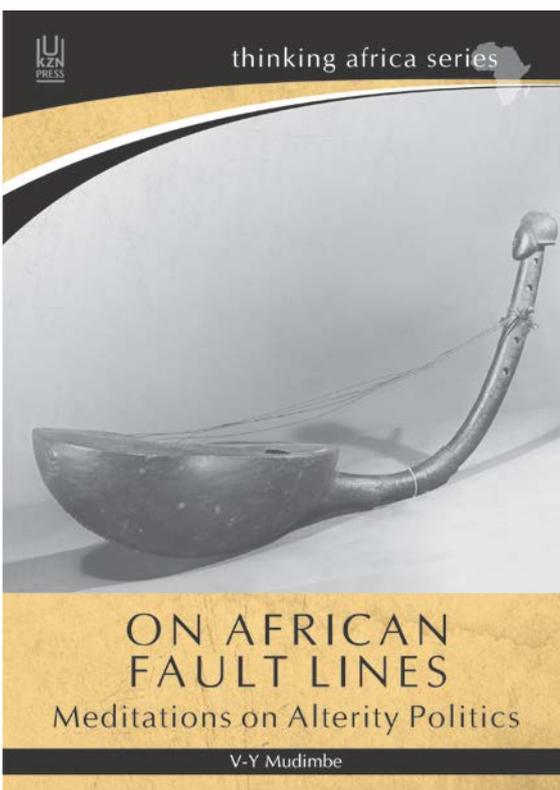


# The Newsletter

## 2013 Colloquium Announcement

We are pleased to announce the details of this year's annual *Thinking Africa* colloquium. The colloquium, entitled *Violence In/And The Great Lakes: The Thought of V.Y. Mudimbe and Beyond* will be held from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> of August at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. This year's colloquium is being organised in collaboration with Grant Farred from Cornell University and reflects on the work of VY Mudimbe using these reflections to consider the current situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Participants in the colloquium include VY Mudimbe (Duke, USA), Grant Farred (Cornell, USA), Gervais Désiré Yamb (Ottawa, Canada), Fabien Eboussi Boulaga (Yaoundé, Cameroon) Olga Hel-Bongo (Laval, Québec), Justin K. Bisanswa (Laval, Québec), Kasereka Kavwahirehi (Ottawa, Canada) and Leonhard Praeg (Rhodes, SA).

The annual *Thinking Africa* colloquia provide opportunities for in-depth debates on topical issues related to Africa. Postgraduate students in the Department of Political and International Studies participate in the colloquia, each of which is tied to a course offered in the Department.



The *Thinking Africa* project runs a *Thinking Africa* book series in collaboration with the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. The latest book to come out as part of this series is *On African Fault Lines: Meditations on Alterity Politics* by VY Mudimbe. This book will be launched at the 2013 *Thinking Africa* colloquium.

The book builds upon Mudimbe's earlier works such as *L'Odeur du père* (1982), *The Invention of Africa* (1988), *Parables and Fables* (1991), *The Idea of Africa* (1994), and *Tales of Faith* (1997).

According to Grant Farred from Cornell University: "There can be no doubt that *On African Fault Lines* is a brilliant and intensely thought assemblage of writings. Intellectual good faith is the hallmark and true achievement of Valentin Mudimbe's oeuvre, and it is spectacularly on display here. His good faith approach draws 'Africa' into the wide orbit of his thought as much as he draws his sources into 'Africa'. The signal accomplishment of this book is that it teaches us how to learn."

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*Thinking Africa* is a project of the Department of Political and International Studies at Rhodes University. If you would like to receive our quarterly newsletters and other *Thinking Africa* news, contact Sally Matthews, s.matthews@ru.ac.za.

## Ubuntu, Agape, Dasein

M B Ramose

Mogobe B. Ramose is Extraordinary Professor of philosophy at the University of South Africa (UNISA). He was one of the participants in the 2012 Thinking Africa colloquium *Ubuntu: Curating the Archive*. This text builds on his reflections as part of the colloquium.

