

## **INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY AND SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

***Purissima Emelda Egbekpalu***

Madonna University, Nigeria

### **Abstract**

Philosophy is the circuit of human development. It embraces all aspects of human existence that concretely leads to development. Intercultural philosophy deals with syncretism of cultural thoughts and praxis with regard to philosophical endeavours. Employing analytic and evaluative methods, this paper investigates the features of intercultural philosophy in relation to sustainable human development in Africa. It acknowledges that development in Africa both at the level of individuals and that of the larger society dwindle steadily due to various cultural factorial differences that clog the developmental wheel. It then recognizes intercultural philosophy as a new and practical dimension of philosophizing that enables effective integration of cultural values which avails lucid acceptance of cultural differences in thoughts and actions for sustainable development at both national and international spheres in Africa. It considers intercultural philosophy as a practical approach to dissolution of cultural differences in responding positively to the famous expression of 'unity in diversity', while it acknowledges the rich human world as a global context within which a variety of exchange of ideas and practices could be harmonized for more effective, rapid and sustainable human development. One of the significant features of human development is unity. Unity of cultural values leads automatically to peaceful development. Therefore, united intercultural philosophical exercise can be an outstanding catalyst in good development of African world. Considering intercultural philosophy as a peaceful way to sustainable human development, this paper recommends a phenomenological approach to cultures for mutual intercultural acceptance of rich cultural values especially in the areas of politics, education, economy, religion and human freedom for optimal and sustainable human development in Africa for well-being of individuals and the society at large.

**Key words:** Culture, philosophy, human, sustainable development, Africa.

### **Introduction**

Human development embraces five major dimensions that have a kind of chicken-and-egg relationship in human beings, namely; the cognitive, the socio-cultural, the emotional, the psychological and the physical dimensions and each of them emphasizes the dominance of one or two aspects that significantly influence development. Generally, man is a product of both

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nature and nurture. Nature refers to innate natural biological endowments inherited from both parents, while nurture denotes the acquired attributes based on the environmental givens of the individual to which culture belongs. The nature-nurture issue debates on whether development is basically influenced by biological endowments or by environmental experiences. Nature theorists<sup>1</sup> uphold that biological inheritance exerts much influence on human growth and development, while nurture proponents advocate environmental and socio-cultural effects on the individual. The two concepts of nature and nurture fit into the philosophical models of empiricism and rationalism. However, the study of human development assumes a hybrid of researches from other scientists. Between the extremes of empiricists and rationalists occur also scientific activities that focus on the interplay of both nature and nurture in determining the behaviour and development of individuals such as behavioural genetics. In this sense, discoveries have been made on both nature and nurture as often intrinsically and existentially interwoven to shape man's behaviour and subsequent developments. Hence, culture is part of man's nurture. Both nature and nurture<sup>2</sup> interact to influence the behaviour of the individuals in the society and each of them exert significant impacts in human development. Hence, genetic as well as environmental factors intermingle to structure and sustain developments of individuals and the general society. In fact, human development is a very complex phenomenon that incorporates the whole of biological, cognitive, psychological, cultural and even emotional processes of the individual.

Man is a meaningful product of his society. Therefore, human development also has a very significant cultural perspective. Many developmentalists perceive man as a cultural being because culture exerts a very strong influence on him. The cross-cultural differences influence the causes and consequences of human behaviour. Language, thought pattern, beliefs, education, behaviours, etc. are all products of a given culture that exert meaningful impacts on human growth. As a socio-cultural being, man is guided by given cultural norms that shape his thoughts and form his values and priorities. These are often expressed in language, symbols and valued cultural practices.

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<sup>1</sup> E.B. Hurloch, *Developmental Psychology: A Life Span Approach*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn., New York, MacGraw Hill Companies, 2006, pp. 53-80.

<sup>2</sup> B. Lahey, *Psychology: An Introduction*, 6<sup>th</sup> edn., New York, MacGraw Hill Companies, pp. 298-318.

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Many theories have tried to explain the multifaceted processes of human growth and development. This work investigates into how intercultural philosophy aids intercultural dialogue which leads to sustainable human development in Africa. It sets to address the core issues that are very essential to human development with regard to culture and to provide new information that will help to observe and guide behavioural changes of the individuals to adapt better to their environments. It begins with identifying man as a being within a given culture and in relation to others.

