

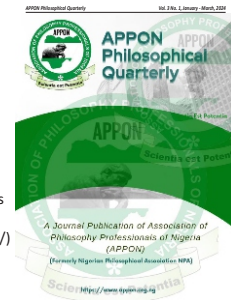
## **THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN PROMOTING POSITIVE LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA**

**Jeremiah Chukwu Ogugua**

Department of Educational Foundations  
Federal College of Education (Technical)  
[chukwu74@yahoo.com](mailto:chukwu74@yahoo.com)  
Tel: 08036727081



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)



**Maxwell Keme Agboufa, PhD**

University of Africa  
Sagbama, Bayelsa State, Nigeria  
[agbumax4christ@yahoo.com](mailto:agbumax4christ@yahoo.com)

And

**Morrison Itelimo,**

Department Of General Studies  
Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education  
Sagbama, Bayelsa State, Nigeria  
[itelimorrison@gmail.com](mailto:itelimorrison@gmail.com)  
Tel: 0803774-2087

### **Abstract**

The issue of leadership is a recurrent decimal in Africa. Consequently, philosophers and socio-political commentators have sought for ways to provide solutions to the problem. The problem stems from the inability of leaders, specifically in Africa, to provide quality leadership that is capable of improving the welfare and well-being of the citizens and society in general. Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas articulate that leadership be construed as a channel through which the common good and happiness of all citizens is achieved and guaranteed. It is against this backdrop that the study aims to examine the role of philosophy in building positive and purposeful leadership in Africa with a view to demonstrating how philosophy shapes and equips a leader with the capacity to lead and ensure the delivery of leadership qualities and democratic dividends to the followers and society as a whole. Using an analytical method based historical and phenomenology of the political reality of Africa, the paper highlights some of the positive traits of good leadership as a basis of its recommendation for positive leadership for the African state.

**KEYWORDS:** Leadership, philosophy, purposeful, leadership and democratic dividends:

## Introduction

African has been bedevilled with leadership quagmires and this has greatly contributed to its underdevelopment. Today, democratic regimes have been toppled through military take-overs in Africa. This trend only goes to justify the fact that Africa is embroiled in leadership crisis. Throwing more light, Haaga asserts that the problem of leadership is hugely to be blamed for the general underdevelopment in Africa. Little wonder citizens in some countries in Africa employed social unrest and other forms of civil disobedience to bring about a change in their country's leadership such as Sudan, while in some others like Chad, Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso, the use of coup dominates.<sup>1</sup>

As a matter of fact, leadership can be said to be the major problem affecting Africa. This has made socio-political scholars and relevant stakeholders to consistently ponder on how a lasting solution to the problem can be found. Haaga expresses this fact succinctly by clarifying that leadership remains the most vital agenda in political discussions centred on Africa and the task right now, in his view, "is the search for effective and sustainable leadership in the continent."<sup>2</sup> Poncian and Mgya also aver that the question of leadership occupies the front burners in forums on Africa's development and that a good number of scholars such as (Mills 2011, Afegbua and Adejuwon 2012; and Mbah 2013, among many others) identified African leaders to be responsible for the economic, social and political woes ravaging the continent.<sup>3</sup>

For emphasis, it is imperative to note that a nation is adjudged to be good or bad depending on who is at the helm of its leadership affairs, hence it is asserted that "no nation can develop beyond the level of its leadership." Buttressing this fact, Mills clarifies that Africa's underdevelopment is not mainly a result of lack of capital or technical experts, neither is it due to unfair global economic system nor lack of access to world markets, but it came as a result of the poor choices made by African leaders that has kept the continent in utter backwardness.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, little wonder that poverty, unemployment, insecurity, hunger, malnutrition, poor healthcare system, impunity, corruption, mismanagement, bad governance, poor economic and social institutions, absence of free credible elections remain the leadership dividends bequeathed to Africans by her leaders. It is against this backdrop that Bhagwan and Bhushan held that "It is only when the right man for a leadership position is gotten that all problems can be solved."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Oni and Excellence-Oluye maintain that the quality of leadership a nation enthrones will be directly proportional to the level of political stability and development she would enjoy and vice versa.<sup>6</sup> This means that the general socio-economic underdevelopment and political instability plaguing most countries in Africa today can be attributed to bad leadership. Folarin alludes to the above by reiterating that the effectiveness of leadership is to be gauged

---

<sup>1</sup> T. Haaga, "Resolving African leadership failure using the 'agent sensitive' archetypal: A jurisprudential approach", *Nasarawa Journal of Philosophy*.1 (3), (2018), 69.

