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Knowledge in praxis and socio-economic development: Explaining the African situation

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One of the most fundamental questions bedeviling the African continent is the problem of underdevelopment which manifests in the forms of fears and despairs Africans face daily as they try to make sense of their existence in a world that has become a global village. Such a situation affects the level of confidence Africans have in terms of the relative opportunity to realize their potentials within the political and economic milieu they find themselves. This question takes on particular pungency when Africans try to make sense of the paradox of penury and hunger in a continent so richly endowed with natural and human resources. This paper argues the position that African socio-economic underdevelopment has its root in the prevalence of the knowledge of “what”, as opposed to the knowledge of “how”. The paper holds that this is the cause of our over reliance on others for thoughts and solutions to our pressing problems and our failure to make our mark in this new age of discovery and globalisation. While concluding that development of knowledge in praxis is a critical element in the achievement of the goal of social reconstruction in Africa, we emphasize the fact that unless Africans accept knowledge in praxis as an instrument for socio-economic revolution, development will remain an unachievable project in Africa.

Key words: Knowledge, Africa, development, philosophy, praxis, globalisation, African renaissance.

INTRODUCTION

Ozoemena Mbachu supports the view that “...it is wrong to believe that politics and economics are separate and somehow unconnected” (Mbachu, 1994: 18). Walter Oyugi corroborates this viewpoint:

Indeed, the whole idea of democracy does not make sense in a situation where people’s major preoccupation is survival... It is virtually impossible to establish democratic practices in a polity which is technologically underdeveloped (Oyugi, 1988: 109). This line of thinking can also be discerned in Hobbes, who suggests that, by

promoting economic development within their own borders, states may eventually attain self-sufficiency (Hobbes, 1998:150). Indeed, one can deduce from the above explications that socio-economic condition affects development. Indeed, the level of socio-economic development of any society makes it easier or difficult for such a society to guarantee democracy and human rights. In Nigeria, the lack of development has made it extremely difficult for the emergence of effective democracy and human rights. Omololu Soyombo contends that corruption is a major cause of Nigeria’s economic problems

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(Soyombo, 2006: 278). In his words, "it has been recognised as a major single cause of...poverty and under-development in the country, posing a threat to social and economic development and political stability" (ibid.). Chinua Achebe estimates that about 60% of Nigeria's wealth is being consumed by corruption (Achebe, 1983: 40).

The inability of Africans to revolutionise when it matters most has been the greatest problem of African development. Africa, with her collection of values, cherished and practiced, left the scene of advancement when she exchanged growth for a stagnate stance. Liberation from the shackles of underdevelopment is now an issue. In the spirit of Sartre's statement that "we only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us" (Sartre, 1963: 15), an African renaissance becomes an imperative. Olusegun Oladipo depicts African renaissance as "a statement of hope – hope that Africa can regain its lost glory, that the African condition of economic underdevelopment and social misery can be transformed" (Oladipo, 1999: 5). Basically, it is a reaction to the persistent perception of Africa as a continent "torn by the interminable conflicts unable to solve its problems, condemned to the netherworld" (Mbeki: 1998: 201). Indeed, it is a call for urgent socio-economic reconstruction at all levels and in all facets of the African landscape.

Owing to the above background, this paper argues for "knowledge in praxis" as the panacea for the much-needed and long-desired African socio-economic reconstruction. This will necessarily involve the reformulation of our problems, exploiting all the resources of the contemporary world without putting in jeopardy our basic values. In the way, a nexus will be drawn between theory and practice. Unless we design and put in place a strategy of development based on knowledge in praxis and defined by Africa's conditions, the hope for a sustainable development would remain a mirage.

