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Address to the 1st Annual Conference of the National Association of Philosophy Students Nigeria [NAPS]:

African Philosophy in the Age of Development: The Case of Nigerian Pentecostalism

My name is Sam Krinsky, and I should probably begin by introducing myself a bit and what occasions my speaking here at this conference of the National Association of Philosophy Students Nigeria, because it may not be initially clear what business I have addressing this audience this morning. I feel some explanation is necessary because, in the first instance, I am NOT, in fact, a philosopher, nor am I, in any formal sense, a student of philosophy. My background is predominantly in history and development studies, though the work in which I am presently engaged concerning the rise of Pentecostalism in Nigeria is more ethnographic in nature. I have been with the University of Ibadan since September, working within the departments of Sociology and Religious Studies, and have been conducting fieldwork in Ibadan's newer Pentecostal churches.

Although much of my work falls outside the usual parameters of philosophy, it does touch on some areas pertinent to the theme of this conference – Philosophy and National Development -- and when my friend Peter Adegoke invited me to participate, I was, of course, happy to accept. I would like to thank Professor Adebayo, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, for hosting this conference, the chairman Dr. Ukpokolo, as well as everyone present this morning for permitting a non-philosopher such as myself to address the theme of this conference.

My paper this morning is entitled “African Philosophy in the Age of Development: The Case of Nigerian Pentecostalism.” At this point in my study, I must confess I have not yet arrived at many especially stable conclusions regarding the nature of Pentecostalism in Nigeria and its relation to national development, but I would like to use this opportunity this morning, nonetheless, mostly just to share some of the questions I

have been grappling with, and why I believe Africa's newer forms of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity have such a great deal to contribute to any discussion regarding philosophy and development in Nigeria.

I realize that, before I go any further, my title may need some clarification. In particular, the phrase "Age of Development," though not mine initially, is also not something I have so commonly encountered here in Nigeria. "The Age of Development," as I use it in this paper, refers to the era in which the idea of "development" – despite its many variations – has existed as the predominant framework in which ideas about personal and social change have been articulated and debated – and as this conference attests, it is an age that is still very much with us today.

Now precisely when this "age of development" first emerged is a subject open for some debate. Frederick Cooper, in his general history of modern Africa, *Africa Since 1940*, dates the "age of development" to a shift in British colonial policy around the time of the Second World War,^[1] though personally I am more prejudiced towards a view that traces this era back to the first missionary encounters of the mid-19th century.^[2]

But from wherever we happen to date the emergence of this age that we are very much still in the midst of, the point I would like to emphasize is that development, both as a *project* of personal and social transformation, and also as a *framework* for the interpretation of unfolding change over time, is very much a product of modern historical contingencies and is by no means a self-evident category of thought. We live in a world that is pervaded by talk of development, and, as such, it can be quite difficult to gain the perspective necessary to make a sober analysis, and ultimately an evaluation, of just what we mean when we employ this word.

The above critique is not entirely my own, and I am drawing here on a growing body of scholarship that has interrogated, increasingly since the 1990s, not only the systematic failures of various development strategies when measured by their own aims and objectives, but also the philosophical underpinnings of the very idea of development itself. Saldana-Portillo makes an outstanding contribution in this field^[3] with her work on ideologies of development within the Americas, both north and south. Through a close reading of texts issued both by official development organizations such as the World Bank as well as those issued by revolutionary movements such as the Sandinistas of Nicaragua, Saldana-Portillo identifies a "normative theory of human transformation" at the heart of nearly all formulations of the development concept – whether capitalist or socialist – and I believe this "normative theory of human transformation" may go a long way towards illuminating some rather unexamined aspects of developmentalist thought in Nigeria presently. The

question Saldana-Portillo raises, and one I see discussed daily here in Nigeria, is not only ‘*how* does development happen,’ but, more specifically, ‘*who* does development?’ And it is here that I believe a great deal of talk about leadership in Nigerian society takes place.

In one sense, there is a broad consensus in Nigeria on what is meant by development. Though we may quibble over the exact formulation, most people can agree, at least in principle, that development is -- or should be -- in the broadest sense, the struggle towards achieving material *abundance*, political *stability*, and physical *security* for the greatest possible number. This is development as a process of economic and political progress within a national unit, figured as a qualitative shift from traditional to modern political and economic arrangements. This is the development we are all more than familiar with by now.

However, hidden within this narrative of national development, lies a more controversial theory concerning the development of the human being itself that may not be always as directly stated. For when we get down to specifics about what kind of person is capable of not only succeeding in a modern market economy, but also of consciously directing the development of his or her society towards a preconceived goal - - or even of preconceiving such a goal -- a particular model of personal agency and consciousness comes into focus, and one which owes a tremendous debt to an Enlightenment philosophy of the self as rational, autonomous, disciplined, intellectual, and forward-looking. This subject of development, in its most common formulation, must not only be rational, but, more specifically, must be able to suppress his or her immediate impulses and desires in favor of deferred gratifications, and it is on this last point that secular developmentalism echoes so closely the capitalist-protestant tradition within European and Christian thought.

It is by now a commonplace to point out that the idea of the rational, self-determining, modern man cannot have developed except in opposition to the idea of the pre-modern man characterized as his exact antithesis. In this philosophy, the pre-modern man is, by definition, primitive, irrational, parochial, mystical, impulsive, undisciplined, and carnal; in general, it is a man entirely focused on his immediate surroundings both in space and in time, with very few of the tools needed to accurately understand or consciously affect his environment. The pre-modern man, in this philosophy, is someone almost completely at the mercy of the ideas and structures imposed on him by some combination of inherited tradition and biological instinct.

