

AFRICA AND THE DELUSION OF DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This essay interrogates the persistent gap between Africa's abundant potential and its limited developmental outcomes, arguing that much of the continent's development discourse is shaped by a profound delusion. It contends that prevailing models of development, largely imported from Western historical and ideological contexts, often fail to resonate with Africa's socio-cultural realities, institutional capacities, and historical experiences. The essay exposes how superficial progress frequently masks deep structural challenges, including dependency, weak institutions, lack of original and innovative options, policy discontinuity, and social fragmentation. By critically analyzing and questioning the different facets of the delusion of development such as the economic, political, cultural, religious and psychological facets, the essay further explores how the uncritical imitation of external development paradigms perpetuates cycles of underdevelopment and dependency, rather than fostering genuine transformation. Ultimately, the essay advocates that to stop deluding, African nations would need a reimagining of development rooted in Africa's indigenous knowledge systems, cultural values, ethical frameworks, and local priorities, proposing a more authentic, inclusive, and sustainable pathway toward human flourishing and societal advancement across the continent.

Keywords: *Development, Development Paradigms, African Development, African Predicament.*

BACKGROUND

The idea of development has long occupied a central place in Africa's political, economic, and intellectual discourse. From the moment of political independence, African leaders and societies have pursued development as the pathway to dignity, prosperity,

and global relevance. Yet, decades later, much of the continent continues to grapple with poverty, inequality, institutional fragility, and social instability. This persistent contradiction has given rise to what has been typified as the African Predicament.¹ This predicament has warranted what may be described as the delusion of development—a condition in which Africa appears to be in constant pursuit of progress while remaining trapped in structures and practices that undermine genuine transformation.

Africa's situation is made more pathetic considering that countries with whom they were grouped as economically poor, often referred to as third world in the 1960s have since pulled themselves out of poverty and advanced. Worthy of note is the rapid industrialization and exceptional economic growth of the four Asian tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan). Between the 1960s to the 1990s, these countries transformed from low-income or developing economies into high-income and advanced economies with strong manufacturing bases, world class infrastructure, and high living standards.

Further still, it is arguable that not only did Africa not develop, based on some parameters, it is also possible that some African countries have underdeveloped over time, moving from a seemingly better situation to a worse situation. These views affirm the conception of development as not being organismic. Hence it is possible for societies to develop and also under-develop.

Historically, Africa's encounter with modern development ideology is inseparable from colonialism. Colonial administrations reorganized African economies and societies primarily to serve external interests. Infrastructure, education, and governance systems were designed not for holistic growth but for efficient extraction of resources and control of populations. At independence, African states inherited fragile institutions, distorted economies, and externally oriented development models. In their

eagerness to catch up with the industrialized world, many postcolonial governments adopted Western development paradigms that emphasized rapid industrialization, centralized planning, and economic growth measured mainly through Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, these models often ignored local contexts, cultural values, and social structures, laying the foundation for enduring developmental distortions. Acceding to the narrative above apportions the blame for the lack of developmental strides in Africa to Western manipulations, often termed Neo-Colonialism.

However, the pendulum swings, one very glaring fact is the need to question the *modus operandi* of African countries, with a view to deciphering what has continued to go wrong. This would be done with the afore recognition that Africa's challenges are not a reflection of inherent incapacity but of misaligned development frameworks. The continent is richly endowed with human and natural resources, vibrant cultures, and resilient communities. Hence, a very important consideration would be to review how Africa has catered to development and know whether their *modus operandi* touches base with reality, hence the very concept of delusion.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE DELUSION

To be delusional is to hold a firm belief or comport oneself in such a manner that is not based on reality, even when there is strong evidence to the contrary. In mental health, delusion is a fixed false belief that is not shared by others; that is resistant to logic or proof; that persists despite contrary evidence. Our conception of delusion, and relating it to the comportment of Africa with regard to development, is merely to highlight the fact that since most countries attained independence in the 1960s, they have continued to pursue actions that are supposed to engender development without results. These actions would be portrayed as being resistant

to logic and have persisted despite the evident lack of commensurate results.

One major factor in the discourse of Africa and the Delusion of Development is the myriad of conflicting perspectives in the conception of what constitutes development, leading to what we call the development problematic. Many discourses on development arise out of the desire to make sense of the apparent majority destitution in the face of minority opulence.² Hence, with regard to discourses about development, the world is divided into the North and South; developed, developing and underdeveloped countries; First, Second and Third World Countries, and so on. It is arguable that in most cases, these divisions and measurements were made unilaterally, often considering only economic growth without considering so many other relevant and life-enhancing factors.