The African predicament

When most of African states were colonised by various European powers, it was ostensibly to bring enlightenment to the "dark continent". Now, after more than one hundred years, Africans see colonialism as synonymous with material exploitation, cultural expropriation and anthropological impoverishment. As Kwasi Wiredu puts it, "colonialism included a systematic program of de-Africanization" (Wiredu, 2004: 1). Today, the African survivors of colonialism suffer gross ego distortion. Indeed, the African continent has become the most bastardized and misused continent. David Lamb paints the picture vividly:

The colonialists left behind some schools and roads, some post offices and bureaucrats. But their cruellest legacy on the African continent was a lingering inferiority

complex, a confused sense of identity. (Lamb, 1986: 140)

Three decades after most African nations gained their independence, the socio-political and economic situation of the continent is simply chaotic. Western civilisation succeeded in displacing the old order, but no new order seems to be in place. The changes that came with colonialism were deep, touching various aspects including cultures and institutions.

According to Toyin (2005), the exploitative connection between Africa and a global economy changed Africa into an inferior race. For him, colonialism was just a means of showing racial arrogance, humiliating African leaders and their people. In Fanon's analysis, the colonized people tend to mimic the ways of the colonizers, while suppressing their natural selves on a conscious and unconscious level, and consequently begin to suffer from various psychological disorders (Fanon, 1982). For Joe Duke, "colonialism served to produce conflicts within the society and organizations in ways that impacted significantly on the performance of the various local social, economic and political institutions" (Duke, 2010: 65). Basically, the African ego suffered distortion, leading to the crises in African socio-economic and political realities. The "white man" has, indeed, put a knife on the things that held Africans together and they have fallen apart (Achebe, 1974).

Almost every form of governmental system and political ideology found in the East or West has been tried out in some country in Africa. In fact, post-colonial Africa has been the battle-ground of competing ideological movements, which have left the African countries, pulled in different directions by nations with conflicting but certainly non-African interests. The economy of Africa is not seeing better days. After the European raping and pillaging of the continent, what remains of its God-given resources is now being selfishly appropriated by the leaders who have arisen in the wake of independence to further the exploitation of the masses who now groan under the weight of their manifold privations. These tyrannical leaders share nothing beyond colour with their fellow citizens, as they flaunt the highest standard of living among the poorest people of the world.

Considering the prevalent tension in politics and the collapse of the new economic structures, coupled with widespread corruption, inefficiency, and mal-administration, it could be argued that having lost what they need, Africans are even unable to gain what they want. Vincent B. Khapoya paints the picture vividly:

There was massive exploitation of Africa in terms of resource depletion, labor exploitation, unfair taxation, lack of industrialization, the prohibition of inter-African trade, and the introduction of fragile dependent one-crop or one-mineral economies. The exacerbation of ethnic rivalries, which the British, especially, through the implementation of the colonial policy of "indirect rule," exploited in furthering colonial control, has continued to echo in

post-independence conflicts in Africa. The alienation and undermining of traditional African authority patterns through the use of chiefs for colonial duties made the task of nation-building much more difficult. The creation of artificial boundaries has been the basis of much suffering in African states as political conflicts have flared up from time to time on account of territorial claims and counterclaims. The destruction of African culture and values through the imposition of alien religions and the relentless attack on African values mounted by mission schools contributed to a mentality of ennui and dependency and to the loss of confidence in themselves, their institutions, and their heritage. (Khapoya, 2013: 134-135):

Indeed, colonial legacies embodied in the post-colonial African states and sustained by neo-colonial imperialism constitute the main obstacle to development in Africa. This is the African predicament.

The role of knowledge in African development

Knowledge is crucial to human survival and flourishing. It is one of the means by which human beings seek to master and control their environment and regulate their social interactions. Indeed, without knowledge, human beings would hardly have been better than brutes. But the production, transmission and application of knowledge are not easy tasks. They require for their accomplishment the development of the culture of inquiry. This culture of inquiry is usually propelled by the pursuit of meaning. It involves seeking and purposeful effort aimed at creating a better world.

