

# Making Development Work: Philosophy and the Challenge of Relevance in Africa; the Imperatives of a Sustainable Philosophy

**Edema Philip, PhD**

Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Augustine University (Lagos State, Nigeria)

**Malachy Igwilo, PhD**

Bells University of Technology (Ogun State, Nigeria)

## Abstract

African philosophy, having emerged from the shackles of a debilitating debate as to the fact very fact of its existence, needs to make itself relevant to the current predicaments of the continent. There is now an urgent need for African philosophers to distance themselves from the blame game syndrome (blaming the white man for all African problems) and focus on a thoroughgoing philosophy that will contribute concretely to the search for the solution of Africa's many problems. Blaming the white man deprives Africa of the mental and intellectual energy required for dealing with the task at hand, while making philosophy appear irrelevant on the continent. This paper, using the philosophical tools of analysis and criticism, submits that African philosophers need to do more to remain relevant in the current search for development in Africa, rather than expending energy on fleeting pursuits such as blaming the white man. It is the position of this paper that African philosophy should be transformed to become a sustainable philosophy. A sustainable philosophy is a philosophy that will deal with current problems while keeping an eye on the protection of a possible future generation. It is only when we philosophise in a sustainable way that African philosophy becomes relevant in the development debate on the continent.

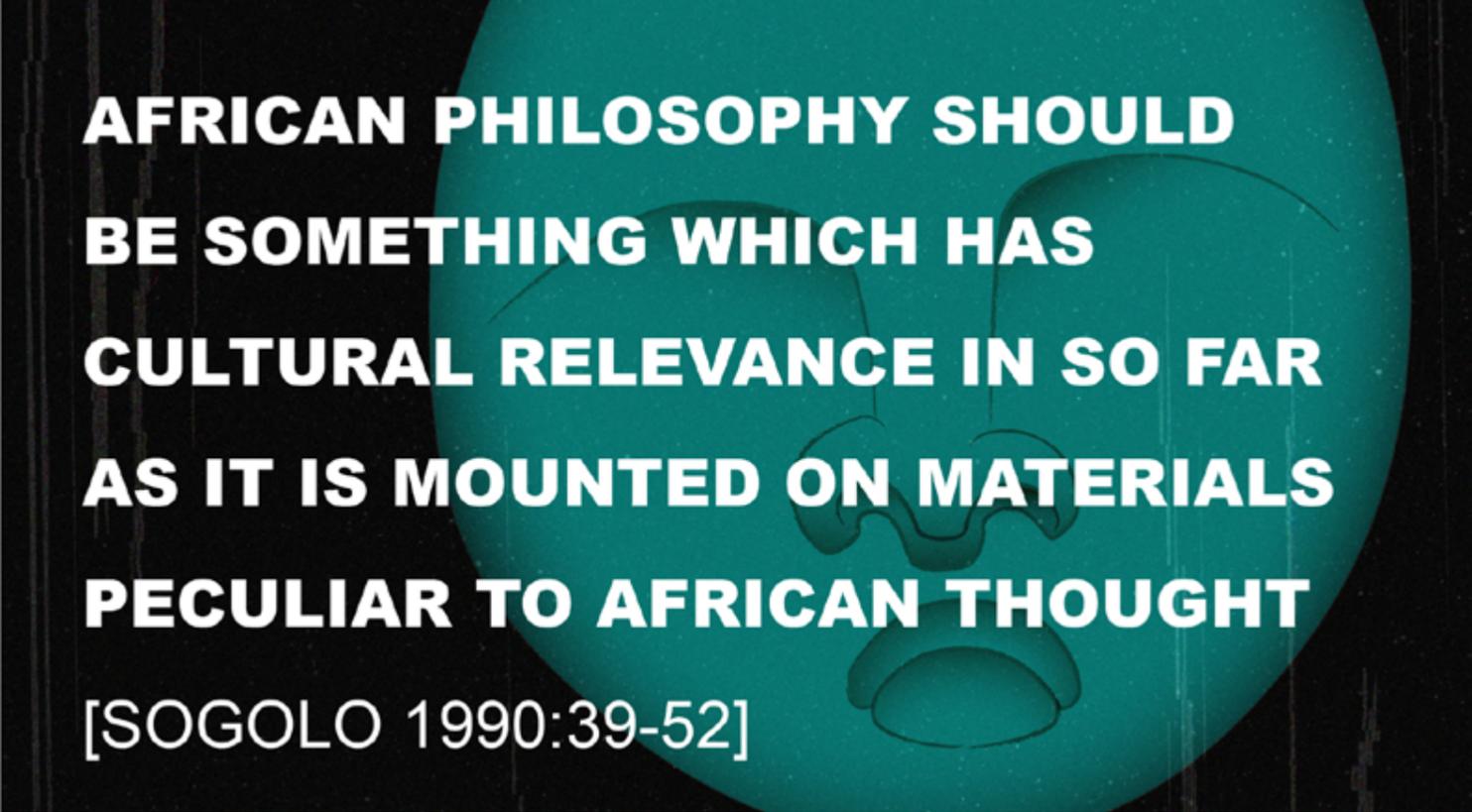
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## Introduction