Since the end of the Second World War to date, the use of the word development seems always to appear with the appendage of one adjective or the other that complicates any attempt at a universal. For instance, when we use the words/phrases: developed, developing, underdeveloped, Least Developed Countries (LDCs), or qualify development as Sustainable Development, Human Development, Structural Development etc., the question is raised as to whether development is a state or a process? Is there a consistent meaning of development that runs through the above usages? Indeed, what exactly is development?

Notwithstanding, whichever understanding or definition one may assign to development, one disturbing fact in history is that the past seven decades have witnessed a lot of preoccupation with development without much success. Despite large investments from the North to the South, from the Developed to the Developing countries, with time frames for achievement, the result does not seem to justify the supposed investment. The latest in this array is the ten *United Nations Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs)

with the target date of 2015. This fact raises doubt as to whether development is possible. G. Rist, on this, writes with some level of pessimism:

Today's 'developers' are like the alchemists of old who vainly tried to transmute lead into gold, in the firm belief that they would then have the key to wealth. The alchemists disappeared once it was realized that true wealth came from elsewhere – from people and from trade. When will we realize that well-being does not come from growth?³

Very pertinent and related to the above is the implication that the cure for delusion is to stop doing the same thing and expecting a different result. To wake up to reality.

Be it as it may, it remains to be said that every imitation exists because there is some original. Pessimism is a condition fostered by a lack of faith and which disappears once there is a ground for faith. Therefore, while it remains very difficult to arrive at a universally acceptable synchronic understanding of development, it remains true that the reality of development and development projects in the world of today stares us in the face, even if we are not able to replicate the same in many African countries. The persistent question therefore remains, why are these actions yielding evident results in other parts of the world but very insignificant results in the African countries? Accordingly, we will attempt an interdisciplinary understanding of what development is.

WHAT IS DEVELOPMENT?

Development could be conceived in the various human disciplines with different meanings. One may, for instance, speak of the development of an equation, a software, an embryo, a child, a person, a society, etc. Development definitely could not mean the same thing in all these uses. Therefore, the word development could be conceived from varied perspectives with as many meanings as

there are disciplines and points of views from which the definitions are made, thereby making it to be contested both theoretically and otherwise and to be inherently both complex and ambiguous.⁴ This difficulty in conceptualizing development is what has been termed *the development problematique*. Not surprisingly, and not unconnected with the above background, the word development was a candidate for Uwe Poerksen's qualification of *Plastic Words*.⁵ This is because of the malleability and uncanny way it is used to fit every circumstance, in such a way that it no longer means anything except what an individual speaker intends. And this is so much that the question has often been raised as to whether there is anything as development? Certainly, when we revisit the most popular use of the term in social and political settings today, a lot of questions are left unanswered.

Notwithstanding, the term development, as used in different disciplines, has a common denominator. In general, development denotes change, and change entails any form of alteration in shape, size, weight, position, composition, quality, function, etc.⁶ But development as change will not be any kind of change but a change that improves the condition of the subject of change, 'a good change.'⁷ It is a change that is purposeful and goal-oriented. A change geared towards an end. Change viewed as such, presupposes knowledge of the end-product of the change process and ways of bringing it about.

According to Allan Thomas, development as good change could be viewed from three different perspectives.⁸ In his view, development could be seen as a vision of the good, a historical process, and positive actions that bring about change. To this extent, development is constantly linked to industrialization and modernization. Indeed, it serves our purpose to limit our discussion to only the development of the society and how it effects man as a social being, which according to A. Summer and M.A. Tribe, could be either of a long-term historical process of structural societal

transformation, short-to-medium-term outcome of desirable targets, and as an ahistorical and ideologically loaded conception that has become the dominant discourse of western modernity.⁹

One can immediately glean from most of the above that development can be conceived in the biological or organismic sense whereby the society is likened to a biological organism that comes to life and grows to maturity over time. This bespeaks of social evolutionism and individualism (in the sense of human development). Co-related to this social evolutionism and individualism are normative (what should be) and instrumental (the means for bringing about what should be) factors. Development, viewed as above, would be characterized as a directional, continuous, cumulative and irreversible growth,¹⁰ such as found in the growth process of organisms. The organismic metaphor merely naturalizes history and raises the question whether development is an immanent or intentional activity. This divide as to whether development is immanent and unintentional process or an intentional activity (or may be better, the result of series of intentional activities), remains one of the confusions common in development literature.¹¹ Be that as it may, we must immediately note that the organismic notion of development is a wrong notion of development. Development as we intend to depict (development of the society) is not an immanent activity. It is an intentional process which is also reversible. Not only do countries not develop, they can also under-develop, and indeed any development must be a result of intentional activities and not automatic or immanent.

In general, while earlier in history (in the 1950s and 1960s) development was majorly identified with economic growth for which the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) became a major indicator of development, this view of development has since given way to more open and inclusive ideas of development.¹² Despite the fact that there is no common consensus on what is development, there

seem however to be a general consensus that development can neither be limited to mere economic development nor to any one index. It is generally accepted today that development has to be multifaceted.

