

# HUMAN IDENTITY CRISIS AND UNSUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: A CRITICAL STUDY

Evaristus Emeka Isife  
Department of Philosophy,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,  
Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.  
[emekaisife@gmail.com](mailto:emekaisife@gmail.com)

## Abstract

*Sustainable development of civil societies depends on the sustainable effort of people inhabiting such societies. Sustainable effort however stems from people with firm and stable identity. This makes sustainable development a product of people whose identity is largely dependable. Contrarily however, it means that unsustainable development in civil societies is largely fostered by human identity crisis. In absence of dependable identity therefore, African nations are laden with poor development glaring in poor leadership, poor human condition, poor institutions and structures. Such unsustainable development has in present time fostered mass agitation, militancy, terrorism and unending secession movements. This paper analytically examines human identity crisis and unsustainable development in Africa. It proffers axiological solutions to the conspicuous identity crisis plaguing the larger population of African continent. The study however finds that African identity crisis is a cultural crisis and progressive societies are stable societies with dependable and authentic identity. The paper therefore concludes that solution to African unsustainable development must begin with tackling the continent's identity crisis which is frustrating evolvment of indigenous theories, practice and development efforts of the people.*

**Keywords:** Crisis; Critical; Human identity; Study; Unsustainable development

## Introduction

Science has proven that human bodily cells undergo frequent changes. Along this lane, human bodies and existence consistently undergo mutation through the process of nutrition and waste. This change implies that no individual possesses the same body and mode of thinking for a long period. From the materialist and idealist perspectives therefore, it means that a person changes with the passage of time; for the mind grows old as well as the body (Offor, 2013). The reality of this acclaimed change in human nature however raises the philosophical question of what really constitutes human individuality, personhood or identity? Aristotle responds to this fundamental question stating that beside the accidents that change, everything consists of substance that remains. Most aspects of culture which serves as human identity fall within what could be understood as substance in philosophy. Since culture stands as identity, it implies that human "identity shoots out from cultural beliefs and practices" (Umeogu, 2013:176). This is more so because culture shapes aspects of human nature and character from the cradle to the grave and forms the basis of human sustainable development. It ties the individual to the community and holds the members of the community together. It is also the constituent of the interiority of the being of individuals in the community. Culture is the

internal equilibrium of a people's personhood which derives from their once stable and communally appreciated cultural values.

These notwithstanding, the western and other alien diffusion of African cultures and their hegemony through colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization have created identity crisis among Africans. Anyaehie (2013:150) shares this view arguing that “European slavery and colonialism devastated African psyche, rubbished her culture and values, and left her empty of any coherent world view of reality.” In congruence with this, Odimegwu (2008:62) documents that “colonialism struck a shattering blow at virtually every element and level of the system of African life.” Elaborating on these submissions, Afisi (2008:90) states,

The African today does not know what it is like to be a pure unadulterated African. Even though the African today acts, speaks, behaves either like an European, an American or an Arab, he is however neither considered nor accepted as an European or an Arab. Similarly, he is also not an African; may be only by the colour of his skin, but culturally not one.

In all these, western and other alien cultures did not totally extinct African cultures or led to identity loss among Africans. These foreign cultures rather truncated African cultures and indigenous people that depend on their autochthonous culture for sustainable development and better living. Thus, alien cultural diffusion of African cultures created identity crisis that today plague modern Africans and keeps them more confused than people from other continents of the world.

Identity crisis in Africa therefore arose from the fact that the culture with which Africans realize, define and actualize themselves has been bastardized with valueless elements of western and other alien cultures. Worst still, these elements of other cultures could not cohere with the being of the Africans, hence their consistent experience of identity crisis. In this poor condition, most Africans no longer find in their indigenous culture the stable foundation, materials and confidence required for self-actualization and sustainable development. With the present confused cultural platform on which modern Africans now cling, they are best described as Fanon's “Black Skin, White Masks.” Yet, these Africans could not effectively identify themselves in and with the western and other bastardizing cultures because the elements of these alien cultures are at variance and often in conflict with the fundamental constituents of their autochthonous selves. This crisis hampers sustainable development in African continent which can only flourish on people's stable authentic identity. Throwing more light on this, Chinweuba and Ezeugwu (2018:1) assert that,

Development is sustained when it is replete with the cultural and environmental needs and coheres with the autochthonous nature and activities of the people. As such, a development that is not *in tandem* with the aforementioned cannot be sustained. Though, its sustenance can be prolonged, it is bound to collapse. This is based on the evidence that such development is a mismatch that faces a lot of friction with the nature of the indigenous people and the different cultural and environmental needs which it tends to resolve.

