Mongrelisation

Africana Philosophy

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Mongrelisation

By

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To my mother
Who worked her nails off
And broke her back
Mhamha—whose love never wears thin

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Preface

This preface will briefly outline my motivations for writing the book and position the work as a contribution to African philosophy.

I am out to grant dignity and worth to those the mongrel label is set to insult. More than that, this treatise is about rehumanising the world through crafting conceptual schema that enable us to better realise, celebrate, and cultivate shared humanity. To do this it is instructive to see that the notion in question is akin to the hybrid, Creole, and coyote. The theorisation in mind is of a piece with cosmopolitan, *mestizo*, and Afropolitan perspectives. It embraces its kinship with these well-known perspectives without seeking to knock them out. It is an outlook grounded on the finding that all human cultural achievements have been attained on the back of crossings and mixings. The metaphors and thought systems I am after speak of how people have been bound up with each other in the past, how we are enmeshed in cultural worlds, and how we could yet mongrelise in ways that produce desirable futures.

Though this project will not attempt a systematic decanting of personhood, I draw on African moral thought to deliver an original decolonial perspective that should appeal to those interested in better ways of being human wherever in the world they may be positioned.

I got interested in this topic while reading about an emerging wave of voices retrieving the unfairly maligned mongrel dog. In Africa, there is an emerging body of scholarship that reflects on how *Canis Africanis* reflects coloniality. This scholarship explains that the social history of the figure of the mongrel is bound up with the cultural-political history of the oppression of Blacks.

To fathom why reading work on *Canis Africanis* touched me tenderly, consider this personal set of notes about my paternal grandfather, who came from a household with close familial bonds to the Nyashanu chiefdom. Sekuru was a teen when the pioneer column organised by Cecil John Rhodes and his British South Africa Company initiated the conquest of what became Zimbabwe. He died in 1983 when he was well past a hundred years old, and I was a ten-year-old. But I vividly remember some of the stories he told.

In his community, Sekuru was one of the earliest converts to Christianity. He determinedly went on to become one of the first trained Black Methodist preachers. To the casual colonial observer, his life prospects may have seemed bright. He was considered a well-to-do native who was finding a respectable way into Western modernity. But he offended colonial sensibilities by objecting to being treated like a lower-class human. He protested against the lower

wages he received in comparison with his White clergical colleagues, disobeyed rules that sought to prevent Blacks from sharing pavements with Whites, and refused to pay dog taxes—all of which he said were unreasonable colonial impositions. When tax collectors came to his neighbourhood, everyone said their dogs belonged to him. In White society, he became known as an eccentric who owned thousands of mongrel strays. As he told the history, this confluence of matters led to his sanity being questioned.

Sekuru would sometimes show the scars on his wrists, marks of his resistance to being shackled for walking on a 'Whites Only' pavement. He said it took many men to pin him down and manacle his hands. He was a physically powerful, tall and stubborn man. He was so adamant that he would not be cowered into submission that a horse tied to his shackles could not move him. This is where the scars on his wrists came from. He only gave in to his captors when they asked him respectfully to go with them.

Little did he know that he would be declared mentally unfit to remain in society. He became one of the earliest patients held in the country's first mental hospital for Blacks. He was not the only political figure held in this way. As Sekuru told the story, Mathew Zvimba, the son of a prominent chief and a highly politically active figure, was also held in the same facility. While Zvimba chose to escape the confinement, my grandfather elected to defy his captors by making himself useful. He said he wanted to show that they, not he, were of questionable mental fitness for holding him in the asylum. Instead of escaping, Sekuru negotiated with the Head of the establishment to be allowed to farm and feed the whole establishment.

Sekuru was a wealthy man when he was thrown into the asylum. When he came out, he found his wealth spent. After that, his marriage with his first wife collapsed. For the rest of his life, he struggled to make ends meet.

Sekuru fought for people to mix and cross without prejudice. For this he was thrown to the dogs. But until his death, he was sure to say that all people come from the same source and that his children should mix freely, equally and proudly with anyone.

