

## EDITORIAL

### The Roman Catholic church, and the hermeneutics of race, as two contexts for African philosophy

Volume XIX of *Quest* (2005) brings the journal up to date again. Its composition is again somewhat kaleidoscopic, with a fair selection of the general topics as defined in the 2004 Editorial. However, the contents converge around two topics:

- the prominence of the Roman Catholic church in African philosophy, and
- the hermeneutics of race.

Given the possibilities of misunderstanding, and the serious effects that such misunderstanding might have, we feel the need to devote extensive initial discussion to these topics, in the present Editorial.

#### *The Roman Catholic church and philosophy in Africa*

If it is true to say that academic philosophy in Africa has developed in the course of the twentieth century CE in critical exchange with North Atlantic counterparts, then the present volume illustrates one major context in which such exchanges have taken place: that of Christianity as a world religion. Here the example of St. Augustine, bishop of the North African town of Hippo (now Annaba, in eastern Algeria) suffices to show the long ancestry of this triadic connection between Africa, philosophy and Christianity. Especially the fact that the Roman Catholic church, as a universalising global organisation, made a considerable number of African male clergy go through the same formal training as elsewhere in the world, including two years of philosophical training, has created a considerable platform for philosophy in Africa.

To this institutional arrangement we owe, directly or indirectly, some of the great names of African philosophy, such as Abbé Alexis Kagame, and Valentin Mudimbe, once a Benedictine monk and now one of the leading African intellectuals world-wide. Even though Mudimbe lost his faith and became a fierce critic of the hegemonic micropolitics (Foucault) of Roman Catholic education in Africa in his generation, he still considers the phase of ‘clerical intellectualism’<sup>1</sup> as ‘an incomprehensible miracle’, since (in Mudimbe’s opinion) that was the context, largely, of the modern intellectual and spiritual mutation of Central Africa towards modernity and post-modernity. Part of that mutation – which for Mudimbe was effectively a ‘liberation of [African] difference’ vis-à-vis the dominant White expatriate clergy – consisted in the strategy of *retrodition*. Retrodition meant that African priests, who in fact had no other spiritual home left than global Christianity, still experimented with the recapture of the historic African world-view and religion, as – presumably – it had been in pre-colonial and pre-mission times. In Mudimbe’s case, retrodition, as a search for African historic religion and African self-affirmation, largely gave way to the agnostic universalism of scholarship – an intellectual stance which – for Mudimbe – no longer has much room for African historic religion, and which, however homeless in the last analysis, in the world today seems most at home in the North Atlantic region.

It has been *QUEST*’s great good fortune that Valentin Mudimbe himself has been prepared to share his personal view on these and related matters in our opening piece, his recent essay ‘An African Practice of Philosophy: A Personal Testimony’.

In other African cases, however, the tension between Roman Catholicism and African historic religion was often resolved in a very different direction. Thus after decades of adamant rejection of historic local forms of ritual practice, Roman Catholicism has sometimes become the very locus for the

---

<sup>1</sup> Mudimbe, V.Y., 1997, *Tales of faith: Religion as political performance in Central Africa: Jordan Lectures 1993*, London & Atlantic Highlands: Athlone Press; van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 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; also at: [http://www.shikanda.net/african\\_religion/mudil0.htm](http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/mudil0.htm) .

incorporation and continuation of local tradition (e.g. music, dance, puberty rites, funerary rites) in the modern African context – however great a price of format change, meaning change, and partial or total loss of African control had to be paid in the process. And even in the articulation and preservation – again, with a fundamental format change – of African historic philosophy (such as informed world-views, ritual and judicial practices, and everyday life, in pre-modern contexts), the Roman Catholic church and its officers have played a considerable though controversial role. The latter point is aptly illustrated by the case (however much contested) of Placide Tempels, the Flemish missionary who, in 1945,<sup>2</sup> published an account of the Luba world view. This marked the beginnings of African academic philosophy and hence has constituted a baseline to which African philosophers (also in the *Quest* context) have frequently returned, usually critically, even contemptuously – as was unavoidable and necessary given the colonial and postcolonial politics of knowledge. Yet for someone personally familiar with the world view of the Luba and related peoples,<sup>3</sup> that cosmology is still highly recognisable through Tempels’ account, even if unmistakably influenced by Thomism as the philosophical template most familiar to him.<sup>4</sup> Still,

---

<sup>2</sup> Tempels, Placide, 1955, *Bantoe-filosofie*, Antwerpen: De Sikkel, first published 1946; translated in French (1945, Lovania: a French translation to appear before the Dutch original), Lingala, English, German, etc.