It therefore means that when people find themselves alienated from their unique identity (culture) which serves as the vital force of their existence, the consequence is identity crisis and unsustainable development which are now African problems.

### **Conceptual clarification**

Outstanding concepts in this treatise are identity crisis and unsustainable development. Identity crisis refers to conflicting pressures and uncertainty of a people about their personhood and purpose in existence. It also points to uncertainty about one's self and one's role in the society. It has been stated that “identity crisis occurs when one either loses track of who he or she is or does not feel happy with who he or she is and wants to change his or her life or to restructure it” (Isife, 2020, p.271). Identity crisis at times appears natural. This is based on the fact that “the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, simple and complex ideas, substance and accidents, change and permanence, one and many, unity and diversity, whether addressed from an epistemological or metaphysical perspective gives credence to the vexing problem of identity” (Isife, 2021:55). Identity crisis therefore points to instability in the personality of a people or in the distinguishing characteristics of a person.

Identity crisis is indeed a product of people's disorientation which severs them from their unique cultural trajectory towards authentic sustainable development. Truly, identity crisis is cultural crisis which results from cultural hegemony and diffusion (Iroegbu, 2004). Reflecting in rejection of indigenous languages, cultural practices, patterns of work and life, identity crisis makes people cease to be cornerstones of their cultural traditions. It also touches on what holds a people together and stands as the basis of their unsustainable development.

Unsustainable development is when quality growth in human society is short lived. Along this line, unsustainable development connotes change in every sector of a civil society for a brief period. In the light of these, Chinweuba (2020:116) describes unsustainable development as “a situation where available resources in a country are not maintained for a long or lasting period of time...a state of defunctness, redundancy, retrogression or underdevelopment.” Unsustainable development is also when a country's structures and institutions are unable to retain or maintain maturity and adequacy. Based on these meanings, United Nations 2005 World Summit Outcome (WSO) posits unsustainable development as absence of lasting growth in the societal areas of politics, economy, culture, etc. This summarizes unsustainable development as a situation in a country where the societal systems, institutions and structures that bear the existence of the society is constantly feeble, wobbling, collapsing and unsatisfying to human needs.

### **Historicizing Identity Crisis and Unsustainable Development in Africa**

Propelled by search for their economic resources and wellbeing; western European countries in Berlin Conference of 1885 partitioned African continent among themselves. With the conquest and domination of Africa thereafter through Christianity and western education came the perception of the superiority of European cultures over those of Africans. In this processes, Africans were indoctrinated to view their cultures as primitive, irrational, savagery, barbaric, evil, inferior, and those of Europeans as the standard and symbol of true way of life (Dukor, 2010). Because of this, Achebe (1958) laments that the colonialists have bastardized the indigenous cultures which holds African identity and development in being.

At this time, Islamic/Arabic cultures also crept in and contributed to African identity crisis of today. These cultural influences disrupted and destabilized African values, beliefs and perception which define the people and constitute their identity/personhood, and threw them into identity crisis (Anyaehe, 2013). In this sense, Africans are not only estranged from their cultural values and customs, but from their indigenous unique autochthonous tract of civilization. This situation is exacerbated by modern globalization which further transmits European cultures to the extreme neglect of what remains of Africa. This modern movement further paves way for cultural diffusion and western cultural hegemony that again foster identity crisis among larger African population.

Identity crisis in this context became glaring in African loss of peculiar way of perception, cognition, knowing and doing. This stunted evolution of indigenous ideas and ideology necessary for authentic and sustainable development. This notwithstanding, the hegemonic western cultural ideas and ideology in African environment became visibly ineffective and unproductive. These paved ways for emergence and persistent unsustainable development in African continent.