<sup>2</sup> T. Haaga, "Resolving African leadership failure using the 'agent sensitive' archetypal: A jurisprudential approach", 67.

<sup>3</sup> J. Poncian and E. Mgya, "Africa's leadership challenges in the 21st Century: What can leaders learn from Africa's pre-colonial leadership and governance?" *International Journal of Social Science Studies* 3 (3), (2015), 106.

<sup>4</sup> G. Mills, *Why Africa is Poor and What Africans Can Do about It*. (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2011)

<sup>5</sup> V. Bhagwan and V. Bhushan, *Public Administration* (New Delhi: S. Schaad Press, 2007), 211.

<sup>6</sup> S. Oni and N. Excellence-Oluye, "Leadership and governance in Africa: The Nigeria experience" *Covenant University Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 2 (2), (2014), 1

by the level in which it steers the ship of a country to greater heights of socio-economic and sustainable development vis-à-vis the adoption and practice of good governance. This is the same line of thinking that informed Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to push for the right leadership in Athens several centuries ago. In fact, Plato underscored the importance of quality leadership in facilitating socio-economic development vis-à-vis an improvement in the living standards and attainment of the full potentials of the citizens by positing that “until philosophers are kings (leaders), there will be no end to injustice and problems in society”.<sup>7</sup> It must be stated that Plato was highly dissatisfied with the general underdevelopment bedevilling his native country which came as a result of bad leadership.

Therefore, drawing from the insights of Socrates, he deciphered the role of philosophy in promoting quality leadership that would in turn transform society and its citizens positively. Can this vision of Plato be replicated in Africa? If yes; what would be its implication for Africans and Africa? Would it help in producing visionary, purposeful and transformative leadership lacking in Africa? Or, help to a large extent in providing a viable solution to the leadership crisis in Nigeria? The foregoing thematic issues constitute the fulcrum upon which the paper looks at the role of philosophy in promoting positive leadership in Africa.

### **Explicating Leadership**

It is expedient that we undertake a conceptual clarification of concepts so as to

ensure good understanding of such terms as used in the context of the paper. The vital term includes the following:

**Leadership** is a concept that enjoys a plethora of definitions. Hence it lacks a universally acceptable definition as each scholar can define the term from his/her perspective. Ogali defines the concept as the ability of an individual to exert authority over a group of people who are organized, set goals for them and strive to enable them achieve those outlined goals.<sup>8</sup> Soludo conceives the term as the act of exercising authority over the institutions in a nation.<sup>9</sup> This means that leadership has to do with the controlling of the machinery of a state with a view to attaining certain objectives. Uveges defines leadership as the capacity to influence the behaviour of others in a society, nation or an organization, set goals and fashion ways of achieving those goals.<sup>10</sup> We can infer from the foregoing that leadership is not only dynamic but also continuous in that it inspires, guides, motivates and directs others (followers) to attain outlined objectives and also ensures judicious utilization of resources for the betterment of the society (nation) and followers (citizens).

There are basic characteristics of positive and purposeful leadership in Africa. Africa is blessed with leaders who are democratic in character and possess what it takes to transform the continent positively. Great leaders like the late Nelson Mandela, who fought to free South Africa from apartheid rule and led by example, Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Jerry Rawlings, whose style of leadership revamped and transformed Ghana

<sup>7</sup> S. Folarin, “Africa's leadership challenges in the 21st century: A Nigerian perspective”, *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 1 (7), (2013), 10.

<sup>8</sup> M. Ogali, “Leadership, participatory democracy and good governance in Nigeria.” *Research on Social Sciences and Humanities* 4 (27), (2014), p.154;

<sup>9</sup> C. Soludo, 7.