### Introduction

If the above title strikes the reader as a motley medley of concepts then part of the purpose of this short piece will have been achieved. This is provided the reader is irked to pose at least one of the following questions. 1. What is the connection between and among these concepts? 2. Are the concepts comparable at all? 3. Are they compatible with one another? Some adherents to ubuntu philosophy might object at the putting together of ubuntu and agape since the latter is a term appropriate especially in Christian theology whereas ubuntu is not necessarily a theological concept. They might find solace in the fact that ubuntu is mentioned on the same plane as Dasein since both are philosophical concepts albeit from different philosophical traditions. Other protagonists of ubuntu philosophy might welcome the placing together of ubuntu and agape on the same plane since doing so recognises the pivotal role each concept plays in its respective field, namely, African philosophy and Christian theology. My second purpose is to make an argument for the establishment of optimal conditions for the conduct of a genuine polylogue. In view of the imposed limits on space, I will answer the three questions in aphoristic style. I recognise that this bears the risk of objectionable superficiality at times and even oversimplification.

### On the connection between and among the three concepts

The brief commentary above on the possible responses to the motley medley of the three concepts is already a partial answer to the first question. Here I wish to emphasise that what the three questions share in common is that they are posed by human beings. Indeed, human beings with different experiences, cultures, knowledges and social statuses. But all these differences do not diminish or extinguish the status of all of them as human beings; animals, for sure, but rational ones. Rationality or reason is thus the common denominator among these animals known as human beings. But reason is not the brain nor is it a thing to be found somewhere in the body of the human being as scientific racism imagined and, its more subtle contemporary forms continue to hold. The next point I wish to make is that the threesome of concepts affirms the point that ontology is the mother of multiplicity and difference. The question then is how to deal with difference. Ubuntu, agape and Dasein are, each in their own right, a particular perspective for dealing with ontological multiplicity and difference. Before I turn to the second question, a brief explanation of the three concepts is given.

### The meaning of the three concepts

The core philosophic principle of ubuntu is the understanding that motion is the principle of be-ing. Be-ing is an open-ended continual flow of wholeness manifested in and through the multiplicity and difference of beings. Ubuntu philosophy revolves around –ness and not –ism. The former is rheomodic seeking for balance in the systematically elusive “order of things”, to borrow from Foucault. The latter seeks balance through the absolutisation, totalisation and the sameness of the “order of things”.

Agape may be understood as “openmouthed with surprise” as so many English dictionaries convey its meaning. This meaning is appropriate to my usage here to the extent that it is the likely reaction of the reader to the motley medley of the three concepts. But as the comment in the introduction shows, I also have in mind the Christian theological meaning of the concept understood as “spiritual love”. Many a treatise has been written on this latter meaning of the concept, distinguishing it from erotic and filial love, for example. Although priests rarely utter the word agape from the pulpit, they often have it in mind when they preach about love being the basis of Christianity.

Dasein is certainly specific to Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of being. Suffice it to state that it refers to the meaning of being-a-human-being-in-the-world. The hyphenated expression must be understood phenomenologically according to Husserl and his critics, including the critics of Heidegger on his elaboration of Dasein.

### On comparison of the concepts

Comparison is the activity intended to discover similarities and differences between two or more things, in our case, two or more concepts. The discoverer is more important here than the things compared because ultimately, it is the discoverer who declares the discovery. In this sense, the discoverer makes a declaration in the name of the things

compared instead of allowing the things to make their own independent declaration. This logic fits into The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (1990 edition) rendition of the meaning of compare as "to affirm the excellence of (one thing) by setting it beside another of known excellence". What I find interesting is that the dictionary has chosen the term "excellence" amid possible plausible options like "superiority" and "inferiority". This is significant in the light of "Comparative Philosophy" producing texts such as *Eastern Wisdom and Western Thought*. Here the logic of exclusion and hierarchisation is operative. "Wisdom" belongs to the East and so the East must not be credited with "Thought" which is the exclusive preserve of the West. The exclusion also sub-serves the concealed vertical reasoning which places "Reason" at the highest level of the hierarchy of values. The more informed ones expand "Comparative Philosophy" without changing its basic logic. They transfigured the invented duet into an imaginary trinity of 'Eastern Wisdom, Western Thought and African Magic'.