### **Realities at stake in African Identity Crisis**

Amidst discussions on African identity crisis, there is the question of what really is in this particular crisis. This question from every indication seeks the factors that are really in, or constitutes African identity crisis. Mbiti (1959:204) enumerates these factors as the present African weak “sense of common origin, unity, oneness and togetherness, common customs, morals, ethics, social behavior and material objects like musical instruments, household utensils, foods and domestic animals which are the basis upon which culture is built.” Constituting this present African identity crisis are also the bastardized African unique authentic knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, customs, science, technology, their indigenous trends and mode of acquisition shared and transmitted from generation to generation (Aghamelu and Asomugha, 2009).

Deepening African identity crisis as well are the entire African way of life; including African attitudes, values, beliefs, modes of perception and habits of thought and activity which has been tampered by foreign influences (Isife, 2021). In this direction, the modern African does not know who he is. For he sees himself living across, identifying with and exhibiting many foreign cultural attributes yet unable to situate his personhood in any. He is thus not a European, American, Asian or a full-fledged African. Though he behaves and speaks like a European, American and Chinese, he is not considered or accepted as any. Worst still, the modern African shares from black colour but does not even know what it means to be truly African. Content of African identity crisis in this context is therefore glaring in the fact that modern Africans have become a hybrid of some sort (Afsi, 2008).

In African identity crisis also are African traditions which now inadequately foster values of faith, hope, medicare, freedom, good education, ethics, human good relationship and personal responsibility. In all round, the entire African communalism is largely laden with crisis as it struggles with western and other foreign influences in African environment. Amidst these,

African identity crisis is best described with Achebe's ((1958:127) famous expression that “things fall apart.”

African identity crisis further consists in people desirous of becoming like foreigners. In this direction, African elites, leadership and greater population sacrifice the welfare of the masses in their effort to imitate westerners in character and thought. Particularly, African leadership and elites view and carry themselves as replacement of the expatriates. This makes African inherited colonial pattern a continuation of colonialism in post-independence African. In congruence with this reality, Isife (2020) reveals that the major change in post-independence Africa was the replacement of expatriates with indigenous politicians. Because of identity crisis, many African leaders embezzle public funds and stack them in foreign banks or use them to acquire properties in foreign lands. More of African identity crisis reflects in many brain drains and preference for foreign lands, names, ways of life, education, healthcare, habitat, materials, foods, languages, products and services. In crisis too are African worldview and understanding of being. These have been stigmatized and diluted by western understanding and thoughts. Thus, Dion(2007: 261) maintains that,

The effects of individualism, westernization and the stigmatization of African concepts of being have had a marked effect on the prominence of the African worldview. From modernizing influences in schools, and from ignorant religious movements in Christianity and Islam, there has been a significant effect in the break-down of traditional African patterns of thought and the resulting behaviour.

Laden with crisis too is indigenous African social and political philosophies. Many have derogatorily referred to these as ethno-philosophy, yet it took care of indigenous African needs and stably propelled African civilization. This means that, “long before the coming of Europeans to the continent Africans possessed social and political philosophies as valid as those of their European counterparts. These systems revolved around a universal recognition of human worth which formed the spiritual foundation of African societies.” (Kochalumchuvattil, 2010:46).

Today, African education system, learning curriculum, social and political philosophy and their basis have largely become replicas of colonial trend and culture. Yet, being implemented in solving African problems in African environment rendered ineffective this education with largely foreign curriculum. Another crisis erupting from this identity crisis is the general inferiority complex and notion that foreigners are superior and well trained and that Africans require their assistance or presence to solve their problems.