<sup>3</sup> From the early 1970s to the mid-1990s the present writer conducted anthropological and historical fieldwork among the Nkoya people of western central Zambia, whose language and culture are very close to those of the Luba. A fragment of the Luba ethnic group, specifically under that name, is found in the same region. Cf. Brelsford, W.V., 1965, *The tribes of Zambia*, Lusaka: Government Printer, 2nd ed., first edition 1956; Smith, E.W., & A.M. Dale, 1920, *The Ila-speaking peoples of Northern Rhodesia*, 2 vols., London: Macmillan; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1992, *Tears of Rain: Ethnicity and history in central western Zambia*, London/Boston: Kegan Paul International.

<sup>4</sup> Mudimbe, in his contribution to *QUEST* below, adduces two other possible philosophical sources of Tempels: the 14th century CE Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck, and (at the suggestion of the American anthropologist Ivan Karp) the early 20th century CE French philosopher Bergson.

The medieval reference revolves on Mudimbe’s adoption of Smet’s (a present-day Belgian author) comments on van Ruysbroeck’s expression *de honger der weet-gierigheid*. This obsolete and syntactically unusual Dutch/Flemish phrase can be decoded to mean, precisely ‘that particular kind of hunger that consists, not in a craving for mate-

half a century later, we see a prominent codifier of Southern African *ubuntu* philosophy, such as Mogobe Ramose, emerge as a product of, *inter alia*, a thoroughly Roman Catholic spirituality and education, crowned (not unlike Mudimbe's early career) with a doctorate from Louvain, Belgium. And in a very similar bracket is Achille Mbembe,<sup>5</sup> who counted forms of African Roman Catholicism among his *Afriques indociles* ('*Recalcitrant Africas*'), and whose critique of the African postcolony features (with Mudimbe) in the present volume in the article by Carolien Ceton. In addition to priests, the

---

rial food, but in a desire for knowledge'. The genitive construction (*der*) is basically in the nature of an unusual embellishment for emphasis, for *weetgierigheid* in itself covers the same semantic field – with the same lexical element *geer-*, *gier-* that in other contexts has produced *begeerte* ('desire'), *gierigheid* (nowadays: 'avarice'), and the famous Geert Geertsen's Humanistic pen name Desiderius Erasmus. The equation of 'knowledge' with 'truth' is not given with the Dutch/Flemish phrasing itself, and derives from Smet's understanding of medieval mystical Christian usage. Mudimbe suggests a convergence between the Christian mystic's search for direct communion with divine truth, and a notion of dynamic, initiatory progress which Tempels understood to underlie the Luba world-view, and which was subsequently built into the Jamaa Christian movement in Congo. Here a consideration of historic religious forms of Congo could have been illuminating. It would have suggested a contrast between initiation into a specific cult or into adulthood (where the novice is certainly ushered into new knowledge that transforms the person – but not primarily out of the novice's own impetus and desire but out of the initiated elders taking the initiative for the novice's transition, extending their privileged access to the novice) and the *nganga's* (traditional practitioner), and *nganga's* apprentice's, quest for knowledge, which revolves on their personal agency in the deliberate desire for esoteric knowledge.

Secondly, Mudimbe argues the implausibility of Bergsonian thought penetrating to Roman Catholic Major Seminaries in Flanders in the 1920s (when Tempels studied there), or of such vitalism otherwise finding its way into Tempels' intellectual baggage – despite the correspondences in terminology between Bergson's *elan vital*, and the 'life force' which features prominently in Tempels' representation of the Luba world-view. Mudimbe's command of the intellectual history of the Belgium clergy in the first half of the twentieth century is impressive. Yet his negative assessment on this point may be reconsidered in the light of the absolute sway Bergson held over continental Western European philosophical life in the first decades of the 20th century. For that period, for instance, Bergson's influence in Roman Catholic clerical circles is clear from the case of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), one generation above Tempels, but, of course, in a francophone environment.

