

WOLFGANG MIEDER

Theoretical Approaches to Paremiology in Africa. By Nereus Yerima Tadi. Zaria, Nigeria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 2016. Pp. 232.

Let it be said right at the outset that Nereus Yerima Tadi's *Theoretical Approaches to Paremiology in Africa* (2016) is a most welcome and invaluable addition to the set of volumes that cover the entire field of paremiology for various cultures, languages, countries, and even continents. In English it started with Richard Chenevix Trench's *On the Lessons in Proverbs* (New York: Redfield, 1853) that went through several editions until its final publication as *Proverbs and Their Lessons* (London: George Routledge, 1905; rpt. ed. by Wolfgang Mieder. Burlington: The University of Vermont, 2003). While Tadi was able to make use of this slender volume, he did not have F. Edward Hulme's subsequent and more comprehensive treatise on *Proverb Lore. Being a Historical Study of the Similarities, Contrasts, Topics, Meanings, and Other Facets of Proverbs* (London: Elliot Stock, 1902; rpt. ed. by Wolfgang Mieder. Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, 2007) at his disposal. But more importantly, he was able to use Archer Taylor's seminal introduction *The Proverb* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1931; rpt. ed. by Wolfgang Mieder. Bern: Peter Lang, 1985) that to this day is the most celebrated general study on paremiology. Unfortunately he must not have been able to get a copy of my *Proverbs: A Handbook* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004; rpt. New York: Peter Lang, 2012). If I had known that he was working on his excellent introduction to African paremiology, I would certainly have sent him a copy of my book as well as that by Edward Hulme. We have been in contact over the years, and it has been an honor to publish three valuable articles by him in *Proverbium*. Since they do not appear in his otherwise extensive bibliography, let me cite them here: "Paremic Tropes and Polysemy: Tangle Metaphorical Proverbs,"

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Proverbium, 26 (2009), 351-366; “Proverbs and Philosophy: Tangle People and Their Worldview,” *Proverbium*, 27 (2010), 301-318; and “The Changing Face of Orature in Postcolonial Nigeria: Proverbs in Eddie Iroh’s *Without a Silver Spoon* and *Banana Leaves*,” *Proverbium*, 30 (2013), 311-332.

For some of the theoretical aspects of his book, Tadi benefited greatly from the many articles contained in two essay volumes that survey the fascinating field of paremiology: Wolfgang Mieder and Alan Dundes (eds.), *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981, rpt. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), and Wolfgang Mieder (ed.), *Wise Words: Essays on the Proverb* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994; rpt. London: Routledge, 2015). Important additional more modern theoretical essays are presented in Wolfgang Mieder (ed.), *Cognition, Comprehension, and Communication. A Decade of North American Proverb Studies (1990-2000)* (Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag Hohengehren, 2003), but this book most likely never reached African libraries. Unfortunately, this is most likely also true for Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt’s and Melita Aleksa Varga’s very recent and expensive essay volume *Introduction to Paremiology. A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015) that in any case was published too late for Tadi to consider in his own study that finally presents an inclusive survey of paremiology in Africa. His new book deserves to be celebrated as a major scholarly accomplishment that will serve paremiologists not only in Africa but throughout the world as a much needed survey of the rich proverb tradition in Africa and the vast studies and numerous collections that have been published during the past two centuries (see also my *African Proverb Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography* [Colorado Springs, Colorado: African Proverbs Project, 1994], and *International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology*, 2 vols. [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009]). Without any doubt this book deserves to stand next to those mentioned in my introductory remarks of this review, and it is my sincere hope that it will find its way into libraries everywhere.

The book is divided into six major chapters with the conclusion of but one page (p. 215) somewhat surprisingly being considered a seventh chapter. Every chapter is richly filled with ex-

amples of African proverbs from a multitude of languages that are cited in the original with English translations, thereby introducing readers to new proverbs whose metaphors are often quite different from the European or Asian proverb tradition. Tadi also finishes each chapter with extremely useful and informative bibliographies, and there is also a final bibliography (pp. 215-227) as well as a subject index (pp.228-232) that will be of great benefit to scholars and students as they deepen their knowledge and understanding about African proverbs. While I found a few bibliographical treasures in these bibliographies that I do not have in my International Proverb Archives at the University of Vermont, I pulled the following books of my shelves that do not appear in Tadi's bibliographies but which are of definite significance: Adeleke Adeeko, *Proverbs, Textuality, and Nativism in African Literature* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1998); Johannes Fabian, *Power and Performance: Ethnographic Explorations through Proverbial Wisdom and Theater in Shaba, Zaire* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Ambrose Adikamkwu Monye, *Proverbs in African Orature. The Aniocha-Igbo Experience* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1996); and Joyce Penfield, *Communicating with Quotes: The Igbo Case* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983). These are all American publications and most likely were not accessible to Tadi. This is probably also true for Aderemi Raji-Oyelade's important book *Playful Blasphemies: Postproverbials as Archetypes of Modernity in Yoruba Proverbs* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2012) that was published in Germany. As paremiologists pay ever more attention to the appearance, use, function, and meaning of proverbs in modernity, it is paramount that we also study the innovative modern role that proverbs – often in the form of postproverbials or anti-proverbs – play in oral communication, in literature and popular music, and above all in the mass media.

