languages, etc., are therefore pronounced as harmful to development. This work is a departure from the foregoing submission that considers ‘ethnophilosophic’ materials as harmful; our focus is on the place of histori-cultural ingredients in the pursuit of ‘development from below and with people’. This, we submitted, should be of interest to scholars that genuinely seek to rejig African developmental thought pattern, which should be a blend of historical lessons and the much needed cultural changes.

**Keywords:** Africa, Philosophy, history, culture, development

### **Introduction**

*... the cultural milieu of a people is a major factor in the development process of that society. The totality of values, norms, attributes and beliefs of a society shapes that society’s social, economic, political organization and inculcate a general feeling towards development and related issue - Andah and Bolarinwa, 1994*

Diverse scholars have been concerned about African development from diverse intellectual climes. For instance, Sartre posed for the Africans, of the 1940s, the imperative to think for themselves, while Tempels inaugurated an intellectual contention which was eventually labelled as Ethnophilosophy, as catalysts to development. Ethnophilosophy, at the time, is not only considered as the *philosophy of the uninitiated*, it was also disparaged as providing an

approach to traditional humanism which in its standard forms leads to basic interpretations of traditions from within. It also constitutes a critical approach to traditional elements as weapons for a radical criticism and a reflection on African modernity with its accompanying contradictions. Furthermore, ethnophilosophy facilitates an appropriate exploitation of the tradition as a repository of signs and meanings of African authenticity. The significance of ethnophilosophy can further be highlighted thus:

- (a) It is a demonstration (using classical philosophical grids) that there is an African philosophy or African critical way of thinking, which its deep system underlies and sustains African cultures and civilization;
- (b) it is a demonstration that African philosophy is essentially an ontology organized as a deployment of interacting though hierarchically ordered forces;
- (c) It is also a demonstration that human vital unity is the epicenter of the endless dialectic of forces which collectively determine their being in relation to human existence. Viewed from these three dimensions, ethnophilosophy provides a schema for the interrogation of the core issues in African thought pattern, which can serve as ingredients for all sorts of developmental plans (Oladipo, 2009)

The efforts of Tempels and, after him Kagame, Sogolo, Oladipo, etc, constituted a direct confrontation, in their manner, with the task and challenge of African philosophy, the chief of which is 'better Africa'. Their efforts constituted reconstruction of past endeavors in order to objectively establish the temporality of African philosophy. Ethno-philosophy thus left a large ground to be covered still, in that respect. Enacting a perennial wisdom, Senghor said, "he who does not know his history is condemned to relive it". Such a wisdom makes it obvious that the cohesion of contemporary African philosophies will be judged by the efforts of the scholars and their strategies to establish a consistent dialogue between the past and the present.

### **Africa and Postcolonial Challenges of Development**

In our context, Africa, the body of knowledge that seeks for its, and her citizens', betterment go as far more back than we have documents to proof, or some thoughts embalmed in constitution, organization and paradoxical richness, an incompleteness or inherently biased perspectives; hence, it is necessary that any discourse witnessing to African knowledge must assume the structure of a discourse of competence. This is because it is a question of unknown societies who did not leave behind any evident texts but rather preserve much in its oral tradition. Obviously, and genuinely then, the task of reading and decoding the vestiges of those societies can only be best appropriated by an objective critical philosophical attitude.

The principal challenge of African philosophy today is thus that of reconstructing its own proper past. This involves a commitment to its unique epistemic archeology. Such archeology relevant to philosophical and cultural studies enterprise, must, like the current tendency of foundational orientation in African philosophy, interrogate both the basis and representation

of social and human sciences. This is an essential prerequisite to the elucidation of the epistemological conditions, ideological frontiers and procedures for the practice of philosophy in Africa. Such effort will also enhance the indication and identification of new praxes on African cultures and languages, which both constitute primary substrate of philosophical expression.