### **Evidence of Identity Crisis among Africans**

Apart from African unsustainable development which stands as evidence of identity crisis in Africa, the general neglect of African way of life to the seeming general embrace of western mode of life is a typical sign of identity crisis. Now, most Africans denigrate things that are African but hold western and other foreign products/personalities in high esteem. These Africans even castigate their fellow Africans who are not quite in touch with foreign mode of knowing and being as archaic, non-resourceful and old fashioned. In fact, modern Africans

prefer adapting to western situations than African originated situations. More identity crisis in this direction is that many Africans now make effort even to change their colour, names and mannerism to foreign ones so as to pass as a white person. And white people in most identity crisis laden Africans' understanding now includes Indians, Chinese, Pakistanis, and other people with fair skins. Referring to this identity crisis, Okolo (1993:36) observes that “contemporary Africans are becoming more and more Europeans and less and less Africans in their values, mentality, and general outlook just as much or nearly as much as Fanon depicted black Africans over twenty five years ago as 'Black skin white masks.’”

In this sense, numerous elements of African autochthonous culture, core values and unique patterns has been diffused or divorced from African experience. Based on this development, Fanon (2008) alleges that to be white is the desire of the black. This desire to be white, according to Isife (2020:271), “brings about an identity crisis into the consciousness of the black.”

### **Identity Crisis and Unsustainable Development in Africa**

Culture as African identity ties the individual with the community and constitutes the interiority of the individual and the community. This is what Okolo (1993) refers to as being-with; an existential unifying factor among Africans. Culture in this context is a complex whole embodying values, customs and traditions that stand as African identity and basis of people's sustainable development. Alumona (2009:354) consents to this role of human culture and argues that “the values of a given society provide insights into how the attitudes and actions of individuals within that society affect development endeavors.” As culture forms the character, identity and basis of people's development, then, it means that African identity crisis which stems from western erosion of her culture constitutes her unsustainable development.

The crisis of identity among Africans situates on the fact that Africans have largely lost their roots which accounts for who or what they were (Ukavwe, 2019). This loss was hugely orchestrated by African colonial history which remains a disastrous period for the continent. This is as many of the problems faced by Africans today stem from this past. Africa therefore lost larger part of her identity under her colonial occupiers. This in turn led to disintegration of societal hierarchies, systems and structures that had developed over the centuries. From this loss is the resulting crisis of leadership, corruption and a reluctance to relinquish power which stunt African development (Kochalumchuvattil, 2010). In this direction, puppet governments and their foreign collaborators embark on exploitation of the continent's abundant natural resources and the use of African nations as a buffer for western rivals, consequently leaving Africa both physically and psychologically scarred (Wangari, 2009).

As nations' original root serves as natural basis for sustainable development, Africans' larger loss of their roots or identity have become the basis of their unsustainable development. This loss has become overwhelming that modern Africans now consciously self-loath themselves and embrace all manner of western pattern of development that turns ineffective and unproductive in African environment. In fact, there is a widespread socio-cultural mal-adaptation in African societies that are not in congruence with African environment. Being a mismatch solution to African predicaments, these alien socio-cultural tenets have become a

great hindrance to African sustainable development.

Destabilized by western cultural hegemony, Africans now lack the discipline, steadfastness and will power for long term innovations and absolute implementations of human initiatives and creativity. Worst still, what becomes African initiative is now an incoherent mixture of alien and less indigenous ideas which fails at implementation since such initiative emanates from distorted personhood and crisis laden identity. This is more so for as Nyasani (2007:130-31) posits,

What we experience in the practical life of an African is the apparent stagnation or stalemate in his social as well as economic evolution...It is quite evident that the social consequences of this unfortunate social impasse (encapsulation) can be very grave especially where the process of acculturation and indeterminate enculturation is taking place at an uncontrollable pace.

Thus, identity crisis in African context is the bane of theory and practice that result to sustainable development. This is as identity crisis forces incoherence in African perception of the world and plays a central role in disintegrating a people's life and purpose. Identity crisis too truncates the people's social, ethical, intellectual, scientific, artistic, technological expressions and processes (Oyenuga and Olukaode, 2009). It does not serve as an integral system that embodies African explicative and regulatory character, and performs adaptive and integrative roles (Michael, 2008). Identity crisis does not also enhance human better understanding of nature, realities and mechanisms of development. It rather constitutes hindrance to human intelligence, comprehension, activeness, strength of character, competence and performance. Identity crisis does not also determine human character but rather wrecks what remains of human character and disposes people to myriad of conflicting cultural elements. The result of these has been ineffectiveness and unsustainable development among larger African population.

