Title: The role of African philosophy in peace and security issues in the context of Africa

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Date: 4 December 2025
African Studies Centre Leiden

Preliminaries
Good afternoon to you all.
I was allocated 20 minutes for this opening presentation, and I will do everything to honour that.
It is a great honour to be part of the 11th edition of the Stephen Ellis annual dialogue.
I wish to thank Dr Yinka, the dean and the entire organising team for the invitation and in particular Paula for all the communication.
Most importantly I would like to extend a special welcome to you all for attending this dialogue both in person and virtually.
I wish to thank Prof Gerrie ter Haar for taking her time to welcome me at the airport. It was a reassuring experience and indeed a life lesson coming as it does from such a distinguished scholar.
To all my partners in the dialogue including the moderator, I greet you.

Introduction
I shall begin by saying something briefly about African philosophy as a practice. Academic philosophy depending on the manner it is approached and practised can be too dry, too abstract, and sometimes disengaging and disempowering - I will not take you down that sterile route because I have learnt to appreciate a mode of philosophy where our knowledge practice must be brought into the service of humanity – to engage on the basis of ethical responsibility.
The story of African philosophy just like the history that informs it is an ongoing quest, an unfinished project, 'it is itself a text without an end, without a [preordained] conclusion' (Masolo 2000, p. 171). As a tradition of thought it constructs itself out of the living resources provided by its cultures, and through engagement with real issues of life and existence, informed by history and memory as the resources that nourish thinking. Real problems of society must feed the reflective meditations of the philosopher. This means philosophy must pay attention to the very place within which questions of ethics and politics arise - it cannot afford to become a fugitive from history nor a silent witness to crimes against humanity. Even as it aims to reach for the universal, African philosophy remains by its very nature, a product of human reflection and a context-oriented practice. The articulation of ideas rooted in the history of their provenance can be the basis of global philosophical contributions (Mungwini 2024).
Three preliminary points:
1) To theorise about Africa is to theorise about the global South, it is to create a platform for transformative engagements.
2) In the words of Macamo (2018, p.8), we study Africa to understand the world. '*Africa is not what it is because of what it is like. Africa is what it is because of what the world is like, and vice versa*' [italics original].
3) My reflections are informed by what I have read about the person and scholar we are gathered here to honour- the spirit of dedication to research and honest intellectual engagement. He rejected tired narratives, gratuitous assumptions, and simplistic ideologies about Africa

encouraging instead the need to be original in our insights and conclusions. His genuine effort to understand Africa within its own historical reality and unfolding dynamics must continue.

The human story can be a great one, but it is also filled with pain and tragedy. Considering what we are witnessing around the world, our topic for the dialogue could not have come at a better time.

What can African philosophy contribute to peace and conflict resolution in Africa?

What is African philosophy's take on peace and security issues in the specific context of Africa?

How Can African cultural resources contribute to peacebuilding and human security issues in Africa?

I was provided with this set of questions to serve as the guiding light on my reflections but not in a manner that would necessarily confine those reflections. It is a legitimate question to ask: What is the practice of African philosophy for if it does not take upon itself the critical role of attending to what Soyinka (1999, p. viii) calls 'patterns of inhuman conduct that continue to scar and traumatize individuals and nations in an ever-escalating magnitude of horrors' on the continent and across the world?

In laying the ground for the dialogue and without venturing too far into philosophy, I have narrowed my discussion on the relevance/role of African philosophy to conflict and peace in Africa to five points.

a) The yet to be answered question

This is a question that Africa continues to defer and to refuse to give considered attention and yet it is a question that Africa has to answer for itself. It is a question whose validity seems impossible to refute. As the late Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (1996) argued, today it is almost impossible to reflect on the problems in Africa [including violent conflicts] without at the same time developing the suspicion that we may not yet have found the system of organizing our lives, a mode of social and political governance that is most suited to our own history and cultural circumstances. We are yet to develop for ourselves a system of governance that resonates with the dominant values of our culture and the metaphysical basis of the constitution of our families and societies. An African contribution to the theory and practice of governance is yet to be articulated and it remains elusive.

[Africa's philosopher kings, that first crop of leaders who saw the role of practically engaged philosophy in Africa's liberation, showed a keen interest to deal with this question but ended up lost by adulterating the idea of tradition to justify one party dictatorships - the phenomenon of life presidents.]

True liberation begins at the level of understanding ourselves, our own history and intellectual traditions; it is about answering to the Socratic dictum - African know thyself. People understand the world around them and make sense of it through their worldviews.

The epistemological and ontological frameworks that dominate the framing and organisation of our politics have consistently failed to reflect the complex cultural dimensions of our existence and this has a significant impact on the ability to exist peacefully and to resolve conflicts in a manner that speaks to who we are as a people.