**Man as a Socio-Cultural Being**

Man is naturally a gregarious being and may not possibly actualize himself maximally outside the cultural society in which he lives. Egbekpalu hints that,

A typical Igbo-African is at his best when he establishes and maintains a harmonious relationship not only with himself and his creator but also and with the community in relation to others and even with other existent beings and vital forces of life, which enables the development and nurturance of his personality.<sup>3</sup>

Based on this consciousness of treasured existence in socio-cultural milieu, many socio-cultural theorists subscribe to the fact that human beings are social beings that have the basic need to belong to a given society and culture. They are interested in understanding and explaining how the individuals are affected by their surroundings, social and cultural factors. As such, they consider the importance of society and culture on the individual's development.

In explaining the effective interaction between the individuals and the cultural society in which they live, Vygotsky<sup>4</sup> established the idea that culture and social interactions have imperative roles in the cognitive development of children and their higher mental functions (speech and reasoning). According to him, the socio-cultural factors such as language, custom, social organizations, and other cultural values affect the cognitive performance of children.<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, children actively construct themselves and their environment by engaging themselves in interesting and meaningful cultural activities in which case they confront various challenges and solve them

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<sup>3</sup> P. E. Egbekpalu, *Authentic Existence: Igbo- African Perspective*, Enugu, Our Saviour Press Ltd., 2019, p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> L.S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1962.

<sup>5</sup> L.S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1978, p. 57.

through the ‘More Knowledgeable Others (MKO)’. He established that the attainment of full potential for cognitive development depends on the ‘Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)’ when children engage in social behaviour. Zone of Proximal Development actually means the point at which children learn new skills. It is attained when children engage in social behaviours and it is characterized by the range of skills that is achieved by the assistance of the more skilled others and not alone. Consequently, full ZPD development depends on full active social participation and interactions when adults intentionally engage and direct children in challenging tasks.

In the same line of thought, Bronfenbrenner employed ecological factors<sup>6</sup> to accentuate how environmental influences shape human development using five environmental systems of micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems that are intrinsically interwoven.

### **Theories of Human Development in Relation to Culture**

The exposure to technological advancement especially to communication engineering and information theories divulge a lot about human development and gave rise to information-processing theory of human development.<sup>7</sup> Studying mechanisms of human development, the information theorists adopt information processing approach to identify and carefully describe changes at different levels of cognitive development and the causal mechanisms of such changes. Generally, they note that individuals process information from their environment. This brings about their cognitive changes which influence their development. According to information processing theorists, both nature and nurture interact to produce changes in the individuals, although more interest was vested on interaction of information from the environment and the nature of processing the information in the cognitive system of the individual. They contend that memory, knowledge and development are interwoven. To this effect, they mostly study the human memory, its components and functional processes as major causes of development. With regard to memory and its

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<sup>6</sup> U. Bronfenbrenner and P. Morris, *The Ecology of developmental processes*. In Damon, W (ed). *Handbook of Child Psychology*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn. New York, Wiley, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> A. Newell and H.A. Simon, *Computer Simulation of Human Thinking*, *Science*, 1961, 134, pp. 2011-2017.

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capacity channels, serial (successive) and parallel (simultaneous) processes, coding of information into large units and structures, they observed that human beings have limited capacity and speed in storing and processing information that they perceived from the environment around them.

Miller, who propounded the information processing theory<sup>8</sup> hints that as the individuals grow in age, they imbibe cultural knowledge that influence their beliefs, thought and action. In other words, their cultural environment informs their attitudes that control their developments. The human mind receives stimuli which it processes, organizes and stores for future uses, locates and reacts to them eventually. The theory explains how individuals as active processors perceive and interpret information around them as well as their consequent reactions. Individuals are therefore characterized by two strong motives; the need to understand the world around them and to exert control over one's own environment and life phenomena.

Development then involves learning the techniques for controlling the flow of information which improves memory functions and advances the quantitative and qualitative development of the individual. The cognitive changes are brought about by quantitative acquisition of knowledge, while qualitative mental operations increase changes in the representation of information and strategized rules which in turn influence the method of processing the information and consequent developmental changes.