<sup>5</sup> Mbembe, A., 1988, *Afriques indociles: Christianisme, pouvoir et Etat en société post-coloniale*, Paris: Karthala.

seminary – in Africa just as much as elsewhere – has always produced a large spill-over of dropouts who carried their relatively superior education, even when unfinished, to academic, administrative and political careers outside the church organisation, and often even outside the circle of Catholic believers.

Once more we are reminded how limited, and how potentially hegemonic, it is to adopt an exclusively North Atlantic perspective upon global knowledge production, in general, and *a fortiori* in relation to Africa. For the idea of the Roman Catholic church serving as one of the principal *loci* of philosophy in Africa is ironic, not to say embarrassing, from the perspective of North Atlantic philosophy today. The latter is saturated with the anti-clerical heritage of the Enlightenment, and with the subsequent secularisation of North Atlantic society in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries CE. In this connection one would associate Roman Catholicism rather with the management of the scholastic, especially the Thomistic, medieval tradition (with its enormous influence on Catholic theology and on Catholic thought in general), than with the current production of a philosophy catering for the challenges of the modern world. These challenges, world-wide, urge us to forge philosophical tools for articulating the contemporary experience (characterised by globalisation and commodification, technology, homelessness, the erosion of modernity and its state-centred political forms, the hectic proliferation and contestation of identities, and the rising tide of inequality, violence, and North American military hegemony); to define elements of meaning therein – if any; and to ethically direct our action. In this vital connection, the Roman Catholic church has largely relied, not so much on topical philosophy, but on church doctrine and ritual *sub specie aeternitatis*. The dilemma is sketched by the caricature of octogenarian Princes of the Church, at the end of a celibate life, officiating on such framing of human sexuality as rubber technology has made possible and as the absolutely devastating HIV epidemic has made imperative, especially in Africa.

Even so, the twentieth century has produced many prominent philosophers of a Roman Catholic signature. The names come to mind of Edith Stein, Alexis Kagame, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Rahner, Jacques Maritain, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, John F. Crosby, Jean-Luc Marion, Karol Wojtyła (more commonly known as the late Pope John-Paul II), Etienne Gilson,

Richard Kearney, Bernard Delfgaauw, Dietrich von Hildebrand, among many others.

And, albeit without quite aiming for that league of intercontinental players, the present volume of *Quest* confirms the prominence of Roman Catholicism in the African production of philosophy. Thanks to the generosity of the Editor of the Italian journal *Africa e Mediterraneo* (for Africanist and Mediterranean studies), and of the author himself who immediately responded favourably to *QUEST*'s reprinting request, we have an article by Valentin Mudimbe, as, perhaps, a post-Catholic. Moreover, the Jesuit Father Jean-Luc Malango Kitungano writes on Habermas, the civil society and the state in a way that promises African relevance. In a soul-searching contribution, Father Alozie Oliver Onwubiko, for several years co-director of the famous Bigard seminary in Central Nigeria, considers the dilemmas of cultural juxtaposition (imported European culture versus African traditional culture).

- Instead of allowing himself to be caught in a racially-defined African counter-culture,
- nor following the lure of universalism à la Appiah and Howe<sup>6</sup> (one might have added: Mudimbe) – a universalism that has little, or no, time for ‘parochial’ African sensitivities in the identitary domain,
- Onwubiko suggests a third possibility: that African Christianity may well constitute a suitable domain to overcome the juxtaposition and to develop a cultural dialogue towards biculturalism, and ultimately transculturalism, in which also the African religious tradition will find its place.

To complete this series of clerical and post-clerical philosophers, in the section *Quest Laboratory*, the philosopher Abbé Louis Mpala Mbabula, from Congo-Kinshasa, offers us sizzingly spectacular polemical fireworks

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Appiah, K.A., 1992, *In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture*, New York & London: Oxford University Press; Appiah, K.A., 1993, “Europe Upside Down: Fallacies of the New Afrocentrism”, *Times Literary Supplement* (London), 12 February, 24-25; Howe, S., 1999, *Afrocentrism: Mythical pasts and imagined homes*, London/New York: Verso; first published in 1998. The reference in footnote 1 above discusses Mudimbe's universalism.

devoted to the specific philosophy of science that was developed by his colleague Frédéric-Bienvenu Mabasi Bakana, – enough to show that despite political and economic hardships, philosophy is still alive and kicking in that country.