<sup>10</sup> J. Uveges, *The Dimension of Public Administration: Introductory Readings*. (Boston: Holbrook press, 2003), 234.

positively, to mention but a few. These leaders exhibited leadership and humanistic trait that is sacrosanct with personal example. Thus, for quality and sustainable leadership to be achieved in Africa, certain fundamental qualities must be cultivated such as:

**Vision:** This is one of the cardinal values to be possessed by anyone aspiring into any leadership position. Most of the challenges confronting Africa stems from the fact that the leadership lacks vision. Vision equips a leader with a picture of what he/she wants to achieve and how resources can be deployed to make the vision a reality. It is vision that equips a leader with the mind set of formulating people-oriented policies. Commenting on vision as a feature of quality leadership in Africa, Oni and Excellence-Oluye aver that the backwardness evident in most African countries surfaced as a result of visionless leadership.<sup>11</sup>

**Accountability:** This is another vital characteristic of quality, purposeful and positive leadership in Africa. A good leader should be accountable to his people. This means that a leader must be able to show how resources (material, funds or human) are used to better the lot of the citizenry. He/she must be able to account for his/her actions. Accountability is one of the treasured indices of good governance which is lacking in Africa. Poncian and Mgaya reveal that most Africa leaders are not accountable to the people, hence they fritter away resources that ordinarily would have enhanced the living standards of the people.<sup>12</sup> For Egharevba and Chiazor, Africa

is a political system characterized by non-adherence to rule of law, secrecy in governance and absence of transparency and accountability.<sup>13</sup> Thus, they further reiterate that of all the problems undermining socio-economic development in Africa, bad leadership has single-handedly stifled the growth and transformation of the continent.<sup>14</sup>

**Transparency:** Positive and purposeful leadership thrives on the feature of transparency. When a leader is transparent, then cases of political corruption and mismanagement will be a thing of the past. As a fundamental feature of good leadership and governance, transparency entails that no secrecy ought to be permitted by the leader. Instead, he/she must ensure that all transactions and dealings are made to be transparent. This quality also has a way of minimizing political malfeasance in countries where it is practiced. The bane of underdevelopment and poverty in Africa has been attributed to absence of transparency among leaders and it is the position of this paper that Africa can get it right and walk the path of sustainable socio-economic development if she absorbs the principle of transparency in its leadership drive.

**Integrity:** This is also one of the cardinal values that leadership in Africa must imbibe. Most African leaders do not have integrity; hence they attain leadership position with the mind to loot the treasury. Integrity makes a leader to match words with action. It makes the leader to “work the talk” and not “talk the work”. Africa is in

---

<sup>11</sup> Oni, S. and N. Excellence-Oluye, “Leadership and governance in Africa: The Nigeria experience.” *Covenant University Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 2 (2), (2014), 1-19.

<sup>12</sup> J. Poncian and E. Mgaya, “Africa's leadership challenges in the 21st Century: What can leaders learn from Africa's pre-colonial leadership and governance?” *International Journal of Social Science Studies* 3 (3), (2015), 106.

<sup>13</sup> M. Egharevba and I. Chiazor, “Political Corruption and National Development in Nigeria”, Being A Paper presented at the *International conference on Democracy, Governance and Curbing Corruption in sub-Saharan Africa*, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, USA 8-10 (August 2012), 4

<sup>14</sup> M. Egharevba and I. Chiazor, “Political Corruption and National Development in Nigeria”, 4.

dire need of leaders with integrity such as Nelson Mandela. The dearth of leaders with integrity has also been identified as the greatest obstacle to development in Africa.

**Commitment:** Leadership in Africa must be committed to lifting the continent from the doldrums of underdevelopment. African leaders must show enough commitment in delivering the dividends of leadership to the citizens. It is on record that most leaders in Africa are only committed in improving the living conditions of members of their immediate families and not the generality. This is why corruption and the greed to hold on to political power still persist in the political landscape in Africa. Commitment on the part of the leaders can bring about positive transformation when put into practice.

**Responsive and Responsible:** This quality stipulates that leaders in Africa should be responsible and responsive to the needs of Africans for sustainable leadership to be achieved in Africa. Some leaders in Africa are only interested in promoting the welfare and well-being of the proxies, cronies, families and relatives to the detriment of majority of the citizens. Therefore, if Africa is to come out of the doldrums of underdevelopment, her leaders should be responsive and responsible to the plight of its citizens and must place the interests of the citizens far above personal interests. Today, in many African countries, the rate of hunger, poverty, unemployment, inequality, maternal and infant mortality continue to soar on a daily basis; and lending credence to the fact that Africa is bereft of responsive and responsible leaders.