Humanistic theories of development came as a kind of reactions to Freudian psychosexual and Skinner's learning theories. The humanistic psychologists have a common ground of thought which underscores the good aspect of human beings. This prompts them to lay emphasis on the existential value of human persons. According to them, human beings ultimately seek for value, meaning and creativity in life. They make choices that lead to self-actualization and optimal development.<sup>9</sup>

Rogers is one of the prominent figures in humanistic theory. He maintains the humanistic credo that human beings are intrinsically good, creative and have basic motives in life; the tendency to self-actualization which involves the fulfilment of individual's potentials and the achievement of highest level of the possible 'human beingness' within the individuals' personalities. According to him, a fully functioning person is an actualizing

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<sup>8</sup> P.H. Miller, *Theories of Developmental Psychology*, San Francisco, Freeman and Company, 1983, p. 253.

<sup>9</sup> A.H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, New York, harper and Row, 1954.

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individual. His humanistic theory of self-concept is emphatic on personal growth and actualization of potentials through good interpersonal relationships and building of healthy personality within a given culture.<sup>10</sup> It underlines three major conditions for the actualization of goals, wishes and desires for good and optimal development of individuals.

1. Suitable environment: The development of individuals requires a genuine environment that permits openness and self-disclosure.
2. Acceptance: Individuals should be accommodated unconditionally with positive regard of their persons.
3. Empathy: Individuals should be well listened to and be well understood. Rogers explains that although human beings are naturally good, they become destructive when they are externally constrained and hindered from realizing their goals. In his understanding, childhood experiences of the individual and the cultural environment determine levels of self-actualization, since it is a process of continuous growing and changing through subjective experiences, feelings and being in touch with the momentous events.

Erickson made a landmark in the psycho-social perspective in explaining human development. His main emphasis is on mature social relationships. Establishing eight interrelated stages of human development, he uses growth as life-long process in discovering new opportunities through social relationships.<sup>11</sup>

The above theories seem to share a common notion of healthy socio-cultural environment as a very strong factor that enhances human development. To this effect, a rational insight into culture as it relates to human development becomes very necessary. Human beings express themselves in culture and language.<sup>12</sup> In essence, intercultural philosophy comes into play. Philosophy itself is hermeneutical in that it is inherently linked to culture. Okere argues that African philosophy is hermeneutical in nature<sup>13</sup> owing to the fact that human thought is embedded in cultural experiences. Within this

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<sup>10</sup> C. Rogers, *A Theory of Therapy, Personality and Interpersonal Relationships as Development in Client-Centred Framework*. In S. Koch (ed.) *Psychology: A Study of Science, Formulations of the Person and the Social Context*. New York, McGraw Hills, 1957, Vol.3.

<sup>11</sup> E.H. Erickson, *Childhood and Society*, New York, Norton Company Press, 1950.

<sup>12</sup> L-D.B. Komo, *The Hermeneutical Paradigm in African Philosophy*, Nokoko Institute of African Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, 2017, 6, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> T. Okere, *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation of its Conditions of Possibility*, New York, University Press of America, 1983.

hermeneutical paradigm of African philosophy, we turn to explore intercultural philosophy within the context of human development.

### **Understanding Intercultural Philosophy in Relation to Human Development**

Philosophy is obviously culture bound. It is not just that it has its source in its culture of origin, but it can never break free of its source.”<sup>14</sup> Philosophical thoughts are embedded in the cultural backgrounds of the given philosophers. Intercultural philosophy denotes reciprocity, mutual acceptance or even cross-cultural of thoughts with reference to cultures and all they embody. In other words, it is the exercise of philosophy done in respect of many cultures that interact to aid healthy human development. It also involves the integration of various cultural traditions for general peace, unity and progress. As such, intercultural philosophy helps to:

1. Respectfully acknowledge diversity of rich cultural practices
2. Discover the cultural differences, critically interpret them and give acceptable explanations of them
3. Discover similarities in various cultures and logically harmonize them
4. Get rid of bias, prejudices and even generalization through its phenomenological approach and openness to life
5. Give critical insight into various cultures as it encourages humane cultural practices, while it discourages inhuman ones that degrade human dignity.
6. Review cultures to meet the demand of the present-day needs, etc.

