

Development and the African Philosophical Debate

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Abstract

The split of African philosophical thinking between the schools of ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy shows the involvement of philosophical issues in the African development process. Indeed, the philosophical debate does no more than revive the entrenched paradigm of development theories, namely the conflict between tradition and modernity. While ethnophilosophy thinks that the rehabilitation of African traditions conditions the drive to successful modernization, especially after the disparaging discourse of colonialism, professional philosophy is of the opinion that success depends on the exchange of the traditional culture for modern ideas and institutions.

The article exposes and evaluates the major arguments developed by the two conflicting schools in support of their position. The outcome is that both are right about their affirmations, less so about their exclusion of the other viewpoint. Accordingly, the paper suggests that the conception of development as validation is alone able to reconcile the positive contribution of each school, since validation is how a traditional personality is sanctioned according to modern norms, and thus achieves worldly success.

Introduction

The involvement of African philosophy in development issues is not a widespread practice. It can even cause uneasiness in view of the speculative nature of philosophy. Allegedly, philosophy either transcends questions of development or is little competent to deal with a topic requiring the attention of positive sciences, such as economics and sociology. A more malicious interpretation would detect in African philosophy a negative reflection stemming from the very failure of African development. In the absence of concrete measures and advancement, powerlessness, it would seem, can find a substitute in a speculative diversion, in a retreat from the practical world. When a deadlock is reached, concrete problems put on a metaphysical turn so that the interference of African philosophy in issues of development would be nothing but the expression of impotence. Witness the conspicuous avoidance of speculative escapism by latecomers, such as Japan and East Asian countries. Excessive preoccupations with speculative and literary matters may thus be the manifestation of a profound discrepancy between the African mind and the exigencies of modernity, the mark of its alienation from the modern world.

To be sure, failure explains the African interest in philosophy. After all, discordance between human aspirations and the objective world has always provoked philosophical reflections. This is a sufficient

reason for trying to understand why in Africa the failure of development turns into a philosophical debate, why questions of social change and policy metamorphose into philosophical categories. The reduction of the philosophical concern to despair and impotence is hardly satisfactory, given the apparent aloofness of the African reaction from the requirements of the situation. Let it be admitted, rather, that the African reaction raises questions of the kind compelling us to upgrade our understanding of development and modernity instead of relying on conventional answers. What must be the deep nature of development for it to elicit the African philosophical debate? Perhaps the involvement of philosophy provides the proof that values and spiritual pursuits are most active in the making of modernity. If so, the apparent untimeliness of the African response would simply unravel a major dimension of development so far little acknowledged by its students.

In order to clarify the role of African philosophy in issues of development, the article assumes the following tasks. First, it shows why and how the issue of African development expounds philosophical problems. Second, it demonstrates how African philosophical schools owe their divergence to the infiltration of development issues by definite philosophical stands. Third, it elaborates the philosophical framework liable to promote a positive process of culture change.

The Philosophical Background of Africa's Development Problems

Without even reaching the point of considering the African drive to development, theories accounting for the underdevelopment of Africa are soon riddled with philosophical questions. Whether the African lag is attributed to colonialism and neocolonialism or to properly African inadequacies or to both, analyses always grapple with philosophical matters. Take the thesis that colonialism kept Africa away from modernity. In addition to the economic pillage of Africa and the establishment of inadequate social institutions, the statement means that the ideology of colonialism has deeply disturbed and negatively affected the perception that Africans have of themselves. This is usually called the dehumanizing practice of colonialism whose palpable outcome plunged, it is said, Africa into a deep and lasting crisis of identity. Summarizing the positions of representative African philosophers, D. A. Masolo writes that the African philosophical debate

expresses the epistemological roots of: the deep social, political, and cultural crisis of *muntu*, the African person (Eboussi-Boulaga); Africans' continued servitude to Western domination (Towa); Africa's dependence on Western tutelage (Hebga); the invention of Africa at the margins of Western knowledge (Mudimbe).

Indeed, according to the racist ideology of colonialism, Africans are so alien to modern and rational life that they cannot be expected to make any progress without a close and corrective European tutelage. The category of primitiveness divests African thinking of any inner impulse to liberate itself from irrationality, myths, and obsolete habits. Only under the supervision and guidance of the West can it be dragged into some kind of rationality.

This model of development, otherwise known as Westernization, had a particularly corrosive impact on Africa because, unlike other colonized peoples, Africans could not counter the disparaging

discourse with the mitigating effect of a glorious past. Africa being the land of "those who invented neither gunpowder nor compass," to quote Aimé Césaire, nor gave birth to universalist religion, still less to expanding empires, the colonial discourse was bound to be devastating. No other race in the world was so reminded of its alleged inferiority, and no other race was so disarmed to combat the allegation.

Quite naturally, the accusation of prerationality and primitiveness imparted a philosophical texture to the whole idea of African modernization. In particular, the question of knowing whether or not Africans are rational by nature triggered philosophical investigations into African cultures. On the presumption that the ability to think philosophically reveals a rationalistic disposition, the presence or lack of philosophy in Africa became the yardstick of the rationality of Africans. This mating of rational thinking with philosophy invested from the start African philosophy with the task of disproving the charge of prerationality against Africa. This refutation had a direct bearing on development, as rationality is a prerequisite for scientific and technological abilities on which development depends.

Among African philosophers, many became convinced that the best way to counter the imputation of prerationality was to support the concept of pluralism. The need for extended humanity, the very one able to offer a place for those who did not invent anything, became all the more pressing the more the records of African failure to catch up with the West were accumulating. The confrontation between the African legacy and the requirements of the modern world acquired the spiritual dimension of alterity, otherness. This, in turn, placed the issue of difference, the connection between race and the human essence, at the center of African philosophical reflections. The need to define African humanness in a world dominated by Eurocentric models imparted to African philosophy an acute sense of subjectivity in search of a new definition. Descartes can say that he is not his body, that his subjectivity is thought, transcendence, aloofness from bodily determinations. He is the captain in his ship. Not so Africans who see to what extent their body sticks to them, how its being held in contempt affects their thinking and prevent them from identifying themselves with a non-corporeal subjectivity. As emphasized by Lucius Outlaw, the deep issue of African philosophy

is a struggle over the meaning of 'man' and 'civilized human', and all that goes with this in the context of the political economy of the capitalized and Europeanized Western world. In the light of the European incursion of Africa, the emergence of 'African philosophy' poses deconstructive (and reconstructive) challenges.

