

Editor's Note

Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)

New Series, Vol.4 No.1, June 2012, pp.i-iii

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<http://ajol.info/index.php/tp/index>

The term “indigenous knowledge” frequently features in discussions on ways of accelerating Africa’s socio-economic development. Nevertheless, it is often quite unclear what those who use it intend to designate. This becomes evident when we consider the manner in which innovations from indigenous African cultures are often disparaged as “backward”, but other times lauded as “eco-friendly” or “cost-effective”. Consequently, it behooves philosophers, one of whose tasks is to investigate the nature, scope and applicability of knowledge, to contribute towards a lucid conceptualisation of this term. It is therefore apt that the theme of indigenous knowledge runs through all the articles in this issue.

Reginald M.J. Oduor presents a critical review of D.A. Masolo’s thought-provoking *Self and Community in a Changing World*. In Oduor’s view, Prof. Masolo offers a fresh perspective to the debate between liberalism and communitarianism within an African context.

The debate on the existence and nature of indigenous knowledge rests on the almost self-evident assumption that human knowledge is produced by human cultures. This being so, the question of the existence or non-existence of universal standards by which to evaluate knowledge produced by different cultures is germane. J.O. Famakinwa argues that the implications of normative cultural relativism highlighted in Kwame Gyekye’s critique of the theory do not necessarily undermine it. He is however quick to point out that he is not giving normative cultural relativism a clean

bill of health, because the possibility of fatal arguments being advanced against it remains.

The recent wave of constitutional reform in Africa demands that the moral foundations upon which new constitutions are built be those that adequately serve the people in the relevant jurisdictions. To achieve this, it is helpful to undertake comparative studies of constitutions not only in Africa, but also beyond. To this end, Rainer Ebert and Reginald M.J. Oduor examine the concept of human dignity in German and Kenyan constitutional law. According to them, the German constitution conceptualises human dignity in such a way as to unnecessarily limit the freedom of action among the citizens and to stifle their right to engage in debate on pertinent issues. In the case of the Kenyan constitution, the two authors contend that the formulation of human dignity is too vague to provoke meaningful discussion concerning it among the citizenry. In both cases, moral progress is stifled. Consequently, they propose that philosophers inside and outside these two countries give greater attention to the task of reflecting on the meaning, basis and scope of human dignity, with a view to stimulating informed public debate on this influential concept.

In our time, the ethical aspect of development is often sidelined in pursuit of values such as efficiency and accelerated economic growth. However, in her reflections on the Iko Toilet business venture in Kenya, J.M. Maweu offers an ethical rationale for accommodating the profit motive in Africa's development models. She contends that the pursuit of honest profits in a voluntary market exchange is not only moral, but also ingrained in human nature, in that human beings pursue activities that benefit them and avoid those that cause them loss.

The custom of a dead man's kin taking care of his widow/s and children among the Luo of Kenya continues to generate considerable debate. It is often disparagingly referred to as "wife inheritance", and blamed for a host of social evils. However, Oriare Nyarwath, who has actively participated in this debate since the early 1990s,

consolidates his thoughts into an article that clarifies various concepts associated with this custom. He maintains that the custom is still the best alternative available to the Luo *widow* and for the care of the *home* of one's deceased brother, especially in the context of the Luo culture. However, he recommends a number of adjustments to discourage some of the abuses that are becoming prevalent in the practice, with a view to making it more amenable to some of the challenges of our time.

Finally, Peter M. Mumo examines ways in which African traditional medicine men made and continue to make a significant contribution to healing in their societies. He argues that due to the numerous challenges in contemporary African societies, there is need for a pragmatic approach, in which all innovations that can alleviate human suffering are taken on board and encouraged as long as they do not compromise people's health.

As many of our readers know by now, we are devoting the December 2010 issue of *Thought and Practice* to the work of the late Prof. H. Odera Oruka, who was the founder of this journal. While he is best known for his work in philosophic sagacity, Prof. Oruka's reflections on various aspects of philosophy constitute a robust contribution to the debate on the nature and scope of indigenous knowledge broadly construed. Consequently, the articles in the current issue are an appropriate prelude to the upcoming special issue.

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THOUGHT AND PRACTICE

June 2012