### **Africa and the Leadership Debacle**

According to Chinua Achebe, the problem of Nigeria (Africa) is leadership. The submission of one of African's foremost literary icon, aptly describes the pathetic situation of Africa in terms of leadership by asserting that Africa leaders are interested in elongating their tenure in office so as to fully loot the treasury of their various countries. Giving a succinct articulation of the type of leadership found in Africa, Egharevba and Chiazor posit that the leaders in Africa are only good at using their position and office to plunder their country's resources, converting public funds to personal and private pockets, living ostentatious lifestyles and condemning majority of the citizens to a life of poverty and frustration.<sup>15</sup> The prevailing scenario affirms that there is leadership debacle/crisis in Africa. As a matter of fact, the incessant cases of political corruption, mismanagement, embezzlement of public funds, rising cases of insecurity, frustration of the youths, elongation of tenure and bad governance have led to the military toppling democratic governments in countries such as Sudan, Mali, Chad, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger.<sup>16</sup>

Africa has leaders who are power-drunk such that they want to at the helm of their country's leadership for life. Denis Nguesso of Republic of Congo has been in power since 1979, Pierre Nkurunziza has been in power in Burundi since 2005, Paul Kagame of Rwanda has been a de-facto leader since 1994 till date, Joseph Kabila of Democratic Republic of Congo has been in power since 2001, Yoweri Museveni has been in power in Uganda since 1986, Paul Biya of Cameroun has been holding sway as President since 1982, Robert Mugabe was Prime Minister of Zimbabwe from 1980 to 1987 and President from 1987 to 2017. The list is endless. The resultant effect is that we

---

<sup>15</sup> M. Egharevba and I. Chiazor, "Political Corruption and National Development in Nigeria", 4.

<sup>16</sup> R. Maclean, "Five African Countries, Six Coups, Why Now?" *The New York Times*, (January 31, 2022),

have strong individuals in Africa, instead of strong institutions.

From the foregoing, it is very glaring that the leadership in Africa has no respect for the rule of law and the Constitution; hence they manipulate it to suit their whims and caprices. These autocratic and dictatorial leaders have impoverished their countries and gagged the press so that no one can stand against them and their selfish interest.

### **The Role of Philosophy in Building Positive Leadership in Africa**

The important role of philosophy in building visionary, purposeful and transformatory leadership can be gleaned when we undertake a historical trajectory into the Classical or Socratic era of philosophy. Recall that discussions about the development of man and society took centre stage in the Socratic period. This was due to the fact that the political leadership at the time was corrupt and bereft of ideas for promoting good governance that would guarantee the attainment of happiness for the citizenry. Thus, Socrates was the first to advocate for moral rebirth of the political leadership with his famous maxim; 'Man know thyself; for an unexamined life is not worth living' and "to know the good is to do the good"<sup>17</sup>. Stumpf further reveals that Socrates used his thoughts to demonstrate that the leadership operating in Athens did not know the good and that is why it incessantly indulges in evil (vice). This clarion call by Socrates stirred up the need for change in the style of leadership at the time in Athens and awakens the desire in the youths to say no to bad governance and demand good leadership cum governance from the political elite.

However, the political class, in a bid to suppress the yearnings of the Youth, arrested Socrates on trumped up charges and

incarcerated him. Therefore, with Plato, a model of leadership that would guarantee the happiness of all and usher in the must needed development was propounded. This leadership was to be domiciled in the hands of the Philosopher-King, who has been educated to know the good. For emphasis, Plato was also dissatisfied with the political happenings in Athens, specifically; he was disillusioned with the leadership handling of Socrates. Thus, to create a better society with the right type of leadership at the helm, Plato divided society into three; artisan, guardian and ruler. In his view, the human soul is structured into three parts-appetitive, spirited and rational- the same way society is divided into three parts and each part has a proper function to fulfil as well as corresponds to the other.<sup>18</sup> Plato further avers that when each part fulfils its function without interference, then happiness is guaranteed. As for his choice of the philosopher-king as the ideal ruler, Stumpf writes of Plato:

...the peculiar function of the rational part of the soul is to seek the true goal of human life and it does this by evaluating things according to their true nature. ...competence should be the qualification for authority. The ruler of the state should be the one who had the peculiar abilities to fulfil that function. In both the individual and the state, the uncontrolled drives of the appetites and spirited action lead to internal anarchy. At both levels, the rational element must be in firm control. Who should be the captain of the ship-should it be the most popular person or the one who knows the art of navigation? Who should rule the state-should it be someone whose training is in war or commerce?<sup>19</sup>

Having posed the question above, Plato provided the answer by articulating that

<sup>17</sup> S. Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, New York: McGraw-Hill Press, p.40.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Republic*. A. Bloom, ed. (Indiana Polis: Harcourt Publishers, 2000), 94

<sup>19</sup> S. Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, (New York: McGraw-Hill Press), 70.

leadership should be kept in the hands of the ruler, who has been fully educated and well-endowed with knowledge of the Good. Plato believes that the philosopher-king is ideal to rule the state because he has acquired leadership training that equips him perfectly for the art of ruling. For Plato, the ruler must not be allowed to own private property. He must be allowed to concentrate wholly on his civic affairs.