John Hospers deciphered three meanings of "knowledge": knowledge by acquaintance, propositional knowledge, and knowledge by ability (Hospers, 1953: 143). Knowledge by acquaintance refers to getting familiar with a fact:

"You know (are acquainted with) Yosemite Falls if you have been there..." (ibid.).

Propositional knowledge is knowledge in the propositional since:

"I know that..." where the word 'that' is followed by a proposition" (ibid.).

Knowledge by ability deals with knowing how. Hospers was very specific:

Knowing how is an ability – we know how to ride a horse if we have the ability to ride a horse, and the test of whether we have the ability is whether in the appropriate situation we can perform the activity in question. If you set me on a horse, you will soon discover the merits of the claim that I know how to ride a horse (ibid.).

This work is concerned with knowledge by ability. The reason for this is not far-fetched: The devaluation of knowledge by acquaintance, propositional knowledge, and the revaluation of the status of the practical "knowing how" is accompanied by a relinquishment of a privileged knowledge that enables and justifies the practice of all (Gimmler, 2004: 49). It should be clear from the foregoing that knowledge of ability (henceforth knowledge in praxis) is both a product and a process. It is a product of inquiry and at the same time, a process of seeking driven by the desire to improve the conditions of our existence and situation. Central to this process is the capacity and ability to examine or scrutinise, in the manner of Socrates, our cherished beliefs and notions, with the view of ensuring that whatever we claim to know is supported with good reasons. He did not claim that he knew anything. In the manner of a practitioner of interrogative method, what he did was to ask questions (Hintikka, 2007: 35). In this sense, knowledge in praxis becomes a tool of self-appraisal and self-understanding without which our search for meaning and development is impossible. Ogundowole (2006: 44), who relates the discussion to the Nigerian situation, asks the question:

"Can Nigeria attain a political praxis that will raise it not only to the present level of advanced nations, but to such a level which will be the immediate future of these nations?"

For him, "the answer to this question can only be found in the kind of political philosophy, destined to guide our people". (ibid.) Little wonder he defined development as the desire and ability to use what is available to continuously improve the quality of life, liberate people from the hazardous power and influence of natural geo-physical and world historical environment. (Ogundowole, 2011: 122) Hence, there is a serious need for practical knowledge in Africa, if Africa is to experience sustainable socio-economic development. In the words of Olumuyiwa Falaiye, One important dimension in the quest for development and mental liberation in Africa has often been seen in terms of a deterministic relationship between language, culture and cognition (Falaiye, 2012: 17).

Here, Falaiye recognises the role of knowledge (which he called "cognition"), for any meaningful development. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Africa today. A characteristic feature of the African condition is "inability to employ epistemological variables in their praxis..." (Ogundowole, 2007: 30) The predominant intellectual orientation in Africa today is that of belief without justification and knowledge of "what", instead of knowledge of "how". This is a culture of almost passive observation of things and processes. It is the sort of culture that takes for granted ideas and social practices received from other cultures. This situation predisposes people to stick to familiar ways of doing things, without

considering their adequacy for a given human situation. Indeed, this is the basis of "the failure to perceive anachronistic things for what they are and to discard or modify them as the case may require" (Wiredu, 1980). The predominance of the knowledge of "what" in Africa, instead of knowledge in praxis, is partly responsible for the inability to regain our bearing and sense of direction since many African states regained their independence from the colonial interlopers. It is also a critical factor in the pursuit of orthodoxy in the search for solutions to our myriads of problems, and our inability to reshape our institutions to meet the challenges of the times. Indeed, it is the cause of our over-reliance on others for thoughts and solutions to our pressing problems and our failure to make our mark in this new age of discovery, hence the image of Africans as a marginal people.

The point is that sustainable socio-economic development can only be achieved through the conscious and continuous effort at expunging of "belief without justification" and the active promotion of the culture of "knowledge in praxis", hence, the need for philosophers and other think-tanks to promote the rationalist temper in Africa. Since the most progressive societies are those that premised their development on knowledge in praxis (Bishop and Trout, 2005), African societies should, as a matter of urgency, form the habit "of freedom of inquiry, openness to criticism, a general type of scepticism and fallibilism and non-veneration of authorities" (Bodurin, 1985: xii). It is this emphasis on knowledge in praxis that will eventually pave the way for the much desired African renaissance.

