

Book Review

**Review of Helen Lauer and Kofi Anyidoho's *Reclaiming
the Human Sciences and Humanities through African
Perspectives***

**TITLE: *Reclaiming the Human Sciences and Humanities
through African Perspectives***

EDITORS: Helen Lauer and Kofi Anyidoho

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The title of this seminal two-volume anthology edited by Profs. Helen Lauer and Kofi Anyidoho draws our attention to two fields of study: on the one hand, it directs our thoughts to “the human sciences” that are also often referred to as “the social sciences” comprising disciplines such as sociology, political science and economics with a methodology which is largely empirical; on the other, it calls upon us to reflect on “the humanities” that focus on introspection and comprise disciplines such as philosophy, literature and the fine arts. Furthermore, the title talks about “reclaiming” these two fields of study through African perspectives. This suggests that the two fields have been illegitimately taken away, presumably from Africans. Reading through the essays in the collection, one quickly sees what has taken the two fields of study away from Africa, namely, the capitalist-dominated Western scholarship that, in the name of universalism, has thickly painted them with its individualistic brush in total disregard of the communalistic orientation of African societies. It is gratifying to note that the title talks of “African perspectives” (plural), thus rejecting the popular but erroneous view that *all* Africans have *one* perspective. This affirmation of multiple African perspectives validates the Dholuo saying that *Paro Iye ng’eny: ng’ato paro mana mage* (“Thought is diverse: each person thinks his/her own thoughts”), and the Kiswahili saying that *akili ni nywele: kila mtu anazake*, which I dynamically translate as “Thoughts are like hair - each person has his/her own.” Paulin J. Hountondji, who decades ago warned against what he called “the unanimist fallacy” (Hountondji 1983, 69), will probably be delighted by this affirmation of pluralism in African thought.

As several African scholars have correctly pointed out, the heritage of the various African peoples have vast potential for the development of theoretical paths alternative to those that comprise Western academic orthodoxy. In this regard, I was recently talking to a friend who had trouble identifying a research problem for her doctoral thesis because the theories in the Western-dominated literature did not account for African realities. I advised her that what she thought was a challenge was actually a vast opportunity, as she could significantly contribute to the building of a non-Western theoretical approach to her area of interest. Indeed, while some Western agencies now profess to promote indigenous knowledge systems (see for example World Bank 2004), I often get the uncomfortable feeling that Western academia views such systems as inferior to “Western science”, whatever that means. *Reclaiming the Human Sciences and Humanities through African Perspectives* is in the tradition of works

that have great faith in the rich heritage of the various African communities spanning centuries, rudely interrupted by imperialism, but boldly seeking to reclaim **their** place in the global community of knowledge producers. Such works include Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967), Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1973), Kihumbu Thairu's *The African Civilisation* (1975), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), H. Odera Oruka's *Sage Philosophy* (Oruka ed. 1991), Kwasi Wiredu's "Toward Decolonising African Philosophy and Religion" (1998), and D.A. Masolo's *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010).

We learn from the preface of the anthology that it was inspired by an international symposium held on the Legon campus of the University of Ghana in September 2003, hosted by the CODESRIA African Humanities Institute Programme, under the broad theme "Canonical Works and Continuing Innovation in African Arts & Humanities" (p.iv). The editors go on to indicate that "This collection has been compiled as a possible antidote to our collective alienation. It is designed for random browsing, as if one were attending a fast-paced symposium of first rate, creative minds. It is intended to inspire, tease, taunt, provoke and compel young academics, whose listless miasma paralyzes them for lack of contact with role models, engaged in the daily arm wrestling that is so essential for vibrant knowledge production" (p.iv). The editors also indicate that some of the papers are decades-old, while others are by relatively unknown but acute theorists, specialists and literary activists from several countries, among them Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda (p.iv).