In line with the above, *The Report of the South Commission* chaired by Julius Nyerere in 1990 defined development as

... a process which enables human beings to realize their potential, build self-confidence, and lead lives of dignity and fulfillment. It is a process which frees people from the economic, or social oppression. Through development, political independence acquires its true significance. And it is a process of growth, a movement essentially springing within the society that is developing¹³.

By the same token, The United Nations in the *Human Development Report* of 1991 aligns development with human development:

... the basic objective of human development is to enlarge the range of people's choices to make development more democratic and participatory. These choices should include access to income and employment opportunities, education and health, and a clean and safe physical environment. Each individual should also have the opportunity to participate fully in community decisions and to enjoy human, economic and political freedoms.¹⁴

In general, therefore, we can surmise that Development viewed from interdisciplinary perspectives and seen in the contest of man and society has evolved and continues to evolve in signification. Notably, in the 50s and 60s, development was presented as a vision for the liberation of people and peoples based on structural transformation.¹⁵ This translated to economic advancement (generally measured with the GDP) as the measure of development. With time, this gave way to a second perspective embraced by international donor agencies with emphasis on poverty reduction

and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).¹⁶ This perspective prioritizes a multifaceted approach with emphasis on human development. A third perspective sees development and poverty as being socially constructed and embedded within a certain economic episteme that promotes certain value systems over others.¹⁷

Whichever perspective one subscribes to, from the foregoing, each of the above perspectives seems to fail to mirror the fact that development has a price tag. For instance, if we consider society as the subject of development (noting that human development is considered with man as a social animal), development will be “the movement upward of the entire social system,”¹⁸ with endogenous as well as exogenous factors. Consequently, “the dynamics of the system are determined by the fact that among all the endogenous conditions there are *circular causation*, implying that if one changes, others will change in response, and those secondary changes in their turn cause new changes all around, and so forth. The conditions and their changes are thus interdependent.”¹⁹ Simply put, a social system has circular causation, characterized by cumulative effects that cannot be known with precision. For instance, one of the cumulative effects of development, which is not lacking in international recognition, is the ecological effect of industrialization and modernization.

Consequently, “our analysis of development must involve broad generalizations and mere hypotheses, built upon limited observations, discernments, and conjectural judgment.”²⁰ It was with the afore going background that Gilbert Rist, while being skeptical about the whole notion of development, offered an alternative and critical description of development. According to him,

‘Development’ consists of a set of practices, sometimes appearing to conflict with one another, which require – for

the reproduction of society – the general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations. Its aim is to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by way of exchange, to effective demand.²¹

Gilbert Rist's description scratches beyond the surface and indeed raises some deep philosophical issues connected to development. Some phrases such as 'conflicting practices', 'reproduction of society', 'transformation and destruction of environment and relations', 'production and exchange of commodities based on demand', and so on, are worthy of note. Perhaps, these issues are engendered by the constant disappointment people experienced from the failure of development projects to cater for what they value, even though it did cater for some values. Perhaps also, there is a disconnection, between the values and cultures of the nations from which the projects originated and those of the target nations. This is more so because, once we accept that development is a form of change, we would then not deny that "values are central to disputes about the definition of development – what to improve, how to improve it and, especially, the question of who decides?"²² This value-laden nature of development therefore calls for a philosophical reflection on its appropriateness, culturally, socially, economically, technologically and environmentally.²³ Indeed, it is the lack of this consideration that gives vent to the depiction of development as a delusion.

Once we accede to the obvious fact of development, and that development constitutes a particular type of change (good change), we are in the ambience of value judgment. This implies that development is encapsulated in a normative or ethical framework, dealing with "how groups ought to behave in order to create improvements."²⁴ This will question, for instance, whether public policies should just be aimed at economic growth or should give equal considerations to providing people with free health care

access, promoting gender equity, and protecting ecosystems. Incidentally, people and societies have different reasons for valuing different things, giving rise to diversity of choices. Putting philosophy at the service of development entails a critique (in the Kantian sense) of the different articulations of what is development with the aim of arriving at a more objective notion of development.