The way forward: African renaissance

The transformation of Africa from a colonial society to a democratic one is an indication that Africa's time of social-economic reconstruction has come. This is African renaissance, a revitalisation of what the African condition used to be (see Onyewuenyi, 1993). After all, the African situation, as Africa's ancient history makes clear, has not always been so. In addition, there is a new generation of Africans who are in support of African renaissance. For Thabo Mbeki, this generation remains African and carries with it an historic pride which compels it to seek a place for Africans equal to all other peoples of our common universe (Mbeki, 1998: 202). This generation of Africans, for Mbeki, "guarantees Africa's advance towards its renaissance" (Ibid). First and foremost, it is important to recognise that some changes have taken place in Africa. For instance, the whole of Africa is now free from colonial rule. This change indicates clearly that the transformation of Africa is possible. Despite this, we cannot legitimately claim that a new African era has begun.

Knowledge in praxis is very crucial to progress development, as these will pave way for the African

renaissance. This type of knowledge aids the society to develop definite methods of selecting, educating and culturing individuals to undertake the arduous task of steering the wheels of development. Many Africans lack this type of knowledge. According to Bewaji (2007: 411) ... while they are 'knowledgeable' in the white man's book information and in wanton individualism, they lack the intellectual and cognitive culture necessary for the appreciation of contemporary social, economic and technological dynamics... This is the problem of knowledge and the processes of its productions in Africa. The predominant philosophy of education is one which favours the transfer of information, as opposed to the development of the capacity for creating; one which is, therefore, essentially imitative than creative.

Furthermore, Africa today is an intellectual colony, which specialises in supplying the metropolises in Europe and America with raw material in the form of data, with little or no value added, and receiving from them finished products in the form of explanatory theories and conceptual frameworks. This general intellectual dependence has generated the problem of "the displacement of knowledge" (Hountondji, 1983: 136). In other words, although the problem African scholars seek to address are in Africa, as are the raw materials for the development of theories to tackle them, these theories are developed elsewhere and exported back to Africa. This is a sure recipe for socio-economic underdevelopment. The above shows that the intellectual conditions for African renaissance are not there yet if we define African renaissance as the "hope that Africa can regain its lost glory, that the African condition of economic underdevelopment and social misery can be transformed" (Oladipo, 1999: 5).

African renaissance, in the long run, entails that Africans develop the capacity for knowledge in praxis for the development of human life. Here, claims and theories are tested against observed facts, and beliefs are adjusted to evidence (Wiredu, 1980: 15). The role of education in the inculcation of this type of knowledge cannot be overemphasised. But the required education cannot be the imitative kind that is predominant at the moment. Rather, the relevant education would be one which is efficacious "in propagating the rational, analytic and scientific orientation" (Ibid.). Indeed, African socio-political development requires that Africans develop the capacity for the application of the results of knowledge for the improvement of the conditions of human life. It requires a sustained pursuit of knowledge in praxis.

CONCLUSION

In this age of globalisation, Africa cannot afford to be left behind in developmental issues. It is mostly important to recognise the fact that "the values of the scientific, rationalist and democratic outlook" (Kutz, 1995: 18) which propel knowledge in praxis are not Western "in any

proprietary sense" (Wiredu, 1998: 17). Rather, these values are "intrinsic to world culture" (Kutz, 1995: 18). The development of knowledge in praxis is a critical element in the achievement of the goal of social reconstruction in Africa. To the extent that Africans emphasize and adopt knowledge in praxis as a tool for socio-economic transformation, to that extent would development be a feasible project in Africa.

Conflict of Interests

The author have not declared any conflict of interests.

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