

Claude Ake – Democracy and Development in Africa: A Review and a Tribute¹

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Abstract:

This paper which takes the form of a review and a tribute is an acknowledgement of the gargantuan contributions of Professor Ake – one of Africa’s most iconic and venerable thinkers – to the development of radical and revolutionary social science scholarship. A globally renowned Political Scientist whose intellectual compass traversed every area of social science, Ake believed in the transformational power of scientific knowledge and broadened its horizons through his many publications. Whereas it is not an assessment of Professor Ake’s works, this essay reinforces the immortal stature of a man who challenged an unjust status quo and widened the frontiers of progressive scholarship through his numerous research. This essay specifically examines Democracy and Development in Africa (1996), one of Ake’s last works whose analysis is on the nexus between democracy and development in Africa. The book x-rays the problem of leadership failure in Africa and highlights the anti – democratic and anti – development tendencies of African elites. This paper concludes that Professor Claude Ake was one of Africa’s great gifts to humanity, and the book under review is strongly recommended to students, researchers and policy makers interested in democratic governance and development – especially in Africa and the Third World.

Keywords:

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“Claude E. Ake (1939 - 1996) is one of Africa’s foremost political philosophers... As a major praxiological figure from whose works the real world in the continent can best be understood, his writings constitute a significant entry point not just for understanding contemporary Africa, but also for rethinking globalization, modernity and the larger theoretical concerns shared by postcolonial theorists throughout the world.”

- Arowosegbe (2019, p.1).

This essay which takes the form of a review is a tribute to the memory of one of the most eminent and globally venerated African social scientists. It explores the author’s position on the interface between democracy and development in Africa as encapsulated in the book. The one hundred and seventy-three-page book, *Democracy and Development in Africa* comprises of five chapters and was written by the cerebral Professor Claude Ake, a “pacesetter, pathfinder, pioneer, *primus inter pares*” (Ukiwo, 1997, p. 34) who “bestrode the African and indeed, the international social science community like a colossus, exemplifying the best and the brightest in social science scholarship that Africa could offer” (Jinadu, 1997, p. 22). One of his last works, this book was an addition to an already intimidating pool of Professor Ake’s patriotic and intellectual contributions to the development of Africa, the social science community and humanity. In his usual lucid and insightful way, the author analyses the correlation between democracy and development and the need for a holistic form of the former to blossom in Africa in order to engender the right type of the latter. He brings to the fore the fact that “there is no question of Africanizing democracy. The key demand of the moment is rather to democratize Africa. This is to say that we cannot import or Africanize democracy because the latter is something that is universal” (Nzongola – Ntalaja, 1997, p. 9).

According to Jinadu (1997, pp. 23-24), in this book, Ake formulated “a populist, people-centred, participatory and perhaps social democratic alternative which recognizes the collective rights of sub-national or ethnic groups and which allows representational voice at different fora for marginalized civil society groups like students, women and trade unions, among others” The implications, in Jinadu’s view, were in a sense iconoclastic, and the result, for example, was a series of insightful interpretations of the development process in Africa and in the identification of the relevant variables that should form the core and central foci for the study of that process. Thus, by challenging Western narratives on the route to development which Africa has to follow, Ake, with this work, “engaged” in “epistemic rebellion” or “epistemic disobedience”, which, according to Zondi (2024, p.60),

„permits the posing of deep and uncomfortable questions necessary in the oppressed and silence’s liberation. It permits the posing of questions against

questions, methods against methods, negation of the negation. We need to be able to negate Eurocentric negations. These are negations by which it has become normal to assume that Africa had no history, has no civilization, has no science, has no spirituality, and it is a dark continent.”

As his point of departure, Ake interrogates the “development paradigm and its politics” and without delay, expresses his dissatisfaction with the slow pace of development in Africa; he lists some of the factors that have been offered to explain the failure of the development process in Africa, and acknowledges that these factors are not irrelevant to the problem. He however argues that “the assumption so readily made that there has been a failure of development is misleading. The problem is not so much that development has failed as that it was never really on the agenda in the first place” (p.1).