In a 1995 journal article in *Development in Practice*, titled ‘What is Development’, Hugo Slim outlined three key principles of any genuine development. He notes,

that genuine development is much more than a matter of economics and economic growth; that development is a universal goal for all societies and not just a ‘Third World problem’; that development depends on the just interaction between different groups and different nations, and that at the heart of the struggle for development is the struggle of relationships.²⁵

Hugo Slim’s outline of the key attributes of a genuine development arose from a background of prior failed attempts at heading development in a particular direction. His outline also serves to highlight the need for a more reflective approach that takes cognizance of development within an ethical or normative framework. This will involve recognizing that development is simultaneously about the development of the human person, of society, and of the environment.²⁶

At the very heart of the African failure with regard to development is the unmitigated pursuit of western paradigms of development, ill adapted to the peculiarities of the Africans. While there are definitely common denominators of any exercise in development like infrastructural development, human development, etc, how these are achieved in different settings must vary. The implication is that any model of development that must thrive in any setting

must be home grown. This inability to adapt development paradigms to the peculiarities of the Africans constitutes the very fabric of the African delusion of development.

Within development literature, the evident lack of success of development paradigms in many areas of the world led to the emergence of post-development theories in the 1990s. These reactions have been typified as the “Post-modern, post-development, post-colonial or post-structuralist position.”²⁷ A major reason for the emergence of the post-development theory, remains the gross lack of success of the development efforts directed to the South by the West. “Instead of the kingdom of abundance promised by theorists and politicians in the 1950s, the discourse and strategy of development produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment, untold exploitation and oppression.”²⁸ Older generation of Nigerians stand on the ruins of the IMF imposed austerity measures and SAP (Structural Adjustment Program), that promised development without any evident result. According to Sachs,

The idea of development stands today like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Its shadow obscures our vision... Delusions and disappointment, failures and crimes have been steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work... but above all, the hopes and desires that made the ideas fly are now exhausted: development has grown obsolete.²⁹

Given the above view, the proponents of post-development theory see the whole gamut of development as a façade, an excuse for the West to maintain power and control over the South; a label for plunder and violence;³⁰ a myth, a construct and the invention of a particular civilization.³¹ Escobar summarizes these views as follows:

... a mechanism for the production and management of the Third World ... organizing the production of truth about the

Third World ... Development colonized reality, it became reality³² Development was – and continues to be for the most part – a top down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treated people and cultures as abstract concept, statistical figures to be moved up and down in charts of progress.³³

The central idea in the post-development theory is that we can only know reality through discourse. However, development (and poverty) are social constructs that do not exist in an objective sense outside of the discourse (a body of ideas, concepts and theory).³⁴ Post-development theorists therefore hold that development is synonymous with modernity, constructed in the North and imposed on the South as a superior condition.³⁵

While definitely the post-development discourse has some things to offer, especially given the failure of the development efforts to achieve their original claims, they are generally criticized for being self-contradictory. This is because, if, as the post-development theorists claim we can only know reality through discourse, there is no reason to prefer their discourse to other discourses, since it could also have been constructed. Another variant of the post-development position, generally termed the noble savage, raises also some controversy on what in such a case constitutes nobility. This notwithstanding, one of the strengths of the post-development position is that the facts on the ground seem to continuously feed their flame. The recent United Nations' and other development agencies' preference for short to medium term development objectives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), may not be unconnected to the post-development criticism.

A very important gain from the Post Development discourse is the departure from the practice of development measured solely by economic indices, leading to the development theories of

Sustainable Development, Human Development and Sustainable Human development. The idea of human development has been in the offing for decades. It came to represent a synthesis of ideas from diverse perspectives such as welfare economics, ecology, sustainable development, feminism etc., with a focus on the human capital. Of particular note in our discourse, is the fact that current development studies, are concerted on the fact that development is a multi-faceted enterprise and does not represent the same thing for all peoples.

THE FACETS OF AFRICAN DELUSION WITH DEVELOPMENT

The historical factors of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism etc., leading up to the African predicament has shaped African reality to such an extent that it does not easily yield to the Western Categories. The African predicament is better understood through the facets that translate to factors that engender the delusion.

a. Satellization and Economic Dependency

The relationship between African countries and their former colonial rulers has often been described as a satellite–metropole relationship³⁶, a concept widely used in dependency theory and world-systems analysis. This concept was popularized in dependency theory, especially by scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin. It explains how former colonies remain economically and politically dependent on their former colonial powers even after independence. The model captures the persistent structural inequalities in the global political economy by arguing that the prosperity of industrialized nations is historically linked to the economic exploitation of peripheral regions. Within this framework, many African states function as satellites, whose economies remain structurally dependent on powerful metropolitan centers in Europe and North America, hence the description as the satellite-Metropole relationship.