Whether Africans ascribe the inability to join the modern world to the inappropriateness of their legacy or to the ruin of their original identity, in both cases they are compelled to construe the West as an unavoidable challenge inducing them to reexamine their legacy and culture. As stated by Serequeberhan, "the indisputable historical and violent diremption effected by colonialism and the continued 'misunderstanding' of our situation perpetuated by neocolonialism . . . calls forth and provokes thought in post-colonial Africa." The addition of the dereliction of post-colonial Africa to the disparaging discourse of colonialism deepens even more the crisis of identity and obliges

philosophical thinking to be nothing more than a haunting quest for identity. Should Africans feel that a major reason for inadequacy is the loss of identity, we see them engaged in the task of restoring precolonial links. Should they decide that the precolonial heritage obstructs advancement, they feel compelled to adopt a critical attitude with the view of strengthening universalist leanings to the detriment of particularism. In either case, they are at variance with themselves so that, as Alassan Ndaw suggests, African philosophy draws its breath from "the experience of internal tear."

The issue of modernity versus tradition thus emerges as the basic concern of African philosophy. Be it noted that the conflict between tradition and modernity is the core question that demarcates the various schools of development. Thus, while the school known as modernization theory explains underdevelopment by the persistence of traditional thinking and institutions, the trend known as dependency school rejects the culpability of tradition, arguing that the satellization of African societies by the powerful Western metropolises is the real cause of underdevelopment. Another school, called the mode of production approach, attempts a synthesis by suggesting that underdevelopment occurs when traditional methods and structures batten on advanced systems to perpetuate themselves. In all these positions, the friction between tradition and modernity remains the core problem.

Nothing could better illustrate the overlap between development issues and philosophical questions than the fact that the conflict between tradition and modernity generates similar divisions in African philosophy. Speaking of the displeasure of professional philosophers with ethnophilosophy, Oyeka Owomoyela remarks that "development is the powerful end that orients all their arguments." For those who argue that the present powerlessness of Africa is due to its straying from its legacy, some kind of revival of the past is seen as a remedy. Termed as ethnophilosophers, their position has instigated a vigorous critique of the modernists or professional philosophers. The latter equate this infatuation with the past with a reactionary attitude designed to maintain Africa in its backward beliefs and practices. Pointing out the real issue at stake, Kwasi Wiredu writes:

This process of modernization entails changes not only in the physical environment but also in the mental outlook of our peoples, manifested both in their explicit beliefs and in their customs and their ordinary daily habits and pursuits. Since the fundamental rationale behind any changes in a world outlook is principally a philosophical matter, it is plain that the philosophical evaluation of our traditional thought is of very considerable relevance to the process of modernization in our continent.

According as the African philosophical effort is geared towards the rehabilitation of the past or its displacement by Western equipment, the objective of development and the choice of strategy are decided. Clearly, the conflict between tradition and modernity in the particular context of Africa's need to assess its legacy strongly highlights the philosophical texture of the terms of African development.

Besides, this should not come as a surprise. The encounter of African philosophy with the problems of development is not particular to Africa. Whatever is their destination, theories of development are sooner or later confronted with the basic problem of philosophy, namely the question of the primacy of mind or matter. Concerning the ultimate nature of being, philosophical schools, we know, be they monistic or dualistic, agree with the necessity of reducing the ultimate reality either to matter or spirit. Whereas materialism holds that all phenomena, including spiritual ones, are the determination and expression of material processes, spiritualism gives primacy to spirit by arguing that material phenomena are themselves derivations. So when theories explain development either by economic or environmental causes or by spiritualist and cultural considerations, they inevitably come under materialism or spiritualism. For instance, as Marxism ascribes social evolution to economic determinism, it represents the most accomplished materialist theory of development. In return, the position of Max Weber typifies a spiritualist approach, as for him religious anxiety explains, in the last instance, European capitalism.

Grant that the drive to development implicates a determining spiritual or material cause, and the way is clear to understanding the African retardation by the absence of the said cause. Thus, the attribution of underdevelopment to economic dependency is consistent with a materialist approach, while the appeal to cultural reasons tends to conform to a spiritualist assumption. It is this philosophy of development, most of the time implicit in the mind of social scientists, which erupts in the debate dividing African philosophers. The question of knowing whether the lasting impact of colonialism and neocolonialism in Africa is to be found in socio-economic or spiritual disabilities is, as we shall soon see in detail, an important aspect of the African philosophical debate.

Because the nature of the problem determines options, strategies of development too are subordinate to the issue of primacy. Take theories of development advocating far-reaching Westernization. Their materialist premises are but obvious, as they believe that the establishment of the appropriate material conditions through reforms borrowed from the West is enough to give birth to the corresponding spirit. Those scholars who insist on African identity and the need to institute an African path to development are rather spiritualist, the setting up of objective conditions being for them useless without the readiness of the engine, to wit the mind. Strategies of development are therefore tributary to philosophical positions, obvious as it is that they cannot avoid facing the question of knowing which, of the spiritual or the material, is likely to trigger the process of growth.

Most remarkably, the question of primacy has assumed a dramatic countenance in the African case. As a result, the encounter between Africa and the West took a philosophical turn from the start. Reproducing the philosophical debate between materialism and idealism in a dramatized form, the West revealed itself to Africa in the striking figure of unmatchable material superiority intent on subduing a traditional spirituality. The situation simulates the European context during the Renaissance and Reformation. Europe was then immersed in an exciting philosophical investigation flowing from the need to counter the materialist premises of the new and triumphant scientific

method. Descartes, Leibnitz, Kant, the British empiricists, all wrestled with the manner of grounding science in a refurbished spirituality so as to unify European thinking and neutralize the materialist challenge of the scientific method.