The author considers how African politics has been constituted to prevent the pursuit of development and the emergence of relevant and effective development paradigms and programmes, and examines what he sees as “the political legacy of colonialism”, pointing out that colonialism in Africa was markedly different from the colonial experiences of other parts of the world. For example, the colonial state was usually statist, and its power was absolute and arbitrary. It also redistributed land and determined who should produce what and how. In Western Europe, for example, the state promoted the virtues of freedom of economic enterprise and local initiatives and creativity were encouraged and protected by the state. To the contrary, in Africa and the periphery, the colonial state was hostile and disoriented the development freedom of economic enterprise. Local industrial and technological development was discouraged. Local bourgeoisie were suppressed and unskilled labour and cheap natural economic resources were brutally exploited to the greater affluence of the metropolises (Akpuru – Aja, 1998 in Obo and Ukor, 2025). One may add that this was how Africa was forced or conditioned to produce mainly agricultural or primary products to meet the industrial needs of the colonizing countries.

In an x-ray of “the post-colonial situation”, the author observes that the attainment of political independence did not greatly change the character of the state in Africa; it remained much as it was in the colonial era, and it continued to present itself as an apparatus of violence which sought compliance in coercion rather than in authority. Those who inherited the colonial state were not interested in transforming it; rather, they were keen in retaining political power and the control of the state apparatus and the attendant privileges. Indeed, the decision by the emergent post-colonial elites to appropriate and consolidate rather than transform the inherited structures of colonialism-especially the economies and state – not only constitutes the dilemma of the present juncture but also explains the perpetuation of the logic of the colonial condition (Cooper, 2005 in Arowosegbe, 2019). As Olayode (2005, p. 28) asserts, “instead of transforming the state and making it relevant to the satisfaction of the needs and interests of the people, the emergent postcolonial leaders in Africa were content



with using the enormous authoritarian structures of the state to appropriate economic gains for themselves". Aliu (2014, p.57) amplifies this position by contending that

„the failure of the state and its managers to repudiate and alter fundamentally the inherited and reinforced socio – economic and political institutions, processes and policies of colonialism antithetical to development and governance is germane to explaining the monumental cases of corruption, insecurity, conflict, poverty, inequality, diseases and political instability ravaging Africa”

Professor Ake also surmises that at independence, in Africa, except for a few countries, politics remained a zero-sum game: power was sought by all means and maintained by all means as colonialism left a legacy of lawless political competition (p.6). This made the struggle for power very intense and dangerous because, as stated in another of the author's works, *A Political Economy of Africa* (1990, p.129), “those in office do all they can to perpetuate their hold on it, and those out of office do all they can to get it; there is hardly any restraint beyond prudence as to permissible means for this struggle”. Clearly, power was sought for selfish reasons and not for the purpose of transforming the society. In other words, the character of the state rules out a politics of moderation and mandates a politics of lawlessness and extremism for the single reason that the nature of the state makes the capture of state power irresistibly attractive. The winners in the competition for power win everything, the losers, lose everything. Nothing can be worse than losing, and nothing better than winning (Izoma, 2018)

In examining “the implications of politics”, the author points out that the political environment at independence was clearly anti-development and the absorbing struggle for power was the main concern of the political elites because, for them, power was everything; it was not only the access to wealth but also the means to security and the only guarantor of general well-being. While pretending to be interested in development, the elites embraced economic dependence, and this mindset led to “the conception of development as something to be achieved through changes in the vertical relations between Africa and the wealthy countries” (p.8). Commenting on “the development paradigm”, Ake states that at independence the elites knew that to retain their power and divert the peoples' attention from demands for development and transformation, they had to settle for the ideology of development, something to replace the nationalist ideology of self-government, that is, something they hoped would create a sense of common purpose. But, according to him, as it turned out, what was adopted was not so much an ideology of development as a strategy of power that merely capitalized on the objective need for development. And “the ideology of development was exploited as a means for reproducing political hegemony; it got limited attention and served hardly any purpose as a framework for economic transformation” (p.9).

Since the African elites did not have a programme of social transformation, it then fell on the West to supply a development paradigm, and this was the modernization

theory which prescribes that for Africa to develop, it should emulate the countries of the North. That is, for modernization theory, “reduced to essentials, the development of the backward parts of the world was implicitly a matter of becoming Western” (p.10). This is part of what Toyo (2001) calls the “delusions of a popular paradigm”. Western experiences and epistemologies do not define all humans, and the theories and perspectives that flow from them are not applicable to all formations, systems and societies. In fact, it is unfathomable for Africa to adopt and follow European and Western developmental modes, as our histories and societies differ tremendously. African countries cannot simply emulate European values in order to catch up with the West (Osaghae, 2024; Ukwandu, 2017).