Scholars such as Walter Rodney³⁷, Andre Gunder Frank³⁸, Samir Amin³⁹, and Immanuel Wallerstein⁴⁰ have argued that Africa's underdevelopment cannot be understood without examining the historical processes that integrated the continent into the expanding global capitalist system. Colonial rule restructured African economies in ways that privileged European industrial development while limiting the prospects for autonomous economic growth in Africa. Sequel to the Berlin Conference of 1885 in which Africa was partitioned by the European colonial powers, the participating colonial powers established administrative structures designed primarily to facilitate economic extraction from Africa to the West in order to serve the needs of European industries. Infrastructural developments, such as railways, ports, and roads, were designed primarily to transport raw materials from the interior of Africa to coastal ports for export to Europe. Industrial development within the colonies was deliberately discouraged because it could threaten European manufacturing interests. Africa was integrated into the global capitalist system as a supplier of raw materials and a consumer of manufactured goods, thereby reinforcing its subordinate economic position.⁴¹

The concept of the satellite relationship was further developed within dependency theory, which emerged in the 1960s. Dependency theorists took a step further and argued that the global capitalist system produces both development and underdevelopment simultaneously. Andre Gunder Frank, who developed the metropolis-satellite model of global economic relations, argued that wealth flows from peripheral regions to metropolitan centers through networks of economic dependency.⁴² Peripheral regions, including much of Africa, remain economically underdeveloped because their resources are systematically extracted by the core.

Similarly, Samir Amin emphasized the concept of unequal exchange, arguing that the global trading system favors industrialized nations. Peripheral economies export raw materials whose prices fluctuate and often decline over time, while importing expensive manufactured goods produced in the industrialized world.⁴³ This unequal relationship ensures that the economic gap between developed and developing countries continues to widen.

The satellite relationship between Africa and the developed world is also central to world-systems theory, developed by Immanuel Wallerstein. Wallerstein conceptualized the global economy as a single capitalist system composed of three structural zones, viz: The Core Countries, Semi-peripheral countries and Peripheral countries. Within this framework, most African countries occupy the peripheral position in the global economy. Their economies depend heavily on exporting primary commodities while importing manufactured goods from industrialized countries. Wallerstein argues that the hierarchical structure of the world economy tends to reproduce itself over time. Core countries maintain their dominance through technological innovation, financial control, and political influence over international institutions.⁴⁴

Given that the satellization and economic dependency models were hatched and implemented by colonial powers, it would be hoped that this will cease with colonialism. On the contrary, although African countries achieved political independence during the 1950s and 1960s, the economic structures established during colonial rule remained largely intact. Political sovereignty did not necessarily lead to economic independence. Many African economies continue to rely heavily on commodity exports. For example, Nigeria remains heavily dependent on crude oil exports. This reliance on primary commodities, exposes African economies to fluctuations in global market prices. When commodity prices decline, government revenues fall dramatically, often resulting in economic crises.

International financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have also played significant roles in shaping economic policy in many African countries. During the 1980s and 1990s, many African governments adopted Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that required them to liberalize trade, privatize state enterprises, and reduce public spending. While these reforms at conception and promotion by these agencies promised to promote economic efficiency, critics argue that they reinforced Africa's dependence on global markets and weakened domestic industries. Ultimately African countries were goaded into inescapable cycle of debilitating debts. These debts empower the donor agencies to engender policies in these African countries that will cater to the interest of their funding countries. These externally driven prescriptions, though presented as development solutions, frequently exacerbated poverty and undermined state capacity, deepening the very problems they sought to resolve. Consequent upon these externally driven prescriptions, many African countries are in worse conditions than they were before adopting them. Many countries are so much in debt, that the cost of servicing these debts annually, are more than their annual earning. Trapped as such, unless there is a radical shift, any hope for development remains a delusion.

Despite its influence, dependency theory has been criticized by scholars such as Bill Warren⁴⁵, Peter Bauer⁴⁶, Fernando Henrique Cardoso⁴⁷, Walt W. Rostow⁴⁸, Deepak Lal⁴⁹, Robert Brenner⁵⁰ etc. These critics argue that dependency theory places excessive emphasis on external factors as the cause of the African predicament, while neglecting internal dynamics within African societies. Some critics point to the economic success of some countries such as the Asian Tigers/Dragons (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan), which were once peripheral economies but managed to achieve rapid industrialization. These economies achieved rapid, sustained industrialization and high-

growth, high-income status within three decades (1960s and 1990s) through export-oriented policies, investment in education, and strong government support.⁵¹ These examples suggest that participation in the global capitalist system does not necessarily lead to permanent dependency. Further still, others argue that internal factors—such as weak governance, corruption, political instability, and poor economic management—have also contributed significantly to Africa's development challenges. Nevertheless, many scholars maintain that colonial history and global economic structures continue to shape Africa's economic possibilities in profound ways.

b. Political Instability

Governance challenges also play a central role in perpetuating the delusion of development. Weak institutions, corruption, political instability, and policy inconsistency have severely hampered Africa's developmental prospects. In many states, public resources intended for development are diverted into private hands, while political competition is oriented toward personal enrichment rather than public service. This environment erodes public trust, discourages investment, and stifles innovation. Moreover, frequent changes in leadership and policy direction disrupt long-term planning, leading to abandoned projects and wasted resources. Development becomes a rhetorical tool rather than a coherent, sustained national agenda.