The fundamental point is that We have not found a way to build the new in a manner that respects the old. Africa's traditions should remain the source of innovative reconstruction (Teffo 2004, p.445). Confronted by a system that breeds so much tension and adversity, we need to relearn the value and meaning of dialogue, solidarity, and consensus, both conceptually and existentially (Wiredu 1996). It is increasingly becoming apparent that faced with these toxic adversarial relations, we need the integrative ethos and belief in the collective

responsibility of all for the welfare of the community. Conflict is a symptom and to address it we must pay closer attention to the systems and structures that guide our organisation as society, including its politics and ethics. Elucidating these theories in the quest for solutions to our challenges is role of African philosophy and other disciplines in African studies.

It is worth mentioning at this point [and I can see the authors present here] that Pius Musima & Henk Haenen have just published their book entitled *Afrikaanse Filosofie* (*African Philosophy).* Among other things, the book places emphasis on dialogue and cooperation between societal groups and between countries and the pursuit of consensus as the best way to promote peace and security in the long term.

b) Philosophy and the rational articulation of the wisdom traditions of Africa

The knowledge and institutions deemed traditional are not static but are instead 'continuously reborn and dynamically re-created' (Moyo & Mine 2016, p. xix) in response to everchanging demands on life.

Traditional African culture and all its institutions is in itself a text that we must continue to explore for its philosophical insights and substance. We must dedicate ourselves to projects of meticulously sifting through what remains of these traditions, utilising the usable aspects to reconstruct a tradition of thought that is African. This is what African philosophy can champion.

Here I focus on the contribution of African philosophy meaning a dedicated reconstruction and rational articulation of the wisdom traditions of Africa that is, its rituals, cultural and religious practices, including political and legal institutions that sustained peace in society. It also entails studying the role and place of the traditional sages in the modern context of our challenges.

At no point is any community without a cohort of well-known and respected sages who are renowned for their wisdom and sagacious reasoning. Today these are being sidelined in matters of conflict and dispute resolution with their role being usurped by politically connected and influential people in society who lack the knowledge and authority of tradition. Without them the connection between people and their ancestral and spiritual resources often invoked as guarantors of agreements on peace and tranquillity is severed.

In Africa's wisdom traditions lie important reference points such as proverbs, art forms, folklore, songs, rituals, and religious practices that can be invoked in processes of conflict mediation and resolution. The role of philosophy is to render these ideas perpetually present in the minds of different generations as part of a philosophical heritage that they can engage with and call upon when the need arises.

Crucial for conflict management in these traditions is the principle of intergenerational mutual responsibility. It is not just a notion of the ordinary practice of citizenship but one that invokes the ancestral tradition and a cosmological dimension which goes beyond the human where to heal the earth is to heal the nation. The belief in ancestors is central to life as lived by most African people. Even those today who for various scientific reasons disavow the centrality of this belief have not been able to exist outside its metaphysical ramifications because of the communitarian structure of most African societies. There are ancestors who have bequeathed to us a legacy that we can and should tap into because it is a moral legacy - a system of ideas on how to live life.

For traditional Africa, life does not just mean the biological opposite of death, and so to speak of living life, is to speak of community, well-being, good health, prosperity, security, peace and happiness. These ontologies of being help to situate the human being in the stream of life in which the community is central.

Some of the violent conflicts in Africa stem from ontological connections to territory as different communities fight to assert and defend their forms of existence in the face of

government-initiated programs and other forms of neocolonial resource extraction and green grabbing in the context of climate change. Cases of the forced removal of rural communities such as pastoralists from their land in the name of promoting sustainable development are becoming another cause of conflict. The point is that Philosophical knowledge of traditions and of ontological connections to territory and place should allow us to anticipate some of these conflicts and therefore avert them before they break out.

c) Reconceptualising justice
From an African philosophical standpoint justice is the necessary condition for lasting peace anywhere. The simple truism is that there is no peace because there is no justice in the world. Structures and institutions that entrench injustice create conditions for instability and conflict. When political regimes in Africa are perceived as accomplices and corrupt enablers of global injustice and of perpetuating historical injustice – uprisings, bandit groups, and militias are formed and often with the support of grassroots people to stop the injustice. Issues of injustice therefore - perceived or real - are at the core of most conflicts in Africa.
Two points about justice:
a) *Shereni ihombe pamhaka* (literally translated: The shilling triumphs over any crime). The colonial roots of this Shona saying is apparent. The Sagacity and contestations about justice cannot be missed. Many people in Africa still find the modern justice system rather alien and alienating, especially for those in rural areas where two justice systems still exist side by side of course with the foreign one superintending over the customary/cultural one. Modern justice can be draining in terms of not only time and money but also emotionally because of the problem of seeing the possibility of rebuilding human relations after the court process - it is too adversarial and rather cold. It is perhaps one of the reasons why so many crimes committed between and among relatives go unreported - because the outcome can be damaging instead of restoring harmony and relations. This justice system can be the incubator for conflict within and between communities. The aggrieved often ends up with no other recourse except to mobilize and embark on acts of banditry and confrontation. Instead of the emphasis on justice being about reaching consensus and restoring relations the concern seems be on escaping punishment and punitive retribution even through the use of sophistry.