The author also observes that the imported paradigm did not improve the well-being of the people as it conceives development as an autonomous process independent of politics, culture and institutional framework, and this understanding allowed the African elites unrestricted liberties. Due to this and other limitations, the paradigm could not achieve the desired results. Although the development paradigm acknowledges the significance of the state, the market and others, it did not show much interest in the institutional framework and cultural values in Africa. Commenting on what he calls “a confusion of agendas”, Professor Ake states that at independence, African elites were in no position to pursue development because they were too engrossed in the struggle for survival, and they did not even know how to manage the development process. In his words, “the poverty of ideas was remarkable” (p.19). He also pointed out that the few countries that attempted to pursue development failed mainly because of the contradictions of the inherited colonial state.

The author surmises that the conflict between Africa and external forces over development strategies was most evident in the rift between the Bretton Woods institutions and African governments. At some point, it is stated, African governments collectively expressed disappointment over the slow pace of development in the continent, and this led to the design of – among others – the Lagos Plan of Action aimed at promoting the development of Africa. Focusing on “the Lagos Plan and the World Bank Study”, Professor Ake states that while the former was designed by African leaders for the restructuring of African economies for self-reliant and self-sustaining development, the latter, titled “Accelerated Development” was developed by the World Bank for Africa but the African leaders saw its recommendations as pro-West and anti-Africa. There was thus a clash between these views, and because African economies were already dependent on the West, the African leaders surrendered to defeat and accepted more Western-designed policies like the Structural Adjustments Programme (SAP).

Professor Ake argues that the bane of analysis of the development experience of Africa is the tendency to ignore history. He stresses the importance of history by drawing attention to the fact that strategies and policies are made and managed by a government in office and a political elite in power in a historical state and under a particular configuration of social forces; one cannot understand development policies and



strategies, let alone the possibility of development without referring constantly to the nature of the state and the dynamics of the social forces in which it is embedded (p.42). He also asserts that most African leaders are not committed to development because of the nature of the state and the political environment; moreover, the state is not a public force as it is being deployed to serve private interests by the dominant faction of the elites. In this case, as Usman (1979 in Nkom, 1986, p. 238) had earlier stated, state or public institutions “are only public in name because they are run, in fact, for the purpose of accumulating private wealth. This is a normal feature of a capitalist society”.

The author examines some of the efforts of African governments to bring about development with his focus on Nigeria and Tanzania. On agriculture, he acknowledges its importance in development but regrets the fact that both the foreign donors and African governments had failed to take advantage of Africa’s agricultural potentials to promote development. He also comments on “agricultural policy initiative in Nigeria”, stating that although most of the agricultural policies of the governments as contained in the different National Development Plans were properly formulated, appropriate measures were not adopted to actualize the goals of these policies. For instance, the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) whose function was to promote agriculture and rural infrastructure was mismanaged by the elites due to corruption and greed.

In his assessment of “Nigerian agriculture in the era of structural adjustment”, Ake shows that even with S.A.P, “agricultural policy still suffers from class bias, which often translates into ill-conceived policies and contradictions between manifest and latent functions” (p.54). He points out that the government did not do much about agriculture but only hoped that the sector would enjoy “residual benefits” from the development of rural infrastructure such as roads. Moreover, the elites were more interested in the enormous revenues from petroleum production. On “agricultural transformation in Tanzania”, the author observes that in spite of the hitches of the first year of independence, “Tanzania is distinguished for being one of the few African countries that initiated a programme of rural and agricultural transformation. The transformation was pursued progressively through the village settlement scheme of 1964, the Ujamaa village programme of 1967, and the villagization scheme of 1973” (p.56). On “Tanzanian agriculture under structural adjustment”, Professor Ake observes that the situation in Tanzania was not markedly different from what obtained in Nigeria. With the adjustment programme, there were still contradictions, and the Tanzanian elites did not control agriculture in order to avoid embarking on an affirmative action to promote agricultural production. The author concludes by stating that the problem is not that African leaders do not want agricultural development; rather the fact is that their actions and policies are driven by self-interests which do not promote development.

The author also examines “industrialization” and observes that the problems that beset it are not different from what agriculture faces: external dependence, lack of political will, the selfish interests of the elites etc. He assesses “import substitution” and states that it was the first industrialization strategy that was adopted. The policy initially

yielded some benefits in the countries that adopted it, but it also brought about those countries' dependence on imported intermediate and capital goods. The policy was hampered by lack of discipline within the political class and business community as well as a limited domestic demand. Professor Ake however states that strictly speaking, what was being practised in Africa was not import substitution but rather import reproduction, which implies the domestic production of the particular product that was formerly imported and focuses on product specificity rather than generic functionality (p.75). Commenting on the programme of "indigenization" in Tanzania, Kenya and Nigeria, the author reasons that these countries were motivated by nationalism and the dependency theory to adopt the programme. He also states that the policy indicates the ambivalence of the policy-making elites and the clash between the latent and the manifest functions of public policy; moreover, indigenization policy should not only be about the control of the economy but should be related to the value of effective management to maximize growth and equity.

