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Development, Modernism and Modernity in Africa

Edited by
Augustine Agwuele

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Introduction

Betwixt Modernism and Modernity

Augustine Agwuele

RUPTURE AND ENRUPTURE

After two decades of sojourn, I have cause to be back in Ibadan, western Nigeria. Particularly shocking was May 16, 2010, when I saw a man stretched out on the ground. He was sleeping right there on the concrete divide that separates north from south bound traffic. It was about 8:30 am. Policemen who direct traffic were standing close to the sleeping man; they continued directing traffic oblivious of him. It must be normal. The junction where he lay is called Mokola roundabout. It is a four-way junction with very heavy traffic especially during the morning commute. The roundabout connects significant governmental, commercial, educational and residential areas of modern Ibadan. Homeless person in Ibadan! Sleeping in public, seen by everyone, and it all looked very normal! Usually, one would see mothers wear a look of pain as they lament in a most pitiful voice the birth and now loss of such a child.

I have seen many homeless people in America and Europe; they are wards of the state. But homeless people in the city of Ibadan! This is new and out of place. The images of Ibadan which I have carried in my memory in the two decades preceding this date did not include homeless people of this kind. There were crazy, mad people who roamed the street in the day time begging for money and harassing normal people. Children feared them, called them names and sang songs to taunt them and then ran away when these mad people approached them. However, immediately night falls, these mad people mysteriously disappear. The only people that slept outside were Hausa people employed as guards to homes and properties. They were called *me-gad*, pronounced “may-gaad.” Popular perception at the time was that *me-gads* have powerful charms that protect them from harms; also they were not considered suitable material for making *ogun* (charms) of various kinds, a very powerful deterrent to staying out late. Aside from narratives of faraway places and very big cities like Lagos ridden with *omota* (hooligans), *omogarage* (touts) and robbers, in that innocent images and memory of mine, homelessness was “unknown” in Ibadan and by extension, Yoruba nation; arguably, it was absent from traditional

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African societies. Regardless of how destitute an individual was, including a mad person, there was a family, a homestead, a community that provided shelter. In fact, according to a Yoruba saying, it is when you kill a mad person that you will know that he or she is not without kin.

Implied in the narrated observation of Ibadan in 2010 is a certain historical break point disconnecting, contrasting, as it were, the present from the past. It is the same city, but with conditions that lead an observer to conclude that things are no longer the way they used to be. The prevailing circumstances do not seem like the natural trajectory for previous epistemologies; they appear contradictory. *Development, Modernism and Modernity in Africa* is about Africans and the reorganization of their world, the alteration to their consciousness and redefinition of their values and developmental processes. The discourse centers on the complex challenges facing Africa and Africans within a simplified scholarly trajectory in form of a lineal developmental continuum from prestate, kin-based mode of social organization to modernism/modernity. Modern Africa is bound in a state of stratification that has heightened exclusion and furthered marginalization, jeopardizing individual and collective emancipation. According to Jürgen Habermas,¹ modernity contends against tradition and values dynamism, novelty, singularity and intense presence; traditional Africa, from a romantic perspective, valorizes community, collectivism, customs and tranquility. It would seem that increases in technological and scientific discoveries as well as the interconnectedness of the world exert constant pressure on the traditional, placing it in conflict with modernism. A conundrum in the conflict between “traditional” and “modernism,” for discursive purposes, is “modernity,” a stark reality that betrays promises, if not the illusion and stigma of modernism. This anthology examines the unrealized potentials for sociopolitical development, freedom, peaceful coexistence, justice, sociocultural rationality and secured existence. It also shows how Africans in and out of the continent are coping with modernity, that is, the consequences of modernism, especially by rediscovering the traditional, exploiting the novelty of modernity and incorporating positive aspects of modernism even as they contend with the oppositions inherent in ideologies of tradition and modernism.

The previous personal narrative and many scholarly exegeses on Africa's problems highlight the quandary involved in the dialectic between the traditional and modern. In fact, it is widely accepted that “the impact of Western civilization on Africa has occasioned a split in style of living throughout the continent. It points to the observation that the African experience of modernism associated with a Western paradigm is fraught with tensions at every level of the communal existence and individual apprehension.”² Putting aside the immediate context of literature for which Abiola Irele made the cited pronouncement, the essence of the utterance implicates the disjuncture of Africa and Africans on several levels, each of which is attributable to the ideas of modernism and its yield, modernity. Implicated in

this rupture are (a) the political geography of the continent; (b) the intellectual whole of the continent—in other words, culture writ large; and (c) the integration or rather coupling of the continents' subsistence to Western economy and market structure.³ V. Y. Mudimbe describes these areas as the acquisition, distribution and exploiting of land; the domestication of the natives; and the implementation of new modes of production. These three areas are not unconnected to Ali Mazrui's much-debated work in which he argued that modernism bequeathed Africans with the mixed triple heritage of tradition, Westernization and religion.⁴ However, it is fair to state that these areas, which involve the reconfiguration of the physical landscape, human experiences and spiritual dimensions, owe to certain initially compelling ideas that, relative to their place of origin, are ferociously devastating to places where they are not organic—for example, Africa.