The African case is no different: a traditional spirituality is challenged by a material power that the scientific method helped to build. Even if direct colonial subordination retarded the philosophical awakening of Africa, it did not suppress it altogether. Philosophical interest in Africa, especially in post-colonial Africa, is therefore in keeping with the general pattern of philosophical inquiry. Whenever a materialist challenge provokes a spiritual anxiety, the philosophical consciousness awakens. In effect, summoned by Western challenge to argue and redefine itself, the traditional thinking could not but assume a philosophical form harboring a defensive reaction.

Another related reason for the deep involvement of philosophy in development issues is that technological ability--an essential ingredient of development--anticipates, if not the solution of philosophical problems, at least the framework of their rationalization. Indeed, the profound meaning of the question of primacy is to open the possibility of changing spiritual anxiety into a drive to conquer matter. The fact that through technology humans can exert their control over nature is then an elegant way of asserting the primacy of mind. Some such admittance of the spiritualist origin of Western technology assigns to African philosophy the important mission of kindling African longing for technology by implanting it in a spiritual quest. The debate on African philosophy is how this work has started; it must be pursued in a positive spirit if Africa is to generate the need for technological expression.

No Modernity without Heritage

It is usual to distinguish four schools in African philosophy. They are: (1) ethnophilosophy, whose thinkers are called Placide Tempels, Alexis Kagame, John Mbiti, etc.; (2) philosophic sagacity, defended by Odera Oruka and his followers; (3) national and ideological philosophy, to which Cabral, Nyerere, etc., are said to belong; (4) professional philosophy, which claims such scholars as Hountondji, Wiredu, Bodunrin, etc. Ethnophilosophy refers to the works of those philosophers who present the collective worldviews of traditional Africa as philosophy. Professional philosophy rejects this identification of philosophy with collective thinking, arguing that only works based on rational and critical argumentation deserve to be called philosophical. Accepting the challenge, philosophic sagacity attempts to identify individuals who crown their traditional background with critical assessments of traditional beliefs. For its part, national and ideological philosophy prefers to emphasize the African primacy of collective destiny and its main corollary, namely the need for a theory rooted in traditional African socialism and familyhood to achieve the authentic and effective liberation of Africa.

Let it be said at once that the classification poses many problems. The classified schools overlap in major issues and, in some cases, distinct trends of thought are not recognized, as for instance the existence of the hermeneutical school. Moreover, the classification is not based on proper

philosophical considerations matching the Western categorization of rationalist, empiricist, materialist, idealist, etc., schools. However, our purpose, namely the demonstration of the relevance of African philosophical debate to issues of development, is not in need of an elaborate type of classification. The broad distinction of ethnophilosophy on the one hand and professional philosophy on the other is enough to articulate our problem. The two schools do reproduce in philosophical terms the splits caused by the conflict between tradition and modernity in development theories.

Viewed from the angle of development, ethnophilosophy toys with a twofold target: the criticism of the Western conceptions of Africa and the rehabilitation of African cultures. The task is regarded as the major condition of African renaissance and hence modernization. The premises of this thinking are found in Placide Tempels. Though Tempels came round to the idea of African philosophy through the purpose of Christianizing Africans, still his problem meets the issue of African modernization in general. He registers the failure of missionary work in Africa by remarking that the work has only succeeded in creating the *évolué*. The *évolué* is a failure in that he/she lacks stability and firmness. The reason for this superficial Christianization is that the *évolué*, according to Tempels, "has never effected a reconciliation between his new way of life and his former native philosophy, which remains intact just below the surface." Because he/she has not reached a synthesis, Christianity and the native philosophy conflict and a deep and firm conversion is blocked. Being essentially uprooted, the *évolué* can gain a firm footing in neither of the two worlds. Hence, the vacillating nature of his/her conversion.

Tempels sees the deep reason for this failure in the colonial discourse describing African beliefs as "childish and savage customs." This characterization, he boldly states, imputes to the colonizer "the responsibility for having killed 'the man' in the Bantu." The outcome of this dehumanization is that evangelization is deprived of the spiritual force able to sustain and animate its message. Instead of presenting Christianity as an elevation, a promotion of Bantu spirituality, the contempt of the native spirituality, in addition to ascribing inhuman intent to Christianity, also removes the fertile soil on which it could grow. Only when Christianity, Tempels concludes, moves from the negation of Bantu spirituality to its elevation, can it take root in Africa and prosper. Hence the imperative to study Bantu ontology, that is, "the corpus of logically co-ordinated intellectual concepts" that supports Bantu beliefs and values. Such a work alone would encourage Bantu traditional wisdom to reach out "from the depths of its Bantu soul towards the very soul of Christian spirituality."

Evidently, Tempels's view extends to the general problem of the modernization of Africa. It inaugurates a mode of thought which discards the method of Westernization as well as the depreciation of African traditional cultures, arguing that modernity cannot take root if it dehumanizes the African. It even suggests that underdevelopment is just the product of the dehumanization of Africa and the duplication of its personality. The superficial adoption of Western culture and the subsequent conflict with the native personality can hardly support a successful process of change.

To reverse this trend, there is no other way than to refute the colonial insult by exposing the philosophical dimension of the traditional thinking. Accordingly, the question of the existence of African philosophy must be answered by a loud and clear yes. Anything less than the demonstration of the prior existence of African philosophy to the colonial incursion, warns ethnophilosophy, would fall short of being a pertinent defense of the humanity of Africans. Some such demonstration retrieves African pride, leading to the emancipation of initiative and inventiveness. This clears the way for an African road to development, which rejects Westernization and conceives of modernization as an assertion of African personality. We recognize here the themes of negritude and African socialism. As Abiola Irele puts it, the specific contribution of negritude "was to articulate, in the form of an all-encompassing concept of black identity, the sense of the African's separate cultural and spiritual inheritance." From the affirmation of a specific identity, there follows the injunction of modernization according to socialist principles, believed to be more in harmony with African cultural patterns than liberalism. The whole idea turns modernization into a restoration of the precolonial norms of Africa.