Professor Ake also briefly discusses "structural adjustment" in Nigeria and Ghana, stressing that in evaluating this policy, one needs to take account of the huge significance that it has assumed in African economies and the lives of Africans. Although originally conceived as short-term measures to revamp a distressed economy, adjustment programmes now look like the only development strategy in Africa. In Nigeria, in spite of what its proponents say, there were problems with S.A.P.: increased indebtedness, adverse social consequences especially for the poor, etc. The author also observes that those who imposed SAP on Africa regarded Ghana as the "framework of adjustment" (p.88). Thus, Ghana was given an unusual level of foreign aid to mitigate the effects of the programme since the Bretton Woods institutions were particularly interested in its success in Ghana. Ake also points out that a major issue raised by the Ghana experience is whether the gains of the programme can be sustained. On "adjustment, growth and development", the author argues that SAP, by its nature is not a development strategy but an interim measure which often tends to be regarded as part of the hegemony of market principles. He states that African leaders whose poor performance necessitates the adoption of SAP do not believe in democratizing the public policy process, and the imposition of the programme on Africa by external forces is also undemocratic.

While examining what he calls Africa's "blocked options", Professor Ake examines some of the issues that are related to the development problematique in Africa. On "the international environment", he points out that following the end of the cold war, Africa does not seem to be important to the global powers anymore, and it is difficult to envisage anything that can put Africa on the international agenda, even as the continent's raw materials are no more indispensable in the global market since they have been replaced by synthetic materials. Moreover, most of the multilateral institutions often impose on Africa priorities that are not salient to it. On "the debt problem" and "the worsening situation", the author argues that in the name of development, African leaders have been preoccupied with gaining access to Western markets and obtaining more loans which may not be very helpful given the continent's

position in the international division of labour. He also states that in view of the fact that Africa's loans are characterized by stiff conditions, and with mounting indebtedness, declining exports earnings and deteriorating terms of trade, new commercial lending became more difficult and the prospects of economic recovery worsened. On "tentative attempts to solve the problem", Professor Ake posits that Africa's debt is so huge that it cannot afford to repay it and thus it is necessary to think of other options to deal with the debt burden. To this end, the strategy of debt cancellation has been pursued but the problem is that Africa's debts that have been cancelled by its external creditors have been very small and of little consequence - which means that Africa still has enormous external debt obligations. When a substantial portion of the national budget goes towards servicing debt, it leaves fewer resources for essential public investments in infrastructure, education, and healthcare thus hindering economic progress, and this has made Africa perpetually dependent on the lenders thereby entrenching a systematic plundering of the continent's resources through unfavourable debt servicing and loan repayments (Ukaegbu, Amali and Chukwuma, 2024; Oyekanmi, Udochukwu, and Adeniyi, 2024). In view of this, "why Africa entered the 21st century as the poorest, most technologically backward, the most debt-distressed and the most marginalized region in the world, is food for thought" (Omotor, 2019, p.70).

In drawing attention to Africa's experience with democracy and development, Professor Ake points out that it is evident that the international development community has been subverting democracy and development in Africa through their alien policies. According to him, the African experience clearly shows that "exogeneity" does not promote democracy irrespective of the policies associated with it. This is because democracy is not a socio-political phenomenon characterized by bits and pieces of values picked up from one social milieu or another, one country or another, or from the international community and its organizations. Each democracy is meant to reflect the ongoing realities of its immediate environment, and it is more of a sin than ignorance to imagine that cultural and ideological factors are not inherently important to the shaping of a people's political culture. Indeed, it would betray common sense to think that democracy, as practised elsewhere with its different economic and socio cultural dynamics should be adopted in Africa without making necessary adjustments (Nnoli, 2011; Falola, 2024).

The author also makes the point that the problem is that Africans have been marginalized in the development of Africa; "development", he states, "is something that people do by themselves and for themselves, or it does not happen. The people of Africa will have to empower themselves to repossess their own development, a formidable task" (p.123). Development is not a unilinear, predetermined condition imposed by powerful actors on less powerful actors. Instead, it is an outcome of the specific association between people and between places across spatial scales seeking to secure advantages, and of actors taking advantage of or contesting new situations. Thus, development policies for Africa should be internally driven and particularly informed

by internal social, political and economic arrangements rather than being externally superimposed (Agbonifo, 2019; Tagarirofa, 2017).

