

【Opening remarks】

Motoji Matsuda, Project leader

This is the 6th forum, and the first forum of the second phase of our African potential project. Some of you have been travelling with us from Nairobi 2011, Harare 2012, Juba 2013, Yaounde 2014, Addis Ababa 2015 and Kampala 2016 in order to make a critical and productive examination on this seemingly simple idea of African Potential.

It was in the first stage premature like an impromptu idea to focus on local and customary method but through creative companionable (or comrade-like) discussions of these five forums, it is becoming a properly thought-out concept to relativize the hegemonic thinking framework of Western Modernity.

The starting point of African potential project is our practical sense.

The African and Japanese researchers who have taken part in this project have all had a great deal of experience carrying out field studies in Africa, where they sensed the presence of African Potentials for themselves. Specifically, the people in their everyday life world have realised reconciliation and coexistence by building close social relationships through the production and distribution of foodstuffs, by pre-emptively avoiding the intensification of confrontation, by minimizing envy, resentment, and anger by airing such emotions in public to be shared among members of the community, or else resolving struggles through arbitration. We have therefore once again made careful notes of such knowledge and practices, endeavouring to think about what we can learn from them, and how they might be leveraged in support of the resolution of ongoing conflicts.

These knowledge and practice, labelled trivial, insignificant or sometime backward, has been marginalized or excluded from the hegemonic, global knowledge structure. Therefore we have explored African Potentials as a kind of epistemology and ontology for relativising West-centrism to look for another mode of existence of the world. Over the course of discussions held at these five meetings of the African Forum, frameworks and their features have emerged for thinking about “Africa’s potentials”.

The first matter at hand is that of a “de-romanticization” of African potentials. This was because, in fixing the concept of “Africa-specific potentials” as something static and giving voice to fantastic ideals by ignoring the complexities of the contemporary world, such thinking stemmed from the same root as mentalities that had come to hold African culture in contempt. The second is inter-face function or conviviality after Nyamnjoh’s use of the term.

With the advance of globalization, African society is experiencing violent fluctuations occasioned by a heterogeneous welter of ideas, institutions, information and materials. The attempt is to discover African potentials in the fact that in the midst of these conditions of fluidity, African society is generating distinctive cultures of conflict resolution as elements regarded as “traditional” or “indigenous” are reorganized and re-created. In other words, African potentials are referred to as what we at the African potentials project call an “interface” function, meaning the power of interweaving and forging connections within assemblages of values, thought, and practices that belong to disparate dimensions and different historical phases.

Nyamnjoh points out that it is this function itself that represents the nexus point where Africa diverges from the intellectual history of Western modernity. In the encounter with alterity (in the broad sense of ‘the other’ not only among human beings, but including the ideological, institutional, material, animal, and spiritual dimensions), the epistemology of Western modernity is to privilege the standards of the self and impose these through the exercise of physical force but the epistemology of potential African modernity is completely far from it.

Thanks to your active participation and strong cooperation together with Ohta san’s good leadership, the first phase of this African Potentials has achieved a lot in the field of conflict resolution and coexistence from a viewpoint of African Potentials.

In this project, a total of more than fifty Japanese researchers and in excess of twenty international colleagues, primarily from Africa, have taken part and expanded the discussion in a variety of ways. As Ohta san already pointed out somewhere that this is the first project in the history of African Studies in Japan to have marshalled so many researchers to explore the issues of conflict and coexistence in cooperation with African researchers. It is thus as a testament to that history that we take pride in the publication of the project’s collected results in the coming African Potentials Series.

In the second phase of our project, we would like to develop and sophisticate this idea more both theoretically and practically. We are thinking three points to materialize this. First, applicability. In the first phase, we specialized conflict resolution and coexistence to examine the validity of the idea of African Potential. We confirmed its unique function and believe in its applicability to other fields. It might make a significant contribution to address other global/regional/national/local issues such as widening disparity, growing exclusive sentiments, gender-inequality, environmental deterioration, and so forth. We would like to examine the

validity and practicability of African Potentials idea. Second, philosophication.

In the last part of the first phase, we reached to alternative epistemology and ontology and were thinking how articulated/interacted between the hegemonic Western modernity and African way of thinking and doing. But it was not considered enough. There should be more exploration and consideration on this issue. We would like to place African Potential idea in the broad intellectual and philosophical history with a collaboration of religious and literature studies.

In order to tackle this issue we have already organized seven research teams, namely, nationality and governmentality, development and economy, ecology and environment, gender and sexuality, education and citizenship, language and literature, and conflict and coexistence. Third, collaboration for the next generation researches both African and Japanese side. In the first phase, we have had a powerful and intimate core members both from Japanese and African sides. But they are now fifties and sixties. In the second phase we would like to support to construct a cordial, comrade-like network among the next-generation scholars from Africa and Japan. This is why the poster session for the next-generation researchers is introduced in this Forum. It will be continued for another five years.

Japanese Africanists and African scholars were linked through the North American and Western European academic community, but in this African Potentials Project we are directly connected and established a creative platform to think and act together for seeking for a new mode of thinking and doing. I hope it can cement out academic solidarity to challenge the hegemonic order of knowledge and practice.