

# Individual Autonomy and Development in Contemporary Africa

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## Abstract

There are some vital questions that continuously and constantly confront us as human beings in Africa. Such questions include, who are we? How did we come to be called Africans? What about our culture, our language or our mode of dressing? What about our leadership and artistic prowess? Do we even have autonomy at all? What is autonomy? Is autonomy all that is to life? To what extent can we say we are free as individuals? Are we really autonomous? Is it when the instinct tells someone that he is free that he can be said to be free? All these and many more questions readily comes to mind as Africans. Lawrence Bamikole made it clear that in discussing the whole and its parts, the individual and the community should not neglect the fact that the individual makes the community. It is the ideas and formed values of the individuals that make the values and the ideas of the community. The values according to him, do not come from elsewhere as the community and its cultures are products of the individual's brain (Bamikole 2004:104)<sup>1</sup>. For that reason, submission to the community is submission to oneself. Thus the question of individual losing their autonomy to what is communal does not arise, because what is communal is not accepted but also generated by individuals. As a result of this, conflict may not be said to arise in this regards when an individual come to realize his personality. This article talks about the individual autonomy and development in contemporary Africa. What do we mean by development? Or what is development? If there was individual autonomy in the traditional African system, how relevant is it in the contemporary world of today?

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## What is development?

A society is the coming together of human beings. No society remains the way it started. This is because there is an insatiable desire and quest in the consciousness of every human person to make things better than it used to be. This quest, and of course the actions that it generates are what give rise to what we refer to as development. Development is a form of positive change that stays permanently with a society as a result of various positive influences for a period of time. There are two aspects of development. They are the tangible aspect and the intangible aspect. [Oladipo, 2009: 94]<sup>2</sup> The tangible aspect of development is concerned about the material progress of the society, which is usually dictated by the level of knowledge of the science and its technical know how. The intangible aspect of development is also referred to as the moral aspect of development. This is development in terms of human relationship in the society. This aspect of development might not be so visible, but it is also very important.

## The State of Development in Contemporary Africa

There are some African countries that might be said to be better than countries from other parts of the world, but a general survey of the African continent undoubtedly reveals that the continent is far behind in development. The level of control we have on our physical environment points to this fact. We have many natural resources that have been discovered but not exploited, for example bitumen deposit in Ondo State of Nigeria is a clear case of this. This is not because we want to conserve them, rather, we lack the mental and mechanical capacity to do. Many African so called technocrats lack the mental and mechanical know how to harness this. This is imminent in the crop of graduates being churn out from African schools. It is disheartening to note that African scholars especially those from West Africa are lagging behind in the scheme of things. To say the least, the crude oil which is currently being exploited cannot be done without the help of white expatriates of Shell and Chevron. Besides, we cannot even convert them to finished products because our refineries are not working. In a nutshell, we still lag behind in the technical development in Africa. Cleveland gave a summary of the attention our government should place on the development of our physical resources.

National and local aspirations for sustainable development are

linked to the integrity of natural resources and the environment. It is, therefore, critical to conserve and sustainably use the region's environmental assets, not only from an environmental perspective but also as a sustainable resource to support human well-being and development and as a sink for wastes from production processes  
Cutler J. Cleveland(2010:13)<sup>3</sup>

Having stated this, it will be deduced that African lack the tangible and the intangible aspect of development. When you ask a child of what he will do when he eventually finds himself in the corridor of power, he will quickly respond that he is going to embezzle fund and siphon it into foreign account. This is a clear case of moral decadence that has eaten deep into the fabric of African society. That is the reason scholar like Oladipo quickly proffer a solution to this horrendous situation in Africa. To Oladipo;

the achievement of a new liberation in Africa requires the development and articulation of an integrated political, economic and cultural agenda, which is guided by a common vision of freedom and pursued with great optimism and faith in the capacity of human being to remake their world and renew themselves(Oladipo 2009:9)<sup>4</sup>