It is arguable that the foundations for the governance challenges were laid during the colonial years in most African countries. In the first instance, in the partitioning of Africa, many non-homogenous and culturally diverse peoples were lumped together as nation states. This complicates the process of consensus, since the peoples' first allegiance is often to their tribes, clans and other cultural enclaves. In addition, at the point of independence, the colonial powers handed over to ill prepared and inexperienced

nationals whose incompetence became an advantage and worked for the interest of the colonial powers.

Moreover, the political arrangements and systems of governance for the emergent independent countries were simply grafted on the countries without any process of adaptation to the local needs and cultures. Hence, the people practiced what they had no ideological basis to prefer. For instance, The Umunna system of the Igbos of South East Nigeria predated the western democracy and could have been more *ad rem* as a political arrangement for the people of South East Nigeria and beyond. The *Umunna* system is the foundational, grassroots administrative and representative democracy of the Igbo people of Southeast Nigeria. This system operates as a "village republic," placing supreme decision-making power directly in the hands of the community, adhering to the principles of consensus, direct participation, and accountability. This is only an instance of ways that devalue indigenous knowledge systems, local technologies, and traditional modes of social organization that could provide viable pathways to sustainable development. It is my view that building on such existing political arrangement would have given rise to more positive results than importing an alien system into a culture that knows nothing about it. Arguably, the importation of social arrangements that did not originate nor resonate with African cultures contributes adversely to their producing the desired results and hence ensuring that expecting sustainable developmental outcomes from them remained delusional.

c. Cultural Hybridization

Culturally, the delusion is reinforced by the uncritical admiration of Western lifestyles and consumption patterns. Development is often imagined as becoming "like the West." This mindset devalues indigenous knowledge systems, local technologies, and traditional modes of social organization that could provide viable pathways to

sustainable development. In neglecting their own intellectual and cultural resources, African societies risk perpetuating alienation and dependency, thereby undermining the possibility of authentic and self-directed progress. Consequently, modern Africans are hybrids, neither originally African nor sufficiently Western. Worthy of note is the role of language in the underdevelopment of Africa. The colonial powers supplanted the African languages with their language. English is the lingua franca of Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya. French is that of Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. And Portuguese is that of Angola and Mozambique. On the surface, this action might look harmless and indeed could be viewed as giving the Africans an advantage of the ability to communicate on the world stage. Yet, knowing the relationship between language and culture reveals a deeper layer of influence.

Generally, language and culture are interconnected. In essence, culture provides the content of communication, while language provides the medium through which that content is transmitted. Culture is preserved and transmitted from one generation to the other through language. Through language, societies pass on values, beliefs, customs, traditions, and societal norms. Hence language is a reflection of the cultural worldview of a people; it is a tool for cultural identity; and it is an instrument for cultural change. This view is supported by the *linguistic relativity hypothesis*, also called the *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*.⁵² The hypothesis suggests that the structure of a language influences how its speakers think and perceive the world. Its supporters argue that language is a guide to social reality and indeed that language structures influence cultural interpretation of reality. Therefore, supplanting the languages of the African peoples uproots and disconnects them from connection with their cultural reality, making them to be cultural herons or hybrids with the inability to really pursue a concerted view of sustainable development.

Still in line with the above position, it has also been argued that people who retained their indigenous languages have been able to develop more effectively than those who did not. This argument is widely discussed in the fields of sociolinguistics, development studies, and cultural studies. The central argument is that language plays a crucial role in knowledge production, education, identity formation, and technological advancement. Ali A. Mazrui⁵³, Ngũgĩ waThiong'o⁵⁴, Walter Rodney⁵⁵, Kwasi Wiredu⁵⁶, and Edward Sapir⁵⁷, variously argued for this position. To further buttress this position, countries such as Japan, South Korea, and China are normally cited to have advanced technologically and economically while continuing to use their indigenous languages as the primary medium of education, governance, and scientific communication. Their experiences demonstrate that modernization does not necessarily require the abandonment of indigenous linguistic traditions.

d. Syncretism and Religious Adaptation

Besides issues such as the slave trade, colonial exploitation, neo-colonial economic structures, weak institutions, and corruption, as factors that have promoted the delusion of development in Africa, there are also ideological factors that shape developmental consciousness in African societies. Among these factors, religion occupies a particularly influential position. Africa is very often touted as one of the most religious regions in the world, with Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religious traditions playing central roles in social life. While religion can contribute positively to social cohesion and moral discipline, it is also true that certain religious orientations may foster what can be described as a “delusion of development.”