In general, intercultural philosophy educates on diverse cultures while it offers critical insights into them. As Demenchonok and Wang capture it, “intercultural philosophy not only affirms the principles of intercultural dialogue and the conditions for its realization, but helps to clarify issues pertaining to the thematic content of such a dialogue regarding universally valid themes in the culturally diverse world.”<sup>15</sup>

The features of intercultural philosophy are as good as the features of philosophy itself. Philosophy deals with human life and development. As a matter of fact, philosophy concerns itself with *raison d'être* of human life and

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<sup>14</sup> W. Sweet, What is Intercultural Philosophy? In Mclean George, F. (ed.), *Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change*, Series 1, Vol. 44, Washington DC: CRVP Press, 2014, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Demenchonok, E. and Wand, K. Striving for Dialogue and Harmony. In: Demenchonok, A. (ed.) *Intercultural Dialogue: In Search of Harmony in Diversity in A Conflicted World*, Uk, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, p. 17.

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existence which encompass culture and development. As such, it has direct impact on human life and development. Culture exists where there are people. In fact, without culture man has no meaningful identity as no one exists without a given culture. Mondin made us to clearly understand that apart from reasoning, culture distinguishes man from other animals.<sup>16</sup>

The relationship between human development and culture is very significant because culture plays a very critical role in human life. In fact, man's culture defines him; his language, mind-set, thoughts and beliefs that prop his actions and reactions to situations and events of life give credence to his specific culture which distinguish him from people of other cultures. Through the critical character of philosophy, intercultural philosophy has the specific characteristic of bringing cultures to harmonious dialogue that promotes sustainable human growth. But then as Ukwamedua hints, "one major characteristic of culture is change"<sup>17</sup> which is made possible through dialogue and adaptation.

### **Intercultural Philosophy as a New and Practical Dimension to Peaceful and Sustainable Development in Africa**

Understandably, philosophy underlies the thoughts and actions of every people.<sup>18</sup> The world is a global entity. Within this global context, intercultural philosophy serves as a new way of syncretisation of thoughts and practices. At this critical period of heightened violence and inter-ethnic conflicts, widening of cultural gaps and differences, intercultural philosophy serves as a channel for peaceful meetings and constructive exchange of cultural ideas. Hence, it becomes a very useful key for social order, peace and progress. On this note, Yousefi considers it as a science of peace.<sup>19</sup>

Intercultural philosophy serves to bring unity in diversity through the integration of cultures and acceptance of cultural differences in thoughts and actions which are required to attain necessary development that can be as well sustained. Achonu and Negedu buttress the triadic function of philosophy, culture and social order for sustainable development when they state,

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<sup>16</sup> M. Battista, *Philosophical Anthropology*, India, Theological Publications, 1985, p.148.

<sup>17</sup> N. Ukwamedua, *Philosophy in Dialogue with Culture Through Hermeneutics*, *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 13, 1, 2012, p. 185.

<sup>18</sup> Mbiti. J.S, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Oxford, Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1989, p.1.

<sup>19</sup> Y. Yousefi, *On the Theory and Practice of Intercultural Philosophy*, August, 2012, p. 105.

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“romance between philosophy and culture will set the pace for wholesome participation in historical events.”<sup>20</sup>

Culture influences thoughts through beliefs and consequently regulates actions. Philosophy in turn shapes thoughts and beliefs. It critically evaluates cultural practices and encourages those that promote well-being, while it discourages those that questions human integrity and positive growth. Cultures are subject to reviews to stand the constant taste of the changing world. Intercultural philosophy avails cultural dialogues through interactions and interpretations of cultural practices for proper understanding in relation to people’s well-being and for enhancement of good social structure.

Intercultural philosophy also encourages social relations and intercultural activities in the various social settings such as schools, churches, etc. where differences intermingle. In such intercultural activities, a lot is taught and learnt. As a matter of fact, social exercises are fertile opportunities where intercultural understanding is better achieved.

### **Intercultural Philosophy Towards Peaceful and Sustainable Development in Africa**

Africa is a large continent with rich cultural values and diversities. Philosophy is generally a veritable and pragmatic tool for development both at the individual and social levels. It covers all aspects of human existence which leads to human development in all domains of life. It offers critical and objective insights into cultural practices to help the particular people of given cultures gain global impact and attain desired development of global standard. Achonu and Negedu rightly observe,

In a world that constantly and rapidly evolves with the fact that cultures contest for relevance, if Africa refuses to act quickly, there would be a race to the bottom approach in issues that deal with the civilization of the African people which will make us incapacitated to measure up with the globalized world.<sup>21</sup>

Intercultural dialogue involves respectful acknowledgement of cultural differences in norms and practices, while it strives to bring them to a middle balance. Intercultural philosophy offers a phenomenological approach to mutual intercultural acceptance of rich cultural values. It therefore permits

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<sup>20</sup> S.A. Omale, and I. A. Negedu, *Internationnal Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions*, 1, 1, 2014, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> S.A. Omale, and I. A. Negedu, op. cit.