Nkrumah is probably the thinker who followed most consistently this line of thinking. For him, just as the communal ethos, the philosophy of the traditional thinking, namely materialism, identifies African modernization with socialist policy. Modern materialism, he writes, "agrees with the traditional African outlook in many points . . . In particular, it agrees with the traditional African idea of the absolute and independent existence of matter." This idea, in turn, promotes egalitarianism, since according to the African "man . . . being not half natural, half supernatural, but wholly natural . . . his metaphysical principle amounted to an assertion of the fundamental equality and brotherhood of men." Because of this, Nkrumah continues, for Africa, "socialism and communism are not in the strict sense of the word 'revolutionary creeds'," whereas for other societies with an entrenched class culture and rigid social stratification the transition to socialism is perforce revolutionary.

The various schools defending the idea of Afrocentricity too make development dependent on "an ideology of heritage." Maintaining that Africa cannot develop unless it moves from the periphery to the center, these schools forward the idea that, to become a center, Africa must simply reappropriate its traditional personality. In its precolonial splendor, tradition was indeed expressive of the thinking of Africa when it considered itself as a center. The restoration of Africa's precolonial philosophical thinking and cultural references will allow Africans to interpret and organize the modern world from their own standpoint. Far from being an assault on tradition, modernization requires its reinstatement, which is then an act of empowerment. Dompere writes:

Africentricity regards the Western and Islamic presence in Africa as experiences that have come to affect the African traditions and modern thinking, but not to replace them. The best of these experiences must be synthesized from the viewpoint of African traditions.

Without the restoration of tradition, the centrality of Africans is anything but possible. The movement of Africa towards the center depends on the interpretation and organization of the world according to African categories functioning as objectifying forms.

All this to say that, in positing a distinct mind, ethnophilosophy endorses the idea of an autonomous process of development. The recognition of the specificity of the mind and of its aspirations promotes a free process of evolution as opposed to imposed external model. Success can be expected when the method agrees with the cultural pattern. Otherwise the outcome is rupture and, Apostel warns, "rupture implies destruction." From a situation plunging the recipient into deep disarray, what else can result but failure? The distinct message of ethnophilosophy is thus clear: modernization does not implicate a flight from one's cultural legacy and the alleged conflict between tradition and modernity is but a fake assumption. What explains underdevelopment is not that tradition persists, but that it has been discarded.

This thinking puts ethnophilosophy and the West on a collision course. Already, as is obvious with Nyerere and Nkrumah, there is an attempt to throw back the insult. Africa is labeled as primitive, yet the alleged superiority of the West is but a sham: it cannot hide how squarely its "superior" civilization is built on the exploitation of "man by man." There is nothing noble about it, and Africa will prefer its poverty to a mode of life that portrays as virtue an unspeakable crime. If Africa is backward, the West is barbaric, and so even less civilized since real civilization is unthinkable without humanism. As Nyerere says, "the creation of wealth is a good thing and something which we shall have to increase. But it will cease to be good the moment wealth ceases to serve man and begins to be served by man."

There is, therefore, a deliberate attempt to rehabilitate Africa by emphasizing its humanistic values as opposed to the exploitative relationships of Western capitalism. The revelation of African humanism counters the colonial affront, but more yet, it falsifies it in the very terms of the civilizing mission. This polemical course is inherent in the position defending the existence of African philosophy, and its purpose is to create what Mazrui called "cultural nationalism." However, genuine nationalism is achieved, ethnophilosophy maintains, only when African philosophy, by establishing the otherness of Africans, radically questions the racist implications of Eurocentric theories of social evolution. This means abandoning the Eurocentric conception of a unilinear process grading modes of life as primitive or advanced in favor of a divergent process of evolution confirming the African, not as backward, but as different. Senghor's discredited attempt to retain emotion for Africa while acknowledging reason as Western was an effort to think along the line of pluralistic humanity. In so doing, he was following Blyden's example who, as Mudimbe puts it, rejected "the evolutionary assumption of 'identical but unequal races' . . ." in favor of "a different assertion: 'distinct but equal'." No small matter was thereby targeted: commitment to a distinct personality was pronounced necessary to generate the competitive spirit that would spur the African drive to development. Outlaw has well defined the philosophical implications of negritude when he said:

In addition to the construction of a philosophical anthropology carved out of African ebony, there was also an effort to displace from its dominating position the paradigm of rationalist epistemology championed by Philosophy by arguing in favor of an epistemology which had its basis in the African racial, biological-cultural life-world.

No Modernity without Denial

Nothing infuriates more the professional philosophers than this complacent affirmation of African alterity. If anything, in thus wallowing in alterity, ethnophilosophy contributes in rendering the development of Africa extremely unlikely. In light of the West identifying itself with reason, the slightest successful move towards modernity becomes conditional on Africans being endowed with the same human potential. The more ethnophilosophy insists on the peculiarity of Africans, the higher becomes their estrangement from the development process. Paradoxically, by making Africans into a strange people, ethnophilosophy, contradicting its own principles, justifies and calls for the civilizing mission. Obviously, being alien to rationality by nature, Africans cannot be put on the track of development without the imposition of an external model. Consequently, the critique of ethnophilosophy by professional philosophers revolves around three points: (1) ethnophilosophy is an endorsement of the anthropological discourse on Africa; (2) it is based on a misconception of the nature of philosophy; (3) its implications are most detrimental to progress. Let us examine these arguments in some details.

The endorsement of the anthropological theory is indeed the apex of self-contradiction. The affirmation of African difference does no more than reproduce the anthropological view of irrational and mythical Africa. It supports the colonial reasoning according to which Africans are unable to acquire the rudiments of modern life without the permanent tutelage of the West. By subscribing to the idea of Africa's otherness, ethnophilosophy defines reason as the prerogative of the "white man." Hence Hountondji's indictment that it is "nothing but a revamped version of Levy -Bruhl's 'primitive mentality'." Far from retrieving Africa's pride and rehabilitating its culture, as it claims, ethnophilosophy is an "accomplice" upholding the disparagement of Africa and its subordination to the West.

What is demanded from African philosophy is, according to professional philosophy, the radical rejection of Africa's alleged otherness. The restoration of the pride and creativity of Africans depend on the recognition, not of their strangeness, but of their universal virtues, which they share equally with the rest of humankind. Since the colonial and neocolonial discourse contests the membership of Africans in the normal human order, African philosophy must denounce this invention of difference for the sole purpose of marginalizing Africa. The staunch critique of anthropology, not its sanction, should be the main focus of African philosophy.

