

**Review of [Development and Modernity in Africa: An Intercultural Perspective],  
by Joseph C A Agbakoba**

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**Introduction**

African Philosophy as a discipline has matured with much literature already published in the field. Unlike Western philosophy that arose from awe and ‘wonderment’, African philosophy originated as a reactionary movement aimed at resolving the identitarian challenges hurled on Africans as ‘pre-logical’ entities and, *ipso facto* debased bunch of people. JO Chimakonam has described this experience as a subset of wonder called *onuma*, which translates to ‘frustration’ (2014, IEP online). According to Chimakonam, it was frustration with colonialism, racialism and legacies of slavery that jolted some Africans to systematic African philosophy. Unfortunately, also, some of the earliest African philosophers suffered from what is generally seen as Eurocentric mis-education that left many indignantly righteous in being complicit in denying themselves the ability to think logically and philosophically. For some scholars in the West, it was very natural to accept the capacity to philosophize for themselves. But to justify their humiliation of Africans as sub-humans, some scholars in the West used ignoble clichés. For example, some of those scholars like Lucien Levy-Bruhl (2015) used the qualifier “pre-logical” to describe Africans.

The pain of these clichés has led some African philosophers, especially in the early and middle periods, to dwell much in confronting this identitarian challenge as against developmentalism. The book under review focuses on the challenge of developmentalism. One of those stances taken by African philosophers in confronting the preceding challenge is intercultural philosophy. This book under review is one of such attempts at using interculturality in order to confront modernism for African development. Interculturality entails “taking the philosophic and cultural considerations of others very seriously with comprehensive mutuality, reciprocity ...” (SWEET 2014, 2), but this is not so for Africa. Agbakoba argues that prior conceptions of interculturality do not capture African perspectives or interests while engaging in intercultural philosophical discussion. His reason may be due to coloniality, the reinvention of philosophy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries left the African with global philosophy as against African philosophy. The curriculum of philosophy in Africa introduces indigenous Africans to philosophy by introducing the Africans to other philosophies. This led to the heightening of the identitarian challenge that birthed what is known today as African philosophy after the Great Debate on African philosophy (see NWALA, 1992).

With the end of the Great Debate, there became a new era of the re-articulation, re-envisioning and reconstruction of African philosophy from the global philosophical resources. According to Agbakoba (2019,10), several orientations became rife for this. The first group toed the afro-centric line of re-inventing the classical nativity by positing the preservation of African pristine indigenous knowledge base. Doing otherwise for this group means the erosion of the essence and integrity of the African philosophical knowledge system. Curiously, the Dutch philosopher Win van Binsbergen represents this group with all the commitments that led him into taking initiation and becoming a *sangoma* (diviner) in order to preserve the knowledge base.

A second group with vested interest in post-colonialism and its identitarian concerns recommends the dethronement of coloniality conceived as the cultural hegemonic domination that succeeded colonialism. This is what Kwame Nkrumah (1965) sees as neo-colonialism or the last stage of imperialism. Dorothy Oluwagbemi-Jacob’s article epitomizes this view. (see OLUWAGBEMI-JACOB in SWEET (ed) 2014, 7107-7120)

Another broad orientation is Afro-constructivism which recognizes the African as a cultural and intellectual hybrid who can only survive by the fusion of deepening their epistemic experiences, namely the global and African philosophical resources. Agbakoba summarizes this position in J C Chukwuokolo’s view thus: The emphasis here is on synthesis, synthesizing ideas out of diverse cultures and in so doing transcending or subsuming the feeder ideas....Jeremiah Chukwuokolo one of the young African scholars who have taken up this orientation describes it in an interesting Hegelian way: he sees pre-colonial African as the thesis, colonization and the West’s adventure in Africa as the anti-thesis; and intercultural philosophy as the pursuit of a synthesis of the cultures of Africa and the West. (AGBAKOBBA 2019, 11)

However, the fourth orientation embodies the possibility of the African who has the global and indigenous philosophic knowledge base to engage in philosophy without taking recourse to African philosophical ideas. This is a minimalist and inconsequential view where the philosopher has been subsumed in the global philosophical resource.