Notably, with regard to Christianity, the work of the early missionaries to Africa contrasted with those of the government agents that managed the colonial infrastructure. Worthy of note is

that besides preaching the gospel of Christ, these missionaries established schools and hospitals for the social welfare of the people. While it could be, and indeed has often been argued, that these institutions, served the interest of the colonial powers, it remains indubitable that these social institutions were like lighting a candle instead of blaming the darkness. In most places in Nigeria, and most likely other African countries, these schools and hospitals has grown and in some cases have remained the only functional ones in the communities where they exist. Notwithstanding, some orientations of religions in Africa – Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion, etc. - seem to foster the delusion of development in Africa, a consideration of which is necessary for deeper understanding of the delusion of development.

i. The Culture of Fatalism

The principal way through which the different religions foster the delusion of development is through the promotion of fatalistic interpretations of socio-economic conditions. Often, religion promotes the belief that social circumstances are predetermined by divine will and therefore beyond human control. This is fatalism. Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* argued that the Christian missionary teachings often emphasized humility, obedience, and heavenly reward rather than material liberation. He interpreted the missionary enterprise as an ideological instrument that encouraged colonized Africans to accept their social position rather than challenge exploitative structures. The Kenyan intellectual Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature.*, towed the same line and argues that colonial missionary education introduced forms of Christianity that redirected African consciousness away from political resistance and toward spiritual salvation. Religions interpretations of reality or worldview as above weakens the motivation necessary for collective action, technological innovation, and political accountability—all of which are critical elements of genuine development.

Noteworthy is that it is not likely the case that religion is conceived by the proponents in Africa to further fatalism. However, it is not avoidable that fatalism could be an unintended outcome of the practice of religion especially in the African continent. However it may seem, fatalism negatively impacts on the development process in Africa. This is because, development is driven by modernization and industrialization which are privileged on the belief that there are natural solutions through scientific innovations to human problems, contrary to fatalism which accepts the human conditions as divine will. Hence, all forms of fatalism promotes the delusion of development.

ii. Prosperity Gospel and the Illusion of Economic Advancement

Within the African continent, there is a remarkable rise of Prosperity Theology, especially among contemporary Pentecostal movements. They teach that profession of faith and financial contributions to religions institutions necessarily translate to material wealth and success. This entails that economic success results primarily from spiritual devotion rather than from structural economic productivity. They also portray poverty as primarily a spiritual problem. The immediate effect of such theology is that individuals focus more on spiritual rituals for success and less on education, skill acquisition, entrepreneurship and technological innovation. Consequently, prosperity theology does not promote critical inquiry and hence limits the development of a scientific and technological culture necessary for modernization. Yet modernization in the present world order is driven primarily by the development of a scientific and technological culture. If therefore prosperity theology persists and dominates, the hope for development in Africa could only be a delusion.

iii. Misapplication of Economic Resources

Religion may also influence development through the allocation of economic resources. In many African societies, resources are often directly expended by political office holders for constructing large worship centers, organizing elaborate religious events, sustaining expansive clerical hierarchies, etc. While such activities may strengthen community identity, critics argue that they sometimes divert scarce resources away from productive investments such as education, industry, research, and infrastructure. As a result, religious prosperity may become more symbolic than structural, reinforcing the perception of development while underlying economic realities remain unchanged. This translates to a delusion.

iv. Legitimization of Political Power

A very significant factor in *Africa and the Delusion of Development* is the relationship of religious leaders with political authority. Political leaders often rely on religious legitimacy to consolidate their power and sustain the narrative that all powers come from God. In doing this, they present themselves as divinely chosen, defenders of religious values and partners of religious institutions. Religious authorities in return, endorse the political leaders in exchange for recognition, influence and material support. A relationship as above weakens democratic accountability and makes citizens to hesitate in criticizing political leaders who are portrayed as instruments of divine will. Development requires structural transformation within both economic and political institutions. When religion shields political elites from criticism, it may hinder the institutional reforms necessary for economic progress. In a scenario as above, Religion becomes part of the ideological framework that sustains the appearance of moral leadership while structural underdevelopment persists.

V. Psychological Consolation and Developmental

Illusion

Religion also performs important psychological functions in societies facing poverty, conflict, and uncertainty. It provides hope, emotional comfort, and a sense of meaning in difficult circumstances. These functions are socially valuable and help communities cope with hardship. However, the same psychological comfort can sometimes produce a substitute for structural change. When religious narratives promise divine intervention, miracles, or future rewards, individuals may feel a sense of progress even when their socio-economic conditions remain largely unchanged. Thus, religion can contribute to a symbolic sense of advancement—a belief that transformation is imminent—while the structural foundations of development such as industrialization, technological innovation, and institutional efficiency remain weak. This as it were is tantamount to an enabler for the delusion of development.

e. Psychological Facet

Delusion is a mental activity. Hence a major facet of the delusion of development in Africa arises from a mental state which is psychological. The psychological effects of slavery and colonialism on Africans are not confined to the past; they continue to shape contemporary realities. These effects include internalized inferiority and loss of self-worth, cultural alienation, trauma, dependency, and social fragmentation.

