

Dear Dr Mosima, dear Pius

In this country, it is customary that at the end of a successful PhD defense, the supervisor publicly addresses the young doctor, congratulating her or him (which I do now in so many words), looking back at the trajectory traversed together during the years of preparation of the thesis, highlighting a few themes of the work, and making proposals and predictions about the career that lies ahead. We call this, in the Latin you know, a *laudatio*. I still vividly recall my own supervisor's *laudatio* at my public defense, and it has guided me career through the subsequent decades.

Now you have had *two* supervisors,

- one, the present speaker, whom you picked yourself for your PhD supervisor eleven years ago in your enthusiasm over my intercultural philosophy which *then seemed* to be the answer to your prayers
- and the other one, Professor Walter van Beek, a prominent specialist on Cameroon, and also my colleague from the African Studies Centre, Leiden. He took a major part in the final stages of your supervision, and (with Leiden's magnanimous contributions towards the printing of the thesis, and with the generous collaboration of the Tilburg University authorities) graciously arranged for your thesis to be defended before this University, when my own relationship of many years with the Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, had come to an end.

For a long time, it appeared as if you had learned my lessons rather too well. It has been largely the achievement of Professor van Beek that your thesis did not get stuck in the phase of hagiography and Gospel truth, but acquired such critical distance from your main teacher and his published texts as is expected from a doctorate in the intercontinental context.

Not so much the mentor versus pupil or apprentice, the initiator versus novice, the seller versus buyer of rare and privileged knowledge, but close kinship ties as between father and son constitute a standard idiom for the transfer of knowledge in sub-Saharan Africa, and you and I have lavishly drawn from the latter model. That today your thesis could be successfully defended before a university of repute and before an objective international committee of specialists on philosophy and Africa, yet means that you and I have managed to overcome the incestuous dangers attending our closeness in thought and life – it means that you have reached maturity and individual stature as a thinker.

You have learned from both African village and family life, and from your extensive experience in religious and academic formal organizations (your

given name evokes your staunch Roman Catholic background, your academic credentials came from West African universities and granted you accredited access to a doctorate in Western Europe. These experiences will have taught you that no achievement in life, and least of all a doctorate, is ever attained without compromises and concessions. Still, I know that you have reached this splendid intercontinental result without betraying your own true identity and loyalty – without falling into the trap (so clearly perceived by you) of intercontinental docility and hegemony (which, in the wake of Hegel, used to be particularly manifest in the field of philosophy, especially where Africa is concerned), and without sacrificing your many-faceted, both traditionalizing and formally educated African identity on the altar of a disempowering, essentially contentless universalism.

Dear Pius, much as you may be disinclined to believe me at the present, precious moment, a PhD thesis is not the end but only somewhere near the beginning of a productive intellectual life. Not only as the author of your thesis, but also as a lecturer and high-ranking examiner of philosophy in your home country, Cameroon, and as contributor to a number of international conferences and publications, you have already demonstrated that the cause of philosophy in Africa is very dear to you – and that it is in good hands with you. Your argument today shows that you are aware of the paramount importance of both lay-man and specialist thought in Africa, but also of the principal dangers besieging such production of thought in Africa, and even of some of the principal resources – both local and global – countering that danger. Containing such lessons, no doubt your book will find its way to your African colleagues and worldwide. Yet, ultimately, it should only be a stepping-stone towards even more definitive, inspiring and liberating achievements, of which I know you are capable and for which your education has suitably equipped you.

Should you (as I know you will) encounter any insurmountable difficulties in the process (known as *aporias* in philosophy – unfordable rivers), let us hope and pray that your new colleagues, your teachers up to today, will live to advise you – although I suspect they would rather continue *learning from you*, as you struggle, like the Biblical Jacob son of Isaac, with the divine being apparently blocking your way but only to bless you in the end (Genesis 32:22 *f.*), on the bank of that brook with its curiously proto-Bantu name (*\*jabbok*, ‘fordable spot in the river’) at a place (West Asia) and a time (1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE, or earlier) where we would not have expected sub-Saharan Africa to be in evidence. This is my *kōan* for you, my meaningful Zen riddle, with which I proudly propose to terminate our teaching relationship as from today.

When preparing for today’s memorable event I added to my personal weblog (<http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/topicali.htm>) the first picture ever taken of you and me together, at your mother’s house in Yaounde, Cameroon (*cf.* [http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/cameroun\\_2005/cameroun.htm](http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/cameroun_2005/cameroun.htm) for details): you as an eager, budding young philosopher, next to a beaming, self-confident, still amazingly young me. Eleven years is a long time in any person’s life. In that period, we have both lived through the ups and downs of

family life, health and career, have known bereavement and severe illness but also birth and recovery, bitter disappointment but also radiant success, the demise or desertion of old friends but also the advent of loyal new ones – including those who helped realise today's success. It is fitting that you have dedicated your thesis to the memory of your father, of whom you can only cherish your childhood recollections. Over the past two years, you lost your stepfather and your brother John, and your mother's house burned down; we both know how such tragedies are read in the African context, even among Christians. But your brilliant wife Christina and three young children are awaiting your triumphant return in Bamenda, Cameroon – while here in the Netherlands your adoptive sister stands by you as a *paranymph*, and the only reason why her mother is not here is that she is now cooking a festive meal for you and your guests.



By invoking God and the ancestors [ gesture of adoration ] let us thank all those whose love and care has guided and protected you to live this glorious day – glorious not so much because it speaks of the achievement of one tenacious, resourceful, bright and charming human being (although that is certainly what you are), but because it celebrates the liberating power of interculturality and of thought – also, and especially, when in African hands.

I thank you all for your attention.

Wim van Binsbergen