In separating the idea, notion and impulsion from their predicates, “we need a term that refers solely to the social dimension of modern societies and a separate one that refers to the cultural movements within these societies. Modernity, then, would mean a form of society or social organization characterized by industrialization, so-called high capitalism, etc.”⁵ Modernism would thus stand for the ideological, the intellectual force, indeed the spirit that compels actions. Against this backdrop, this anthology specifically distinguishes between ideas and consequences of ideas in their substantive forms. It draws a stark distinction between the cultural ideology and intellectual life of a society separate from its overt output in form of social, material, economic and political realities. In its *heimat*, modernism and modernity—ideology and associated practices—are organic and whole, in the sense of arising within the population as all subsuming sociocultural phenomenon preconfigured and pre-equipped with institutional checks that dialectically work for corrections progressively. For instance, Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault see modernity as attitude, as a method of responding to contemporary realities by questioning them.⁶ This attitude and questioning are inseparable; they evolved together within the *geist* that informed them: absent them, modernity is void.

However, when modernism is transplanted to Africa, being not endogenous, it grafted poorly to existing life structures; its course is similar to those of imported finished and packaged consumer products such as cars, military hardware and physical structures constructed by external firms with externally obtained materials. These consumer items remain in place as long as the producers provide after-market support. When the contractual obligation of the expatriates ends, the material items begin to degenerate and invariably become dangerous relics, such as the many abandoned structures, vehicles and machineries that litter the face of the continent. Included also are the many dead bodies due to imported instruments of death and false political systems, and the ever-growing number of destitute due to false developmental ideologies. Consider, for example, the cases of

failed transfer of technology and technological expertise to Nigeria with respect to car manufacturing. In 1972 six plants were established to assemble vehicles in the country. It was expected that with increase in knowledge and expertise, these plants would become full-fledged auto-manufacturing industries. By 2010, these plants are no longer viable. The expectation that they will become indigenous auto-manufacturing industries remains elusive. Real, however, is the greater dependence on Europe for vehicles, on Asia for replacement parts, and on both for the construction of roads for these imported vehicles. The fate of modernism has been analogous to that of materials imported to the continent: they continue as odd appended systems, the utility of which appears to be the furtherance of modernity-corrupt regimes, wars, religious violence and genocide. Essentially, the actual ideals of modernism—the freedom that enlightened reason promised to provide from traditional authorities, from kinship as mode of societal organization and from land-based subsistence strategy, among many others, robbed Africans of what they had and left as their only “replacement abstract rational principles of theoretical, moral-practical and aesthetical knowledge with no significant integrative cultural force.”⁷

Modernism floats on the African continent, eclipsing the evolutionary teleology of existing social institutions with inherent self-organizing principles. For instance, the much-vaunted notion of individualism, a contravention of the existing communal worldview of Africans, turns out to be the elevation of Europe as the center of the world and a hegemonic tool through which political, social and cultural effacement of African civilization was vigorously enabled, even as modernism urges a reconfiguration of the continent. Initially, modernity was used to denote the transition from antiquity, heralding the new way of life. Later, it was used to express observable and empirical scientific positions and rationality in view of industrialism; thus, it speaks to progress, especially material progress, enabled by scientific discoveries and inventions. In these understandings are located material progress and cultural revolution.⁸ The bright side of modernism is the material progress and the promise of freedom; however, the dark side of it—that is, modernity—reflects the disappointment and unfulfilled aspiration, the loneliness, the poverty and the heightening stratification with respect to power, wealth and prestige. The continuous dichotomy in, and, unequal access to even basic necessities such as fair life chance, justice and freedom, intensify rather than abate with the increase in, totalitarianism of the Western sociocultural worldview. We find existential experience of alienation and of despair, specifically in the West and rising at a very fast pace in Africa; thus, the much-vaunted idea of a freed spirit endowed with enormous creativity, able to soar as far as its imagination allows, and alter the physical world, remains but an ideal to be hoped for. For Hegel, this movement of the spirit makes for the realization of selfhood and ascendancy to universalism. In that connection, the state becomes the idea of the spirit in the external manifestation of human will and freedom.⁹

