

BOOK REVIEW

Bolaji Bateye, Mahmoud Masaeli, Louise Müller, and Angela Roothaan, eds. *Beauty in African Thought: Critical Perspectives on the Western Idea of Development*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2023. 270 pp. \$105.00. Hardback. ISBN: 9781793630759.

In a neoliberal world, *Beauty in African Thought: Critical Perspectives on the Western Idea of Development* introduces African thought and philosophy as a distinct paradigm that not only deserves to be seriously considered but could also offer a real alternative developmental framework to counter the inequality and injustice created by the dominant paradigm. The book showcases how African thought and philosophy could be integrated through genuine intercultural exchange to address the exclusivity, weaknesses, and exploitation inherent in Western-centric approaches. The book is organized into three main parts.

The first part addresses the notion of beauty in African thought and its implications. It begins by critiquing the prevalent notions of beauty in environmental conservation. By contrasting Western and African perspectives, the book argues that, while Western beauty is largely materialistic and individualistic, focusing on physical appearance, African beauty is more communitarian, emphasizing the interconnectedness and inner beauty of individuals and the pragmatic value of things. Both perspectives, however, are anthropocentric, relying on rigid binary categorizations of beauty that contribute to the ongoing ecological crisis. To address these shortcomings, the book proposes a holistic-relational theory of beauty grounded in Afrocentric complementary ontology, advocating for a non-individualistic and non-categorical concept. This theory posits that real value is found in the interconnected web of existence, where beauty arises from inclusiveness and harmony rather than isolated judgments.

The second part of the book focuses on how African ideas of beauty and human flourishing discussed earlier could be used to replace the Western-dominated developmental framework. The book introduces African metaphysics as an integrative cosmology that bridges the spiritual and physical realms, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals, nature, and the spiritual world. Unlike Western thought, which views humans as isolated individuals, African philosophy sees them as corporate social beings bound by intimate ontological ties. The book argues that metaphysics, which in African thought is understood as the involvement with reality that constitutes our system of knowledge, significantly influences development practices within societies, as development should not exclude those affected by it.

The book also tackles development from an Afro-communal approach that emphasizes communal or harmonious relationships based on shared identity and solidarity. According to this approach, stronger criticism of

Western development should focus on its individualistic, anthropocentric, and technocratic nature.

The book then addresses sustainable development. While SDGs aim to promote global sustainability and end poverty, their individualistic “developed vs. developing” mindset still reflects a modernist approach that excludes spirituality and community values. Thus, the trans-modern paradigm is introduced as a framework that integrates African and Western philosophies. It rejects the dominance of any single philosophy and promotes inclusivity by fostering dialogue between universalism and particularism. The book focuses primarily on Ubuntu, a key African philosophy that emphasizes non-dominating values such as solidarity, consensus, and interconnectedness, countering hegemonic narratives and promoting a more humane and inclusive global order.

The notion of genuine development is also introduced, arguing that genuine development must be inclusive, fair, and just, yielding mutually reinforcing and equitable development results. It should guarantee humanitarianism and have no conditionalities. The book introduces a Genuine Development Index to measure factors such as colonial legacy and capitalist exploitation.


The final part explores the complex relationship between African spirituality, indigenous knowledge, and modern development frameworks, arguing that Western-centric models often fail to grasp the holistic and interconnected nature of African metaphysics. By analyzing the agricultural practices of the Dagara people in Ghana, the author shows how spiritual beliefs are integral to sustainable practices, making the selective extraction of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) problematic. The critique extends to development projects that engage in “knowledge mining,” disregarding the broader cultural and cosmological contexts.

Discussing African spirituality, the book also contrasts two perspectives on African identity, symbolizing broader philosophical tensions faced by many Africans. One viewpoint embraces a cosmopolitan identity shaped by Western education and intellectual traditions, while the other resists Western validation, focusing on maintaining a purely African identity. This tension highlights the struggle to reconcile traditional African ways of knowing with the influence of Western epistemologies.

The book also delves into the “Omoluabi” ethos based on in-depth interviews with the Yoruba people in southwestern Nigeria. The “Omoluabi” is a moral obligation that serves as the basis for human well-being, emphasizing harmony, tolerance, peace, and a strong sense of community. Revisiting African democracy, usually rooted in consensus rather than competition, could allow “Omoluabi” values to take firm root. Additionally, the role of African myths and taboos in environmental conservation is explored, showing that spirituality, often sidelined in modern development narratives, is crucial for sustainable practices.

Overall, the book advocates for integrating African values, thoughts, and philosophical perspectives to create more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to development and identity. It mainly focuses on the communitarian nature of African thought, emphasizing how ideas of harmony, inclusion, political consensus, economic cooperation, and respect for sacred nature,

embedded in African spirituality and philosophical thought, could counter the exploitative, universalistic nature of the dominant Western-centric paradigm in development studies and practices.

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