The challenge of contemporary African philosophy implies an orational obligation to elevate to the level of current intellectual communion, the apparent intellectual speculations of such ancient peoples of Africa as the Yorubas, Dogons, Nubia, Kush, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Rhodesia, and in this way pave an itinerary for a comprehensive approach to understanding the possible interconnections of the cosmologies, ethics, social order, religious rituals, epistemologies, metaphysic and logic of those civilizations, particularly how they describe an intricate pattern of knowledge as well as its complexity in the more distant phases of the history of philosophic thinking in Africa.

In this manner, contemporary African philosophy will have achieved a significant objective. It will have established a cogent manner of integrating ancient African civilizations into modernity. This is an important step in effecting the intellectual liberation of both the civilizations and the modern Africans who have been living the civilizations unconsciously.

The necessity of this project derives from the fact that the more significant differential features of knowledge in Africa unfold in a deformed and disjointed history, as such that only a philosophical approach will enhance the explanation of not only its origin, but also its development, through time. In this challenge relative to the imperative historicity in Africa philosophy, one will find out that in the ancient recesses of African history, the expressions of wisdom are carefully, following their own proper logic, encoded in mythical symbols, legends; paintings; sculptures and masks, all of which provide a collective description and interpretation of the foundation of history, culture and society. These are dramatically re-enacted in mythical rituals the purpose of which is to unite, order and explain the complex cosmological systems, correspondence of worlds, calendrical tables, classification of beings; and even more importantly, social transformations.

We should therefore acknowledge that in this context, myths present us with implicit philosophies, whose essential character is embedded in the cosmic dynamism of its universe of creation. Myths have significant role to play; and frequently, the reality into which we inquire, loses its meaning without the appropriate myth. In specific instances, let us consider myths of the Lugbara which give them a history of the shifting connections between the community, its extension and dissonance. The myths of the Tiv fuse with genealogies defining the overall lineage of human brotherhood; presenting itself as a cosmic liturgy of order. In the same vein, myths express linkages between social organizations and the cosmos for the Dogons. It becomes essential therefore to affirm that relative to the current projects in the reconstruction of African philosophy, one must not force myths into an enclosure limited by their more primitive functions because despite their apparent paradoxical forms, and frequent irrational contradictory

versions, they not only express the mechanics of discrete rationality which account for analogies, dependencies, antinomic virtues within the natural social and cosmic orders; they also defy appropriation by alien systems. They play supra-temporal roles and always exude at punctual circumscription; hence they should be prioritized to constitute the basis of the uniqueness of African philosophy.

In each case, we shall be obliged to acknowledge, as Hountondji (1970 and 1983) had pointed out, that mythical and ideological languages evolve within a definite social environment, where it develops its own history and the possibility of its own history.

### **Legends, History and Development**

Let us consider another ethno-philosophy concept; the idea of legend. Legends, due largely to their apparently unanalyzed nature, inspire repulsion in the domain of objective investigations. Nonetheless, precisely because of this particular character of legends, they open up spheres of intellectual curiosity which impose a salutary obligation on a resolute integrative research on the reconstruction of a history. Legends, are the principal forms in which can imaginatively evaluate and relive history. This is particularly so, where history is all saga and myth, the construction of the state of our intellectual power at a particular time, demonstrating our specific capacity for comprehension, the vigor of our imagination and our feeling of reality. In the assembly of myths and legends, history assumes the role of our relation to succinct values, setting itself as mechanisms of intellectual modes of value attribution, where our current intellectual attitude toward the pact determines the philosophical value of that past.

We may thus be obliged to rethink the concept of history and this is particularly necessary in the face of changes in time. Braudel (1980) indicated the fundamental demands of the problem in this manner:

History exists at different levels, I would even go so far to say three levels, but that would be only in a manner of speaking and simplifying things too much. There are ten, a hundred levels to be examined, ten, a hundred different time spans. On the surface, the history of events works itself out in the short term: it is a sort of microhistory. Halfway down a history of conjunctures follows a broader slower rhythm...And over and above the 'recitatif' of the conjuncture, structural history or the history of the 'longue duree', inquires into whole centuries at a time. It functions along the border between the moving and the immobile and because of the standing stability of its values, it appears unchanging, compared with all the histories which flow and work themselves out more swiftly and which in the final analysis gravitate around it.