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this dialogue in a reasonable and phenomenological objective way as to assure its positive effect. It serves as a practical approach to lucid acceptance of cultural differences that avails unity in diversity. Hence, intercultural philosophy can also be referred to as dialogue philosophy or science of peace. Emphasizing the unique role of intercultural philosophy in development, Demenchonok and Wang express, “cultural diversity contains a rich potential and opens new opportunities for the creative self-expression of individuals and for an interactive development of cultures and human liberation.”<sup>22</sup> Again, delineating how intercultural philosophical dialogue strives for more peaceful and just environment through addressing major cultural themes, they state,

Freedom of cultural self-identification presupposes a responsibility for respecting same freedom for others, thus promoting mutually beneficial intercultural relations through dialogue. Dialogic relationships are an indispensable means for progression toward a more harmonious world. Unless mutually respectful dialogic interrelations among culturally diverse people prevail, the continuation of historical patterns of culture wars and clashes of civilizations will be even more devastating in the globalized world.<sup>23</sup>

They further recognized that extreme defence of cultural identity gave way to inter-cultural conflicts and these conflicts should be properly resolved in inter-cultural dialogue. Hence, they establish,

Much of the conflict that permeates the world today is the result of clashes between cultures, religions, races, nations, and ethnic groups...In the search for their originality, or “authenticity,” they turned focus to their own cultural traditions. However, their further development requires them to interrelate with other philosophical traditions and to elaborate their intercultural dimensions...The true meaning of harmony is not to agree passively with the maintenance of the status quo, but actively to advocate taking the initiative to conduct dialogue and exchange among different cultures...the dialogue needs a friendly atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect...all the parties to the dialogue should have the spirit of tolerance regarding the differences among cultures. The implementation of these...will benefit the maintaining of world peace and stability, and the flourishing of world cultures.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Demenchonok, E. and Wand, K. Striving for Dialogue and Harmony. In: Demenchonok, A. (ed.) *Intercultural Dialogue: In Search of Harmony in Diversity in A Conflicted World*, UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Demenchonok, E. and Wand, K., op. cit. p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> Demenchonok, E. and Wand, K., op. cit. pp. 21-22.

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In sum, cultural diversity is a necessary phenomenon for human existence. Intercultural philosophy acknowledges diverse cultures in the world and focuses on integrating them, while maintaining their individual identities for peace and harmonious interplay. In effect, a peaceful society is a harmony-conscious cultural society.

## **Conclusion**

Today's concrete experiences have grossly proved that good development and its sustainability will never happen in conflictual situations. African cultures must come in honest, true and transparent dialogue for desired and sustainable development. Intercultural philosophy aids intercultural dialogue which leads to sustainable human development. Therefore, it should be considered as a pragmatic and peaceful way to sustainable human development in Africa.

Based on the above discussions, this paper recommends that Africa needs sincere intercultural dialogue to break the shackles of set-backs in the existing structures in order to give way to good human development at both personal and general spheres. African continent might as well seek for a unified African language to concretize effective dialogue since language is a very powerful tool that expands the frontiers of culture and good understanding for sustainable development.<sup>25</sup> Language experts may be employed to chart a good course in this regard by investigating on the most popular and most spoken of the already given languages and suggest effective ways to generalize it within the continent. This can be achieved, for example, through its incorporation into school curricula from kindergarten to adult education as well as other informal enlightenments.

A phenomenological approach to cultures, that is unbiased attitudes towards cultural beliefs, norms and practices should be seriously adopted for mutual intercultural acceptance of rich cultural values especially in the areas of politics, education, economy, religion and human freedom for optimal and sustainable human development in Africa for well-being of individuals and the society at large. To this effect, curriculum for civil education should be expanded to accommodate topics on education for intercultural understanding.

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