### *Jacques Derrida*

In a volume where the contradictory presence of Roman Catholicism as a world religion and a self-styled guardian of philosophy is so unmistakable, the need may be felt for a totally different philosophical perspective on religion. On October 8, 2004, Jacques Derrida died of cancer in a Paris hospital at the age of 74. His death marks the end of one of the most significant philosophical careers of the twentieth century. Born in Al-Biar, a residential area in the south of Algiers, Algeria, in 1930, from a Jewish family, he is in space and time an amazing counterpart to St. Augustine, and – strictly speaking – *another great philosophical son of Africa*. Derrida's explicit influence on African philosophy has been slight so far – although there are considerable Derridean parallels in Mudimbe's work, which may not all be attributable, indirectly, to these two philosophers having been similarly exposed to the Paris intellectual milieu of the 1960s. However, Derrida's thought on deconstruction, difference/ *différance*, presence and logocentricity, and more recently on religion, hospitality and terrorism, has contributed enormously to the development of a philosophical 'toolkit' with which we can approach the globalising world today in its complexity, its identity struggles and its violence, and in which, particularly, issues of interculturality can be articulated. Hence the inclusion of Wim van Binsbergen's article on Derrida and religion.

### *Race, Afrocentricity, and African philosophy*

Let us now turn to the second, potentially even more controversial, topic of this volume, 'race'.

Teodros Kiros, professor of Africana Philosophy at Brown University and Du Bois fellow at Harvard University, both in the United States of America, deals with the role of Africa in the thought of one of the most seminal of Afrocentrist writers of the first half of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) – as a stepping-stone to what to some *Quest* readers will come almost as an uninvited guest, notably, a *systematic philosophy of race*.

Again on race is Sanya Osha's positive and enthusiastic assessment of the work of Pierre-Joseph Salazar on South Africa, so that at least two of the three co-editors of *Quest* volume XVI on *Truth in Politics* come together again in this edition.

Almost as a more general, theoretical rider to these two reflections on race, Carolien Ceton presents a philosophical approach to identity as evolutive, based on an examination of the work of four philosophers as diverse as de Beauvoir, Mbembe, Mudimbe and Taylor. Much in the same way, Tashikanda Kahare's review of the recent collective volume *Is violence inevitable in Africa?* suggests that intercultural complementarity and critical collaboration between African and North Atlantic identity positions (in other words, *a colour-blind, somatically indifferent approach*) may lead us to insights in African matters of vital importance today. Similar South-North complementarity in the construction of African knowledge is revealed in the two reviews by Sanya Osha that conclude this volume.

How could a philosophy of race represent an 'uninvited guest' to part of the *Quest* readership? We consider it our responsibility as Editor to elaborate, especially since our publishing the contributions by Professors Kiros and Osha means that *Quest* fully endorses the academic stature of these two papers and their authors. Does that mean that *Quest* now invites open discussion in terms of 'race', as if 'race' were no longer a historically polluted, no longer an academically unusable word? No, it does not mean that. This journal encourages critical debate on the apparent or unmistakable racism of others; it would be irresponsible to try and avoid such debate in the African context to which *Quest* emphatically belongs. However, this journal will not, under the present Editorship, be open to explicitly racist arguments in their own right.

Let us recapitulate the relevant history of ideas, which in this case – as so often – may reveal the politics of knowledge of North Atlantic hegemonism.



As uninvited guests violently breaking such laws of hospitality as also obtained in their own countries of origin at the time, European, Asian and North African intruders extended a regime of slavery and slave trade to the sub-Saharan African lands they visited, at various times in the course of the last two millennia, and possibly already much earlier. In early Modern times (from c. 1500 CE onwards), early imperialism, Mercantilism and the subsequent colonial conquest of Africa needed, and invented, racism. In the hands of theoreticians of race such as Blumenbach (1752-1840) and de Gobineau (1816-1882),<sup>7</sup> European racism's obsession with skin pigmentation, nasal and skull architecture, hair texture, and the shape of buttocks and genitals, did the trick of *conceptually expelling large sections of defenceless and exploitable humans to outside the category of common humanity*. And whoever finds herself outside that category, can – like an animal – be hunted, appropriated, raped, put to unpaid work, sold, and killed, at will and with impunity, by all those whose membership of the full human category went, apparently, uncontested (although, inevitably, their own membership becomes liable to contestation by virtue of their very thoughts and acts of racism). The mental construct of racist exclusion from humanity sufficed to justify (albeit only subjectively, and only for the time being) crimes against humanity that would scarcely have been tolerated in the respective homes of these traders and colonialists, outside Africa – except, when the heyday of colonialism was already over, in Nazi Germany from the late 1930s to 1945; then the victims were not Africans but Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and mentally retarded people.