b) *Mhosva haiori* (literally translated from Shona: a crime does not putrefy or decompose). Ubuntu justice rejects the politics of amnesia although it remains amenable to closure if the perpetrator takes full responsibility and honors the debt in a manner that allows for closure. It does not condone superficial settlements where the perpetrators of injustice and usurpation everywhere are left to 'pursue privileged existence, secure in the spoils of a sordid history' (Soyinka, 1999, p. 24), and unmoved by the plight of their victims. This is one way to explain some of the most old and intractable conflicts that seem to die down and then irrupt without notice now and again. If left unresolved disputes over resources such as land in some parts of Africa remain a huge source of disquiet with the potential to trigger conflict. The role of philosophy is to articulate the different conceptions and metaphysical basis of justice and of living together and that includes paying attention to the problems of a certain dominant conceptualization of justice as it is applied in the community.

d) Ubuntu and the rehumanizing mission in African philosophy
This mission, which in part defines African philosophy given its own history, must become a key element for dealing with the problem of conflicts in Africa and to move towards a future with no genocide and senseless killing.
Violent conflict is not a creation of nature, it is caused by human beings and so it is not eternal. 'Thinking sets the agenda for action, and thinking of humans as less than human paves the way

for atrocity' (Smith 2011, np). The systematic dehumanization of fellow humans is perhaps one of the strongest driving forces behind atrocities throughout history including what we continue to witness today. Dehumanization unleashes aggression. With this loss of humanity, with this inferior ontological standing, human beings can now be hunted like animals. Dehumanization creates 'conditions for guilty-free massacre' (Duster 1971) and moral disengagement. Confronting its dynamics ought to be among some of our most pressing priorities as philosophers. It is here where recourse to traditions of humanness and their articulation becomes paramount. A philosophy that speaks to this problem and which challenges this at its core helps to expose the practice and to challenge the theoretical framework that sustains dehumanization.

As both philosophy and politico-ethical framework, Ubuntu is a tradition of thought whose provenance lies in the subterranean depths of indigenous African cultures but lends itself to the demands to illuminate thinking on issues that affect our world. Its distinct relational orientation is rooted in belief in the ontological one-ness of humanity. By taking both the totality of existence and the mystery of being as its point of departure, this is a tradition of thought which compels us to re-examine our relations not only as humans but towards the world in which we live together.

The question that some may have is this: with this philosophy and its promise, why are conflicts still prevalent? Does this not invalidate its credentials? The answers can be varied, but the point I wish to make is this: You do not abandon religion because more people are sinning, instead you double down. And second, perhaps without this ubuntu it is possible that conflict could have been worse than what it is. African philosophical effort to articulate the various indigenous philosophies of humanness inherent in the cultures of its people can be one of its most important contributions towards peace and conflict resolution in Africa. Here the entire point behind ubuntu and the rehumanizing quest is the desire to build a more humane world. As Wiredu (1980, p.21) warns, 'it would profit us little to gain all the technology in the world and lose the humanist essence of our culture.'

e) Transformative engagements

The role of African philosophy should be to champion transformative thinking and to establish the foundations for intercultural and cross-cultural engagement not only within Africa but with the rest of the world. The colonial relationship which binds Africa to the West in a very special way has also created compartmentalisation of the continent at many levels which call for social and intellectual boundary-crossing in order to maintain relations even at the level of ideas. The internalities of Africa demand the continuous strengthening of an intercultural philosophical practice even within the continent itself. And the roots that nourish that philosophy are located in our traditions of dialogue. Dialogue must assist us in addressing the many complex issues that define our continent even as we continue to borrow valid ideas from other cultures. Transformative thinking looks to the future. In this ceaseless struggle between life and death the resources inherent in our cultures which are a culmination of years of living together must provide solutions to our problems including the challenge of conflicts.

Conclusion

To return to my earlier point, African philosophy cannot become a silent witness to crimes against humanity. It must always have as its starting point of engagement, the very places within which questions of ethics and politics arise, that is, the real world in which we find ourselves. To address our challenges, we need to reclaim some of the traditions including the riches of our oral heritage that continues to play a role in our contemporary struggles.

As Wiredu (1996) reminds us, the foundation of African morality and therefore of existence is the principle that life is a theatre of mutual aid. African philosophy would do well to articulate this and to improve the people's own understanding of the meaning and bases of community. There are priority issues that impose themselves on the philosophical practice in Africa, and these deserve our attention. Ultimately, what we can achieve with this intellectual heritage is only limited by our capacities to imagine what is possible. There are resources inherent in every culture to guarantee community, relationality, justice and to advance the quest for building a more humane world. All that is needed is to heed the *saying chenga ose manhanga hapana risina mhudzi* - there are sources of vitality in every culture no matter how different in outlook.

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