

Introduction to the special issue: Rethinking the humanities in twenty-first century Africa

Japhet Bakuwa

Chancellor College, University of Malawi
jbakuwa@cc.ac.mw

This is a special issue of *Journal of Humanities* (JH) containing some of the papers presented at the 2015 Faculty of Humanities Conference, held in the Great Hall at Chancellor College, University of Malawi, from 10-11 November, 2015. The papers have been selected after undergoing a thorough and rigorous peer-review process. The conference theme was “Rethinking the humanities in twenty-first century Africa,” and it was aimed at addressing questions relating to the relevance of the humanities in our modern world. The participants at the conference were drawn from Zambia, Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa.

Arguably, disciplines within the field of humanities across the globe face serious challenges in the 21st century. The humanities in Africa generally, and particularly in Malawi, have been adversely affected by many challenges, including negative public perception, and reduced funding to humanities research. Humanities disciplines are constantly portrayed as not important in national development, when in actual fact any meaningful development cannot neglect the humanities.

The structure and content of this special issue is systematically and logically sequenced so that there is one extended argument. The issue has a total of seven articles. It begins with a thought-provoking paper by Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, from Birkbeck, University of London, titled “Rethinking the future of humanities in Africa and the question of epistemological agency”, based on his keynote address. In the paper Msiska notes that the humanities operate within a local and

global context, and he insists that we need to grasp how the local and the global transform our subjectivities and their contexts, and how that in turn impinges on the humanities as the site of a particular production of knowledge. Using Bergson's theory of history and Foucault's concept of knowledge as power, and others, Msiska argues that the field of humanities in Africa should be reconceptualised into African Humanities in order to effect what Deleuze and Guattari have defined as conceptual self-semiotisation. Msiska also identifies the main challenges the humanities world-over face in the 21st century but goes on to advise us that the Humanities in Africa must continue to map out the specific ways in which the local and the global simultaneously determine the human subject on the continent.

The second paper by Damazio Mfune-Mwanjakwa is an attempt to investigate the root cause of the negative perception of the humanities by modern societies. Mfune-Mwanjakwa argues that in some sense, the period of scholarship we know as the Enlightenment could be largely to blame for the perceived schism between the humanities and the sciences. Mfune-Mwanjakwa posits that the Enlightenment cannot yield us an ontology that would engender cordial relations among humans themselves or between humans and their environment. Instead, Post-Enlightenment (by which is meant post-Cartesian or post-binary) ontological, epistemological and ethical postulations could redress the centuries-old disjunction (which characterises this shadow) between technological or intellectual development and amicable global living.

Simon Makwinja's paper titled "The Socratic *elenchus* and knowledge processes in the 21st century" comes third and tackles a fundamental epistemic issue. Makwinja observes that contemporary scholarship in various academic spheres has often perceived the epistemological domains within the Arts and Humanities as obsolete and irrelevant to the contemporary development paradigm. Instead, disciplines which promise immediate and practical results are preferred as significant and appropriate. Contrary to this popular perception, the paper reflects on the relevance of the Socratic *elenchus* to the 21st century knowledge processes, especially in developing countries (including Malawi). The paper argues that the Socratic *elenchus* used in Arts and Sciences is more significant and relevant in today's world affairs which are becoming more complex than ever before.

The fourth paper by Hermann Mvula zeroes in on broad ethical issues. At the heart of Mvula's paper is an observation that people do not have a proper

understanding of the nature of the image of God in humanity. This misunderstanding of the nature of the image of God has a bearing on their actions and how they relate with one another. The paper argues that proper understanding of the nature of the image of God in humanity is the foundation of good governance in our societies. It also argues that such a proper understanding is the foundation of *Umunthu*.

The last three papers by Emmanuel Ngwira, Winfred Mkochi and Ken Lipenga Junior focus on practical problems Malawians are facing today. These are contextual issues, and therefore more relevant to socio-economic and political development of Malawi. Ngwira's paper addresses a very critical social issue in Malawi – HIV/AIDS. According to *UNAIDS Gap Report 2016*, there are 980, 000 Malawians living with HIV. Malawi's adult HIV prevalence rate is at 9.1%, and there are 33, 000 new HIV infections annually. Ngwira's paper examines how the female body is portrayed in selected HIV/AIDS-themed songs in Malawi. Having analysed five songs, the paper has found troubling subtexts which undermine their intended meaning and purpose. Generally, the paper reveals how, besides being portrayed negatively as a carrier and transmitter of the HI virus and other sexually transmitted diseases, the female body is implicitly blamed for the spread of HIV and related infections. The paper argues that the songs' purported advocacy is heavily compromised because they are underwritten by negative perceptions of women and their bodies.

Lipenga's paper examines the depiction of witchcraft in a number of Malawian films - *Magwiragwira*, *Chigulumwah*, *Black Angel*, *Dangerous*, and *Mapatidwe* – with the objective of illustrating how this daring representation by the filmmakers potentially holds the key to opening a conversation on various superstitious practices that could help to reveal, and correct, harmful ignorance within local societies. Drawing on current scholarship on African film and on the phenomenon of witchcraft, from theological and philosophical perspectives, the paper argues that the portrayal of witchcraft reflects an attempt by filmmakers to display a local ontology, and that this worldview enables the filmmaker to best articulate a number of issues that culminate in the archetypal struggle between good and evil in a language that their potential viewers are bound to understand.

Lastly, Mkochi's paper titled "Minimal prosodic stems/words in Malawian Tonga: A Morpheme-Based Templates Theory analysis," aims to investigate the real size of the minimal prosodic stem/word in Malawian Tonga (popularly known as ciTonga), a Southern Bantu language spoken in Malawi. The paper is recast within Optimality Theory (OT) as developed by Prince and Smolensky (1993/2004) and extended by others (e.g. Downing, 2006). Drawing evidence from an optional process of deletion of initial vowels in vowel-initial verb stems, and deletion of final syllables of LV (liquid plus vowel) type, the paper argues that the real level of analysis in this language is the syllable and that the required size of the minimal prosodic stem/word is essentially disyllabic. Thus, the status of monosyllabic stems/words in this language is that they are sub-minimal and that they attain bimoraicity through a general process of phonological phrasing in Bantu languages.

We hope that researchers and scholars in the Arts and Humanities and related fields will find this special issue to be informative, intellectually stimulating, and useful in many ways.