Report on the 2013 Colloquium and Public Lecture

August was a busy period for Thinking Africa as we held our annual colloquium and public lecture. The annual colloquium related the work of VY Mudimbe to violence in the Great Lakes Region while the public lecture, by Gillian Hart, explored contemporary South African politics. Both events were tied to book launches – the colloquium to the launch of VY Mudimbe’s new book On African Faultlines and the public lecture to the launch of Gillian Hart’s Rethinking the South African Crisis: Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony.

This newsletter includes a summary of one of the papers presented at the colloquium, Kasereka Kavwahirehi, summarizing some of the issues he raised during the colloquium (see page 2).

Also included in this newsletter is an extract from the latest book to come out of the Thinking Africa book series: Leonhard Praeg’s A Report on Ubuntu (see page 3).

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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.

Gill Hart and Richard Pithouse at the Thinking Africa public lecture (left) and Amanda Xulu, Sarah Brunchausen and Ndapwa Alweendo at the Thinking Africa colloquium (right).

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On a Common Ascension in Humanity: an overview of a paper by Kasereka Kavwahirehi

By Sarah-Jane Bradfield

Kasereka Kavwahirehi (left), Professor of Francophone Literature at the University of Ottawa, made a heartfelt plea for empathy between victims and perpetrators of violence in the Great Lakes region in his presentation, ‘For a Common Ascension in Humanity’.

Challenging the audience to consider the extent to which the international community has neglected to acknowledge or assist in the violence, Prof Kavwahirehi asked, ‘Are Congolese men, women and children who were massacred, raped, and who are wandering around like devils from one makeshift camp to another in order to escape from an absurd death, really faceless (in the Levinasian sense) that their tragedy leaves the whole of humanity unmoved? Don’t they have something in common or something to share with those whose security and well-being justify invasion, war and the exploitation of Congo’s resources?’

He suggested a lack of the fundamental notion of l’avec (to come into being with), which can give rise to disconnect among peoples. Drawing on the works of Jean-Luc Nancy, Prof Kavwahirehi explained how this sense of human existence as co-existence (cum-eksistere) is perfectly expressed by the French verb comparaître (from the Latin cum), which ‘puts us in front of each other […] delivers us over to each other […] risking us against each other’.

According to Prof Kavwahirehi, ‘What we have lost sight of is the cum, which, together, brings us to the experience of existing necessarily together with, which constitutes and defines our being-in-common (notre être-en-commun). It is truly this cum, this ontological being with or existing commonly with, which exposes us and makes us sensitive to a body dying of hunger, a tortured body, a bruised will, a war, mass grave, a migrant’s wandering, an insidious deprivation of being.’ The loss of this shared togetherness, Prof Kavwahirehi explained, leads to a fundamental denial of humanity, and can give rise to violent behaviour.

According to Prof Kavwahirehi, it is at the fundamental level of the community of existence, ‘exceeding all politics and disconnected of all ideological reification, of all nationalism, patriotism, ethnicism, as of all forms of boundaries socially or religiously instituted’, that we need to think of the future of the Great Lakes region by replaying politics and, within these politics, the place given to ethnic groups. He also emphasised the requirement to ‘dare to change the way we think’, in no longer making reference to a nation state or ethnic group, but to la mesure sans mesure of the world, that is ‘to dare to think of what can withhold a world and put people together without sacrificing plurality; applying ourselves to uncover hidden bonds between people, ethnic groups, and continents, whose forces mutually oblige them’.

In order to carry out this fundamental task, which finally consists in re-imagining or re-founding, politically and socially, the African Great Lakes region to make it an area of humanisation and civilization, Prof Kazwahirehi said, it is imperative to acknowledge the vulnerability which goes beyond national and ethnic boundaries. ‘In other words the requirement here is to look for a way to constitute the pain that persists into a starting point of a new comprehension, if we are able to transform our narcissistic absorption in melancholy into concern for the vulnerability of others’, he said.

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What does it mean to say “Ubuntu is an historical construct”?

By Leonhard Praeg

Pre-colonial Africa’s ubuntu praxis or political economy of obligation (Chabal 2009) was shattered by a number of events that can be considered historical conditions of the possibility of the emergence of Ubuntu as abstract post-colonial philosophy. Ubuntu was effectively de-territorialised from the domain or territory of cultural praxis and re-inserted or re-territorialised in a different context as a trope or philosophy that allows Ubuntu, under certain conditions, to function as sign for ‘us all.’ I think four historical conditions – two global and two local – account for this transition. The global a priori’s are 1) a shift from a historicist to a relativist a priori and 2) the dialectic of recognition. The local a priori’s relate to 1) urbanisation and 2) constitutionalism. Let me say something about the dialectic of recognition as formal and historical a priori for talk about Ubuntu in the postcolony.