When Africans, and their descendants the world over, began to confront racism in their writings and their political activism, they did so as long-standing victims of racism who sought to regain, and celebrate, dignity and

---

<sup>7</sup> As is well-known but – until recently – little discussed, the founders of modern Western philosophy, Kant (1724-1804) and Hegel (1770-1831), made considerable contributions to the construction of North Atlantic racism; cf. Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi, 1997, 'The Color of Reason: The Idea of "Race" in Kant's Anthropology', in: Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi, ed., *Postcolonial African philosophy: A critical reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 103-140; Bernal, M., 1987, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, I, The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1787-1987*, London: Free Association Books/ New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press; Poliakov, L., 1971, *Le mythe aryen*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy; and Idowu in *QUEST* XVIII, 2004.

freedom. Understandably, the language of anti-racism was initially predicated on the central concept of race, and went through a phase when the proud affirmation of African somatic traits had to put an end to Blacks' internalised self-negation imposed by Whites' racism (in ways explained by Fanon, and Sartre). Du Bois, Césaire, Senghor, and others of their generations, could still phrase both their indignation, and their affirmation of self-respect, in terms of *race*. For a long time, the discourse of race continued to appear as the most obvious way to articulate socio-economic inequality, exclusion, and the desire for emancipation.

However, the period when 'race' could naïvely be invoked as if it were a neutral, universal and self-evident category, has ended sometime during the second half of the 20th century. This shift in discourse was a consequence of the very success of the anti-colonial and anti-racial struggle, in Africa, as well as in American, Asian, and Oceanian former colonies, – aided by the global human-rights movement extending over more than two centuries, and more recently (from the 1940s onward) by the rise of cultural relativism in the social sciences and philosophy. These developments have combined, from the 1930s onward, with the demolition of the 'scientific' racial edifice by scientists (geneticists, other human biologists, psychologists, anthropologists, political scientists), relegating racism to *pseudo-scientific* status ('man's most dangerous myth' – Ashley Montagu),<sup>8</sup> and with the philosophical reflection on the dehumanising implications of racism both in the colonial and in the Nazi context.

Today, the United States of America is (along with South Africa) one of the few countries in the world where the concept of race has continued to be part of polite and sophisticated conversation and of official bureaucratic parlance – where the social construction of 'race' (not as a disreputable exploitative ideology or an obsolete, patently exposed pseudo-scientific illusion, but as a widely endorsed 'reality' – as a 'collective representation' – Durkheim) has survived into the late 20th, even the 21st century. This has special reasons to which I will shortly turn. Meanwhile, and regrettably, the hegemony which the United States of America has claimed in terms of military, scientific and media control during the last few decades, has created a

---

<sup>8</sup> Montagu, A. (M.F. Ashley Montagu), 1945, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*. New York: Columbia University Press, first published 1942.

situation where the *collective representations informing everyday life in North American society today*, have gained an enormous impact on the perceptions and aspirations of people outside the United States of America. This includes people in Africa, and also in Western Europe. In the latter region, the massive influx of intercontinental immigrants, also in the course of the last few decades, has created socio-economic, cultural, religious and political tensions for which the concept of ‘race’ provides, once more, a ready (if naïve, muddled, deceptive, and dangerous) shorthand expression.

Despite the multifarious and intercontinental criticism of the term, ‘race’ has been able to survive as an apparently neutral, civilised concept in American society, and thus as a collective representation, because, for several centuries (ever since the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the plantation economy in the southern States), blatant socio-economic contradictions in that country have happened to coincide with Black-White somatic contrasts, thus acerbating class relations into the almost inescapable oppositions of ‘colour castes’. Major, but (as the New Orleans hurricane disaster of 2005 has demonstrated) still only partial, improvements in that situation were effected with the abolition of slavery in the mid-19th century, and the civil rights movement as recently as the 1960s. Thus, whenever African Americans articulated their proud identity as Blacks and as Africans, they would do so in a context where an appeal to race was indicated, not only by their own group history of exclusion on somatic grounds, but also by the collective representation in terms of race as held throughout American society.