### **Towards solving African Identity Crisis and Unsustainable Development**

Human existence is confronted with problems but what marks a people is how they are able to locate, confront, manage, overcome these challenges and actualize themselves. The baffling aspect of Africa is that other parts of the world that experienced colonialism and its resultant cultural crisis have picked up their pieces, gone back to their roots and advanced their authentic development. This raises the question; why is Africa yet to reintegrate her identity and advance her development? Answer to this lies with African sympathetic and mental complacency. Anyaehie (2013) explains this psychological complacency as being induced by African bogus idea of possessing abundant resources and human and environmental friendliness that sustains life at minimal stress. This complacency again results from Africa's endless focus on past achievements and glories of the continent.

To adequately salvage Africa from her present identity crisis therefore, there is need for a general re-orientation towards overcoming the present psychological complacency and relapse to sympathy. Amidst these, the twin tasks of self-discovery and recovery is required through indigenous education. Indigenous education in this sense has to be replete with

existential African values that are capable of ensuring Africans' massive return to their roots and indigenous tract of sustainable development. In congruence with this view, Isife (2020:271) notes that “Africa has to go back to her roots, her past, to her cultural values. This going back will not be to admire the past but to see how these cultural values are relevant to Africa's quest for freedom and her desire for a new humanity.”

Meanwhile, indigenous education as envisaged has to possess a curriculum propagating indigenous relevant norms, ethos, integrity, ways of life and traditional institutions. It has to focus on determining contemporary African wits and prowess that can propel people towards overcoming psychic complacency that hampers sustainable development.

To further curb African identity crisis and unsustainable development, there is need for general value re-orientation, proper placement of values, adherence to African indigenous values and propagation of African indigenous functional and progressive ideologies by African intellectuals (Isife, 2020). These should be coupled with serious drive towards national integration. For with national integration comes the desired unity and stability also needed for African states to be prosperous and truly independent. This has to be followed by restructuring of African societal structures to reflect indigenous identity which is as well the basis for sustainable development. The restructuring of African societies should however reflect the cultural and indigenous values, norms, ethos and aspirations.

Amidst these, African indigenous languages have to be upheld as means of communication, education and research. This is especially as indigenous languages are the vehicles that drive cultural values which lead to sustainable development. Indigenous languages also enhance people's authentic and better understanding of nature, relationship and mechanisms of realities. It reduces human struggle to grasp realities and to implement ideas. This is true in the sense that indigenous languages are original and authentic languages that define people's originality, authenticity, and strengthens them towards sustainable development. Moreover, original languages communicate the strength of people's character, intelligence, competence and performance. It aids peoples' better understanding and ability to work better. This is the secret of rich countries whose means of communication, education and research are their native languages.

### **Conclusion**

In this discourse, the glaring question revolves on why African mind is so receptive and retentive of alien cultural interferences? This is basically on the fact that African mind is more emotive, participatory and intuitive. As such, it is interested in forging unity and harmony among the various aspects of realities; hence it's receptive and retentive of alien ideas and cultures (Nwigwe, 2005). This disposition is however the platform that aids deep foreign interferences in African culture, which today gives rise to African identity crisis and unsustainable development. Therefore, the western cultural control of Africa largely re-orientated Africans' consciousness, perception and worldview. It sets Africans on the trajectory that lacks solid foundation that ought to have been guaranteed by authentic African culture. It thus means that human identity crisis in Africa is the force behind her unsustainable development. This is truly so because on crisis laden identity, development wobbles. This is as

it does not cohere with its foundation which includes the cultural elements, natural and environmental factors that make up a people's identity.