From the foregoing, it is clear that one of the roles of philosophy in enthroning quality leadership in Africa consists in moulding leaders morally. It is this moral upbringing that enables the would-be leader to exhibit exemplary leadership qualities capable of accelerating socio-economic development that has persistently eluded Africans for several decades. Secondly, the role of philosophy in enthroning quality leadership lies also in making the leader imbibe the tenets of accountability and transparency—twin indices of good governance. Here, it is apt to point out that the ethical re-orientation philosophy affords the leader by reason of his moral upbringing would enable him accede to the implementation of transparency and accountability. Thirdly, philosophy has shown that through its role, leadership in Africa can be made right if leaders are prevented from owning private property. Though, this is an arduous task, Africa can get it right if concerted efforts are made towards ensuring that leaders are stopped from acquiring private property. This is the bane of underdevelopment in Africa.

Lastly, the role of philosophy in building purposeful leadership can be gleaned in the fact that it demonstrates the view that development begins with man. To this end, it maintains that a leader ought to know that leadership is about deploying available resources with a view to improving the living standards of the citizens vis-à-vis the attainment of their full potentials.

## Conclusion

It is crystal clear that Africa will continue to

grapple with leadership challenges which undermine her development unless steps are taken to address the problem. The paper has shown that the general underdevelopment and leadership debacle confronting Africa can become a thing of the past if the role of philosophy in inculcating ethical and moral values in leaders are utilized and properly harnessed. Moral probity is a *sine qua non* for positive and sustainable leadership attitude necessary for achieving a stable and peaceful polity where good governance and effective democratic institutions can thrive. Therefore, the paper contends that Philosophy remains imperative if Africa is to attain sustainable leadership and overcome the challenges which continue to stifle and undermine her development. The role of philosophy consists in equipping leaders with the philosophical insights necessary for enthroning a peaceful, orderly and stable polity devoid of chaos and where democratic dividends would be delivered to all in such a way that the welfare and well-being of society and the citizens are achieved.

## Bibliography

- Bhagwan, V. and V. Bhushan, *Public administration*. New Delhi: S. Schaad Press, 2007.
- Egharevba, M. and I. Chiazor, "Political Corruption and National Development in Nigeria." Being A Paper presented at the *International conference on Democracy, Governance and Curbing Corruption in sub-Saharan Africa*, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, USA, 8-10 August, 2012.
- Folarin, S. "Africa's leadership challenges in the 21st century: A Nigerian perspective." *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 1 (7), (2013), 1-11.
- Haaga, P. "Resolving African leadership failure using the 'agent sensitive' archetypal: a jurisprudential approach." *Nasarawa Journal of Philosophy* 1 (3),

- (2018), 67-78.
- Maclean, R., "Five African Countries, Six Coups, Why Now?" In *The New York Times*, January 31, 2022.
- Mills, G. *Why Africa is Poor and What Africans Can Do about It*. Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2011.
- Ogali, M. "Leadership, participatory democracy and good governance in Nigeria." *Research on Social Sciences and Humanities* 4 (27), (2014), 153-162.
- Oni, S. and N. Excellence-Oluye, "Leadership and governance in Africa: The Nigeria experience." *Covenant University Journal of Political Science and International Relations*. 2 (2), (2014), 1-19.
- Plato. *Republic*, A. Bloom (ed). Indiana Polis: Harcourt Publishers, 2000.
- Poncian, J. and E. Mgya, "Africa's leadership challenges in the 21st Century: What can leaders learn from Africa's pre-colonial leadership and governance?" *International Journal of Social Science Studies* 3 (3), (2015), 106-115.
- Stumpf, S. *Philosophy: Problems and History*, 5th edition. New York: Mac-Graw Hill Publishers, 1994.
- Uveges, J. *The Dimension of Public Administration: Introductory Readings*. Boston: Holbrook Press, 2003.