

Rhetoric in Africa

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This description of rhetoric in Africa will focus on two primary tendencies, namely, the valorization of the virtues of classical antiquity on the one hand, and the highlighting of an ethos of cosmopolitanism and the politics of the private on the other. These two disparate discursive operations are often complementary and give a deeper meaning to the political and cultural formations of the contemporary age.

The academic study of rhetoric studies in Africa is relatively new and South Africa maintains a pivotal position in spreading and entrenching the discipline. In this regard, the efforts and accomplishments of a South African-based French professor of philosophy, Philippe-Joseph Salazar, who founded the Centre for Rhetoric Studies, University of Cape Town, have been seminal. Salazar has not only worked to establish the academic parameters and credentials of the discipline but has also contributed to the creation of the institutions to legitimize the field of study. In particular, he was instrumental in establishing an association for the study of rhetoric and communication in Southern Africa whose reach extends to other parts of Africa and the globe, and which espouses a multidisciplinary ethic (see for instance Salazar et al. 2002).

In addition, one of the ways in which Salazar lays the foundations for the academic viability of the field is by various interrogations of categories such as democracy and race within the context of post-apartheid South Africa (→ Rhetoric and Race). Accordingly, Salazar's important study *An African Athens: Rhetoric and the shaping of democracy in South Africa* (2002) examines the discourses of democracy, multiculturalism, race, cosmopolitanism, public deliberation, and constitutionalism in South Africa (Osha 2005). Within the shores of Africa, Salazar's focus on democracy, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism is quite important for moving beyond conventional discourses that fail to address the interconnections between these categories. Along with these general discursive concerns, there have also been elaborate attempts to ground the study of rhetoric beyond Southern Africa, in regions as diverse as West Africa, through the hosting of regular international conferences that attract reputable academics from all over the world. In other words, the institutionalization of the practice has indeed been equally important.

Democracy remains a very topical issue in Africa for many reasons. The problems of governance have been the bane of postcolonial development. Ethnic conflicts, wars, and genocide continue to plague the African continent, as events and developments in Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and so many other countries demonstrate. The global community wishes to see Africa democratize and develop, and in this connection external theories of democracy and development are frequently advanced. A dominant *rhetoric of democracy* offered by the Bretton Woods institutional order for postcolonial African nations includes the following conditionalities: good governance, public accountability, fiscal discipline, and economic liberalization. This dominant rhetoric of democracy is often proffered without an

elaborate historical context. Salazar and other scholars (for example, Cassin 1998) re-establish the rhetorical and historical connections between Athenian conceptions of democracy and modern modes of governmentality. By making this connection, scholars of rhetoric in Africa historicize, and grant depth to, the problem of governance in contemporary times.

The historicization of the rhetoric of democracy in contemporary times is not a merely anachronistic maneuver. Scholars of rhetoric also investigate categories such as race, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and sexuality, as we have noted in the case of Salazar. These various preoccupations give the study of rhetoric a contemporary flavor and relevance. In his reflections on these issues, Salazar advances a notion of multiculturalism (rainbowism), tolerance, and a new understanding of the semiotics of the body within a globalizing, cosmopolitan South African context (→ Rhetoric, Vernacular). The investigation of cosmopolitan sensibilities, the ethics of good living, and the technologies of the self in the neo-liberal age is usually conducted within the context of broader historical dimensions. In this way, we come to understand that the competitive spirit of sport and its modern sublimation owe much to the medieval thrust to domesticate human activities that were usually bloody or unduly harmful. The contemporary cult of the body and the cult of personality regarding the ruler (caesarism) can be traced to distinct historical formations, and part of the success of rhetoric studies has been to unravel the antecedents of these traces.

As mentioned, the study of rhetoric in Africa has moved in *two central directions*. First, there has been a powerful tendency to foreground the importance of classical studies and knowledges. Second, the gains made from the initial maneuver are then transferred to explorations of contemporary phenomena and problems. Scholars of rhetoric studies have also situated the contemporary political instrumentalization of the concept of democracy within a much broader conceptual canvas than is usually attempted by scholars in other disciplines, through a conscious link to Athenian institutional impetuses and forms of life (→ Rhetoric, Greek). The multidisciplinary scope and approach of rhetoric studies in Africa has been considerably assisted by the contributions of scholars such as Charles Calder and Chris Dunton, who employ their backgrounds in literature and literary theory to demonstrate the ways in which contemporary sexualities can be conceptualized. Thus by unearthing the deeper layers of meaning in the concepts that govern contemporary existence, scholars of rhetoric in Africa show that what is assumed to be “new” or “unusual” has wider and perhaps more illustrious historical origins.

SEE ALSO: ► Rhetoric, Greek ► Rhetoric and Race ► Rhetoric, Vernacular

References and Suggested Readings

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- Salazar, J.-P., Osha, S., & van Binsbergen, W. (eds.) (2002). *Truth in politics: Rhetorical approaches to democratic deliberation in Africa and beyond*. Special issue of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, 16(1–2).