How does professional philosophy repudiate the colonial discourse on the prelogical nature of Africans and reinstate their pride and humanity? Since the claim of difference and the relativization

of Western pretensions to universality result in a backfiring strategy, the best way is to demonstrate that the science on which the perception of Africa is based is a fake, a "pseudoscience," as Hountondji says. That is why professional philosophers lead the battle on the epistemological ground rather than on metaphysical and ethical grounds, as ethnophilosophy does. The idea is to pinpoint invention, construction where the colonial mind professes an objectivist reading. This method of discrediting the colonial descriptions of Africa makes the school dependent on the philosophical premises of the Frankfurt school and French structuralism.

Unsurprisingly, the endorsement of African strangeness obliges ethnophilosophy to contrive a no less strange notion of philosophy. The neologism of the term "ethnophilosophy" perfectly illustrates the oddity of African philosophy in the hands of ethnophilosophers. We are dealing with a philosophy having none of the universal characteristics of philosophy. As Odera Oruka defines it, it is "a folk philosophy" parading "a communal consensus" and claiming to reproduce "the totality of customs and common beliefs of a people." For Hountondji too, philosophy designates "no longer the specific discipline it evokes in its Western context but merely a collective worldview in implicit, spontaneous, perhaps even unconscious system of beliefs to which all Africans are supposed to adhere." Conspicuous by its absence in this notion of philosophy is the individuality of the thinker, submerged as it is in the consensus of the collective thinking. Yet, as Theophilus Okere reminds, what else made the prestige and specificity of philosophy but the fact that it "is essentially an individual enterprise and is often a *mise-en-cause* and a rational questioning of the collective image?" So essential is the individual and critical dimension that a collective philosophy is openly a contradiction in terms.

Does this mean that professional philosophy disputes the existence of African philosophy? If we are to believe Hountondji, the answer is no. Ethnophilosophy is the proof that African philosophy exists by "the same right and in the same mode as all the philosophies of the world: in the form of a *literature*." Simply, in the case of ethnophilosophy, the individual views are hidden under a collective veil and identified with an ethnic group. It is "a philosophy which, instead of presenting its own rational justification, shelters lazily behind the authority of a tradition and projects its own theses and beliefs on to that tradition." But the attempt to revive the past is a lure: the past is gone and "cannot be recaptured." So what is being offered as a collective philosophy is the view of an individual African philosopher.

What is the purpose of this ethnic camouflage? For Hountondji, this question unmasks "the profoundly conservative nature of the ethnophilosophical project itself." The purpose is to conjure up authority for views that are otherwise individual. In pretending that it is not the individual but the whole ethnic group which thinks thus, an individual idiosyncrasy metamorphoses itself into a native trait and acquires the communal blessing urging all members to abide by its precepts. Also, symptomatic of the reactionary project of ethnophilosophy is its constant reference to the past. Behind the attempt to unearth the precolonial thinking, there is the suggestion that it provides

landmarks for contemporary Africa. Yet ethnophilosophy knows that, as Bodunrin puts it, "a way of life which made it possible for [African] ancestors to be subjugated by a handful of Europeans cannot be described as totally glorious." What other terms than those of reaction and conservatism can define a philosophical project so pinned on the past?

Such a purpose indicates that ethnophilosophy "has been built up essentially *for a European public*. The African ethnophilosopher's discourse is not intended for Africans. It has not been produced for their benefit." Towa expresses the same opinion when he intimates that "its real purpose is not philosophical but theological." The grafting of an alien purpose on the corroboration of anthropology shows to what extent ethnophilosophy is an accomplice of colonial and neocolonial projects. Its deep conservative aim is erected on the idea of the strangeness of Africans, which strangeness always maintains the need for a tutor, be it in the form of direct colonialism or through the African representatives of the neocolonial order. In both cases, the subordination of Africa to an external model and internal dictatorial regimes is called for. Far from arousing the resolution to match up with the West, the thesis of alterity invites Africans to indulge in exoticism, deepening even further their estrangement from modernity.

In the light of these serious drawbacks of ethnophilosophy, the progressive thinking is the one that admits that African philosophy "is before us, not behind us, and must be created today by decisive action." It must be critical not only of the West, but of African cultures and customs as well, thus avoiding any smugness about African vices and shortcomings in the name of identity. As Mudimbe proposes, this philosophy "should be critical of the other discourses . . . and, at the same time, by vocation, one which should be autocritical." Above all, it must discard the idea of African otherness so as to inaugurate philosophical systems defined as African only by "the geographical origin of the authors rather than an alleged specificity of content."

For professional philosophers, this amounts to saying that development can neither be positively theorized nor practically engaged if the conflict between tradition and modernity is not accepted as an essential ingredient of the problem. The undermining of folk thinking and past beliefs and practices is the first step towards modernization. In turning folk thinking into a sacred cause instead of debunking it, ethnophilosophy stands in the way of African progress. If development is really desired, the need to change must have precedence over the concern for identity. All the poetry of negritude and the evocation of the past will not build the simplest machine. But let Africa put the obsession of originality aside, and the goal becomes the generation of a new attitude through the resolute dissolution of the past identity. To quote Towa, "in order to affirm and assume oneself, the self must deny itself, it must deny its essence and therefore its past, it must expressly aim at becoming like the other, similar to him and hence uncolonizable by him'."

Development lies in this transition from particularism to a universal, scientific culture. Summarizing the position of Towa, Irele writes:

if the spirit of the traditional past is inoperative in the present, and if it is understood that the immersion of traditional man in that spirit is responsible for our conquest and domination by Europe, then we should seek out the secret of the power which overwhelmed us and ascertain the direction from which it came. Towa finds this secret in the European practice of rationality, the key to the scientific and technological progress.

The target of professional philosophy could not have better transpired: the concern to liberate Africa from marginalization prefers its Westernization to the fanfare of Africanness. The extirpation of tradition is the first step toward freedom. The encounter of this process of change with the trend already taken by the West does not mean that Africa comes under external tutelage. On the contrary, it suggests that Africans are fortifying their universalist abilities to the detriment of particularism and getting ready to embark on a similar process of empowerment.