A few years ago, I was pleased to read that Zvimba (in Ranger, 1995: 28) astounded and offended a colonial Chief Native Commissioner when, in 1927, he argued against taxes imposed on natives by saying, "I am the Lord of Lords and King of Kings." Indications are that Chief Native Commissioner thought poorly of Zvimba's metaphysics—perhaps as the kinds of ramblings that can land someone in psychiatric care. I immediately recalled how Sekuru used to frequently repeat the same Biblical line to say that, being children of God, all persons are equal. He argued, from a Christian perspective that is deeply informed by African cosmologies, that all persons are sovereigns who must

refuse to be lowered before anyone. I understand that, from his Christian perspective that was doubtlessly deeply informed by African cosmologies, Sekuru was telling his grandchildren that everyone is equal and must refuse racial inferiority.

So, while this treatise must be read as an extension of early work on *Canis Africanis*, it must also be crystal clear that I do not seek to either review or parley those contributions. After reading on the dogs of Africa, I felt compelled to speak of the knowledge, power and governmentality of mongrelity. But, with further thought, I have ventured to a more fundamental set of concerns. Drawing on African systems of thought, I am out to present a secular reading of our being that insists on the need to dignify all humanity in ways that make the world a better place.

On its course, this intensely personal exploration draws on historical inspirations, lived experiences, years of working to build theory that speaks about our lived conditions, and myriad other sources. I write from many deep places when I say it is invaluable to recover the notion of mongrelity from the mouths of racists and other deniers and belittlers of our shared humanness. Recovery of the idea that we are mixed and crossed—which is what the concept of the mongrel denotatively says we are—is a pertinent exercise if we are to overcome racisms, colonialities, and other unjust otherings.

It should already be manifest, but this is as good an occasion as any to clarify that I am not out to animalise or besmirch anyone when I say we are mongrels. Far from this being the case, I heed Bénédicte Boisseron's (2018) fiery admonitions against dog metaphors. She rightly bewails animalising language that perpetuates how Blacks of all genders have been dehumanised.

I care to avoid what Richard D. Ryder (2015: 61) called 'speciesism'. He came to this concept when contesting the assumption that human beings are centres of existence, with all else in the universe being merely for our responsibility-free benefit. For Ryder, anti-speciesism runs together with anti-racism, anti-sexism, and other movements for social justice.

I will draw on African moral reasoning to recentre humanity in relational bonds of care that challenge the 'us' vs 'them' that anti-speciesism wages war with. We must choose better praxes of community—ones that respect all of nature! Given that we know the pain of centuries of unjust racial violence, I hope our insights regarding the merits of more attractive ways of living will promote individual freedoms and enrich collective humanity.

Rehumanising all of humanity is an urgent mission in our troubled times, which are peppered with news of 'civilisations' rising to protect themselves against alien influences. National borders are being shut down. Racial intolerance has stopped retreating and is boldly marching towards high ground.

Gender, religion, and other differences are being driven in old and new ways to wedge people apart. The air is heavy with narratives of trepidation about lost purities. This makes this treatise against essentialisms a timely intervention.

In truth, though, this treatise was not conceived as a rebuttal of the current wave of 'us versus them' isms. It arose, quite humbly, as a writ of appreciation for our mixed and crossed humanity. Given how our intersecting and interconnected nature has been painfully dismissed and damaged by rejections and other misanthropies, it will be necessary to mount this paean on a critical platform. The resultant combination of appreciation and critique continues traditional African homage practices that have dignified many.

While my focus is on giving scholarly tribute to our shared humanity in ways that respect differences and interconnections, it is apparent that we live in a world in which people are banally unjustly set apart from each other on grounds that include gender, sex, and religion. In the hope that a narrow and close reading will yield insights that can be applied in other spheres, I will focus primarily on issues to do with race, attending to some aspects of how the antihumanism of coloniality denies and abuses the heterogeneity of our mixedness. In particular, I will focus on the figure of the Black without settling for the naturalisation of race.

The label 'Black' has been used to identify people of African descent. It designates that Black people are a race. Race is not a 'natural' but is a social category. To indicate this, it makes sense to capitalise 'Black'. White, Coloured, Indian, and all 'race' categories likewise merit capitalisation (see Allen, 1988; Appiah, 2020). Doing this follows a convention that was first prominently adopted in 1930 when the *New York Times* took to capitalising the 'N' in 'Nigro'. It did this after Blacks had protested that failure to do this belittled those addressed by the word, which was widely used then, rather than words such as 'Blacks', which were widely adopted in later years.

I will follow the convention of capitalising the labels used to identify races to flag that these are socially constructed categories. However, I will not offer a corrective when quoting directly from sources that do not follow this convention. Allowing for this diversity in expression is consistent with the realisation that the convention is arbitrary. I hope that respecting differences in norms in this way may signal loudly against those who perpetrate injustices in favour of skin-deep prejudices.