One of the most destructive vestiges of slavery and colonialism is the internalization of inferiority and loss of self-worth. Both systems systematically portrayed Africans as primitive, irrational, and inferior to Europeans. Over time, such narratives became embedded in the consciousness of both the colonizer and the colonized. In *Black Skin, White Masks*⁵⁸, Fanon argues that colonialism engendered a “dependency complex” whereby the colonized sought validation through the culture of the colonizer.

This implied a low self-esteem, self-doubt and a tendency to devalue African identity and achievements. These manifest in what we have earlier described as modern Africans being mainly cultural herons, suffering identity crisis and manifesting preference for foreign (Western) norms and lifestyles. A further consequence of this psychological situation is the ingrained dependency mentality and learned helplessness.⁵⁹ This implies that for most Africans and especially the leaders, development must come from outside; Local systems are inadequate; Authority lies with foreign institutions.

Further still, this psychological condition gives rise to the psychological normalization of domination and oppression, evident in the cycles of political violence, collective memory of oppression, fear, distrust and insecurity among post-colonial African communities. This mindset is the harbinger of social fragmentation and distrust due to weak national cohesion and heightened ethnic consciousness, a recipe for the evident conflicts within the African continent.

Noteworthy however, is that within Africa, there is an ongoing effort toward psychological and cultural decolonization—through education, language revival, and intellectual movements—that seek to restore dignity, identity, and autonomy. But until this takes root and yields results, the African search for development may remain delusional.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our reflection so far on *Africa and the Delusion of Development*, could paint a picture of a hopeless shadow chasing. Be that as it may, while the future is evidently gloomy, redeeming Africa from the delusion might be difficult but not impossible. This is because, Africa's challenges are not a reflection of inherent incapacity but of misaligned development frameworks. The continent is richly endowed with human and natural resources, vibrant cultures, and resilient communities. Nigeria for instance alongside other

countries like India is a notorious source of talented human resource for the West. Therefore, a meaningful departure from the delusion of development only requires a fundamental rethinking of what development means and how it should be pursued. Such reimagining must prioritize human well-being, ethical governance, social justice, etc., over narrow and western oriented metrics. It must also emphasize education that fosters critical thinking, innovation, and civic responsibility, alongside economic systems that promote inclusive growth – human, infrastructural and otherwise - and local entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, Africa's development agenda must be grounded in indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and communal ethics. Concepts such as solidarity, reciprocity, and collective responsibility, deeply embedded in many African traditions, offer powerful foundations for participatory and inclusive development. By integrating these values into modern governance and economic planning, African societies can craft development strategies that are both contextually relevant and globally competitive. A very important place to start in this dimension would be rethinking the political arrangement in most African countries.

In conclusion, Africa's developmental predicament is best understood not merely as a failure of resources or effort, but as a crisis of vision and orientation. The delusion of development lies in the pursuit of externally defined models that obscure the continent's own potentials and priorities. Overcoming this delusion demands intellectual courage, political integrity, and cultural confidence. Only through a deliberate redefinition of the African identity and development—one that is homegrown and centers on human dignity, social equity, and indigenous wisdom—can Africa chart a sustainable and authentic path toward genuine transformation. This requires a sustained sagacity, and Africa is not lacking in the sagacious.

ENDNOTES

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³⁴A.Sumner , M.A.Tribe, *International Development Studies: Theories and Methods in Research and Practice*, 14. See also; D.Booth – al., *Q-Squared Working Paper No. 25 June 2006: Experiencing Poverty in Africa: Perspectives from Anthropology*, 12-13.

³⁵A.Sumner, M.A.Tribe, *International Development Studies: Theories and Methods in Research and Practice*, 15 For a more detailed discourse of modernity in relation to its use in *this context*, See K. Willis, *Theories and Practices of Development*, 2-3.

³⁶ The satellite-metropole relationship, central to dependency theory (popularized by Andre Gunder Frank), is an unequal system where "satellite" (peripheral) economies are dependent on and exploited by the "metropole" (core/center). Satellites transfer economic surplus, raw materials, and profits to the metropole, causing the satellite to remain underdeveloped while the metropole prosper.

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⁵⁶ K. Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1996).

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⁵⁸ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (NY: Grove Press, 1967). This is a foundational post-colonial work analyzing the psychological effects of racism, colonialism, and the alienation of Black people in a white world. It bears the influence of Marxism, existentialism, and psychoanalysis.

⁵⁹ Walter Rodney argued along this line in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972