The Imperative of Validation

Sure enough, the debate between ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy demands fresh reflections on the meaning of development. The deadlock of African philosophy, its entanglement in an apparently sterile and sharp antagonism, can only be the expression of the impasse of Africa itself. Were we to show that the debate stems from the wrong ideas that scholars have of development, a way would be found to effect a rapprochement of positions, which would hopefully substitute the more promising attitude of dialogue and synthesis for entrenched divisions.

We saw how positions regarding the past, the Western model, the future of Africa reflect statements about the nature of development and its motive force. If I say that Africa cannot modernize unless it frees itself from past attachments, I propose a full-fledged Westernization. If I find that development is unlikely to occur within the Western model, I plea for some kind of a return to the past. To my mind, what must be radically questioned is the very notion of a conflict between tradition and modernity. For I observe that as soon as the relation of tradition with modernity is perceived in terms other than conflict and displacement, a realistic and resourceful general theory of development emerges and, in the case of Africa, ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy tend to unite in a dynamic synthesis.

Before developing this point, it is important to know to what extent the debate between ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy is booby-trapped and results in mutual annihilation. Assuming that, as ethnophilosophy sees it, the purpose of African philosophy is to refute the colonial imputation of an irrational, prelogical Africa, then, as rightly pointed out by professional philosophy, the assertion of a particular African personality or mind, no matter how it may be embellished and poeticized, is a pure and simple endorsement of the colonial view. On the other hand, the position of the professional philosophers is no less contradictory: the rejection of particularism and the emphasis on the universality of Africans hardly elucidate the reasons for the retardation of Africa and its apparent inability to match the West. Willy-nilly, considerations of immaturity, of primitive and

advanced stages in a unilinear process, come to mind, and this agrees with the views of the colonizer.

Moreover, the way professional philosophers conceptualize the whole problem inflicts a dubious meaning on the assumed universality of reason. Indeed, if all what Western anthropology said about Africa is an invention, a construct of the mind, one should become extremely suspicious about Western rationality in general. A mode of thought able to produce such a gross misconception and, what is more, succeeds in fooling the whole world, is little reliable. The denunciation of anthropology as an invented discourse is thus dragging Western thinking, against the initial wish of professional philosophers, down to a Eurocentric position. Being particular and imbued with myths and irrational tendencies, the thinking is rightly denied the privilege of being a model.

Ethnophilosophy seems to triumph here, but not for long. Its victory is vain and illusory so long as it does not understand the formidable material power which is crushing Africa. This power is no illusion; it is the power of science and technology, both products of reason. Can the same reason build this powerful material force without trespassing on the boundaries of particularism? Professional philosophers say no, while the commitment of ethnophilosophers to pluralism so relativizes human conceptions that the success of the Western trend is wrapped in mystery. If universalism does not explain the success, neither can particularism, since no reason exists for the one trend to accomplish more than others. There is more: each culture being bound to pursue its particularity, the engagement of Africa in the successful trend of the West remains problematic, to say the least.

The debate on the nature of philosophy exhibits the same shifting positions. Ethnophilosophy is accused of extending wrongly the notion of philosophy to collective systems of thought. Philosophy, professional philosophers argue, is the work of individual thinkers who are in critical relationships with the collective thought. The charge comes as a surprise in view of the philosophical theses of those Western philosophers from whom professional philosophers borrow their critical weapons. Whether one refers to Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, or to the various schools of structuralism, the prevailing opinion among these radical Western thinkers is that the philosophical subject is an illusion. The real thinker is behind the individual thinker; it is a class interest, or a suppressed desire, or the will to power, or the unconscious structure of the mind, etc. Thus, Hountondji's defense of the individual thinker sounds discordant with the weight of Althusser's influence on him. Since postmodernism seems resolved to dissolve philosophy into folk thinking, the defense of the individual thinker by those African philosophers who owe much of their critical muscle to postmodernist philosophers appears as inconsistent. Besides, even the classical philosophers have always supposed, rightly or wrongly, that their ideas are also shared by the society at large. The very notion of reason involves collective considerations.

Does this mean that the ethnophilosophical conception of philosophy is correct? Not in the least, for by conceiving of African philosophy as the process of unearthing a past thinking, ethnophilosophy

totally ignores the reasons for its own genesis and discourse. While it owes its existence to colonialism and neocolonialism, strange is the way it traces its origin back to precolonial Africa only. Its *raison d'être* being its confrontation with the colonial and neocolonial rule, its source is in the distress and anger of present day Africa. Moreover, the past views of Africa could hardly be philosophical in view of ethnophilosophy's attribution of a different line of life to Africa. In thus referring African philosophy to the past, ethnophilosophy is actually going against its defense of African otherness. The only way out is to say: the West imposed philosophy on Africa, both by its conquest and by arousing the desire for emancipation. African philosophy is bound to be the appropriation of the weapon that the West used to enslave Africa. It is by definition an integrating method of philosophizing intent on bringing about a cultural change.

I see the main defect of ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy in the inability to grasp the synthetic imperative of African philosophy. This inability results from the reluctance to transcend the usual conflictual understanding of tradition and modernity. Ethnophilosophy could have overcome the conflict easily, had it accepted its involvement, not in the discovery of a past philosophy, but in an interpretative work aimed at accommodating the traditional personality to Western concepts. Yet accommodation is what it tries to achieve: armed with Western philosophical concepts, it reviews the traditional thinking, notes agreements as well as disagreements. Where it errs is when it concludes that its work is not interpretation but the excavation of the past. In addition to rendering its analyses inconsistent, this illusion distracts ethnophilosophy from the task of achieving a synthesis, thus putting its thinking at variance with the imperatives of modernization. Those African thinkers who, like Theophilus Okere and Tsenay Serequeberhan, admit the hermeneutical nature of African philosophy seem to follow the right track.

To be sure, the purpose of hermeneutics is to overcome ruptures by instituting the continuity of change. If we take as an example the Christian hermeneutics, we see that it is guided by the aim of changing ruptures and challenges into continuity. It does so by the argument that, not the Bible, but the interpretations of humans of the Bible are always deficient. This turns the Bible into an object of continuous reinterpretations by means of which novel ideas and events are integrated and continuity restored to Christian life. Clearly, the survival of Africa depends on a similar work of interpretation with the aim of integrating Western norms into the mainstream of African personality and worldview. The work does not bring back the past; instead, it recreates African cultures. It is less a retrieval of the past than a renaissance for the simple reason that it includes the challenge of the West and the resolution to fight back.