Apart from these, the present western cultural hegemony and increasing acculturation in African societies are gradually making remaining African cultural contents extinct. This has created its own crisis in the intrinsic personal equilibrium of African individuals. In all these, African identity crisis gives a clue to the fact that exhibiting alien cultural identities absolutely in an environment mars peoples' originality, authenticity, strength and sustainable development. But developing largely from one's cultural state enhances better understanding, fosters human activeness and easy work that results to sustainable development. Neglect of this mechanism of existence constituted the present African identity crisis which now keeps Africans in endless struggle to actualize their purposes. The consequence of African identity crisis is also visible in the fact that "Africans today, can rarely define the rules and regulations of their economy, production, credits and exchange of goods and services" (Ugwueye, 2007:104).

### References

- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things fall Apart*. London, England: Heinemann.
- Afisi, O. T. (2008). "Rethinking the African Identity Crisis" in *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy* 2, 89-108.
- Aghamelu, F., and Asomugha, C. (2009). *Readings in African Thought and Culture*. Awka, Nigeria: Strong Tower Books.
- Alumona, M. I. (2009). "Understanding the Crisis of Development in Africa: Reflections on Bedford Umez's Analysis" in *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 3(9), 354-359. <http://www.academicjournals.org/ajpsir>
- Anyaehe, M. C. (2013). "Appraisal of African Identity for Sustainable Development" in *Open Journal of Philosophy* 3(1A), 150-154.
- Chinweuba, G. E., and Ezeugwu, E. C. (2018). "Inauthenticity in Development: A Philosophical Study of Nigerian Unsustainable Development" in *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research* 6(1), 1-12.
- Chinweuba, G. E. (2020). "Mass Media and Unsustainable Development in Nigeria: A Critical Investigation" in *Albertine Journal of Philosophy* 4, 115-126
- Dion, F. (2007). *The Impact of Knowledge Systems on Human Development in Africa*. Pretoria, South Africa University of South Africa
- Dukor, M. (2010). *African Freedom: The Freedom of Philosophy*. Berlin, Germany: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Isife, E. E. (2020). "Dialectics of Freedom in Franz Fanon: A Potent Tool towards Achieving Political Stability in Nigeria" in *The International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*

- 8(5),265-273. DOI no.: 10.24940/theijhss/2020/v8/i5/HS2005-090
- Isife, E. E. (2020). “Political Instability in Nigeria: Causes, Impacts and Philosophic Solutions” in *AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy* 8 (6), 1-13.
- Isife, E. E. (2021). “A Critical Analysis of the Implications of Covid-19 Pandemic on African Identity” in *Sapientia Journal of Philosophy* 14, 54-64.
- Kochalumchuvattil, T.” The Crisis of Identity in Africa: A Call for Subjectivity” in *KRITIKE* 4(1), 108-122.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1959). *African Religious and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann Publishers.
- Michael, B. (2008). “The Influence of Information Communications Technologies on the African Philosophy and Culture” in *Essence Interdisciplinary-International Journal of Philosophy* 5, 87-97.
- Nyasani, J. M. (1997). *The African Psyche*. Nairobi, Kenya: University of Nairobi and Theological Printing Press Ltd.
- Offor, F. (2013). “Personal Identity and “Life-Here-After Poetics”: A Critique of Maduabuchi Dukor's Metaphysics” in *Open Journal of Philosophy* 3(1A), 146-149.
- Okolo, B. C. (1993). *African Philosophy: A Short Introduction*. Enugu, Nigeria: CECTA Nig. Ltd.
- Oyenuga, O. F. (2009). “Reproductive Cloning and Culture: Reflection on African Cultural Experience” in *Essence: Interdisciplinary International Journal of Philosophy* 6, 92-102.
- Ugwueye, L. (2007). “The place of Africa in Globalization” in *Essence: Interdisciplinary International Journal of Philosophy* 4, 102-111.
- Ukavwe, H. O. (2019). The task of African Philosophy in the search for African Identity. *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy*, 11(2), 57-53.
- Umeogu, B. (2013). “The Aftermath of Globalization on African Identity” in *Open Journal of Philosophy* 3(1A), 174-177.
- United Nations 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, December 15, 2005, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sustainable-development.27/04/2011>.
- Wangari, M. (2009). *The Challenge for Africa: A New Vision*. London, England: William Heinemann.