The first two essays in the anthology set the tone of the discourse. Giving copious examples from sociology, political science and economics, Claude Ake's "Social Science as Imperialism" demonstrates that to continue on the well-trodden path of Western social science is to perpetuate the domination of Africa by putting an alien capitalist orientation in the place of the socialist orientation so characteristic of indigenous African communities. On his part, in "Nationalising Africa, Culturalising the West, and Reformulating the Humanities in Africa", Toyin Falola draws our attention to the vast potential of the humanities to evoke imagination, and the central place of such imagination in all liberating social engineering. Falola calls for "a humanities that can respond to the challenges of reformulating ideas, images, narratives and frameworks so that the products of these disciplines can serve more than the shameless elite" (p.31). Falola cautions against misplaced comparisons between the humanities on the one hand with the sciences and technologies on the other, misleading

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analyses of the connections between the humanities and the market, and the temptation to ‘technocratise’ the humanities, all of which vindicate my own warning, in a previous issue of this journal, against philosophers succumbing to undue influence from the social sciences, especially with reference to methodology (see Oduor 2010).

The anthology ends with Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s “Remembering Africa: Memory, Restoration and African Renaissance”, which aptly captures the over-arching goal of the collection, that is, the need to utilise indigenous African intellectual resources to liberate African scholarship from Western domination. Ngugi takes up one of his favourite topics - the need for African scholars to facilitate the preservation and development of the continent’s intellectual heritage by writing in their indigenous languages.

Each of the eighty-two essays between Ake’s and Falola’s at the beginning and Ngugi’s at the end is a unique contribution to the effort to preserve and utilise the indigenous African intellectual heritage in contemporary African scholarship. Yet the collection does not advocate for an uncritical acceptance of this heritage; instead, it encourages a thoroughgoing examination not only of Western scholarship and its African appendages, but also that of pre-colonial African societies, as well as that of some of the misleading notions now bandied about in the name of those societies. This critical approach is evident in several papers that pursue themes similar to Derek Gjertsen’s “‘Viruses’ of the Mind” (p.164 ff.), and which are reminiscent of Wiredu’s incisive critique of indigenous African culture in “Philosophy and an African Culture” in his celebrated book under the same title (Wiredu 1980, 1-25), and of my own “Mental Impediments to Desirable Social Transformation in Contemporary Africa” in the Premier Issue of the New Series of *Thought and Practice* (Oduor 2009).

The eighty-five full essays by African and Africanist scholars in the anthology cover a range of subjects, as is evident in the headings of the nine main sections into which they are divided:

VOLUME I:

Section 1: Examining Knowledge Production as a Social Institution.

Section 2: Explaining Actions and Beliefs.

Section 3: Reappraising ‘Development’.

Section 4: Measuring the Human Condition.

Section 5: Recalling History.

References for chapters in vol. I.

Appendix: Style specifications for preparing publishable manuscripts.

Index.

VOLUME II:

Section 6: ‘Africa’ as a Subject of Academic Discourse.

Section 7: Debating Democracy, Community, and the Law.

Section 8: Revisiting Artistic Expression.

Section 9: Regaining the Voice of Authority.

References for chapters in vol. II.

Appendix: Style specifications for preparing publishable manuscripts.

Index.

As I was reading one of the thought-provoking essays on the topic of intellectual liberation in the anthology under review, a friend of mine walked into my office, and I began talking to him about what I was reading. His reply was quite typical: “Don’t you think we blame colonialism for all our woes?” Yet the far-reaching damage inflicted on Africans by Western imperialism cannot be repaired in half a century, especially when the forces that subjected them for over four hundred years, first through slave trade and then through colonialism, continue to work feverishly to perpetuate their subjugation, all the while their agents masquerading as defenders of human rights. In his analysis of the impact of colonialism, the celebrated Algerian liberation fighter, Frantz Fanon, pointed out that “Europe’s most horrible crime was committed in the heart of man, and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity” (Fanon 1967, 254). Indeed, while ‘colonialism’ is primarily a euphemism for robbery with violence through political domination at the international scale, it also involved intellectual subjugation broadly construed and manifesting in multiple aspects of life - social, educational, religious and artistic, among others. Steve Biko aptly summarised the subtle but highly effective strategy of intellectual domination in his oft-quoted statement that

“The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (Biko 1987, 92).