From my slighted position in Africa and my maligned Blackness, I want to show that there is value in beginning with and recovering the outcast mongrel. I am writing from an African perspective without forgetting that I am human before I am African. I aim to do this by presenting descriptive and normative adumbrations that direct us towards acceptance and theorisation of the

apparent fact that humanness is shared and established on common grounds that we both meet and co-create.

I walk into a minefield by taking on this project. Not least, this is because questions immediately arise about the legitimacy of African philosophical perspectives.

Africa is an idea whose gnosis emerges with histories of racism and colonialism.

What is immediately apparent is that there is no singular African perspective. Over time and space, there have been, and will be many African cultures and value systems. Yet, at least since Placedes Tempels (1959), it has been conventional to speak of African philosophy.

Philosophy is commonly understood to point to the contemplative reasoning that of lovers of wisdom. The etymology of 'philosophy' takes us back to Ancient Egypt. The word *seba* is inscribed on the Ancient Egyptian tomb of Antef I, 2052 BCE. This, the earliest written text to talk about philosophy as the exercise of wise and reflective reason that guides actions concerning problems of the world, says a philosopher is one

> whose heart is informed about these things which would be otherwise ignored, the one who is clear-sighted when he is deep into a problem, the one who is moderate in his actions, who penetrates ancient writings, whose advice is (sought) to unravel complications, who is really wise, who instructed his own heart, who stays awake at night as he looks for the right paths, who surpasses what he accomplished yesterday, who is wiser than a sage, who brought himself to wisdom, who asks for advice and sees to it that he is asked advice. (in Obenga, 1992: 56)

It is from *seba* that the word *sophia* is derived. In Greek, the word *sophós* refers to a scientist or scholar, while the Greek word *sophia* speaks of 'knowledge' and 'wisdom'. The Egyptian word *sbō*—'instructed' was translated as *sophós* with the derivative *sophia* in Greek. We draw the Greek word *philosophía* from this Egyptian source. There appear to be no etymological traces of *phil, philo* or *sophós* in Indo-European languages such as Greek. However, Théophile Obenga finds evidence that suggests how the word *sophós* may have migrated to Ancient Greece. For example, he notes that Thales, who studied in Egypt, was the first Ancient Greek to be called *sophós*.

Drawing on this historical idea of the quest for wisdom, I claim that this transdisciplinary and sans-disciplinary scholarly offering is a philosophy insofar as it is an art and science that seeks to reflectively and wisely advance human culture from a particular position. I reject the appropriation of the

field by the narrow set associated with Western professional practice. Likewise, I thumb my nose at those who say philosophy is only worth the name when it has a written tradition. Our most profound philosophical works are in the script of our lives, just as our most dear literacy is of the worlds we encounter. All philosophy worthy of the name does not exist apart from people's concerns. It involves contemplative inquiries into what it means to be, where we have been, where we will go, or what we will become.

Philosophy is not merely an exercise in thinking carried out by individual philosophers. It is a social practice that theorises how people write and read the world. And, make no mistake, I am saying that theory is not separate from practice. This exposition puts a complex relational framework to the observation that philosophising is for and by everyone.

I must now channel Walter Mignolo (2007: 21) and say I am not playing games of disciplinary identity. In taking this stance, I am *writing the mongrel walk* of transgressing boundaries.

Generously acknowledging the many hands that enable individual achievements goes against the Western myth of the lone individual thinker and doer. In contrast, I take the counsel of Shona sages, who attest that *tswanda huru haitori chomuridzi*—a big basket does not have to be filled by its owner. My part is to weave a capacious basket that can freight many conceptual things, burdens, concerns, and opportunities—it is to join hands with many to provide for a better tomorrow for all. So, neither this project's innovativeness nor worth is found in humbug denial of its cooperative genesis. This perspective aligns with the fundamental insight that all that is human—including our creative innovations—are combinations and recombinations of prior forms.

Ultimately, this is an exploratory and expository project. It provides an account that enables scholars and lay persons alike to assess the viability and promise of the mongrel metaphor and its associated conceptual framings. It is expository in that it champions a kind and yet transgressive way of thinking about the human condition.