Apart from this, some people have also attributed the state of under development in Africa to the communal lifestyle of Africans. This is because nobody lay claims to the achievement he or she makes on the society. All products and achievements of the individuals are donated to the bank of achievements in the community. As a result of this many people will not be willing to do noble thing in the community because they will not be attributed to him, rather to the community. Perhaps this is in tune to the saying that what is collectively own is nobody's. To some scholars, this is untrue, they base on their argument on the coronation of titles to those who have distinguished themselves in an art. This may sound true but the bottom line is that in the traditional African setting, individual's achievement is seen from the community's angle where everyone is seen in relation to the community. Buttressing Mbiti famous quote of I am because we are. For the fact that individuality is not reckon with is anathema to traditional African society this makes development to be slow as a result of it making the people unwilling to contribute to the society. Though this is a contentious issue among African scholars. This is because an African in the traditional African society has a sense of belongingness with his community. This is the basis of allegiance to the community in terms of wars and shared valued. He alone can lead his fellows to wage war or to subdue another in a conflict. An example is King Odewale in Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to Blame*. Where Odewale is said to help the Kutuje people to conquer the Ijokun people, which subsequently led to his being coronated as the Oba of the land of Kutuje. Here it would be seen that Odewale's individual valour is reckoned with which subsequently led to his royalty. Some scholars will argue in line with this that individuality can be encouraged among Africans. This is more of a part of their emotion—the emotion of conquer, dedication or transparency which is the product of their enculturation or indoctrination. If such an allegiance exists, there is no doubt that the societies, though communal, have its individual members alienated from its development.

### **How Individual Autonomy Affects Development in Contemporary Africa.**

As I inferred earlier, the word development is a contentious issue. Some see development in terms of its tangibility while another school perceive it in terms of being intangible. This section focuses on how an individual's autonomy affects development in an African society. There is no gainsaying the fact that some societies are termed developed, developing and underdeveloped societies. These appellations are possible as a result of the tangibility and intangibility of development. The idea behind these distinction is as a result of the discrepancy in indices like economy, industrial technology, and other material conditions. Just like the Marxian materialistic conception of history where the substructure of development is economic, while the superstructure are such things like politics, religion and culture. Though scholars have argued that development is in the totality of all spheres of life. Perhaps that is what Albert Dalfovo sees when he says;

development has to represent the whole gamut of change by which an entire social system could move away from a condition of life widely perceived as unsatisfactory towards another condition regarded as materially and spiritually better(Dalfovo1999:38)<sup>5</sup>.

Since development is seen as a totality of a society well being it will not be out of place to say that this change come about by an individual or group of individuals. And what makes this possible is the contributions of the individuals to the society. Since the individuals make a society. The more the individual develops, the more the society develops. For instance, if the individuals is enlightened which is an intangible aspect of development, the better for the society for the society will be enlightened. Therefore, excellence should be measured in terms of what contributions an individual has been able to give to the society. This can only be possible when the autonomy of the individual is guaranteed in the scheme of things.

The form of development which will do Africa good is what Ogundowole calls self-initiated development or self-reliance (Ogundowole 2004:93)<sup>6</sup>. A situation where an individual will not look up to anybody or the society before he could do something for the society. Such individual will have to be independent, self sufficient and self determined. It is only through this that his autonomy will be guaranteed. For Ogundowole and other proponents of his theory such as Yinka Opafola, Africa has stayed so long in the hands of foreigners expecting them to develop our continent for us. This is premised on the argument that since they are our colonial masters, they know best and should therefore do everything for us. This is what Oladipo called Africa problematic (Oladipo,2009;1)<sup>7</sup>. This problem in Africa has taken different forms in Africa scholarship. Each definition depends on what scholars perceive as the source of Africa weakness and humiliation in the contemporary world. This weakness ranges from one country to another. Like in Nigeria, the problem is much. This range from the human capacity backwardness to lack of infrastructural amenities, to prevalence of immoral aptitude and attitude among the citizens of a country. Embers of these and many more are seen among African nations. So this problematic in Africa has not helped Africa in anyway. So there is need for Africans to take baton of development in their hands. Similarly, there is the need for the individuals in the community to develop themselves in other for them to make positive contributions to the society. We cannot talk about human development without an emphasis on the values of confidence, self-trust and independence; all of which are characteristics of individual autonomy.