Among African American identitary expressions of the late twentieth century, *Afrocentricity* has been most vocal, immensely influential, and often intellectually impressive, combining an American intellectual and activist ancestry from Blyden, Du Bois, Booker Washington etc., with the Diopian philosophical and historical inspiration from Senegal – and, in the last two decades, finding additional support from established White intellectuals engaging in the *Black Athena* debate which Martin Bernal had initiated. Afrocentrism came heavily under attack<sup>9</sup> (most vocally from the part of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Lefkowitz, M.R., & MacLean Rogers, G., eds, 1996, *Black Athena revisited*, Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press; Lefkowitz, M.R., 1996, *Not out of Africa: How Afrocentrism became an excuse to teach myth as history*, New York: Basic

classicist and – remarkably – *feminist* Mary Lefkowitz) in the mid-1990s. This was a period when the United States of America, in the course of the so-called *Culture Wars*, had to invent and cultivate its own internal enemies (such as militant and defiant African Americans), for the sake of internal national cohesion at the middle-class and upper-class level. For, in a way scarcely imaginable any more today, as far as foreign politics was concerned the United States of America found themselves ‘in between’ convincingly demonised external enemies in the 1990s:<sup>10</sup> the ‘Cold War’ had ended in the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989, and (despite the prelude, in the form of the First Gulf War) the ‘War on Terrorism’ was only to begin on ‘9/11’ 2001. Not surprisingly, now that external enemies are back with a vengeance, the whole political topicality of Afrocentricity at the national level in the United States of America has subsided; the eagerly prepared manuscript of the American version of a major French denouncement of Afrocentricity<sup>11</sup>

---

Books. In retrospect, one is inclined to see Mary Lefkowitz, not at all as the arch-enemy of Blacks which she has been made out to be, but as primarily a passionate but misguided scholar, who allowed her relentless insistence on technically impeccable scholarship (a quality in which the most vocal Afrocentrist writers, including Bernal, do not exactly excel), to eclipse her awareness of the wider political issues involved, as well as her awareness of the specific kinds of solidarity history imposes on intellectual producers today.

<sup>10</sup> Berlinerblau, J., 1999, *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena controversy and the responsibilities of American intellectuals*, New Brunswick etc.: Rutgers University Press. Incidentally, Berlinerblau shows considerable and deserving admiration for Bernal, yet he cannot refrain from pointing out the latter’s indebtedness to intellectual positions that had been held among African American intellectual for generations. This is why Berlinerblau jokingly characterises Bernal as ‘the intellectual Elvis’, sc. Presley, the latter being a ‘White’ who gained fame by appropriating and transforming a ‘Black’ musical style.

<sup>11</sup> Fauvelle-Aymar, F.-X., Chrétien, J.-P., & Perrot, C.-H., 2000, eds., *Afrocentrismes: L’histoire des Africains entre Égypte et Amérique*, Paris: Karthala. Cf. Obenga, T., 2001, *Le sens de la lutte contre l’afrocentrisme eurocentrisme*, Gif-sur-Yvette (Cedex)/ Paris: Khepera/ L’Harmattan. Although we may appreciate Obenga’s Diopian theoretical position, we may regret his sheer demonisation of the editors of *Afrocentrismes*. He showed himself incapable of any hermeneutical appreciation of their position. Like in the Lefkowitz case, that position does not seem to be primarily inspired by siding with the forces of White hegemony (the North Atlantic scholars in question would scarcely recognise themselves in such a characterisation). Their attack on Afrocentrism was prompted by, once more, their (somewhat myopic and uncharitable) blind love for technically impec-

is sitting idly on a shelf in Mary Lefkowitz's office.