Philosophy in Africa has come a long way. There is no doubt that we have recovered from that very taxing debate as to what African philosophy is. If we accept that we in this part of the world can indeed philosophise, then we can stand up to show the fruits of this philosophising. The best place to show this is in formulating sustainable principles that we can use to salvage the African predicament. There is no doubt in our minds today that for us to be relevant, we must engage society and make life better than it is now. Time has

passed when philosophy in Africa was limited to an escape to the ivory tower, where we go to split hairs and engage in musings that will ensure our promotion in our various academic careers. Yes, those are necessary, but we can no longer limit ourselves to that. When we look at philosophical heritage elsewhere, especially in the West, we see that indeed philosophy is the most viable tool for development. In the West, the history of philosophy we read has always been about how to make life better by understanding the

meaning of reality and the way it affects us. At the beginning of Western philosophy, Thales posited that the stuff of reality is water. He was philosophising from his environment. Others followed in his footsteps to posit other ideas. But most importantly, they were all philosophising from their environment for a better understanding and for the betterment of life. The time has come for practitioners of philosophy in Africa to philosophise from their environment and change it through a sustainable philosophy.



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## Philosophy in Africa: The Journey so far

It has indeed become a very large area of discourse to delve into the debate about the manner of philosophy in Africa. We have been shocked and sometimes given our nod to the trends of the debate concerning philosophy in Africa. If you are trained in the West and are in Bodunrin's camp, that is the camp that rejects ethno-philosophy, you will most likely suggest that there is yet no such thing as African philosophy since the world views we call philosophy are not critical enough for us to term them philosophical rumination [Bodunrin 1981:161-179]. If you are in the other camp, the camp that is for ethno-philosophy, which Godwin Sogolo is sympathetic with when he said that 'African philosophy should be something which has cultural relevance in so far as it is mounted on materials peculiar to African thought [Sogolo 1990:39-52].

Its preliminary stage may be some descriptive accounts of the raw ingredients of thoughts, beliefs, folk wisdom, worldviews, etc,

which, though necessary, are no more than rudiments yielding philosophical questions. Such questions may bear relation to, but are not lifted from, other philosophical traditions. It is, therefore, an orientation that puts one foot ahead of ethno-philosophy and the other beside professionalism by way of domestication; then you are indeed participating in African philosophy, or you are participating in philosophy in Africa. The distinction I make here may easily rekindle the old debate. Is it African philosophy or is it philosophy in Africa? Whichever way you look at it, both can suffice. If you think you are an African philosopher, then you must agree that those defining characteristics of philosophy, viz, criticality, systematicity, logicity, argumentation, depth, must be present in all you do by way of thinking or writing. The same goes for if you say that you are merely doing philosophy in Africa. We must all bear in mind that we are all engaged in some philosophy, full stop. It is the realisation of this that has

increasingly defined, permit me, African philosophy. People have already gone beyond these trappings of self-definition and are now facing the real task at hand. Some have even chronicled the history of African philosophy. For instance, Oguejiofor has insisted that philosophy has been on in Africa even when the self-defining debates were going on [Oguejiofor 2006:1]. If this is the case, then we can firmly establish a historiography of African philosophy. This means that we are already accumulating defining ideas that shape the way we live. The most striking thing to note is that philosophy arises in wonder everywhere. In the West, where we all get our backbone from, this appeal to wonder was most aptly represented in Thales, Anaximenes and Anaximander and other pre-Socratic philosophers.

