

EDITORIAL

The principal challenge facing the African philosopher today

In this volume of *QUEST* (XVIII-2004), we have once more (like in Volume XVII) chosen to let the kaleidoscopic riches of philosophising in and about Africa, be represented in their wide-ranging variety, without imposing any particular thematic emphasis or selection.

Meanwhile we have found that, by and large, the contributions as submitted to *QUEST* fall in a relatively limited number of categories, most of which are represented in this volume:

- the debate on the nature and the possibility of an *African philosophy*
- the development of a philosophical perspective on *African identity*
- the development of an African philosophical perspective on *Religion*
- the development of an African philosophical perspective on *Politics and law*
- ‘*Voices from the North*’, where Africanists who would not identify as Africans (in the Sobukwe sense of ‘agreeing that Africa is their home’) reflect on topical issues and trends in Africa
- the development of a philosophical perspective on *African societies and cultures*
- contributions to *World philosophy*, especially to mainstream North Atlantic / Western philosophy, in recognition of the fact that it is largely in critical debate with the latter that African philosophy has developed
- the *QUEST laboratory*, as a rubric seeking to initiate new debates and to highlight current ones, occasionally by highly polemic and/or highly personal contributions
- and finally the *Reviews Section*.

The ensemble reflects basic orientations in current African intellectual life, and in the influences (in the political, economic, religious and educational domains) that have shaped it, especially in the course of twentieth-century

colonial rule, decolonisation, and the postcolonial experience. Contributions on any of these topics continue to pour in at the editorial mailbox, and many more are welcome.

Yet, what is perhaps the most intriguing about the above list is what it does *not* entail.

In the first place, even as a factual summing up of possible themes it has certain blind spots, for instance in the natural and life sciences, with a special eye to their place and role in Africa, and to the ethical problems they pose; technology and its philosophical critique and/or appraisal; philosophical approaches to economics, belles lettres, myth, history; the construction and deconstruction of ethnicity; the development of an African approach to interculturality and interlinguality, hegemony and dependence; local and regional cultural self-affirmation versus global and consumerist boundary-effacement – or the critique of such facile juxtapositions; violence versus consensus, legitimacy versus coercion; a consideration of current world politics from the African perspective; and (beyond the clearly Christian antecedents of much of African philosophy today) a reassessment – positive or negative – of the global role of Islam on that basis, etc.

If the selection of topics that penetrates to *QUEST* seems to be rather narrower than the range of topics that are of potential relevance given the *QUEST* mission and terms of reference, what does this mean? It reflects, in the first place, the historical orientation of African philosophy departments, and the specific personal and institutional ties they have with the rest of the world. Secondly, it is not only in Africa, but also in the North Atlantic, that many philosophers try to steer away from the ‘illusions’ of the day, and concentrate on apparently perennial themes, to be approached in a format recognisably in line with a canon that has been with us for decades, centuries, even millennia. Given the fact that academic philosophy in Africa has developed in the course of the twentieth century in critical exchange with North Atlantic counterparts, it is not surprising that philosophers who (aspire to) write in *QUEST*, show a certain predilection for the presentable and modernist faces of Africa, easily to be grasped and appreciated from a North Atlantic point of view, whilst these philosophers may be somewhat disinclined to engage with the postmodern: the chaos, the rupture, the controversial, and the absurd.

What our above list lacks is a systematic basis in a coherent, comprehen-

sive conception of the specifically philosophical tasks that face African philosophers today. One might pragmatically – and circularly – define African philosophy as ‘African philosophy is what African philosophers do’, and then the above list would be as good as any other. As a venue of publication open to contributors regardless of origin or identity, *QUEST* reflects a heterogeneous set of practices, not a coherent philosophical movement. *QUEST* can never define what philosophy in and about Africa should be like. It cannot set the agenda. Yet individuals within *QUEST* may make suggestions towards such an agenda, on their own account, and with all due respect for the complex variety and the impressive expertise accumulated among African philosophers, for the principles of dialogue, and for historic South–North sensitivities.

There seems to be one recurrent echo in the background of any discussion of philosophy in the African context. *What is it in African philosophy that, time and time again, both in individual careers and in the collective pulse beats of decades, schools, generations, makes it go through the pendulum swing movement of*

- *now exposing North Atlantic hegemony and condescension, even racism – and*
- *now seeking recognition, access, shelter, in the North, at whatever hidden or dissimulated costs of exclusion, humiliation and indignation?*

Does the answer lie in sheer economic dependence? Or (as Mudimbe¹ would have it) in the redeeming power of place-less universalism? Or in uncertainty about the nature and the value of the local African heritage? Or in the individual philosopher’s awareness of having been hegemonically expelled from the latter, through the micropolitics of education and economic necessity of making a livelihood outside the village and the kin group?

Explosive questions, that may bring the visiting lecturer the enthusiasm

¹ Wim van Binsbergen, 2005, ‘“An incomprehensible miracle” – Central African clerical intellectualism versus African historic religion: A close reading of Valentin Mudimbe’s *Tales of Faith*’, in: Kai Kresse, ed., *Reading Mudimbe*, special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 17, 1, June 2005: 11-65.

of a student audience and the dismay of their professors at the same time. Yet the contributions in the present volume show that such questions are to a large extent rhetorical in the non-specialist, pejorative sense. These questions are predicated on an *essentialism* that does not seem to contain much promise for humankind – the essentialist assumption that Africanity is, *ipso facto*, more than a simple pragmatic situation in space and time. That essentialist assumption would claim that being African, more than just a locus from where to ask questions, also entails a locus where a repertoire of eminently illuminating and redeeming *answers* may automatically be found.