Not surprisingly, a major version of Afrocentrist thought plays, once more, the racial card, affirming identity, dignity and even historical seniority and superiority ('Africa leads and Europe follows', 'Africa is the mother of all culture') on the basis of a unique birthright that, presumably, the possession of (selected) African somatic traits would grant, but that could not be claimed in the absence of such traits. However, next to this 'strong Afrocentricity' that claims a biological basis at the centre of its construction, there is also the other, 'attenuated' version of Afrocentricity, one where the unique and massive contribution of Africa to global cultural history is acknowledged and documented, in the awareness that, since culture is by definition acquired not through the genes but by a learning process, these riches of African culture (just like the riches of other cultures in the world today) are in principle open to any human being regardless of somatic appearance, language, creed or gender – thus forming an integral part of the shared collective heritage of humankind.

This emphatically non-racial version of Afrocentrism has much to recommend it,<sup>12</sup> and much of it coincides with scientific insights that are widely held today. Since the first,<sup>13</sup> still tentative and defective scientific formulation of the 'African Eve hypothesis' nearly two decades ago, there is now almost global consensus among specialised scientists that Anatomically Modern Humans (a category to which *all* humans living today belong) did emerge in Africa c. 200,000 years BP (Before Present), and started on the Out-of-Africa Exodus only c. 140,000 BP, in a spatial movement probably spread out in time and involving, in total, about a thousand Africa-born

---

cable scholarship, and by their self-righteous, hurt (but humanly understandable) insistence on the integrity of their own particular love for Africa, which they (naïvely) considered beyond reproach, having devoted their entire scholarly life to it. The South-North politics of knowledge production on Africa are immensely complex and contradictory, and generate overwhelming emotions. We cannot do justice to this central problematic here, beyond voicing, once more, our conviction that South-North complementarity is, in the long run, the best strategy for valid, reliable and productive knowledge on Africa.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., ' "An incomprehensible miracle"', o.c., and further references there.

<sup>13</sup> Cann, R.L., Stoneking, M. & Wilson, A.C., 1987, 'Mitochondrial DNA and human evolution', *Nature*, 325: 31-36.

women of reproductive age. Here we have solid, state-of-the-art genetic substantiation of the idea of Africa as our Mother – but mother, not only of people who today stand out as Blacks and Africans (which is, incidentally, a category displaying the greatest possible genetic variation), but literally of all of modern humankind. During c. 60,000 years, the whole of modern humankind shared an exclusively African history, was effectively African.

But the argument goes on. Many cultural (as well as somatic) traits were taken along on the Out-of-Africa Exodus, and recent comparative research into myths, into cultural near-universals, and into languages, now begins to allow us to identify and reconstruct fragments of the Out-of-Africa package.<sup>14</sup> The Out-of-Africa Exodus started out for the other continents along two different routes:

- the oldest and/or fastest one being due east along the Indian Ocean coast;
- a later and/or slower one being due north into North Africa, West Asia, and subsequently east, north and west into Asia and Europe.

In the course of over 100,000 years the package was increasingly diversified and gave rise to many prehistoric local cultures. It was in this period that the somatic differences arose now commonly associated with ‘race’; they are (on the time scale of species evolution) recent, less than skin-deep, and merely amount to physical adaptations to different ecozones. When and where the two ‘Out of Africa’ demographic and cultural movements collided, the process of cultural and linguistic innovation and diversification was dramatically intensified. And finally, from perhaps 20,000 BP, certainly not later than 10,000 BP, a considerable *return migration Back-into-Africa*

---

<sup>14</sup> van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2005, ‘Mythological archaeology: reconstructing humankind’s oldest discourse: A preliminary attempt to situate sub-Saharan African cosmogonic myths within a long-range intercontinental comparative perspective’, paper for the comparative myth section of the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN) Pre-Symposium / 7th ESCA Harvard-Kyoto Roundtable on ‘Ethnogenesis of South and Central Asia’, organised by RIHN, NIHU / Harvard University, the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Kyoto, Japan, 6-8 June, 2005; forthcoming in the conference proceedings now in press, and meanwhile available at: [http://www.shikanda.net/ancient\\_models/mythical\\_archaeology/mytholog.htm](http://www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/mythical_archaeology/mytholog.htm) .

