

BOOK REVIEW

Francis B. Nyamnjoh, Patrick Nwosu, and Hassan M. Yosimbom, editors. *Being and Becoming African as a Permanent Work in Progress: Inspiration from Chinua Achebe's Proverbs*. Mankon, Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaaa Research & Publishing ClG, 2021. xx + 490 pp. \$55.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-9956-551-47-7.

The edited volume *Being and Becoming African as a Permanent Work in Progress* offers a unique take on the question of identity formation and the historical process of defining Africanity. The eighteen essays that comprise this collection examine the meaning of being African through the lens of the proverbs invoked by Chinua Achebe in his works. Drawing on traditional practices and sayings from a variety of communities throughout Africa, the contributions explore the fluidity and constancy evident in the construction of social identities, specifically in the colonial and post-colonial context. This is certainly a celebration of Achebe's importance in contemporary African literature and thought, but the book is also an act of re-construction of the African sense of self in the wake of imperial rule and the recovery of political sovereignty. Divided into four sections with an introduction and afterword, *Being and Becoming African* makes a significant and nuanced intervention in the ongoing conversation about what it means and is to be African.


The first section of four essays explores the importance of proverbs in African cultures and demonstrates why the invocation of proverbs in contemporary literature can be a potent mechanism for exploring themes critical to the life of African communities. Taking the lead from Achebe as well as integrating his insightful use of African proverbs, the authors examine how certain sayings have maintained their importance among Akan, Igbo, and other cultures in Nigeria and Ghana. One way their power has persisted is due to their malleability and the agency of the teller in shaping the meaning of the proverb within a specific context. In this way, the proverb has the force of historical relevance in addition to being a living part of the community so that it can be used to guide purposeful action in the present.

The second section shifts to a thematic examination of how proverbs shape and revitalize spirituality and moral systems in the space of post-colonial African politics. Drawing on examples from Ethiopia as well as more illustrations from the Igbo and Yoruba experiences in Nigeria, the four

contributions to this part interrogate the intersection of morality and governance to hold political leadership accountable as well as to expose the corruption and misgoverning of those in positions of power. It is also a mechanism whereby agency is recovered among the people to delegitimize those with elite status who violate the norms of the community. Beyond a mere invocation of established expectations for proper conduct, the proverbs are mobilized to chart a path forward to correct the ills in society and to continue to shape the existence of the community so that it meets the needs of the people, while also making the proverbs available (and relevant) for the future.

In section three, the focus is on proverbs as a genre of expression. Here the nature of the proverb is interrogated by the four authors as they delve into the construction of the thing-in-itself as well as how this offers a uniquely African contribution to global literature and performance. Returning to one of the arguments in the introduction, this part of the volume argues for the alive-ness of the proverb and its accessibility as a link to the past as well as its openness to reconstruction and reinterpretation in contemporary circumstances. As such, the proverb is an integral aspect of the process of defining Africanness and the place of Africa in the global space.

Finally, the fourth section of six essays dives into the role of proverbs as a font of knowledge as well as a realm for the articulation of epistemological frameworks for the further elaboration of systems of wisdom. Beyond the specific phrases used in proverbs, the terms contain multiple potential meanings, and new understandings can be embedded into the enunciation and re-contextualization of those cultural artefacts. This returns to the way in which Achebe used proverbs to speak to his audiences and the contemporary world at large. Drawing on the received wisdom of the past but placing that in novel frames allowed Achebe to connect directly to the process of understanding the colonial experience, recover and invent a sense of African identity in the wake of that moment, and at the same time de-privilege colonialism as a determinant in the making of the African sense of self in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the end, this book is a critical contribution to the fields of African philosophy, cultural studies, and history.

James E. Genova 

The Ohio State University-Marion
Marion, Ohio, USA
genova.2@osu.edu

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