The contents of this volume pleads against such essentialism on several counts.

In the first place, the great bulk of the present volume consists of African contributions displaying the considerable variety indicated by our initial list of topics: from Moses Òkè's critique of J.S. Mbiti (a plea for an African epistemology) to Ahmadou Tidiane Talla's glimpses of the exchange between two seminal North Atlantic philosophers of the twentieth century CE, Wittgenstein and Popper; from Hamidou Talibi Moussa's reflections on the nature of globalisation / 'mondialisation' in relation to modernity, to Kasereka Kavwahirehi enthusiastic account of P. Ngoma-Binda's recent approach to political power in Africa; from Sanya Osha's grappling with African sexualities as filtered through the Scandinavian perspective of Signe Arnfred, to F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo drawing up, once more, the balance-sheet of African philosophy with a critical reflection on Barry Hallen's aggregate account of the subject; Mohammed Seifikar's review of Englund and Nyamnjoh's edited collection exploring the applicability of Taylor's concept of the politics of recognition to Africa; and finally, in Bongasu Tanla Kishani assessment on naming, decolonisation and gender, with an abstract in the Nso' language² and other passionate excursions that reveal the author

² Nso' (or Lamnso') happens not to be the mother tongue of the majority of the *QUEST* readership. Also, scholarship needs to be outward-looking (as the author's English text is, after all), in addition to inward-looking. Therefore the Editor, however sympathetic to the author's position, decided to steer a middle course and added the present English abstract to the author's Nso' one. This ensures that the author's text is accorded the same inter-continental dissemination as other *QUEST* articles, through the abstracts journals and their online links. Moreover, in an argument dealing with personal proper names, understandably the author preferred to use all full names for all persons to whom he makes reference.

as a splendid poet as much as a philosopher. However rich the variety, in all these contributions one can see the sustained attempt to get beyond facile juxtapositions and essentialist stereotypes, to use the North as a resource without becoming subservient to it, and to quietly imply an African identity without being trapped in it, either.

The principal challenge facing the African philosopher today seems to lie in her or his ability to engage in an amazing, and admirable, balancing act, between deconstruction and affirmation, between African essentialism and globalising or universalising detachment, between metaphysics and epistemology, between philosophy and empirical enquiry – between philosophy and the world, and between Africa and the world. (One is reminded of the ‘placelessly local’, or the ‘locally placeless’ – the apt formula, literally utopian (in the sense of nowhere-ness), that the Indian–German philosopher Mall puts at the centre of intercultural philosophy).³

In the second place, heeding this challenge allows one to mobilise selectively whatever can be contributed from *beyond* the realm of essentialist identity. For instance, in the present volume, Peter Geschiere, an internationally renowned Africanist identifying as a social scientist *cum* historian, deals with questions of autochthony and citizenship in Africa today, in a way that many of our readers will recognise as topical, relevant, meaningful and insightful; but Geschiere is neither an African nor a philosopher. By the same token, Fred Woudhuizen, one of today’s world specialists on Luwian, Etruscan, Cretan, and other ancient languages of the Mediterranean, in his short contribution states a rather convincing case to the effect that we may claim, on the basis of an Etruscan document, *400 years more of written history to the name and the concept of Africa, than hitherto conceded in intercontinental scholarship*. This is certainly music to the ears of Afrocentrists and to all who have made Africa an important cornerstone of their individual and/or collective identity – but again, Woudhuizen is neither a philosopher

However, we have insisted on the ‘shortened Harvard’ format. The problem is illustrative of the contradictions that arise from the affirmation of counter-hegemony through mediums (writing, the printing press, the academic format of the scholarly article, the English and French languages) that are wrought with hegemonic implications.

³ Mall, R.A., 1995, *Philosophie im Vergleich der Kulturen: Interkulturelle Philosophie, eine neue Orientierung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

nor an African. Perhaps such outside contributions are all the more inspiring because they can hardly be swept aside on the accusation of partisan wishful thinking.

With Louise's Muller's brief comparison between four African philosophers (Idowu, Mbiti, Okot p'bitek and Appiah) in their approaches to 'truth' and the 'High God', these 'voices from the North' show that scholarship, including philosophy in and about Africa such as is at the centre of *QUEST*, may well entail: *venturing beyond one's own chosen boundaries, regardless of whether such boundaries are defined in a geographical, an identity, a disciplinary, or a logico-conceptual sense.*

Boundary-reifying essentialism, however tempting as an ideological strategy, is a sign of weakness.

Yet, the *attack on essentialism* (however facile; however much *en vogue* during the past few decades of deconstructive constructivism; and however much applauded by sophisticated academic audiences dealing with the critique of identity, of ethnicity, and of religious fundamentalism) seems largely a sign of the *complementary* weakness: it is, notably, the sign of an unwarranted, excessive belief in the redeeming social applicability of rationality, and a lack of empathic understanding of what makes the essentialist tick, emotionally and existentially.

We have advocated a balancing act, between deconstruction and affirmation, between African essentialism and globalising or universalising detachment. Such a form of philosophising in Africa has a lot in store, for Africa and even on a global scale. It is therefore pertinent that in the *QUEST Laboratory* section, we present (in addition to the self-presentation of the German Society for African Philosophy) some 'African Notes on the UNESCO strategy on philosophy', seeking to identify where the global and the local/ regional may meet to mutual benefit, which certainly includes mutual criticism; and where we recognise that the specific *format* under which such a meeting takes place (and in UNESCO's case, this is the universalist and elitist format of the *formal organization*) has implications for the success or failure of such a meeting.

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