took place.<sup>15</sup> The latter brought back, to Africa, genes that had made the more than 100,000 years' detour across Asia – many genes detectably mutating on the way. The Back-into-Africa return migration also brought back, into the African continent, cultural and linguistic innovations from Asia. These would now begin to percolate all over Africa (perhaps least so in a belt of varying width along the Atlantic coast from Sierra Leone to Angola), interacting – in a fascinating feed-back movement – with the many innovations which the pre-Out-of-Africa package had meanwhile achieved *inside* the African continent. The latter innovations were highly significant: humankind's oldest sophisticated hunting implements (barbed harpoons), geometric art (the complex diamond-shaped geometrical pattern of Blombos Cave, South Africa), and representations of animals and humans (Tanzania), have all been attested in Africa, 90,000–40,000 BP. The result of all these developments has been: *kaleidoscopic diversity yet unmistakable shared origins as well as more recent convergence on a truly intercontinental scale*. Global cultural history emphatically includes Africa, but in this connection Africa has played

- not just the passive role of receiver of cultural achievements coming in from the outside (as a condescending, potentially racist North Atlantic version of history had it),
- nor exclusively the role of giver of cultural achievements, without receiving anything substantial from other continents (as the biologically entrenched, potential racist strong version of Afrocentricity would have it)
- but a combination of both roles of giver and receiver of cultural

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Cavalli-Sforza, L.L., Piazza, A., & Menozzi, A., 1994, *The history and geography of the human genes*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Cruciani, F., Santolamazza, P., Shen, P., Macaulay, V., Moral, P., Olckers, A., Modiano, D., Holmes, S., Destro-Bisol, G., Coia, V., Wallace, D.C., Oefner, P.J., Torroni, A., Cavalli-Sforza, L.L., Scozzari, R., Underhill, P.A., 2002, 'A back migration from Asia to sub-Saharan Africa is supported by high-resolution analysis of human Y-chromosome haplotypes', *American Journal of Human Genetics*, 70: 1197-1214; Hammer, M.F., Karafet T., Rasanayagam A., et al., 1998, 'Out of Africa and back again: Nested cladistic analysis of human Y chromosome variation', *Molecular Biology and Evolution*, 15, 4: 427-441; and references cited in these publications.

achievements, on the basis not of biological/ somatic/ genetic, but of non-somatic processes of cultural transmission through learning.

This, I propose – as an informed personal synthesis – is a possible context in which to situate the debate on race in the context of African and Afrocentrist identity. It affirms Africa's, and Africans', absolutely crucial contribution to global cultural history, but does not make that claim dependent on the exclusive, and accidental, possession of such genetically transmitted somatic traits as are commonly associated with 'race'; and (in ways remarkably convergent with Kwame Appiah's argument on race – however, this is precisely the line of thought that is dismissed in Kiros' contribution below!) it emphatically separates the sociology and the hermeneutics of race as a collective representation, from the kaleidoscopic minutiae of humankind's minor somatic variations and ecological adaptations in the course of the last 140,000 years.

Thus, when Teodros Kiros proposes a Du Boisean philosophy of race, this does not necessarily amount to a plea for the strong version of racially-inclined Afrocentricity as defined above, and least of all is it an attempt at reviving de Gobineau. It is simply an invitation to join him, and Du Bois, in their magnificent and deeply moving hermeneutical quest for the *meaning* of 'race' – race as a collective representation (shared by both Whites and Blacks) of American society during Du Bois' life time. In this quest, Kiros, Du Bois, and the reader may join hands in recapturing the resources of culture and dignity that the experience of White racism had sought to deny them by forcibly making them members of an almost inescapable colour caste. And when Sanya Osha deals with race in his discussion of Philippe-Joseph Salazar's work on South Africa, it is not in order to reify the concept of race, but, on the contrary, because Salazar in his modern application of Aristotelian rhetoric (as a communicative technique of making the political desirable) offers<sup>16</sup> a perspective *liberating us* from the pernicious reification of race – not as an objective scientific datum but as a man-made, deceptive, and manipulable collective representation.

---

<sup>16</sup> Such is Osha's reading; cf. *Quest XVI*: 238-272.



The purpose of this (I admit) unusually lengthy, substantive and personal Editorial was not to dictate a particular view, but to explicitly identify fields of possible misunderstanding, to adduce additional background information, and to invite members of the *QUEST* constituency to make their own contributions to the ongoing debate; *Philosophical Discussions* was once the apt subtitle of this journal, so please live up to it, by producing, and submitting to *QUEST*, critical responses on the matter of race and on all other topics of interest to philosophy in Africa today.

Wim van Binsbergen

