



VRUJWILLIGERS
ACADEMIE Amsterdam

Masterclass African Values and Supporting People

4 February 2020

Pius Mosima is philosopher from Cameroon where he teaches at the university of Bamenda. He is specialised in African and Intercultural philosophy.

Objective: Become familiar with a different frame of reference and thinking regarding supporting people in emotional and mental challenging situations and get ideas on how African values can be included in our ways of supporting each other.

Content

In this masterclass Pius Mosima shares from his personal and academic background in Cameroon, how African values can lead to alternative frames of thought on supporting each other and offer insight in supporting people who are emotionally and mentally experiencing difficult circumstances, like depression or loneliness.

Pius shares from his own experience in Cameroon how life is deeply communal. The individual **life is always connected to the community**. 'We are a person through other persons.' He refers to volunteers having a similar feeling for others and therefore can change things in our Western way of living. He asks the volunteers 'to construct new villages.' In this he refers as well to the notion of the family, meaning also the **family beyond the nuclear family**, including those who are not born yet and the ancestors who have died, but also we in this room are his sisters and brothers. By using this language you create a different feeling of belonging.

Furthermore, he shares from his own frame of reference how African people deal with mental problems or feelings of depression (even though strictly there is not a word for it). There is a **healing process in front of the community**. Herbs are used (not pills). Here, the community is very important. '**Belonging heals depression.**' He emphasizes the role of strong women in African communities. Another important aspect is the **religious and spiritual element**.

In the African concept of personhood (even though he only referred to his own background, similar concepts can be found in other African countries), the person is not body – mind (like the French philosopher Descartes made us believe), but the soul and spiritual part of the person is very important. Too much focus on the mind will contribute to depression. 'don't overstuff the mind.' The body is important, dance, use your body when you speak.

There is also the aspect of Vital Force. Everything is spirited. If referred to God, there is a mix of Christian religion with indigenous religion. He describes this as a God with subgods and emphasizes the importance of 'hope.' Not the founder of religion or the Bible is important, but that 'we live our religion.'

This frame of thought is also challenge in our own context:

Some participants can connect with the religious aspect, for others the word 'God' is problematic. It can also be described as 'love.'

Another question is 'what to do if you are different from the community you are meant to belong to and you don't fit it, e.g. because of your sexual orientation.'

From an African ethical perspective, everybody should be considered as human and therefore belong to the community, but Pius recognizes that in practice this is often not the case. He does not want to idealize the African situation, but wants to share a different frame of reference. The notion of human rights is discussed as these are based on the concept of 'individuals. In our Western way of thinking how we relate to each other in a group is often based on the notion of a 'social contract.' This is very different than the feeling of belonging to a group in African communities.

Another aspect often present in African communities is the 'sages', the people who are considered the wise people within their community. One of the participants, Henk Haenen shares his thoughts about this. The way of communicating of the sages is through proverbs.

We split up in six groups and each receives a proverb and an image as a starting point to discuss and relate this to our own experience.



Wisdom is like a baobab; one person alone cannot embrace it.



He/ She ('God') is a force that moves the world.



'God' is the concept of open-heartedness



Happiness is openness to all people. It is good.



It is a duty of every person to reject force imposed by another.



'Relations are like a part of your body; if anything touches it, however small, you feel it.'

Participants critically reflect on these:

It is not only God who moves the world. We are in motion together.

If the emphasis is on happiness, can we then also create space for the circle of life. To what extent can we be unhappy?

The word 'duty' is very strong.

We should also realise that not all depression can be healed in relations. Sometimes it is exactly difficult relations, which caused the depression

Reaction group on reconstructing villages: the vision of people of different generations living together and taking care of each other (stadsdorpen). Or invite different people together even if they don't know each other. Another idea is to find the village in the big city (e.g. marktplaats).

From the masterclass it becomes apparent that we have indeed different frames of reference and hopefully this gave some insight in differences and possibly inspiration, without valuing the one above the other. The experiences and ideas shared should be seen in the context of Pius life in Cameroon. Also, Africa is a continent with an enormous variety of cultures, languages and values. The communal, religious and spiritual aspect are probably more dominant than in Western countries, but there are differences between places as well.

More to see/ to read:

Sunny Bergman on depression in Ghana:

<https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/sunny-side-of-spirit/1.html>

Interview Pius Mosima Trouw:

<https://www.trouw.nl/religie-filosofie/nergens-in-afrika-bestaat-er-een-woord-voor->

[depressie~bb89aef9/](#)

De Correspondent: Depressie is een ziekte van de hele maatschappij:

<https://decorrespondent.nl/9479/depressie-is-een-ziekte-van-de-hele-maatschappij/1044330985522-842ba02f>