This type of language is, of course, politically intolerable in this day and age. Nonetheless, similar imperial tropes, even if not so explicitly articulated, do still color more recent discussions of Africa’s

development crisis. It is only from within this “normative theory of human transformation” that the Nigerian state, under both Buhari and Babangida, could respond to something like the economic crisis of the mid 1980s with a “War Against Indiscipline.” Although we have been conditioned to see a very close connection between moral failure and economic failure, when examined from within a broader cross-cultural or historical perspective, it is far from obvious that an *economic* collapse would be met by a political campaign for *moral* regeneration. Regardless of whether or not the military drive for greater discipline and personal responsibility in society was an appropriate strategy or not, it should be noted how closely this line of thinking correlates with so many imperial theories of how primitive impulses and desires -- as opposed to modern self-control and agency -- inhibit historical progress.

Now you may be thinking at this point, ‘I thought you were going to talk about Pentecostalism.’ Though I haven’t mentioned it explicitly in some minutes, I do believe I have been talking about it this whole time as the Pentecostal narrative of re-birth, followed by progressive growth in all spheres of personal, social, and spiritual life closely replicates this “normative theory of human transformation” that I have been discussing thus far. For instance, when Nigerian born-again Christians compare their life before and after their moment of salvation, they typically employ a set of oppositions strikingly reminiscent of that between the primitive and the enlightened man. On the one hand, most born-again Christians I have interviewed privilege the concepts of discipline, purpose, planning, individual choice, and deferred gratification as typifying the life of the Christian, whereas the life prior to one’s salvation is usually recounted as one in which the individual is dominated and led by impulse desires into patterns of behavior that are self-destructive in the long run – especially those relating to consumption, whether it be sex, cigarettes, alcohol, or even personal debt; indeed, there is a sense in a great deal of Pentecostal rhetoric that, in the absence of the Holy Spirit, self-control is, quite literally, a human impossibility. Furthermore, the ‘nominal’ Christian in Pentecostal theology is depicted not only as a slave to his desires, but also a slave to social pressures and inherited traditions (whether ‘orthodox’ Christian or pagan), and in this respect, as well, closely corresponds to European ideas of primitive or traditional man.

One of the more striking aspects of Pentecostal belief and practice, from the standpoint of academic philosophy, at least, is the epistemology that ultimately defines the movement and distinguishes it from other forms of Christianity. In particular, I am speaking of the central belief that it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that an individual can break free from the bondage of tradition, protect oneself from contemporary malevolent social and spiritual influences, and lead one in the correct interpretation of scripture. In the most

extreme expression of this belief, the Holy Spirit is understood as something very nearly akin to the basis of all knowledge in general, directing an individual's choice of spouse, career, location, and even determining whether someone is able, for instance, to cognitively retain the content of their textbooks and thereby pass their exams.

For the most part, this spirit-based knowledge is defended in purely subjectivist terms; in response to questions regarding how they know their interpretation is correct, many Nigerian Christians will simply assert that, more or less, 'they know, because they know, and that's just that.'

Nonetheless, pragmatist justifications are often provided as well. For instance, one informant responded to a question about speaking in tongues as follows: "No, I can't tell you how it works -- I don't know. It's a mystery. Truth is, I don't even really know about all this Holy Spirit nonsense in general. All I know is that when I go to church, good things happen. I can't tell you any more than that."

Before I close, I would like to point out that the newer Pentecostalism of Nigeria, via these twin pillars of subjectivism and pragmatism, ends up articulating a vision of the self, of consciousness, and of knowledge that strongly rejects any suggestion of the social, biological, or historical conditioning of an individual's consciousness. In this respect, Pentecostalism represents a profound contrast not only with the contemporary social and biological theory of the modern west, but also of African philosophical traditions in which the weight of community, history, and nature is thought to determine a great deal of what it means to be an individual. While these forces are acknowledged in Pentecostal thought – usually as demonic – in the life of the Christian they are superseded ultimately by the power of the Holy Spirit, bestowing upon the believer a true liberty unencumbered by the weight of the past, of circumstance, or of biology. In this model, all the believer must do is make a choice to accept Jesus, be spiritually transformed as a result, and empowered to leave the old self of primitive desire and traditional thought behind.

Although the pervasive role of spirit within Nigerian newer Pentecostal thought would seem to contrast sharply with secular developmentalism and its Enlightenment heritage, in my understanding, at least, both philosophies are pivotally concerned with liberating an individual's consciousness from its social, historical, and animal constraints. It is for this reason that I believe Pentecostalism makes such an important contribution to any debate regarding Philosophy, the Society, and National Development in Nigeria as it, more or less uniquely, manages to build on both the strong spiritualism of traditional African Philosophy as well as a developmentalist model of human transformation. Although we may debate the merits of such a spiritualist

approach to development, it is beyond any doubt that this unusual mix is immensely popular in contemporary Nigeria and must be taken seriously by any philosopher or critic seeking to move Nigeria beyond its present impasse.

[1] Cooper, Frederick. Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[2] Peel, JDY. Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.

[3] Saldana-Portillo, JS. The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.