Thales of Ionia, for instance, thought that the substance from which every reality is made is water. He must have been influenced by the fact that Asia Minor is

surrounded by a large water body, and this got him thinking. Although we cannot know what other things lead to his conclusions, the presence of water is instructive. This kind of thinking may not be elicited in someone living in the Sahara Desert. A look at the whole history of philosophy will show that there are mostly environmental factors inherent in the way each philosopher philosophises and in the kind of change he wishes to see, both at the level of solving existential problems or seeking meaning in the many concepts that arise in life. In the same vein, African worldviews and environment are enough to start wonderment in Africans and elicit some form of desire for change, both at the level of solving existential problems and clarifying meanings. There are now many works that point to this. For instance, Pieter Boele van Hensbrock's book, *Political Discourses in African Thought: 1860 to the Present*, not only showed the trajectories of thought that permeates African life, it shows how these thoughts have translated into concrete understanding of the way life is led in Africa while departing from the usual misunderstanding of African political philosophy as the thoughts of African nationalist leaders [Hensbrock 1999:22]. Also, the book *African Philosophy down the Ages* by Francis Ogunmodede further exposed the profound presence of African philosophical thoughts in all aspects of life in Africa [Ogunmodede 2004:5].

The point this paper is making is that 'African philosophers, therefore, like their western counterparts, are in the best tradition of Plato see philosophy as a way of

life and not some fleeting preoccupation' [Oguiejofo 2006:2]. This way of life is defined by the fact that we are the least developed in the world in terms of the human condition. There are more AIDS related deaths than anywhere else, there is starvation going on in many lands, renowned economic principles are not working here, we have one of the most pervasive cultures of corruption, we respect human life the least, we are the most that is bogged down with supernaturalism, we are the most that grapples with unnecessary wars and many other evils. The philosopher in this situation is particularly on an endless quest. The philosopher asks herself pertinent questions. How come my philosophising has not been able to formulate a theoretical framework for the assuaging of these mammoth problems? Why is philosophy still barely known in academia? Why hasn't philosophy informed governance in Africa? These questions are definitely begging for answers since there ought to be concrete fruits of philosophy wherever it is claimed to be practised. We see evidence of philosophical practice in the West. Throughout their history of thought, it is philosophy that is always there to provide the necessary benchmark for discourse and development. What then is African philosophy doing to position itself for this kind of task? If the present crop of philosophers in Africa abandons the task of philosophising to change the African situation, philosophy will remain irrelevant on the continent. The philosophers on this continent must show how serious he is by contributing their intellectual capital in the search for development on the continent.

## The Crisis of Development in Africa

'The "development" obituary has been written, if not already read. The valorisation of international development is today justifiably replaced with the pillorization of so-called development. In fact, it does not require any great sense of intellectual imagination to accede that international development, as we have all come to know and understand, has met with disappointment in Africa. Today, the euphoria of international development has worn thin in the minds of many local people [Dei 1998:335]. We hear all the time that governments are making an effort to bring development home to us. We see international financial institutions budget and wire money to Africa for development purposes, yet we have all been disappointed by how this has paid off. We have fared badly in almost all aspects of development. In the midst of this, there is still doom spelt out by new economic figures coming out from the continent. African governments themselves have become impatient with themselves in the midst of the lack of progress that is seen everywhere in Africa. They have gathered many times to create avenues for solutions to the problems. But the more they create avenues for solution, the more they discover that it is never working in the real sense of the word, despite the rhetoric to the contrary. According to Claude Ake, all this bickering and disputes concerning development in Africa create the impression that development has failed in Africa.