When Ubuntu was discovered in 1994 by the successors in title to conquest in the unjust wars of colonisation in South Africa they made sure it is mentioned only as "an endnote"<sup>1</sup> in the 1993 interim constitution and, is totally excluded from the 1996 "final" constitution. Despite this exclusion, interest in the concept was particularly high in the political, business, legal and academic spheres. The discoverers adopted the logic of exclusion and hierarchisation inherent to the method of "Comparative Philosophy" and retained the transfigured imaginary trinity. To this they added a concealed mathematical calculus under the guise of philosophical analysis. This manifested itself in the subtle reinstatement of the "superior", "inferior" categories. From this platform, with zeal and vigour unmatched with thoroughness and solid argumentation they hurled Ubuntu into comparison with Western philosophy. Indeed beginning with *S v Makunyanje*, there is now a large number of judgments in which Ubuntu is invoked, forming what is elegantly called Ubuntu jurisprudence. But this is problematical for as long as Ubuntu is excluded from the constitution of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996. Because of this, the appeal to Ubuntu is necessarily *obiter dictum*, an exotic aside to savour legal reasoning. It is like political therapy administered from the judiciary. Other examples of "Comparative Philosophy" are articles on Ubuntu and education and Ubuntu and human rights. It is as if Wiredu's article, "How not to compare African thought to Western thought" was not already ten years old in 1994 when the "new" South Africa was born. It also looks like Inibong Udoidem's criticism of Wiredu's article, "Wiredu on how not to compare African thought with Western thought: a commentary" was not seven years old in 1994. But such indifference should come as no surprise because it is consistent with the logic of "Comparative Philosophy".

### On the compatibility of the three concepts

If by compatibility we understand the capability to live together then the answer to the question whether or not the three concepts are compatible must be in the affirmative. The living together of these concepts can be realised through a thoroughgoing questioning of the sterile, exclusivist, hierarchical, suppressive and oppressive method of "Comparative Philosophy". One result of such questioning must be the recognition of the need to renounce the arbitrarily established unilateral right to speak on behalf of others, in this case, Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a philosophy deserving of thorough philosophical interrogation. It is questionable to treat it as a thought experiment according to the idiosyncracies of a philosopher.

At the core of the renunciation of the comparative method must be found the recognition of the imperative of mutual recognition and the principle of equality as the minimal but indispensable exigencies for dialogue – indeed, polylogue - between and among the three concepts. It is counterproductive to deal with difference by either excluding it or being indifferent to it.

### Conclusion

I have argued against an absolutist dominating, totalising and hegemonising monologue claiming "Comparative Philosophy" as its method for the philosophical analysis of Ubuntu. My argument is a plea for the establishment of conditions proper to the conduct of a genuine polylogue.



Mogobe Ramose listens to Lewis Gordon during the 2013 Thinking Africa Colloquium.

<sup>1</sup> *Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa and Others v Minister of Health and Another* 2004 (4) SA para. 39 (SCA)

## Teaching Africa in the Department of Political and International Studies

One of the aims of the *Thinking Africa* project at Rhodes University's Department of Political and International Studies is to reflect upon and improve the teaching of Africa at our university. In particular, we want to better integrate research and teaching at the postgraduate level. To this end, we have tied each of our annual colloquiums to a postgraduate course so that postgraduate students in the Department are able to participate in the colloquium and are prepared for the colloquium by their participation in a semester course run in the Department. This year, the Department is running several postgraduate courses on Africa, one of which is tied closely with our upcoming colloquium. Below are some details of some of the Africa-related courses on offer in the Department.



**African Theory** introduces students to a selection of important scholarly work in Africa. This year the course covers five key African scholars: Walter Rodney, Ifi Amadiume, VY Mudimbe, Achille Mbembe and Mahmood Mamdani. As part of the course, students will attend the colloquium on Mudimbe's work where they can interact with Mudimbe as well as with other scholars working on issues related to Mudimbe's work.

**African Political Economy** introduces students to key themes relating to the inter-relationship between politics and economics on the African continent examining issues such as trade, Africa's relationship with international financial institutions, and Africa's position in the global political economy of food.

**Ubuntu** explores the relationship between ubuntu and various ideologies and philosophies like African socialism, communitarianism and humanism.

**An Introduction to the Thought of Frantz Fanon** gives students and opportunity to engage with Fanon's key writings as well as the most important secondary literature developed in response to his work.

**African Security and Development** invites students to examine the root causes of conflict and underdevelopment in Africa, focusing on the post-Cold War period which was characterised by an alarming rise of civil wars in Africa.

### **Upcoming Events on Africa at Rhodes University**

Rhodes University will soon be hosting two conferences related to Africa:

- In May, the Department of Political and International Studies will be hosting the conference "**African Voices in the New International Relations Theory**". The conference considers calls for a new paradigm of international relations theory that is more global, open, inclusive, and able to capture the voice and experiences of both Western and non-Western worlds.
- In July, the Legacies of Apartheid Wars project which is based in the History Department will be holding the conference "**Addressing, Archiving and Accounting for Legacies of the Apartheid Wars in Southern Africa**". More information on this conference is available at <http://www.lawsconference.co.za/>.