

Review of *Africa Development XXIX* (1) 2004, Special Issue on Philosophy and Development.

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This special issue on 'Philosophy and Development' is interesting for at least three reasons. First, it represents one of the valiant efforts seeking, with only limited success, to fundamentally question the concepts and practices of development, instead of simply elaborating ways of developing societies within the dominant neoliberal framework that has almost assumed the position of a universal and absolute religion. Second, it brings together a group of mostly African scholars to discuss the issue of Africa's development problems, in an era in which debates on the African condition are dominated by people who do not live these conditions. The virtues of this collection go beyond the unsettling of development discourse and practice, which the two characteristics pointed out above represent. It brings together essays that escape economic myopia to approach the issue of Africa's development from varied directions. Gordon's essay raises the fundamental question of what development is. The contributions of Diagne, Amin, Kebede, Nyamnjoh and Hountondji reflect both on why Africa has continued to face problems of development, and what would make possible an escape from these problems. Keita's contribution in addition to other things also reflects on what a developed Africa will look like.

The contributors to this volume have made no deliberate effort to speak to each other. But one of the subtexts that unites all the contributions is the view that if Africa is to achieve 'development' it will have to do so despite the obstacles presented by the current international system, and not because of the elimination of these structures. All of the contributions in various ways seek possibilities for African transcendence from within Africa. They tackle African attitudes towards various issues, including the pre-colonial past, colonial legacies, current international structures, and the future. The lack of focus on the effects of international political economic structures can be levied as a criticism against all these contributions. One can ask, 'given the character of the international system, does it really matter what Africans think and do?' The refreshing character of this volume comes from the resounding 'Yes' answer that is implicit in all of these contributions. While recognizing that our problems have not necessarily arisen from our own failings, they all escape the trap of waiting for the delivery of salvation from elsewhere. While such an attitude frees

Africans from the onerous tasks of solving these problems, it also legitimizes the hegemony of foreign solutions since African activity is seen as irrelevant within such a framework.

Many of the authors see liberation of both individuals and communities from various forms of received traditions as a necessary condition for the type of African activity that will allow for an escape from present problems. Amir focuses on the individual's ability to depart from received Islamic tenets. Kebede, Nyamnjoh and Keita all focus in various ways on the African's ability to escape the debilitating structures of colonial discourses and educational systems. Interestingly, these authors do not necessarily agree on the conditions for such liberation. Nyamnjoh posits concordance with existing social realities as the yardstick for such liberation. Kebede's analysis flirts with the problematic issue of assigning ahistorical validity to practices when it invokes the resuscitation of valid past practices, decapitated by colonialism as key to liberation from the debilitating effects of colonial discourses. Diagne's reflection on the importance of outlooks in which meaning flows from the future into the present provides an alternative conception of validity that is historical and thoroughly liberating. The future exists in our mind as the realm of the possible – aspirations, dread and anxieties. Meaning is thus not drawn from something fixed and immutable, already in the past, but from existing Africans' 'imagination of possible scenarios' – their future.

Keita's contribution stands out in being the only one that dares to present us with a specification of the content of this imagination; of what a developed Africa will look like. In doing this it also exposes the political character of the issue of Africa's development. There is no one African imagination of the future, there are African imaginations, and the ingredients of these imaginations are and will continue to be the subject of much dispute and struggle within Africa itself.

In conclusion one can say that the project of this volume demonstrates the more positive side of what Gordon refers to in this volume as the condition of 'implosivity'. Gordon associates this situation in which one's choices are confined to contemplating one's reaction to social realities that one cannot seriously influence with the wholly negative attributes of powerlessness, 'madness and despair'. This volume demonstrates that the ability to reconstitute the self, to fashion a response to overwhelming social realities, is for many people of the Third World the fundamental first step towards aspiring to agency. All of the contributors display determination and hope that are genuinely uplifting antidotes to the pervasive Afro-pessimism of our age.