Ake insisted that the talk that development has failed in Africa is misleading. The correct thing is that development has never been on the agenda in the first place [Ake 1995:1]. If we take this seriously, we could see that Ake

is indeed correct in suggesting such. Otherwise, how could development work in the presence of the rot that has become our way of life? Economists have submitted that one of the driving forces of development is human capital [Schultz 1961; Denison 1962:1-12]. But in Africa, our human capital remains at a very minimal level, and yet these same economists, especially those at the international financial institutions, pump in money with the view to achieving development on the continent. One wonders, what human capital will pilot such monies for development? The state of the universities where we hope to get the human capital from has become a huge exercise in deception. In Nigeria, for instance, the universities are so much decayed that intellectuals now engage in various religious fundamentalism. Many have chosen the pulpit in favour of the academy. The government have no way of monitoring what is going on the ground, even though it releases money to finance this decay. The National University Commission of Nigeria, established to have an oversight on the universities, have become a place where fantasy plays a huge part in national development. It is important to note that members of this commission are academics who are expected to think better than the politicians in Abuja. Why are they merely fantasising?

On another note, African economic conditions are traceable to negative globalisation. Our equation in the international market is not something that can bring hope to this suffering continent. We are not able to export much to the world. But the world can export to Africa and even dump in Africa. According to Gerry Helleiner,

an economic analyst, primarily from the World Bank but also including some from the UN's Economic Commission for Africa and the independent African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), he dared to ask: 'Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?' While they laid out a formidable array of requirements that might make it possible to answer 'yes,' they certainly did not answer 'no' [Helleiner 2002:531]. This seems to show that Africa is on everyone's agenda, but no one is willing to go the whole hog to change the continent. Helleiner again suggested that 'modest improvements in market access for African exports in Europe and North America have materialised, but Africans' prime concerns about the international trading machinery were peremptorily brushed aside in the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) Doha meeting in November 2001 and thereafter' [Helleiner 2002:538]. This drives the point home further that there is an urge to debate Africa in the international arena. People need to be seen to show compassion for Africa in the midst of this gloom, but no one will participate in the serious, muddy business of getting things done the right way. What has increasingly characterised African debate is quick-fix solutions that will arise and fall as if that is what the problem is. Look at the disgrace that has become NEPAD. 'Despite much positive hype in some G8 capitals (not including Washington), it does not now look like it is going anywhere very significant in dealing with the extent of Africa's current problems' [Helleiner 2002:542]. NEPAD has come to represent the absentmindedness that characterises the handling of African economies. The World

Bank, for instance, does not have a deep and proactive engagement in Africa. Its activities remain parochially peripheral. This is seen in the analysis it gives to various projects and how it releases money to corrupt regimes and rogue regimes to create the impression of working very hard for the economy. Despite this, the African governments are tied to listening to them even though the Bank's decisions are usually reached without adequate consultation with all the interested parties [Riddell 1995:262].

All these seem to support Ake's position that development is never on the agenda; otherwise, if it were, why all this foot-dragging

concerning Africa? Many other aspects of development are not really dependent on what other people can do for Africa or what the world thinks about Africa. These other aspects depend on the worldviews that are African and that shape the general lifestyles of Africans. This brings the cultural dimension of development to focus. There is a clear connection between the cultural system of Africa and development. African culture has not been fine-tuned to better face the present predicament on the continent. This means that the indigenous attitudes should be worked on for the better. According to Ake again, 'building on the indigenous is the necessary condition for the self-reliant de-

velopment to which there is now no alternative' [Ake 1993:19]. If this is the case, then our culture will have to come into focus since there are many aspects of our culture that have indeed made it impossible to pursue development. For instance, Africans are prone to supernaturalism, and we see this in their many utterances concerning God and other discarnate entities. This in itself predisposes us towards a life of abandonment to some supernatural expectation. Christianity has become one of the most visible religions in Africa and has also contributed to the abandonment of development values among Africans. Apart from supernaturalism, there is an onslaught of Western entertainment stre-

aming into Africa, corrupting our youth. Take football, for instance. The level of mental activity that goes on among the young people of Nigeria, as it concerns football news, is alarming to say the least. School children have abandoned the memorisation of mathematical formulae, the accumulation of information in literature and the knowledge of science in favour of memorising the names of all the footballers playing in Europe and their status in the general FIFA rating. This leaves much to be desired. If this football craze continues to define our culture, then we will have nothing to complain about when we have no energy left to tackle more serious development problems. Those who claim to be friends of Africa are watching from the sidelines and are doing nothing to bring the youth back on the track of personal development, instead of being mere spectators of Western pastime.