I am staking a humble claim to making a philosophical contribution in the understanding that all quests for wisdom are cultural modes of expression. This work is a small part of the story of how humans live in and make sense of social realities. I strive to account for needs, concerns, and interests that arise in my context. In doing this, I do not hesitate to take in applicable knowledge from anywhere so long as it adds to efforts to form viable bases for endogenous adaptations and developments.

Though this project does not seek to decant personhood, it contends that African traditional conceptions of humanness grant that personhood arises in societies. They grant that personhood arises as intermixtures.

I will argue that from the evolutionary bottom of humanness, we have been entwined in others.

I will read ubuntu as an African moral philosophy that manifests in a plurality of norms which are incompletely realised. It is formed and reformed in the cultural practices of the people who normativise personhood and practice morality in pursuit of it.

When talking about African moral philosophy, I will not seek to enter into arguments regarding the extent and nature of how Sub-Saharan moral cultures are extensions of Kemetic forms (rather see Luyaluka, 2019; Diop, 1974; Martin, 2008). This difficult conversation is not one I can satisfactorily contribute to here. Suffice it to say that I will try to tread carefully when speaking about Africa and Africans so that I do not level out differences that matter. I will honour the reasonable understanding that Africa and Africanness of systems of thinking are contested by seeking to avoid rash and harmful generalisations. To fail to grant recognition and respect to different individuals and cultures would cut against every tenet of the thinking this project advances.

I take *a priori* the life-affirming values of Maat as historical antecedents of ubuntu. I accept that Maat has imprints in contemporary African moral perspectives.

Developed by the people of the Ancient Egyptian Kingdom of Kemet, Maat is a relational system of virtue that requires and produces right actions towards the Divine, nature and other people. 'Maat' may be translated into 'right', 'rightness', 'truth', and 'justice'. Ancient Egyptian attitudes in this regard constitute a system of ethics and morality that is embedded in knowledge and wisdom that reach towards the Divine (Karenga, 2004: 10; Lichtheim, 1992: 7).

It is inopportune to entertain family squabbles about the legitimacy, breadth and width of Africa and Africanness. Still, admittedly, talk of African philosophy may easily bind us to unreal purities, myths, and ossifying ideologies that deny pluralities and differences (Janz, 2009: 37–62; Wiredu, 1980). Within and beyond the continent's boundaries, African identities and representations agglomerate innumerable precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial genealogies, myths, contingencies, individualities, and imaginations. Demarcating the scope of possible African expressions, even if this is by anchoring them to one port, involves violent inclusions and omissions that painfully distort actualities and potentials (Eze, 2008; Diagne, 2009; Gyekye, 1996).

African philosophy is not sealed and delivered into one neat category or another. Nothing African is simple, singular, or flat. Whatever the gains may be, gross injustices are committed wherever people are levelled and agglomerated in ways that would accord with imagined Africanities. African worldviews have contesting, co-existing, and emergent oral, painted, written, forgotten

and remembered histories, traditions, customs and orientations that merit fair and representation exploration. African philosophy cannot but be a practice that is as complexly capacious, open, bounded, and freely chosen as the people who elaborate it while choosing, changing and enacting belonging in multiple, conflicting, dynamic, and conflict-ridden fashions.

An infinitude of factors shape any weltanschauung. We see this in how different African cultures and subcultures present identifiable philosophies. And we also notice this in the trite fact that human cultures are complexly interrelated. All human actions are individual, communal, and global to varying degrees. Seeing this enables Kwesi Wiredu (1992: 9), while commenting on Ghanaian thought, to draw attention to the trite fact that work on Ghanaian philosophy contributes to African worldviews. With further obviousness, one may add that a contribution to Ghanaian and African philosophy is an input to human cultural development.

There are many African philosophies, but this does not make it vapid to speak of African philosophy—just as we can recognise that there are many Africans without this preventing us from pointing out that a particular person is African. This project presents an African perspective, and it draws on African philosophies, but that does not mean it harbours the hubris that can envelop all legitimate African intellectual ideas that lie within its scope.

This project aims to re-think and re-member difference. Working on it can open the way for new and better ways of dignifying humankind. As I do this, I honour those who have thought about similar humanising notions before me.

A little while after I started working on this topic, a colleague pointed out to me that in 2015, in the heat of student protests to decolonise universities, Jade Hoffman a third-year University of the Free State student in Fine Arts, was assisted by O'Ryan Heideman and Thato Nkgapele to put up wire sculptures of mongrel dogs. The students did this work as part of a 'social cohesion' project funded by the National Arts Council of South Africa.