The basic idea that we should derive from Braudel's insight is that traditions, and also philosophical traditions, primarily imply discontinuities through a dynamic continuation within such framework that the conversion of legacies can be possible. In such a case the element of transition is both history and consciousness. In this context, an effective historiography in

African philosophy should be interested not only in describing arts, culture, politics, economics etc but reflecting the dynamics of the needs and preoccupation of human intellect in Africa down the ages. It must also undertake the task of opening up synchronic investigations, geared toward emphasizing the dialectic tension and balance between regional creativity and universal constraints of the human thought. This task will be best accomplished, obviously by conceiving thought characterized by its more or less coherent or organizing elements as the major factor in the evaluation of cultures which then will be understood as different historical characters. In this context, history will provide us with its peculiar rationality, but also, and perhaps even more significantly, presents us with the grids for interpretation and action upon dialectical discontinuities of the social and cultural systems. History will therefore endow us with the possibility of linking tradition with modernity, with ethnophilosophical contents as the base.

### **The Histori-Cultural Catalyst and the Contemporary Quest for Development**

Premised on our preoccupation thus far, it becomes glaring that an appropriate historiography relative to African philosophy must involve a cultural rejuvenation, a return to culture, precisely ethnophilosophical contents, as we navigate the developmental concerns. This is particularly relevant to the Africa of today, saddled with unscrupulous social, political, economic and even cultural crisis and biases. This rejuvenation will also emphasize that history is not only a discourse of knowledge, but also a discourse of power, as Foucault (1973) pointed out; history has the project of bringing man's consciousness back to its real condition, of restoring it to the content-forms that brought it into being, and elude us within it. In other words, in emphasizing the rapport between knowledge and power, the historiography of African philosophy and African developmental thought pattern, will provide an original framework for social and human studies in Africa.

The historiography that should interest the African philosopher of today must thus involve a concerted critical retraditionalization of African cultures. This is a form of reappropriation of our cultural consciousness as well as the invention of new paradigms for our renaissance. Pragmatic approximation as a bridge between indigenous language use and techno-scientific knowledge, for instance, is one of such retraditionalization (see Ademowo, 2016). These imply a reflective re-evaluation of the general context of our tradition and our contemporary modes of life.

The objective of a philosophic retraditionalization should not link itself with any prior prejudice, rather it should constitute a historical imperative. The objective of the project therefore includes the imperative of authenticity which is urgent for an African philosophy in search of cultural uniqueness and relevance. It is imperative to note that it is within such a platform that we can evaluate the particularity of African discourse which in itself we encounter as an intellectual obligation. Gasset (1973) had already made this point when he noted that each geographical space, in so far as it is a space for a possible history, is a function of many variables, and then that the history of reason is the history of the stages through which the

domestication of our disorderly imagining has gone and which differentiates us from those done by others.

The effects of an appropriate histori-cultural retraditionalization in Africa will be based on an interlocking of *four complementary components*: the subject of discourse; a re-evaluation of the concept of rationality from the perspective of the intrinsic properties of categories functioning in disjointed ancient regional texts; myths and qualification of knowledge; and, the relationship that philosophical knowledge could have with other forms of knowledge.

These components are meant to underscore the enviable, and functional, intermingling of the variables, most especially their role in nurturing contemporary African philosophy in search of identity and pragmatic critical developmental thinking. Be that as it may, let us also place it on record that retraditionalization could only be possible within the wholeness of its history (this much has been echoed by Frantz Boaz) based on three vital issues: the invention of the present, a memory and a reflection on the past. The present is better reinvented and innovated based on the memories of the past, for the sake of the future. In this case, the retraditionalization process should involve an attempt to establish a relationship between the conceptual framework, a model and a multi-stage rhythm which characterize the past. In effect, we cannot avoid history if we must be whole, and be able to distinguish our philosophies from others. We must inquire into all the cultural figures that determine our specificity as we try to understand their particular characteristics and what constitute the domain of events that give rise to history. The resulting past-present-future materials will be invaluable.

This should be our task; the task that scholars of development should not or cannot avoid. It is an existential task that we have been trapped in and condemned to untrapping for the sake of the future that is already saddled with lots of hopes.

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