There are many things that are contributing to the development crises of Africa. Like we have pointed out, they include economic, intellectual, social and cultural. But what are we going to do to salvage the situation? Many people have suggested that we should liberalise our economies to stimulate change. But such changes must come when we have properly equipped people to pilot the change. There has also been advice about modernisation, which means, among other things, reshaping our culture and lifestyle to suit the temper in today's world. This too has some flaws. How can we modernise when moder-

nisation has continued to mean westernisation? We know that westernisation will simply destroy our unique sense of being. In the midst of all this confusion, this crisis of development, Philosophy must take its rightful position to tackle the present problem in order to be relevant. We need to establish this as a fact since philosophy has the critical tool to move society forward.

This is important as Hannah Arendt said that important pursuits like this will provide us 'some assurance that our deeds of today will not disappear into thin air, but rather like the strong permanent wall of a city, the polis, our heroic deeds will have its day in court, to be remembered, recounted and celebrated by those yet unborn' [Arendt 1958: 197-198]. To abandon this task of searching for a solution to the present human suffering in Africa will be to abandon our call, thereby limiting philosophy to 'mere mental flexing'. Such philosophising is not tenable in the present situation in Africa. The tendency for African philosophers to escape to academia to split heads over irrelevant philosophical debate is clear and present, since there are factors that have militated against serious intellectual pursuits on the African continent. Supernaturalism, authoritarianism, lack of hope in human reason and capability are some of the factors that can discourage African philosophers from giving up hope for change and retreat to the university in search of solace and academic titles. This is not to talk of the fact that

philosophy in Africa is not taken seriously since, according to Udo Etuk, the recent sentiment concerning philosophy is that there is a need 'to clothe, feed, house and provide medical care for our teeming populations first, and then people who want to philosophise can do so. So, the priority in the area of education is not for people who will split hairs over words and concepts and theorise about lofty ideals-the popular image of the philosopher-but for the training of agriculturalists, technicians, doctors, engineers and others who can contribute much more tangibly to the development process' [Etuk 1987:29].

In the face of this, African philosophers can emphatically make themselves known by philosophising sustainably. A sustainable philosophy is a philosophy that puts the present into concrete consideration while establishing firm stances for the future. In other words, sustainable philosophy should be used to provide the theoretical framework for the urgent development needs of Africa. Sustainable philosophy is possible when we look brilliantly at the historical landscape of Western philosophy. We could see from this brilliant look that the whole developmental history of the West arises from its philosophical enterprise. Be it technology, science, arts, music, or other life forms, all could be traced to one philosophical idea or another. This kind of thinking can surely be replicated in Africa, especially now that the tools for this are readily available. **African Philosophy as Su-**



A Busy Street in Lagos, Nigeria  
Photo by Muhammad-Taha Ibrahim on Unsplash

## Stainable Philosophy

African philosophy, having emerged from the debilitating debate concerning its very existence, can now carve a niche for itself. This debate started in the first place when the racist philosophy of Hegel and Levy Bruhl, and others, motivated some scholars into making an academic career out of the falsehood that Africans do not have a philosophy. However, many contemporary African scholars have repeatedly debunked such claims by attesting to the existence of African philosophy. For instance, according to G. Salemohamed, while responding to the accusation by Bodunrin [1981:170] that ‘there is one universal philosophy as seen in the west and African cultures have no philosophical content, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and continental philosophers writing today, for whom philosophy is metaphysics, European, ultimately Greek and even founded in the Greek language, would agree with him that autochthonous African thought-systems are not philosophical. They would not agree with him as to the criteria he advances for judging whether something is philosophical or not. Nor would they, by virtue of the definition they give to philosophy (European, etc.), agree with the characteristics he assigns to it-e.g., that philosophical ideas are relevant to all men. Some would even argue that in purporting to be of universal relevance, (Western) philosophy is a sub-class of ideology and myth, both these being defined restrictively as the universalisation of what is particular-particular, that is, to a culture’ [Salemohamed 1983: 535]. If this is the case, African philosophy must be on the same status as Western philosophy. In the same vein, V. Mudimbe submits that African philo-

sophy is already very alive and its trajectories are already seen in the history of human thought [Mudimbe 1983:222].

