

Makerere marks World Philosophy Day

The Makerere University Department of Philosophy joined the rest of the world to mark the World Philosophy Day on 16th November, 2011, with a call for greater use of reason, critical thinking and dialogue in addressing challenges faced by humankind.

Celebrations to mark the day were held in the University Senate Building under the theme; “Understanding the Role of Philosophy in Uganda’s Development.” The function was attended by the Minister of Ethics and Integrity, Rev. Fr. Simon Lokodo and other dignitaries.

Addressing participants, mainly philosophy students and representatives from UNESCO, Dr Gervase Tusabe, a senior lecturer in the Philosophy Department at Makerere, emphasized the importance of philosophy in the development of any society, noting that the critical nature of the discipline demands it to always strive to detect and guard against fallacious beliefs and claims that may undermine trends of livelihood as well as establishing and sustaining a good society.

Dr. Tusabe said if human beings are not effectively equipped with the critical skills that philosophy offers, they may be obstructed from founding and sustaining democratic governance. “Moral philosophy is a vital subject to have in civic education if we are to have informed citizens who can make critical reflections and deliberations on social and political matters that affect them,” Dr Tusabe noted.

Despite the numerous contributions of philosophy to personal and societal development, Dr. Wilfred Lajul, also a senior lecturer of philosophy at Makerere, noted that the discipline still faces challenges, especially in the area of ethics, where failure to expand the principle of communal responsibility beyond tribal lines has promoted tribalism. “The bigger challenge is that Africans, since independence, have failed to expand the boundaries of this communal brotherhood beyond their tribal or ethical boundaries. In Uganda for example, the atrocities committed by (former military dictator) Idi Amin and his supporters were translated into hatred and persecution of Amin’s tribemen, the Kakwa. He noted that the Kakwa’s close allies the Madi and Lugbara - were also persecuted by other Ugandan tribes for Amin’s deeds.

In a statement read for her by Mr. Peter Olowo, Programme Officer – Sciences at the Uganda National Commission for UNESCO, the Director-General of UNESCO, Ms. Irina Bokova, noted that philosophy, the exercise of critical thought and freedom of expression, is vital in the search for lasting responses to the challenges of peace and development.

Bakova further noted that the extraordinary exuberance of the Arab Spring invites everyone, whether participants in or spectators of these events, to ponder the meaning of history, social justice, gender equality and fundamental freedoms. “Several large-scale disasters – in particular, the earthquake followed by a tsunami and nuclear accident in Fukushima – have emphasized the powerful relevance of questions on the place of humans in nature. All of these events call on us to bolster our efforts to provide everyone, the young and the old alike, with the means for understanding our rapidly changing societies.”

The Makerere University Vice Chancellor, Prof. Venansius Baryamureeba, called for the recognition of the critical role that the age-old tradition of philosophy can play in the modern, interconnected world. He noted that philosophy teaches diversity lessons through its numerous schools of thought.

“The study of philosophy develops a particular set of skills: People who study philosophy are able to make critical evaluation of philosophical positions and arguments using the techniques and methods of philosophy. They are able to interpret contemporary and historical texts, reconstruct positions, follow complex lines of reasoning, weigh evidence for or against views, craft arguments, offer creative answers to philosophical questions and construct independent solutions to philosophical problems,” he said, adding that philosophy could effectively guide humans in critically assessing their problems and designing adequate solutions for them.

The chief guest, Ethics Minister Lokodo called for public responsibility in solving problems that affect humanity. He urged Ugandans to take action against the wrongs in society, adding that this is the only way corruption, which has led to the degeneration of the country, can be fought.

The World Philosophy Day is celebrated every third Thursday of November since 2002, with the aim of making philosophical reflection accessible to all – professors and students, scholars and the general public – thereby enlarging the opportunities and spaces for the stimulation of critical thinking and debate.