One of the objectives of the Council, spelt out in the National Arts Council Act of 1997, is to foster a national identity and give consciousness and expression to this identity through the arts. In line with this, the students positioned wire *Canis Africanis* dogs in the University's Presidentsplein—a square in front of the Bloemfontein Campus Main Building. They wanted to ignite discussions that could foster an inclusive national identity.

At the time, two monuments of historical significance stood in the square. One was of President C.R. Swart, who served as the last governor-general of the Union of South Africa from 1959 to 1961. He went on to be the first state president of the Republic of South Africa from 1961 to 1967. The second was

President M.T. Stein, who was the sixth and last leader of the Afrikaans-led Orange Free State from 1896 to 1902.

Hoffman's wire *Canis Africanis* dogs were placed at the feet of the Steyn Monument to encourage audiences to relearn to value all people while realising that we have always been "merging", "*we are already on our way*" to being mongrels (Hoffman, 2016: 35, *highlights in original*).

This is not a critical review of the young artists' work.

So, I will swiftly move on to say that I admire Hoffman's courageous, youthful insights. Her art shone a light on the fact that the belated classification of *Canis Africanis* as a pedigreed dog is an acknowledgement that colonial and apartheid segregation is unmerited and unjust. She understood the story of the African dog is considerably inseparable from that of the continent's indigenous peoples.

I humbly submit that I am trying to learn from Hoffman's 2015 student project. While she placed her dogs at the feet of a monument to a dead White president to invite a University discussion on social cohesion, I am putting my writing before readers I invite to self-reflectively re-think how they think about themselves. I do this knowing that the task in hand cannot be meaningfully carried out without looking at how individuals relate with others.

Stand my wish to learn from a student of our University against the swift and harsh reaction Hoffman's wire dogs received when they were installed. A group of White male students vandalised them! The bruisers responded to the young artist's representations of our shared mongrelity with fear and destructive violence. In contrast, my approach to facing up to our being is careful not to be damaging even as it does not side-step contentious conversations. It seeks to build and open spaces for us all to flourish in the gainfulness that human dignity affords.

I am glad to report that my University has moved significantly past that epoch of mind-numbing fear and trembling in the face of 'others'. Without denying that the University continues to negotiate difficult social, cultural and structural hardships and strife related to colonial and apartheid history, I report on progress in race relations at the University since I have watched part of the change from close range while heading its descriptively titled Unit for Institutional Change and Social Justice. I have followed the great work by which many individuals, before and after my time at the Unit, have broken down barriers to inclusion and dignity. So, I know that we can all make vital changes to how we see ourselves and others that will advance socially just rebirths of the world we live in. I believe the contents of this book contribute to this social change agenda.

This slim offering seeks to dignify our mongrelness. Among other things, I will try to show that this implies that we must find the humanity to see that to promote the individual good is to advance the good of all beings that share our cosmos.

Let us now get to philosophising in favour of our unjustly divided humanity—a task that requires trying to see and discuss our being afresh. I pray readers will not react with cold and blanket haste and adversely to this fervently offered body of ideas and hopes.

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I marvel at the patience and insights of the series editor Everet Green and his anonymous reviewers. If your work is often thankless, please hear my Shona when I say *Tatenda*—accepting and acknowledging how you have pushed me to greater heights.

And how can I say I appreciate the Brill Dream Team—Helena Schöb, Erika Mandarino and Giorgia Rota? Publishing is not easy work. Yet this team has only met me with grace, creativity and professional commitment to excellence.

I cannot forget to thank Innocent Dande, who I met on one of my many walks on campus. He piqued my interest with talk of his work on mongrel dogs. But many moons later, when I got to searching for literature on the topic, he was not to be found. I am glad I have cited some of his work, and that I eventually tracked him down to my express appreciation for how his work led me to this exploration.

There are countless others whose contributions I am unable to list. In some instances, there are important names I fail to remember. So, trust me, I am aware that my work is a mongrel with many sources that spring eternal.

Above all, I thank my family.

This work is love made visible.

All the omissions and commissions that make my writing less than it could be are hard to bear. So, I hope readers generously take these as opportunities for productive engagements that can produce great good. As for me, there remains the certainty and gratitude of knowing that this project could not have delivered this fruit without so many contributions from others.