

REPORTS

THE SECOND YEAR OF ASIXOXE

Alena Rettová

The second run of the SOAS conference on African Philosophy, Asixoxe – Let’s Talk!, organized by Benedetta Lanfranchi and Alena Rettová, took place in London on the 1st and 2nd May 2015. As Alena Rettová, Associate Head of the Department of Languages and Cultures of Africa and Senior Lecturer in Swahili Literature and Culture, emphasized in her short opening speech, Asixoxe is primarily a student conference, but this should not be taken to imply a lower academic level. On the contrary, for people at such early stages of their academic development, learning is a truly existential encounter: students are confronted with new, and often radically different theorizations of the world which shatter their habitual outlooks. This is doubly true in SOAS, whose environment adds a markedly intercultural dimension to these intellectual challenges. In Alena Rettová’s words, “grappling with the diverse perspectives on how the world is conceptualized across disciplines and across cultures is a humbling experience; you are exposed to your naked self and left to recreate that self with the conceptual repertoire of other cultures.”

The participants’ strong engagement with their academic pursuits was evident both from the themes of the presentations and from their personal investment. The presentations covered a wide range of topics, from ethics and moral thought to political philosophy, from epistemology to the intersections between African philosophy and anthropology or literature. The theories discussed in connection with African philosophy included analytic philosophy, continental philosophy, in particular existentialism, structuralism and poststructuralism, postcolonial theory, but also interdisciplinary theoretical models involving non-Aristotelian logics and post-Newtonian physics. While the geographical and cultural focus of most presentations was, understandably, Africa, the SOAS context proved a fertile soil also for

comparisons with Asian (Chinese and Japanese) and Latin American (Bolivian) cultures and philosophies.

An explicit intercultural focus was present in Aleksandra Manikowska's (BA Chinese Studies) paper on the influence of Maoism on the political theories of Julius Nyerere, and in Katherine Furman's (PhD candidate, LSE) and Yola West-Dennis's (BSc Philosophy and Physics, Bristol) presentations on the applications of British analytical philosophy to, respectively, South African politics and Yorubá epistemology. Interdisciplinary concerns were pervasive in the papers which highlighted the philosophical relevance of literature in African languages. Roberto Gaudio (PhD candidate, Bayreuth) analysed the influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger on Tanzanian writer Euphrase Kezilahabi's poetry. Livia Cossa (BA Politics and African Studies) studied the repercussions of Nyerere's thought in three genres of Swahili poetry. Katya Nell (BA Swahili and Development Studies) offered an original interpretation of William Mkufya's novel *Ziraili na Zirani* as an allegory for the revolution of the proletariat, and Christine Gibson (BA Swahili and Social Anthropology) elaborated the link between Said Ahmed Mohamed's novel *Dunia Yao* and theories of artistic mimesis, including the innovative reading of the concept by anthropologist Michael Taussig. Becca Stacey (BA African Studies) explored the existentialist perspectives embodied in four characters in the Swahili novels *Kichwamaji* and *Ua la Faraja*. The links between epistemology and African literature were considered in Alena Rettová's paper. The importance of language and multilingualism in philosophy was the topic of Ella Hiesmayr's (BA Philosophy, Vienna) paper. Ida Hadjivayanis's (Teaching Fellow in Swahili, SOAS) paper on initiation rituals in Luguru society combined gender theories and anthropology, and the role of anthropology in philosophy was theoretically discussed by Adam Rodgers Johns (BA African Studies and Social Anthropology). Estrella Sendra (Mphil/PhD candidate, SOAS) examined the influence of Negritude on cultural festivals in Senegal. Conflicting Euro-American, Far Eastern, and African theorizations of technology were compared by Aviv Milgram (MA Religion in Global Politics). Some presentations covered relatively little studied areas of African philosophy: the philosophy of the Mozambican thinker Severino Elias Ngoenha was reviewed by Anaïs Brémond (MA History, LSE). The two concluding papers offered in-depth critical readings of the Kenyan philosopher and theologian, John S. Mbiti. Claire Amaladoss

(BA Swahili and Development Studies) compared Mbiti's present-oriented view of time with the phenomenological study of time by Edmund Husserl, while Hannah Simmons (BA African Language and Culture) contrasted Mbiti's and Cheikh Anta Diop's concepts of time as two distinct possibilities to project the future of African philosophy.

While the majority of the presenters were SOAS students of Swahili literature and African philosophy, the conference also attracted students from other UK universities, such as LSE and Bristol, and from Europe, in particular Bayreuth and Vienna. SOAS has very good relations with both of these universities. SOAS students of Swahili literature regularly have a strong presence at the annual international Swahili Colloquium in Bayreuth, and the cooperation between both universities has recently been strengthened by an Erasmus+ mobility contract. Ugandan philosopher Wilfred Lajul was unable to attend the conference in person, but his paper was read out by one of the organizers, Benedetta Lanfranchi (PhD candidate, SOAS), who extensively cooperated with Lajul during her fieldwork in Uganda. The conference was well attended by students and staff from SOAS, as well as researchers from other UK institutions, such as Patrice Haynes, Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Liverpool, and Stefanie Kolbusa from London's Aga Khan University. The friendly and intellectually stimulating atmosphere extended into the breaks and evening hours, and as Rettová said, "it is in the liminal space between work and privacy that friendships are sealed and future cooperations projected."

The words of Chenjerai Shire can be quoted in conclusion. The Zimbabwean linguist debated in his talk the Southern African concept of humanity or personhood, ubuntu (Nguni languages) or unhu (Shona): "If you lack the ability to care for others, you do not have ubuntu, even if you are biologically human. The verb ukuxoxa, from which asixoxe is derived, means to talk, to chat, to be together, to share, to care for each other. This is the very foundation of Ubuntu."