At this juncture, Agbakoba's drive for this work is to examine why intercultural philosophy in Africa took these four possibilities. To this effect, he examines the historical and social context of the cumulative of African experience vis-à-vis the means of generation, preservation and transmission of knowledge. He compares the African indigenous method of knowledge with Christian Europe and avers that epistemic censorship was the strongest heritage of Judeo-Christianity where Catholicism exerted the most profound cultural influence on Europe.

From the lessons on the African epistemic experience that mostly toed the intuitively-revelatory orientation, which the author sees as impeding the developmental trajectory of Africa, he proposes agential reactivity. This "is the capacity of an agent... to build and maintain the social immunity that is necessary for the cultural and developmental self-determination of such an agent; as well as the related cultural firewalls and firewalling processes; and, indications of advocacy and adequacy and inadequacy regarding these notions" (AGBAKOBA 2019, 49).

This work interrogates 'the why' of the apparent false developmental consciousness seen in Africa. This is seen in the fierce pursuit of the identitarian challenge in African philosophy as against the developmental orientations. The author interrogates the notion of justice in Africa's developmental societal perspectives. He surmises that unless Africa rethinks its notion of justice, its developmental demands will be a far cry. He draws this conclusion from the Singaporean model of social relations, locally and internationally. Consequently, the notion of African justice must be re-thought to improve the nature and condition of social justice in internal, inter-communal, and international settings. The essence of this is to become more open than being in the closed system of the nativists who eschew patriotism that accommodates a wider range of cultural diversity and progressivism.

With the above conceptualizations of the aims of this work which could be summarized in creating a more progressive approach for the catapulting of Africa from a developing to a developed society, the author sets out to achieve his aim in seven chapters.

### **The text and its contents**

In chapter one, the author examines the notion of development holistically. He begins by discussing the nature of development, delineates the difference between development in animate and inanimate things, and subsequently sees integrative development as pervading the sphere of humans. He relates human development to self-realization- understandable in the actualization of the potential for thoughts and actions. The major concern he raises is whether the notion of development describable in self realization (especially in Western philosophical resources) can pass the criterion of particularity or universality. The author characterizes development in Universalist and organicist terms. There in, the modernization conception of development as the peripheral countries trying to imitate the core countries as the only model of development is seen as largely responsible for the failure of most development plans of the Third world countries. This is due mainly to the fact that there was an attempt at trying to universalize development without setting an equal social justice base. Rather the relationship was based on predatory orientations where the core countries exploit the peripheral ones. This also brings to bear the epistemic challenges of technology transfer as resulting from the mis-education of universalism and organicism vis-à-vis development. Agbakoba, however, disagrees with the notion that to develop, one must “appropriate” technology. He instead advocates for the generation of technology.

In chapter two, he asserts that true development is engendered within the confines of mutual non-negation of extant freedom. He discusses in detail the role of epistemology in the generation of ideologies, which are the fundamentals of development. The essence of this chapter is seen in the resolution of how the autonomous mind, beliefs, and values, especially reasonability and history, particularly in respect of development, enhance the development of any society and how it should help in African development. He interrogates this by stating how the “autonomous mind generates, deepens and spreads reasonability through beliefs, values, institutions etc by subordinating, transforming and generating other values based on consistency-beneficence, and causal processes by which values determine the transformation and development of societies” (AGBAKOKA 2019, 113).

In chapter three, the author’s main drive is to dilate on the relationship between agency and circumstances, how the autonomous mind through ideology composes agency and in-depth evaluation of some of the specific issues concerning African agency in the historical and developmental environment. He does this by taking a historical contestation of Africa’s reasonablistic and insensibilistic orientations.

In chapter four, the author does in-depth examination of the philosophical evolution of African thoughts and institutions using the Igbo and making generalizations about Africa with respect to demonstrable features shared by most African nations. He summed up by pointing out the distinction between the pre-colonial connotation of *umunna* characterized by what he calls *umunna-obodo*, and the hybridized modernist, universalistic connotation characterized by *umunna-uwa*, and how the latter has been influenced by global philosophical resources. Accordingly, this sort of “distinction should be considered by engaging similar and related philosophical ideas in African cultural context of *Ujamaa* or *Ubuntu*” (AGBAKOKA 2019, 211).