So also can we not talk of development without talking about culture. Kwasi Wiredu in his article, Philosophy and an African Culture talks about African culture being anachronistic, authoritarianism and supernaturalism. And these are ingredient that mal the development of Africa. In this article, he argues for universalism with regards to the issue of development. According to him, one illuminating way of approaching the concept of development is to measure it by the degree to which rational methods have penetrated thought habits(Wiredu,1980:43)<sup>8</sup>. He believes however that on this conception of development , we cannot compare the development of different peoples in absolute terms. He also argued for development in rational term. Oladipo also follows this trend when he makes a distinction between culture of belief and culture of inquiry(2001:65)<sup>9</sup>. According to Oladipo, the culture of inquiry involves a systematic investigation of phenomena that is natural and social with a view of enhancing our understanding of their nature. In order to do this, he proposes the use of the scientific method. On the other hand the culture of belief is an act of almost passive observation of things and processes in nature and society.

The culture of a people goes a long way in deciding the fate of the society. When the culture is developed, the society too develops. That is what the western world is enjoying till today. Take English language for instance, the widely use of English language amidst other languages as a medium of communication both in speaking and in writing make it possible for the English culture to be developed. Unlike the languages in Africa which are not well spread. Apart from this Africa problem is succinctly summarized by Thomas Hodgkin below;

The African elite have been taught in schools organised on the model of British public schools or French Lycees. It has sat for his senior Cambridge or its Baccalaureates. It has been compelled to learn a little Latin and less Greek. It has been taught to reason in the style of Hume and Ayer, or Descartes or Gilson. It wears academic dress, or drinks vermounth in cafes. When it succeeds in winning a measures of self government, its institutions take the form of a parliament on the British model..... When this elite want to write poetry, or do scientific research or run a business or make political speeches or philosophise, it is obliged to use European ;language. Friendship, family relationships, lovemaking, can be handled in the vernacular but little else....(1964:134-135)<sup>10</sup>

This long quote is a perfect depiction of a typical Africa, which mal the development of Africa. It is demeaning for such thing to happen to Africa. It means Africa can not stand straight without groping for a wall for support. The situation is even worst when the elite could not even use their enlightenment to salvage Africa from the invested maggot that has eaten deep in the fabric of Africa development.

It is not that we are suggesting that we should be glorifying and romanticising African tradition. However, there is the need to look closely into the concept of tradition. According to Karl Popper, there are two views about tradition: rationalists view and anti-rationalist view. The rationalist wants to judge everything on its own merit. While the anti-rationalist view have as their attitude to accept tradition as something just given. For instance, they will say you have to take it, you cannot rationalise it, it plays an important role in society and you can only understand its significance and accept it (1991:52)<sup>11</sup>

Popper went on to explain that certain types of tradition of great importance are local and cannot easily be transplanted. These traditions are precious things, and it is very difficult to restore them once they are lost. He also make us to understand that there are two main attitude towards tradition. One is to accept tradition uncritically, often without even being aware of it and the other possibility is critical attitude, which may result

either in acceptance or in rejection, or perhaps in a compromise.

## CONCLUSION

It is the individual that brings about this change in tradition, culture and development. It is when an individual is autonomous that he is able to solve this problem. This is also in relation with the society, for the change is in the society, all things been equal. The problem one will have with the subject of autonomy today is such that some individuals have become so powerful that they undermine the position of the society. Sometimes because these individuals have become as wealthy as the state, perhaps wealthier in some cases. This may be a result of their wealth or the political position they occupy. This has led to occurrences such as tyranny, social disorder and god-fatherism, hooliganism and so on.

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