But, one might argue, why all the fuss about interpretation when, to all appearances, the operation amounts to the replacement of the traditional thinking by Western norms? Why not simply appropriate the norms through the easiest way, to wit the removal of the folk thinking? This is roughly the position of professional philosophers. The first reason is that such a removal did not take place even in the West. The West is not the realm of pure reason; this reason coexists with a

traditional personality, as manifested by the persistence of Judeo-Christian aspirations. In truth, by reason we understand less a content, an arsenal of drives than a set of impersonal rules striving to control drives, which are otherwise mystical, religious, and partisan. Reason is the steering wheel, not the engine. Descartes fascinates because he has clearly posited the issue of modernity in terms of adopting a new method, less so in terms of going out of oneself. The spirit of the new method is all in the idea of inaugurating the era of humans becoming, in the words of Descartes, "masters and possessors of nature." The new method is an ensemble of rules establishing the manner beliefs and assumptions acquire the rational entitlement of worldly conquest.

This conception allows us to assign universality to reason, which is then not reducible to the West. In the Western life too, we can say, reason is superimposed on an irrational substratum from which it remains distinct. Only thus can it be explained that the same people use reason to become powerful and yet indulge in invented discourses. The expression "Western rationality" appears bogus and self-defeating, especially when those Africans who denounce the falsifications of anthropology use it. Particularism alone did not build the material power of the West; it has required compliance with objective norms. Its most successful product, namely science, perfectly defines this reason. Its ethos is all embodied in the idea that worldly success is a validation of beliefs. Marx gave the general formula when he said: "Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the 'this-sidedness' of this thinking in practice."

My contention is that the successful and conquering Western synthesis of tradition and modernity stems from the idea that worldliness is a validation of otherworldliness, that beliefs and myths are valid if they inspire and bolster the desire for material conquests. Take the case of Kant. The confirmation of the limits of science is, we know, an important outcome of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Since the inaptitude to deal with the things-in-themselves is established through the reduction of scientific knowledge to phenomena, this notion of phenomenon is a new way, as Kant himself said, to make "room for *beliefs*" by construing the world as objectification of reason, as confirmation of its premises. This approach was congruent with the spirit of the Renaissance and Reformation, which demanded, according to the Protestant version, that worldliness be the proof of religiosity instead of monasticism. Through such interpretation, that is, through the assumption of an objective task, the idea of election was reconciled with rationality.

I am not suggesting that Western philosophy can be reduced to the purpose of rationalizing religious beliefs and idealistic assumptions. Who can deny the strength of the materialist and atheistic trend of Western philosophy? But who can also deny that the struggle between idealism and materialism is itself couched in terms of worldly validation? In this way, the assumption leading to the greatest mastery of nature is bound to triumph. Such is exactly the way Marx announced the contest when he wrote: "the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world differently, the point is, to *change* it." And if today Marxist socialism is going into retreat, it is because it has lost the economic battle.

It seems to me that the drive to modernity stems from the dictate urging human beings to prove the validity of their thinking in practice. When mundane conquests or economic activities serve the purpose of validation of beliefs and myths, the proper motivation calling for development occurs. This is exactly the meaning of the Copernican revolution: the world must conform to ideas, which is then the manner material success is made into validation of beliefs. The urge, the passion for material conquest springs from its attribute to substantiate beliefs: it is a rational way of living one's beliefs. I conclude that development is impossible if this type of longing does not possess the mind.

In particular, I maintain that the depiction of development in terms of mere satisfaction of needs rather than validation of beliefs largely explains the underdevelopment of Africa. By not being a program of corroboration of beliefs, development fails to be animated by a competitive, insatiable, and creative spirit. Because the scientific texture of proving is missing, work is still a burden and wealth the object of greed. Far from being an undertaking governed by specific rules, economic projects turn into disorderly activities, driven as they are by the sole aim of coping well in situations where all means are justified, where rules are perceived more as obstacles than norms of validation. In not unfolding as a program, as a rational enterprise, economic goals are thus restricted to the task of escaping the fate of poverty.

The question is, then, to know what prevents Africa from nurturing the right type of motivation. The full meaning of Africa's dehumanization and loss of identity crops up here. Disparaged by the colonial discourse, betrayed by the *évolués*, and undermined by the imitation of the West, the situation of African personality and legacy does not allow the sublimation of economic goals. If development is proving, Africans have nothing to prove: they have only drives that they must suppress. Being at odds with their beliefs and identity, their sole option is to imitate the West, let alone vie with it. The resolution of Africa is not to conquer the world--such a conquest would require the mobilization of myths--but to conform to the Western model, if possible to try to reduce the gap, even though the model admittedly represses African personality and relegates it to a peripheral role. Many scholars have come to reprove the Western model because it has so far failed. Failure exposes the bare fact that Westernization is merely a continuation of the colonial model. The fact that in post-colonial Africa the model has become the goal of native ruling elite does not change its nature; nor does it make it any more successful. So long as Africa is not after its own self, armed with its own beliefs and myths, development is still a civilizing mission, not the validation of its ideals. Is not the injunction to catch up with the West subduing Africa to an external model perceived as normative? Real development, however, would require a competitive spirit urging Africa not so much to copy the West as to objectify itself through mundane conquests.

The perseverance of ethnophilosophy in retrieving African thinking and personality acquires here a positive turn. It wants to supply the missing cause, to arouse the ethos of validation by providing beliefs and the accompanying concern. When Towa, faithful to his Western model, upholds the opinion that in order to realize development "we must exorcise the obsession of originality and

difference," he wanders from the correct understanding of development. Being an expression of the scientific mind, development is an enterprise of validating beliefs through mundane conquests. One cannot have the means without the end, namely the corroboration of cultural idiosyncrasies according to rational rules. From the evacuation of the obsession of originality, Towa might get the desire for a better material life and, among some individuals, the impulse of greed, that is at best hedonistic reasons, which are far from pushing society into a passionate worldliness. In short, development requires the involvement of human pride such as it flows from cultural idiosyncrasy.