If there is an established African philosophy, its concrete benefits ought to be manifest in the human activities in Africa. It ought to define our various approaches to life and provide us with the critical tool for assuaging problems in Africa. Following this, conceptualising African philosophy as sustainable philosophy becomes an imperative since such philosophy can provide the critical and theoretical framework for the development challenges facing Africa. It is only through this way can African philosophy be most relevant. Seeking such a philosophy is what makes this paper worthwhile. The central thesis of the study is that the present state of African philosophy is not adequate for the development challenges facing the continent. However, a brief clarification of the concept of African philosophy will be appropriate here. African philosophy is here understood as the body of thought that is represented in the various scholars writing on the continent of Africa. Many of them are not even on the continent itself but are in the Diaspora, in which case their work is now part of what is called Africana studies in the various universities of the world, especially the United States. African philosophy also includes those components that are found in ethno-philosophy as it is seen in Africa. It is believed in this work that philosophy is first and foremost ethno-philosophy before it moves on from there to a more profound representation of philosophy [Oraegunam 2006:6].

However, a generally acceptable definition of African philosophy is not possible, just as in Western philosophy, as there are as many definitions as there are African philosophers. But African philosophy has the critical, analytical, systematic, and conceptual contents seen in Western philosophy. The present work defines it, though, as the body of thought that represents the African worldview, a worldview that is peculiar to Africans, given their unique position in life. This position may be defined as their black skin (black blood), geography, mentality, religious worldviews, African ancestry, and their history. This establishes an epistemic privilege for the African, placing him in a position to view reality differently from the rest of the world.

This African philosophy has been mortgaged in many respects in the analysis of the ‘blame theory’. The blame theory centres on the blaming of all African woes on the African cultural contact with a corrupting Western culture. The white man, with his disease, religion, decadent and lopsided science, and immoralities, has made the African depart from his primordial position in search of the fleeting fancy of trying to be the white man. This has created an ontological mediocrity. We are neither Africans anymore nor whites. A monster has been created as ugly as Fanon’s white mask-black skin. Analysis of this has permeated many works of African philosophy without seeking to return Africa to her honour.

This study, with the benefit of hindsight on the effects of Western philosophy on Western development, submits that concrete steps need to be taken to help

## The Imperatives of Sustainable Philosophy

bring about a graceful human existence in Africa. This philosophy equipped for has been termed sustainable philosophy. It is sustainable because it is not only preoccupied with the present problems of poverty, dehumanization, injustice, civil wars, environmental degradation, governmental irresponsibility, corrupting religious values, faulty education, emotionalism, international hypocrisy, it is also preoccupied with the present wildcat mining, deforestation, water poisoning, desecration of farm lands, adoption of western children-hatred that is devastating Africa. These are both present and future problems that not only affect Africa now, but also compromise the prospects of a future generation.

Sustainable philosophy uses the tools available to philosophy (analysis, criticism, systematic thinking, and logic) to look at the peculiar nature of Africa to provide alternative ways of thinking that will advance the human condition in Africa. These alternative ways must include, open and critical education that sharpens the intellect better situating it for the common good, education with the indigenous scientific thinking, respect for the capability of the human person, establishment of alternative governance models for Africa different from the corrupting colonial legacies, recovery of the African identity on the issues of morality, religion and family, and many other elements. It is only when we adopt such a sustainable philosophy that we will better position ourselves to occupy a rightful position in the committee of nations.

Having said all of this, it is important to, in fact, move ahead to philosophise sustainably. It is believed that with a sustainable philosophy in place in Africa, the numerous well-thought-out development programs in Africa will start to yield fruit. ‘Philosophy is usually thought of primarily as a doctrinal or intellectual or verbal construct - an inclusive or architectonic structure of thought and expression, formulated and defended by schools and successions of schools in controversial opposition. That structure of rigour and precision in thought and expression usually has little connection with philosophy conceived as an order and quality of individual or communal life’ [Mckeeon 1981:419]. It is time we make this connection by merging this critical enterprise with making life better. We have to conceive of philosophy that is centred on man as the full beneficiary. This portends humanism, a humanism that is based on an understanding that human nature is multifaceted and therefore should be taken as a whole in order to make it work for man. We can no longer see development as a one-sided economic and material enterprise; rather, we must see it as a collection of human consciousness.