In chapter five, Agbakoba discusses the role colonialism played in the distortion of agential integrity of the African. He surmised that the imposition of colonial rule distorted the traditional power sources, means of legitimate exercises of power, communal control of abuse of power and processes of selecting credible leaders. There is no doubt that colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century compromised the traditional reasonable institution, but Africans can never be absorbed from active collaboration in this process. Development in Africa should therefore rest on the advancement of reasonability and purposivity in given contexts, including countering the revolution- converse of the anti-colonial and nationalistic struggle. Only after these have been countered can positive freedoms and development take deeper root and thrive.

In chapter six, African responses to the development crisis embody how African intellectuals responded to their developmental challenges. He focuses fundamentally on “the structures and reluctance of Africans taking appropriate levels of personal responsibility for the state of agential reactivity, malfunctioning cultural firewalls, agential integrity and concomitants as well as a reluctance to locate the roots of all these in the nature of the insensibilistic stands in traditional philosophy, culture and institutions and their evolution in the face of global challenges” (AGBAKOKA 2019, 265).

In the final chapter, Agbakoba discusses the role of justice in the development of any society following the intercultural perspective, which directs a synthesis between African and Western philosophical resources. He argues that positive justice has elements of complementary justice which can also be called developmentarian justice. Accordingly, this is the sort of justice that enhances the ideal of relations that should bring the best out of people, that is, give them their best chance of development (AGBAKOKA 2019, 368). This sort of justice is additive, as against the punitive and reparatory ones that further angst amongst diverse peoples, especially those who colonized or exploited others in the past.

### **Conclusion**

In this work, Agbakoba has jettisoned the identitarian challenge of African philosophy and follows intercultural philosophy with a bent on Afro-constructivism. From the above, African philosophy must engage modernism in a way that must incorporate its best in deep cultural values with modern realities that face it. This is more so when compared with the Asian tigers who suffered the same fate as Africa, yet some of them, like Singapore, have migrated from Third world to First world economies.

Agbakoba is honest in challenging Africans with the personal notion of taking responsibility for our woes instead of always laying our blame and leadership failures on the colonial misadventure. He x-rays the sordid features inherent in the African state that helped undermine its development courtesy of negative colonial and Western influence. He understands the reality of such bad influence but argues that with agential integrity, Africa will surpass such mines laid by the forces of imperialism.

Reading through this work with its massive philosophical categories and concepts, one cannot but see it as *sui generis* from the other commentary works. This is where we locate its distinguishing feature from other works of this nature. The author is convinced that development is anthropocentric by the drive for freedom and choices in the disposal of the human agents who drive it. He brings this out in the concepts of reasonability, consistency-beneficence, purposivity, insensibility that pervades the entire work. He argues that weak values ensconce African development challenges, and the above can strengthen it in order to blossom.

In its philosophical complex, the Nri example that he presents as a classic example showcases irrationalism in its climax and therefore is an instance of epistemic torpedoing of development in Africa. He uses the Nri complex to establish the enthronement of materialism that at least heaps part of the blame of the slave trade on Africans rather than its entirety on the West. He also uses the Nri philosophical complex to state how Africa mismanaged its epistemic concentration on intuitionism. This is contrary to the European catholic Judeo-Christian heritage of epistemic censorship that helped Europe to advance technologically more than Africa.

Agbakoba also draws from the Nri philosophical complex, the nze ethics, which should have placed a great premium on integrity and rectitude, thereby placing beneficence and reasonability on global concern for Africa. Agbakoba has seen the challenges inherent in these values and advocates hybridity in cultural exchange with his original and innovative application of positive justice on cross-cultural bases.

However, Agbakoba's critique of the Nri philosophical-cultural complex derivable mostly from myths as if it actually happened may present a case of one whose Eurocentric (mis)education has over-affected his ideological orientation of moving from mythical to real order. His critique of the *dibias* (diviners) as too enclosed is another instance of reactive analysis of one who judges a closed system that he does not know enough about. The *dibia* as the accumulation of knowledge that could make or mar should not be placed on an open systemic consideration as that could be akin to giving a nuclear reactor to one who is absolutely ignorant of how nuclear energy works. It is of serious concern for future researchers to study the epistemic experience of *dibias* in order to use the knowledge therein in to reconstruct Africa's developmental experience. Despite a few weaknesses, Agbakoba's book is a mainstream work in Afro-constructivism that should be studied and incorporated into Africa's development.

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