The struggle against colonialism presented in two registers that Paget Henry (2000) calls the historicists and the poeticists. For Gordon (2008:175) ‘[t]he former are primarily concerned with problems of social change and political economy. The latter celebrate the imagination with a focus on the conceptions of the self as represented by literature and poetry.’ Two forms of secular humanism that emerged in twentieth century Africa exemplify the difference. The work of Cheikh Anta Diop (1923-1986) represents the historicist dimension ... while Senghor is often considered the father of the Africa’s poeticist tradition (Gordon, 2008:191) ... Senghor forms part of a tradition of African philosophy known as ethnophilosophy whose three main principles - the temporal, existential and epistemological - remain of relevance for the contemporary discourse on Ubuntu. Ethnophilosophers consider colonialism in terms of a fundamental rupture pivoting around the binary opposition pre/postcolonial which, in turn, produces two radically different and incompatible conceptions of a western (individualist) and African (communalist) way of being often presented as irreconcilable ontologies. The temporal and existential beliefs are closely related in the sense that, to a radically different time of pre-colonial Africa corresponds a radical different way of being. And this is where the third, epistemological principle comes in. Ethnophilosophers believe in the possibility of recovering the logic of interdependence as cornerstone of a politics of identity that will confirm the essential authenticity of Africans while serving as the ideological foundation for the sovereign, post-colonial state. Historically this project – essentially one of liberation as self-recognition –replicated the historicism at the root of colonialism in a number of problematic ways ... By way of critique, suffice it here to point out that, just as Africans did not know they were black before westerners told them they were not white, Africans did not celebrate their ‘communalism’ before colonialists told them they lacked a sense of individualism. The categories of ‘being back’ and of ‘having communalist traditions’ are function of a global a priori, first of colonialism (their negative denotation) and subsequently, of post-coloniality and self-determination (their positive denotation). Succinctly placing this in historical context, Mudimbe (1981: 60) writes:

Eboussi-Boulaga aptly wrote that at least for Africans, the emergence of an African “We-Subject” was the major human phenomenon of the second half of [the last] century . . . [Thus] . . . emerged . . . a strong emphasis on history and a new anthropology as a means for better understanding of both African tradition and identity.

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This has obvious resonance with the notion of double consciousness as theorised in critical race theory as far back as Du Bois and which found some of its most poignant expressions in the work of Fanon. When the latter stated that blackness is ‘a white construction’ he meant that

the people who have become known as black people are descendants of people who had no reason to have regarded themselves as such. As a consequence, the history of black people has the constant motif of such people encountering their blackness from the ‘outside,’ as it were, and then developing, in dialectical fashion, a form of blackness that transcends the initial, negative series of events (Gordon, 2008:158).

Fanon famously summarised this insight in *Algeria Unveiled* (1959/1980:25) when he stated: ‘It is the white man who creates the Negro. But it is the Negro who creates negritude.’ The creation of negritude (or Black Consciousness, for that matter) ‘originates in the need to respond to the negations of blackness embedded in Western philosophical discourse . . . [It] becomes a means of overloading the denomiating structure with precisely that which the latter names as negative’ (Quayson, 2002: 586). In other words, a system that nominates the fact of blackness as negative will engender in the various forms of resistance to it, dialectical oppositions aimed at *overloading the denomiating structure with precisely that which the latter names as negative*.

The re-invention of Ubuntu was never going to escape the logic of double consciousness and the power struggle implicit in offering counter-representations of Africa’s ‘primitive communalism’ that would overload the denomiating structure of colonialism with precisely that which the latter always named as negative (Ubuntu as salvivic humanism, for instance). Following the logic of the double consciousness, African communalism in general and Ubuntu in specific is a ‘white construction’ in the precise sense meant by Fanon, namely that it is encountered from the outside by Africans as a result of being told that they lack not only whiteness but also a concept of the individual. Just as black people have set out in dialectical fashion to develop a meaning of blackness that would overcome its initial postulate as lack, so they/we have set out in dialectical fashion to develop a meaning of communalism aimed at transcending the initial colonialist insistence that a lack of individualism equates a lack of humanity. The problem here is the dialectic itself, for to conceive of the self in the binary logic presented by it, to accept the idea that the most significant fact about the African self is its communal nature, is to affirm the very violence of western thought through the act of contesting it on its own terms.

Professor Leonhard Praeg teaches in the Department of Political and International Studies at Rhodes University and is a member of the *Thinking Africa* steering committee.