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Review of Ambrose Adikankwu Monye’s Proverbs in African Orature: The Aniocha Igbo Case

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Despite these criticisms, Cann’s work nevertheless is a valuable tool for those interested in studying the official Portuguese perspective on colonial wars in Angola, Guinea, and Mozambique.

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PROVERBS IN AFRICAN ORATURE: THE ANIOCHA-IGBO EXPERIENCE.

The author’s declared mission in this study is to offer a synthesis of analytical methods needed to evolve “a new approach to the criticism of African proverbs” (p. xi). For him, this synthesis consists in “incorporating the views of the folk on how they use and appreciate their proverbs as well as the literary styles, strategies, and critical responses they give while doing so with those of the literary analyst-participants” (pp. x–xi). In the hope of “making some significant contribution to African scholarship,” the author declares this synthesis to be the “missing link” earlier scholars have failed to include in their research (p. x). Those unaware of the large body of scholarship over the past thirty years or so on African proverbs and other aspects of African oral literature might find these objectives as innovative as the author would have them believe. But for most scholars of African oral literature, the book is a disappointing baggage of platitudes that is made all the more irritating by the curious mixture of naiveté and arrogance that the author brings to the enterprise.

There is neither a “missing link” nor a “synthesis” in this book. Monye merely applies the fairly well-established principles of metafolklore to the analysis of a body of proverbs collected among the Igbo people of Aniocha, west of the lower Niger, in the present-day Delta state of south-central Nigeria. What Alan Dundes describes as “oral literary criticism” was later promoted by other scholars as an endocultural tool for ascertaining and analyzing the aesthetic principles of art recognized and used by the people among whom oral literature flourishes. ¹

Since the late 1970s, it has become increasingly conventional to include some data from oral literary criticism in the scholarly analysis of most forms of African oral literature. Focused studies of this kind include several articles by the present writer specifically on the Igbo epic.² It is thus both naive and arrogant for Monye to presume that his project of synthesizing Aniocha “canons of oral literary criti-


cism" and what he naively calls "those of the orthodox" would pave the way for "a new kind of criticism which would be accepted as a paradigm for the criticism of African proverbs in general" (p. vii). Since such a critical tool already exists, Monye's effort in this book amounts to nothing less than an awkward attempt to reinvent the wheel.

Monye's major problem lies either in his unfortunately shallow knowledge of relevant published materials in the field to which he claims to be a pioneer, or in his apparently deliberate suppression of evidence that would have contradicted his self-promoting image as a pioneering Igbo paraemiologist. No knowledgeable African paraemiologist would make the statement Monye makes so brazenly:

Our investigations reveal that earlier studies of African proverbs both by expatriates and African scholars have not paid due attention to how Africans use and appreciate their proverbs as well as some of the canons of oral literary criticism which they give to their proverbs (p. vii).

Monye's methods are clearly in line with what is widely recognized today as the most valuable approach to the collection of proverbs. What is at issue is the projection of this folklore-in-context or performance-oriented approach as an innovative approach that supersedes the efforts of all his predecessors.

Interestingly, Monye presents himself as the chosen successor of the great Igbo folklorist, the late Donatus Nwoga. The failure to cite even one out of several fine articles on the Igbo proverbs by his peers and contemporaries at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, raises serious doubts about Monye's self-promoting strategy. Other Igbo paraemiologists would seem to have stronger claims to the achievements in Igbo proverb scholarship that Monye claims for himself. This is particularly true of Nwachukwu-Agbada, the author of over fifteen articles on Igbo proverbs, whose dissertation on Igbo proverbs at the University of Ibadan represents a more coherent and rigorous application of the metafolkloristic instruments Monye arrogates to himself.

This book should be read not as the radically innovative critical tool it pretends to be, but as a mediocre application of a well-established metafolkloristic instrument to a previously unpublished corpus of proverb texts from the Western Igbo country. In addition to its other deficiencies, the book is full of stylistic inelegancies. It is generally repetitious and ill-organized. Curiously, every chapter has a bibliography, with a number of entries appearing in every one of these chapter bibliographies as well as in the general bibliography at the end of the book. No attempt has been made to transcribe the Igbo texts in accordance with the well-established principles of official Igbo orthography (the Onwu Orthography of 1961). Thus, such essential diacritical marks as tone-marks on homonyms and subscript dots on open vowels are missing, making it difficult in most cases to read the Igbo texts without the aid of the author's translations which, in themselves, are not consistently accurate.

In 1913–14, the British colonial anthropologist and linguist Northcote W. Thomas published several hundred proverbs in two volumes of his Anthropological Report on Ibo-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria (reprinted by Negro Universities Press in 1969). Many of these proverbs come from the same Aniocha Igbo culture area from which Monye's texts have been collected. It is truly disappointing that
the present work, produced over fifty years later by a native speaker of one of the Aniocha dialects should add so little to our understanding of the obviously rich and varied rhetorical resources of the region. This text is not recommended for any serious student of Aniocha proverbs or for Igbo oral literature at any level.

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This work, formidable in learning and unwavering in aim, is dedicated to the proposition that, by comparison with all other imperial constructs in modern history, the colonial state in Africa left a legacy that was unusually malign. The Romans conferred a slowly widening citizenship; the Spanish crown, if not as altruistic as Las Casas, tried to lessen the burdens on South American Indians; the Dutch in the East Indies did little more than trade. In more recent times, the Americans allowed Filipinos to intrigue; the Japanese left a varied imprint on East Asia; ex-colonial plural societies in southeast Asia have done pretty well for themselves. The regimes that come out best in Young’s survey are the British West Indies and British India. These left behind them working democracies that have stood the tests of time and crisis. In the former more than a century elapsed between slave emancipation and independence, time for the emergence of civil society. In the latter, a cultural policy intimidated by the Mutiny in the last century combined with a canny strategy of devolution in this one to produce a fusion of political cultures, at once local and liberal. It was by learning from their previous experience in India that the British were able to put up the “least worst” show in some parts of Africa.

What then was peculiarly unfortunate about African colonial states? Young unpacks this question before answering it. He goes into the foggy issue of the nature of the state and (as is his habit) emerges with clear answers. States are abstractions; but their governing regimes are all too human, with self-interests that set them apart from their subjects. Subjects they will remain if they do not become citizens. The necessary alchemy is struggle, in which amorphous masses with no effective opinion become a civil society with a competitive self-interest in holding their rulers to some sort of account. The nub of Young’s argument is that colonial regimes in Africa neither permitted the politico-economic space nor laid the appropriate cultural foundation for that kind of politics. They were initially unwilling and, when on their deathbed they repented, proved to be unable to reform productively because of the brutally exclusionary manner in which they had secured their state interests in the first place.

In Young’s analysis states have six interests. First, to build hegemony (which seems to mean control) by a mixture of force, cooptation, and law; next, to defend