Based on this, the call for a sustainable philosophy acquires integral clarity when we consider two contemporary trajectories that demonstrate how philosophy can become a practical instrument for Africa’s regeneration and development. The first is the *Ubuntu* paradigm, the second, the new orientation of *African eco-ethics*. Both reveal the possibility of transforming metaphysical reflection into cultural praxis, thereby situating philosophy at the centre

of human and ecological renewal. *Ubuntu*, which holds that “a person is a person through other persons,” has evolved from a moral aphorism into a philosophical system of relational sustainability. It conceives of the human being not as an isolated substance but as a node within a web of communal existence. In this sense, Ubuntu offers an ontological grammar of interdependence that directly resists the atomistic subjectivity bequeathed by Western modernity. Recent African philosophers have deepened this interpretation, showing that Ubuntu provides a holistic foundation for sustainable development because it fuses social, moral, and ecological equilibrium within a single moral horizon [Ewuoso & Hall 2021:111; Metz 2022:87]. This insight is not confined to theory. It has found expression in reformist experiments in governance and community education across the continent. In South Africa and Kenya, Ubuntu-inspired ethics are being invoked to reconstruct postcolonial patterns of leadership and participatory citizenship, where human dignity and communal solidarity are taken as criteria of policy [Moekelsi 2023:5]. Through these initiatives, sustainability is no longer a technical slogan managed by bureaucrats but a living moral consciousness that obliges the community to preserve itself and its environment. Ubuntu thus becomes a sustainable philosophy because it links self-realisation with collective flourishing, turning relational existence into a moral infrastructure for enduring development.

A complementary current of sustainable philosophy is found in the field of African eco-ethics, which reinterprets traditional cosmolo-

gies as resources for addressing modern crises of environmental degradation. Contemporary African philosophers such as Workineh Kelbessa and Edwin Etieyibo have articulated an environmental philosophy that is at once indigenous and globally resonant. They remind us that in the African world, the moral order extends beyond human society to encompass the entire cosmos, the animals, the forests, the rivers, and the invisible presences that sustain life. Workineh Kelbessa's studies of Oromo ecological traditions reveal a profound ethic of respect for the land, where rituals of purification, communal land ownership, and intergenerational stewardship operate as philosophical expressions of harmony between humanity and nature [Workineh 2018:27; Workineh 2022:54]. Etieyibo, on his part, interprets environmental justice within African philosophy as the duty of reciprocity between the human and the natural order, where care for the earth is inseparable from the moral self-care of communities [Etieyibo 2017: 63]. These perspectives have transcended academic discourse to influence local initiatives in environmental education and community-based conservation, especially in Nigeria, Ghana, and Ethiopia. What emerges is not merely a call for ecological protection but a reconstitution of African being itself, a recovery of the cosmic communion that colonial modernity fractured.

Both Ubuntu and African eco-ethics demonstrate that sustainable philosophy is not a borrowed category from Western sustainability studies but a reawakening of the moral and metaphysical energies already latent within African thought. They show that development, when rooted in African humanism and ecological reverence, becomes a holistic project of restoring balance between self and other, culture and nature, the present and the future. As Ndwakhulu Tshishonga [2021:47] argued, the path toward African sustainability must be humanistic, relational, and ecological at once. This triadic structure defines the moral vocation of philosophy in Africa today. Sustainable philosophy, therefore, is not another academic abstraction but a mode of thought that merges critical reason with ethical renewal and practical governance. It is through such a philosophy that Africa can reconstruct its moral foundations, reinvigorate its developmental imagination, and guarantee a future in which life, human and non-human alike, can endure in dignity. To refuse this task is to resign Africa to the logic of dependency and decay, and to embrace it is to recover the creative breath of African thought as a living force in the destiny of the world.

## Conclusion

It was submitted in this paper that development is something that touches all aspects of life within a society, and it depends on each society's way of looking at reality. Development is also not something that is handed down from top down, as the World Bank and others have attempted. It should therefore be pointed out that the initiative of the people matters a lot in development. If development is to be achieved in Africa, then it has to be something Africans have to pursue from their own perspective without waiting for others to think for them. This means that we have to pursue development through the help of a sustainable philosophy, a philosophy that will ensure that our peculiar condition is taken into consideration and also seek the good of the generations yet unborn.



Edwin Etieyibo and Workineh Kelbessa

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