Furthermore, more than forty years ago, Fanon noted the urgent need for previously colonised countries of Africa to avoid imitating their erstwhile European colonisers, and instead to engage in true invention in order to further the cause of humanity (Fanon 1967, 252). This venture has at times been correctly referred to as ‘post-colonial reconstruction’. Thus the intellectual liberation of the continent spearheaded by thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Okot p’Bitek, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Steve Biko, H. Odera Oruka, and Kwasi Wiredu is a work in progress, and the anthology edited by Profs. Helen Lauer and Kofi Anyidoho is a valuable contribution to this struggle.

One of the strengths of this collection is the fact that the index for each of the two volumes covers all the topics treated in both. Another of its strengths is that the editors’ footnotes in each chapter frequently cross-reference to other chapters, thereby further highlighting parallels and themes reflected in seemingly disparate subject matters and divergent disciplines. Yet one of the most creative features of the two-volume work is that each of the volumes is appended by a practical guide to producing manuscripts for publication in the humanities and the social sciences: having edited the journal *Thought and Practice* over the last six years, and having taught philosophy and related disciplines in a number of universities over the last twenty-five years, I can confirm that this inclusion is a vital contribution to African academia at this point in its history, when many of our universities, under unprecedented financial pressure, are churning out graduates and post-graduates with inadequate skills in research and writing.

However, the papers in the anthology are not fully representative from the point of view of the various regions of Africa, as the bulk of them focus on the Ghanaian situation, and the number of papers from West Africa is disproportionately higher than that from the rest of the continent. Yet this is not surprising, bearing in mind that both of the editors work in Ghana, West Africa. Indeed, the editors themselves hope that “reading from this broad selection of seminal essays will motivate the writing of many more” (p.iv), and I venture to add my own hope that more anthologies like this one will see the light of day. It is therefore not surprising that the anthology is dedicated “to the contributors and to future generations of contributors”.

All in all, this anthology is a unique contribution to the inter-disciplinary study of the social sciences and humanities in the African context - an approach to scholarship whose merit hardly needs any defence in a manifestly interdependent physical and social world. In this sense, it is a worthy partner of the journal *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya*, whose mission statement indicates that it “serves scholars with broad interests in the humanities and social sciences by disseminating original articles with a philosophical outlook, with emphasis on intellectual, social and political issues that are of special relevance to contemporary Africa”. I therefore highly recommend it to every department studying and teaching the social sciences or the humanities, to any library wishing to enrich its Africana section, as well as to individual scholars who desire to enhance the inter-disciplinary feature of their personal libraries. The anthology already sits proudly in the Africana Section of the Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library at the University of Nairobi.

Copies can be acquired at commercial rate of £50.00 each volume via print-on-demand from Africa Books Collective at:

<http://www.africanbookscollective.com/books/reclaiming-the-human-sciences-and-humanities-through-african-perspectives.-volume-i>

and

<http://www.africanbookscollective.com/books/reclaiming-the-human-sciences-and-humanities-through-african-perspectives.-volume-ii>

For non-profit subsidized rate, African based scholars, students and institutions can obtain copies of the original hardcover print run by Sub Saharan Press. Contact editor Helen Lauer at <helenlauer@yahoo.com>. Production cost of copies is US\$ 250.00 for both volumes, which includes DHL postage. All proceeds apply to future reprinting of the volumes.

Portuguese translation available through Eliane de Paiva, Advisory Editor of Alexandre de Gusmão Foundation, Fundação Alexandre de Gusmão – FUNAG - Ministério das Relações Exteriores, Anexo II, CEP: 70170-900, Brasília - DF, publicacaofunag@gmail.com

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