Africans cannot be said to be truly free. Even the intellectual orientation of most Africans is a profession of values and worldview both familiar and strange. Economically, Africans are tied by virtue of Western hegemonic devices to perpetual striving for undefined market goals, whose immediate effect is plunder through the so-called elites. Debra Klein (chapter 8) describes the symbiotic relationship between traditional Yoruba dancers and Western apprentices and scholars; Kenneth Harrow (chapter 7), Africans' production of literature; and Moyosore Okediji (chapter 9) in these cases, African dependency on Western patronage is subtended either for pecuniary or intellectual reasons. Be it in the realization of individual or collective selfhood of the nation-state, Africans, rather than being free, are tied in their allegiance and personhood to the West.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ANTHOLOGY

The already highlighted distinction between modernism and modernity is premised more particularly on the logical connection that is presumed to delineate the goals of modernism, that is, the application of empirically and scientifically founded knowledge to exploit, manipulate and transform the environment for ease of life and toward the enrichment and advancement of humanity. Science, according to Lyotard,¹⁰ derives its legitimacy from programs that promise the advancement of humanity; the failures of these programs as well as the equivocation of science, in his view, questions the viability of modernity and renders the associated view of the world irredeemably damaged. Nevertheless, although progressive and qualitative transformation of societies and lives of individuals for the better drive modernistic ideologies, there is no denying its obtrusiveness in Africa. Thus, in spite of Habermas's project of modernity, that is, "the development of objective science, universal morality and law,"¹¹ the fruits of such scientific and rational enterprise in the form of greater freedom from want and arbitrariness of natural calamity¹² elude Africans in almost every way. It therefore becomes imperative to reflect on the extent to which this goal has materialized for Africans and to ascertain the scope and reach of this transformation. To this effect, the chapters in this book are divided into three thematically related parts. The division is rather artificial; there is considerable cross-referencing between the chapters and the themes, underscoring the interrelationship between the topics. The three thematic parts are offered under the assumption that the state of Africa can never be fully conceptualized but in its relation and interaction with Western civilization.

Part I: Modernism and Modernity: Sociocultural Transformation

It is often the case that a new language orientates hearers and learners to its speakers' values and norms, indeed, to its speakers' worldviews and ways

of doing things. In the same fashion, modernism engendered new social awareness, informed new habits while either attenuating or amplifying existing tendencies. Modernism in collision with the existing sociocultural provenances in Africa not only upended them; it transformed Africa's civilization and its dreams into something comparable with the extreme horrors of the Dark Ages of European societies. In a summary overview of extant Africa, Ali Mazrui (chapter 1) reflects on its many institutions and experiences with democracy and development. Mazrui assumes that development equals modernization minus dependency. The subtraction of dependency from modernization is what saves it from being Westernization. Thus, democratization is a fundamental aspect of modernization. Given the horrific state of most nation-states, the question he addresses is whether Africa is modernizable, and if so, when? Rather than tinkering with imported ideologies, Mazrui concludes that Africans should distinguish democracy, and by extension, development, as a goal from democracy as a means. The goal could be achieved by various means, and Africa should embrace the same goal but perhaps not necessarily the same means as Western nations.

As David Harvey has stated, "to be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are."¹³ Uniting all mankind, modernity cuts across ethnicity, geography, space and cultural institutions such as worldview; however, the one certainty in modernity is its uncertainties. Modern existence is suffused with the ephemeral as it ruthlessly breaks with its own past. Nevertheless, the past is ever with us in some form. The sociocultural transformation of the continent includes the examinations of such institutions as chieftaincy, transnationals, literacy and education.

Part II: Modernism and Modernity: Cultural Productions in Arts, Media and Religion

Fragmentation of art and its separation from other social behaviors, especially creativity for purely aesthetic values, constitute a significant departure from the customary. Visual arts, performing arts, and religion, aside from their entertainment and cathartic values, have their place in oral tradition of African societies as instruments of education, sanction, and orientation to social, cultural and political order as well as being important devices for group cohesion. Traditional theaters reenact history for the education of leaders and subjects alike. For the various families and lineages charged with performing these public and civic duties, they constitute means of livelihood. Art as a means of intensification that reinforces the norms of community and strengthens group membership and communal identity, the conveyance of deeper symbolic and cultural knowledge, no longer holds the spiritual power it once did; patronage is now dependent on the market