

# CONFERENCE REPORT

## **International Society for African Philosophy and Studies (ISAPS) 20th Annual Conference**

### **Conference theme: Re-thinking African Identity and Culture, 30 to 31 May 2014, Fort Hare University**

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On 30 and 31 May 2014 the University of Fort Hare Philosophy Department in conjunction with the Fort Hare Institute for Social and Economic Research (FHISER), hosted the International Society for African Philosophy and Studies (ISAPS) 20th Annual Conference with the theme “*Re-thinking African identity*”. The conference was held at Chintsa in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, a venue 50 km outside East London. The conference was attended by 50 delegates based in different institutions across Africa, America, and Europe. In total there were 35 presentations mainly from South African and Nigerian scholars. Prominent figures from the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa (PSSA, not to be confused with the Psychological Society of South Africa, PsySSA) were present at the conference. The conference lasted for two days and was held over a weekend.

On the opening day heads of philosophy from South African Universities welcomed everyone to the conference, Eastern Cape and South Africa. After the introductory formalities and background information about the society the president of the society, Prof J. Obi Ogeujifo, was due to deliver a presidential speech. Being an Africanist scholar I had high expectations about the conference.

Just before the presidential speech my high expectations were soon woken up to the reality of South Africa that some tend to ignore or accept as normal. What sparked the realisation was the introduction of Prof J. Obi Ogeujifo by the conference host

of the event. A claim was made by the host that Prof J. Obi Ogeujifo's name was too difficult to pronounce and therefore he will not even attempt to do so. This was a moment of embarrassment, clearly not for the perpetrator but rather for those of us in the audience who observed and listened critically. One would expect that, out of respect, an attempt should at least be made before-hand to know the name and surname of the main speakers. This unfortunate incident was to set the tone for most of the conference, as we proceeded to attend presentations.

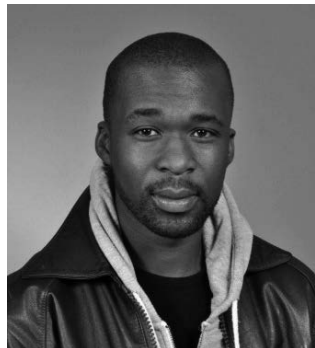
Although the titles of most presentations were interesting, the content of the presentations was rather disappointing and frustrating. The focus appeared to be on either proving the existence of African philosophy or posing questions about the existence of African philosophy. Such presentations demonstrated a commitment to ignorance about the body of knowledge that has already been produced in African philosophy. In that way they also exhibited a pledge of ignorance about the African continent. Sadly, most of these presentations were from South African scholars.

The questions and debates about African philosophy were dealt with in detail in the 1950s and 60s. There is a vast body of literature by African and African Diaspora scholars answering such questions and the field has long moved on from such concerns. For a number of years already there have been universities across the world teaching modules in African philosophy. The University of South Africa (Unisa) has for many years offered extensively critical and intellectually stimulating modules in African philosophy. To encounter questions about the existence of African philosophy posed by academics from South Africa at the conference was not peculiar, but a reflection of the reality of South Africa. This communicated a message that some universities and academics do not think or concern themselves with discourses from where they are located (Africa), but rather take their priorities with those from elsewhere. Their bodies and structures are located in Africa, but their minds and thoughts are in other parts of the world.

Not all was dull and miserable, however. There were a few interesting and thought-provoking presentations. One that stood out was "Conquering Reason", which provided much needed interjection. Whilst some presentations toed the lines of escapism, "Conquering Reason" provided realistic and provocative inputs. The presenters improvised on and challenged the issue of a lack of thorough and rigorous understanding of identity politics and institutional racism in South African. The sources of evidence for advancing their arguments were drawn from personal experiences and the academic community's reaction to the Dr Louise Mabile incident that occurred in 2013.

Overall, in terms of logistics, food and drinks the conference was well organised. It was quite refreshing to attend a conference in South Africa outside the big four cities of conference hosting (i.e., Durban, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria).

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



**Melusi Mbatha** is a junior lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Unisa. His interests include critical psychology, community psychology and cultural psychology. In 2013, Melusi co-edited “Some communities imagined” (<http://somecommunities.co.za/>), a book about problems and resources in a selection of South African communities.