In the final section of the work, Professor Ake discusses what he regards as “the appropriate development paradigm for Africa” and outlines its elements. On the nature of the paradigm, he states that it recognizes the fact that development is a process and not a project, and that it is the process by which people create and recreate themselves and their life circumstances to realize higher levels of civilization in accordance with their own choices and values. On the politics of the development paradigm, the author states that for sustainable development, the people have to be the agents and means of development; that is, they should have the responsibility to decide what development is, its values and methods of realizing it. As Nnoli (2011, p. 304) puts it, “only the masses can take care of their interests. They are the only ones who can remove the obstacles to their progress. In fact, they are the only ones who can tell what these obstacles are in the first place”. Indeed, as Ascroft and Masilela (1994 in Jegede, 2018, p. 243) have illustrated, “if peasants do not control or share control of the processes of their own development, there can be no guarantee that it is their best interest that is being served”.

Ake also examines the feasibility of democracy in Africa as well as the attitude of the West to democracy in Africa, pointing out that Africa does not need externally – foisted democracy, and that the West does not believe that Africa needs democracy which explains the former’s support for authoritarian African regimes. In the words of Yusuf (1994, p. 259), the interference in the internal affairs of African countries and the assistance offered to authoritarian governments, without doubt, contributed to the subversion of democracy, for they supplied these repressive governments with the screws to tighten the machinery of repression. The point is strongly made by the author that Africa needs a democracy that is inclusive and which places emphasis on concrete socio-political and economic rights as well as one in which people have real decision-making power and which also emphasizes collective and individual rights. As Toyo (1994 in Ojukwu and Nwaorgu, 2012) states, in any society where the concept of democracy does not embrace actual governance by the people and does not extend to the economic and cultural spheres, democracy is at best truncated. Professor Ake concludes by once again reiterating the fact that “the development project has not failed in Africa. It just never started in the first place because of hostile political conditions. It can start and it can succeed” (p.159).

With this work, professor Ake’s awesome intellectual profundities were once again brought to the fore-with his penetrating analysis of post-colonial Africa’s experience with democratic practice and foreign development models. It can be discerned from this work that African elites are neither harbingers of development nor promoters of democracy. As Ijoma (2008 in Ochi, Okeke, and Eze, 2023) opines, the best way to assess African states on democracy and development is to score them based on the demands of their people and the responses of the governments towards such demands. Be that as it may, the social condition of the majority of people in Africa presents a startling paradox: Africa, a continent that is so richly endowed, turns out to be wretched



of the earth with the majority of her populace exposed to the terror of poverty, malnutrition, ignorance, and diseases. African elites are self-serving rulers who are only interested in primitive accumulation of wealth by appropriating and privatizing public resources. That is, the promotion of democracy and the development of Africa have never been the priorities of the majority of African elites. In fact African “elites have shown that they are callous, dangerous, unpatriotic and extremely avaricious. They have demonstrated that they are not leaders but... predators who have robbed the...continent of its future as well as bruised and violated the collective humanity of the people” (Obo, Omenka, and Agishi, 2017, p. 22).

This work also cogently demonstrates that it is not in Africa’s interest for it to be studied or governed according to foreign models or epistemologies. Therefore, as Jinadu (2000 in Laakso, 2024, p.9) contends, “Africa must be studied in terms of the conditions and possibilities of its own self-centred development, and the adaptation of its own indigenous institutions to the problems of governance”. One would have loved to see an analysis-even if brief-of the situation in pre-colonial Africa. Before colonialism came with its disruptive and destructive effects, Africa had its mode of socio-political organization which was essentially not anti - democratic. This system promoted development in its own unique way; it established structures and institutions that catered for the needs of the people. This fact cannot be overemphasized.

Generally, we do agree with Arowosegbe’s (2019) view that a measure of a philosopher’s greatness is evaluated in terms of the appeal and continuing relevance of their work, especially after their death. According to him, others may disagree in their assessments and interpretations of their major ideas and positions yet such disagreements in part serve to testify to their greatness. As he rightly puts it, “although it may be too early to measure Ake’s greatness as a political philosopher, nevertheless, one can safely suggest that other considerations notwithstanding, Ake was a great political philosopher” (Arowosegbe, 2019, pp. 169-170).

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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