

## *EDITORIAL*

# **African philosophy and the negotiation of practical dilemmas of individual and collective life**

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This collection of papers, making up volume XXII of *QUEST: An African journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, drives home the message that African philosophy is not just an abstract and academic undertaking removed from the multifarious and excessive problems of African life today, but on the contrary has consistently sought to make contributions to the negotiation of practical dilemmas of individual and collective life.

Here African philosophy, in certain respects, has remained close to its ultimate rootedness in the everyday experience of people living in historic communities (be they agricultural villages, cattle posts, royal capitals or migratory bands) –seeking to conceptualise and to understand the world around them and to survive in the face of both outside threats (of a political, military as well as environmental nature) and of the incessant internal centrifugal tendencies inherent in any human social group.

However, this awareness of the practical challenges for African philosophy has also been informed by confrontations with the world outside Africa: encroachments in the form of migrations, trade, the spread of world religions, conquest, colonisation and post-colonial forms of hegemonic domination – but, as a positive side-effect of these often devastating transcontinental influences, they also brought in their wake the exposure to such modes of thought as academic philosophy, modern science, Islamic and Christian theology and law, and such as were implied in the image of the modern state, of the formal bureaucratic organ-

isational rationality, and of human rights. These modes of thought may well have shared a distant common origin with historic, pre-colonial African ones, yet when reaching Africa (mainly in the course of the second millennium CE, and particularly the last hundred years) they stood emphatically out as foreign imports, and they were to have a lasting and powerful effect upon the modern transformation of African lives.

The contributions to the present volume do two things.

*In the first place* they direct the faculties of conceptualisation and analysis of African philosophers to a selection of the myriad practical problems that beset modern African life. Admittedly, this selection is limited. Some of modern Africa's obvious central problems are dealt with such as

- violence – more especially addressed under its forms of
  - genocide (Jean-Luc Malango Kitungano), and
  - capital punishment (Moses Òkè),
- intrasocietal peace and conviviality (Lucien Ayissi)
- ethnic divisiveness (Dieudonné Zognong)
- divisiveness based on somatic classifications, in Africa and worldwide (Sathya Rao)
- the finite resources of nature and a commensurate environmental ethics (Kwami Christophe Dikenou)
- and global terrorism in combination with the fight against poverty (Joseph Osei).

Further horizons of philosophical approaches to practical problems of African life are touched upon in the reviews section: development cooperation (Julie Ndaya Tshiteku); media, democracy and identity ( F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo), and civil war (Sanya Osha). Yet inevitably the present collection overlooks some of the other central practical problems such as the appropriation of collective resources for particularist purposes ('corruption' – yet a topic repeatedly discussed by African philosophers); transcontinental economic and political dependence, the arms trade, war lordship and child soldiers, etc. Excellent work has been conducted by African philosophers in the highly practical field of bio-ethics, which however could not be represented here. Much of African philosophy has

been engendered in, or inspired by, the context of conviviality in small-scale communities based on co-residence and kinship, in ways that could not be discussed in the present volume – however, *QUEST XXI* contained several pertinent discussions on this point, especially those relating to the work of Odera Oruka. Also the relation between the genders is not specifically addressed here, not because it is the least of Africa's (and the world's) practical problems, but it has been treated at length in Sanya Osha's excellent and timely special issue on African feminisms, recently published as *QUEST* volume XX. Likewise, for discussions of *ubuntu* philosophy, so eminently relevant to our topic, we must refer to earlier volumes of *QUEST*.

*In the second place* this volume reflects on the provenance, the nature, and the epistemological and knowledge-political status of the philosophical resources which Africa has at its disposal in confronting its practical problems. Here the contribution by Kasereka Kavwahirehi deals with *Knowledge geopolitics and other strategies of the decolonisation of knowledge*. A major practical resource in the confrontation of the practical problems of life in Africa are historic and imported forms of religion, and Louise Müller in her contribution presents an overview of scholarly approaches to Akan religion in West Africa, in a bid to identify their transcontinental validity or, as the case may be, ethnocentric bias. Wim van Binsbergen's contribution seeks to vindicate *Traditional wisdom – its expressions and representations in Africa and beyond* in an attempt to explore the possibilities and strategies of intercultural epistemology.

This volume thus is a, far from complete, sample of the illuminating perspectives African philosophy casts on African life outside the ivory tower of academia. May it also be a further reminder – as if one were needed – to African philosophers of a struggling, suffering world out there, whose elucidation and guidance has always been among the major concerns and inspirations of African philosophy, and must remain so.