This is so true that situations placing traditional ruling elite under the threat of external domination were found to be highly propitious for the change known as modernity. Such a change has then a salvational meaning. Referring to this meaning of development, Rostow wrote:

Men holding effective authority or influence have been willing to uproot traditional societies not, primarily, to make more money but because the traditional society failed--or threatened to fail--to protect them from humiliation by foreigners."

Rostow's remark can be generalized as follows: ruling elite change themselves and introduce innovations in their society when reforms appear to them necessary to defend their rule against either internal uprising or external domination. We know today how decisive the threat of communism was in upholding the industrialization of East Asian countries. In all the cases of modernization, we find the same theme in different contexts. In the West the challenge of science to traditional beliefs and values, itself intensified by social movements and nationalist struggles for supremacy, called for a process of validation through worldliness; in non-Western societies the challenge of Western material power gave rise to a similar salvational will. Naturally, those countries little susceptible to the colonial disparagement owing to their past glory, or not profoundly disrupted by the colonial rule, or had managed to avoid colonialism altogether, like China and Japan, produced sooner the salvational commitment. Where colonialism has been most disruptive, as in Africa, the salvational ethos is understandably slow in coming.

But it must come, for Africa cannot do without it. Hence the importance of ethnophilosophy: African philosophy will be relevant only if it is a philosophy of *enracinement*, of taking root. The whole concept of a return to the past springs from the conviction that the inability of Africa to modernize is due to the imposition of a disparaging and oppressive model. Accordingly, development posits the rehabilitation of its identity on which the liberation of its creative forces fully depends. Ethnophilosophy is accused of being a withdrawal; it is indeed so and quite naturally, given its purpose to provide the much-needed ideological boost to the awakening of Africa.

Where ethnophilosophy is wrong is when it confines the rehabilitation of Africa to only one aspect of the question. It advocates a return but forgets to set the conditions of the empowerment of Africa, namely the appropriation of Western technology and the rules of validation by the return journey. The indictment of retrogression by professional philosophers is, therefore, not groundless. As profoundly noted by Hountondji, the return to the past of ethnophilosophy carries along many of the

Western philosophical concepts which, because they are used outside the context of modernization, justify any retrograde view and embellish African vices. What occurs then is an amalgam of traditional ideas with modern notions. This amalgam can only be paralyzing and confusing, being but a cause of dualism and conflict of loyalty, just as it lends a modern dignity to unchanged traditional positions. For example, the modern version of African tyrant is nourished by the amalgam of the traditional notion of chief with a modern military and bureaucratic apparatus. The traditional notion, feeding on modern institutions, naturally results in a tyranny against which the traditional means of power control are ineffective. The warning of professional philosophy is quite pertinent: rehabilitation is not feasible without a critical approach. Unless the good is separated from the bad, the uncritical revival of the past becomes detrimental to real progress.

Even if I do not follow professional philosophy in its equation of ethnophilosophy with a reactionary attitude, the uncritical revival of the past and the conception of modernity as a mere amalgam of traditional ideas with modern concepts must be censured. The revival must not invite narcissism, and the role of professional philosophy in denouncing exoticism and advising theoretical rigor and a progressive program is most welcome. Ethnophilosophy must be led to admit that its work of restoration is perforce an interpretation of African legacy, that its project deals with a compound situation. The task of African philosophy is to counter this spontaneous amalgamation by a reflective and critical synthesis such that traditional longings, far from battenning on modern settings, are challenged by them and compelled to prove their validity through worldly success. This requires a reinterpretation of African cultures, a rationalization whereby elements of African personality, instead of merely coupling with modern ideas, search for their corroboration through the acceptance of the rules of validation.

This task is eminently philosophical, the articulation of the traditional worldview with modern philosophical concepts being necessary to achieve rationalization. Unless there is convergence on the need for validation, the two will remain apart forever. Accordingly, between ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy there is place for African philosophy understood as a midwife, that is, as assisting African thinking in delivering the desire for worldliness. This should change the perplexing and crippling amalgam into an autonomous, self-contained, and structured personality. The error of professional philosophers is to decline to enter into dialogue with tradition, preferring the attitude of the tutor, which is then barely different from the colonizer.

For instance, take the case of ethnicity. It is viewed as an evil to which Africa owes much of its misery and retardation. However, its mere repression, assuming that it is possible, will cause an irreplaceable loss, given the high degree of devotion that it seems to inspire. So why not try to modernize ethnicity rather than stifle it? By this I mean the device of a social and political order organizing ethnic attachments so competitively that it compels them to seek worldly confirmation. Likewise, consider the case of communalism. Because it does not seem to encourage the rise of individualism in the Western sense of word, it has been decried as a culprit. Yet its mere extirpation

will take away much of African fervor, all the more so as the African preference for harmonious organization of the group over vying individuals does not exclude competitive spirit at other levels of social life. Even the principle associating age with wisdom is bound to modernize, provided that economic success becomes the test of social leadership.

To conclude, the dismissal of the conflict between tradition and modernity and the conception of the latter as worldly corroboration of the former advise the replacement of the suppression of traditional longings by a policy of enhancement consecutive to a reinterpretative work. In this way, culture change is promoted through the commitment to tradition rather than its denial. Neither Westernization nor careful borrowings really change an inherited personality; they simply burden it with dualism. Also, the attempt to wipe out the legacy is futile and humanly suicidal. In return, what is viable is the alteration of the past, the manner the legacy is received. This amounts to renovating identity.

In other words, retrospective will, rather than exclusively forward-looking attitude, is the way to change. The reinterpretation of the legacy is how new assignments are contrived and recipients exhorted to be up to expectations. The work unleashes an ethical process of culture change, the very one giving primacy to duty accomplishment over aspirations and betterment. Its advantage is its readiness to change, for it has the will to accept the necessary sacrifices. When change emanates from an ethical prod, it assumes the form of sacrifice inherent in the accomplishment of duty. This promises Africa a new departure, since development is no more to go out of its own self, still less a civilizing mission, but the call of duty, no more no less.

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