The first chapter on “Conceptualizing the Proverb” (pp. 1-49) is an informed survey of the definition, the poetic nature of proverbs, the origin of proverbs, the coiners of proverbs, and the sources of proverbs. It is here where Tadi reviews previous scholarship on these matters showing his vast international knowledge of paremiology. He correctly observes that most scholarship does not reference African proverbs as examples and

by doing this in his own book, he renders a tremendous intercultural service to all proverb scholars. As the Head of the Department of English (the book is written in exquisite English) at Gombe State University in Nigeria, Nereus Yerima Tadi is a speaker of the Tangle language and draws many of his examples from his mother tongue, but he also cites proverbs from literally dozens of other African languages in the original and with English translations. While these languages have their respective terms for “proverb”, it is to be noted that they also include such genres as aphorisms, idioms, sayings euphemisms, etc. As he states:

The Tangle people of Gombe State of Nigeria use the term *sam kwi bolji* as an umbrella term for proverbs, sayings, and idioms. The phrase ‘*sam kwi bolji*’, literally means matter whose head is turned upside down and hence utterances whose meanings are not to be taken literally. [Proverbs are] loaded speech which demands thought for meaning to yield itself. Like most African terms for proverbs therefore, *sam kwi bolji* connotes figurativeness, hidden meaning and allusiveness. (p. 10)

Following a review of a number of definition attempts by such American and European scholars as Archer Taylor, Bartlett Jere Whiting, Ruth Finnegan, Arvo Krikmann, Wolfgang Mieder, and others, he rightfully cites well-known African paremiologists like Kwesi Yankah, Okumba Miruka and J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada and comes up with the following composite definition:

[Proverbs are] mostly short, terse, witty, literal or figurative statements, often expressing a general truth or wisdom of the society and accepted by the generality of the people. They often have linguistic markers like parallel and contrastive features; are sometimes accompanied by introductory remarks and may or may not be antiquarian in origin. Indeed, the proverb has a particular shape, a particular structure or nature that is akin to poetry. (p. 12)

This is followed by detailed discussions of non-figurative proverbs like the Tangle proverb *Kon nang ka koditho* (Everything has its time) that brings to mind the equivalent Bible proverb “There is a time for everything” (Ecclesiastes 3:1; Tadi p. 18 and

pp. 198-199), structural parallelism, alliteration, assonance, rhyme, imagery, metaphor, personification, synecdoche, and allusion in proverbs.

Regarding the origin of African proverbs, Tadi makes the following important statement that must be kept in mind:

A proverb may have its origin either in the distant or recent past; it could originate from man's reflection on the totality of his life; it could be a product of history or of a song, a tale or a myth. Neighboring language groups could also be sources of proverbs. This means that a particular proverb that is current in a culture might have its origin in another culture. In Africa today many people use Biblical and European proverbs even when speaking in African languages. This is a result of the cross-cultural encounter occasioned largely by trade, missionary activities and colonialism. Globalisation has erased borders as there is increased intermingling of people across cultures, which in turn affects the way we speak. (p. 39)

Regarding the influence of Bible proverbs by way of missionaries on proverbs current in Africa let me add at least these two studies: Philippe Dinzolele Nzambi, *Proverbes bibliques et proverbes kongo* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992) and W. Jay Moon, *African Proverbs Reveal Christianity in Culture. A Narrative Portrayal of Builsa Proverbs. Contextualizing Christianity in Ghana* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2009). I should also mention the following essay volume by Willem Saayman (ed.), *Embracing the Baobab Tree: The African Proverb in the 21st Century* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1997). It contains the papers presented at an International and Interdisciplinary Symposium on the African Proverb held at the University of South Africa in 1995. I had the great honor of presenting the keynote address on "Modern Paremiology in Retrospect and Prospect" at that unforgettable gathering. It was then that the African Proverbs Project was created under the directorship of Father Joseph Healey that is active to this date publishing every year several unique proverb collections of small and almost unknown African languages. At that time, and with this I return to Tadi's statement above, I argued that while we have

numerous and excellent giant African proverb collections, we know very little about the loan processes among them. Thus while we have documented what proverbs are common in Europe or in Asia by borrowing processes, we really don't know anything or very little about proverbs that are known identically (!) throughout Africa or in larger areas of different languages on that extensive and fascinating continent. Tadi concludes this magisterial chapter by also commenting on the coiners and sources of proverbs. It is good that he mentions, albeit only very shortly, the significance of the internet, phones, and the media in all of this (see pp. 44-45). It would certainly be a mistake to study African proverbs or proverbs in general only as traditional wisdom. The modern age everywhere is creating new proverbs or changes established proverbs into anti-proverbs (that might become new proverbs), and if paremiology does not want to become stagnant, these modern phenomena need to be studied locally, regionally, nationally, and globally.

The somewhat shorter but equally informative second chapter on "Basic Issues in the Study of Proverbs" (pp. 50-68) covers the universality, internationality, users, and translation of proverbs. His statement that "there are differences of socio-political, cultural and political realities of the peoples of the world but even in this diversity there are experiences that are essentially human and thereby universalistic in application" (p. 52) covers the phenomenon that proverbs from different cultures and languages, though they might have different metaphors and exhibit different realia, might in fact mean the same and relate to similar phenomena. This is also the reason why foreign proverbs can be accepted in translation as borrowings from one language to another that can lead to internationally disseminated proverbs. Proverbs from antiquity, the Bible, and medieval Latin were loan translated into many European languages and beyond, as Gyula Paczolay has demonstrated in his comparative collection of *European Proverbs in 55 Languages with Equivalents in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese* (Veszprém, Hungary: Veszprémi Nyomda, 1997). But notice, the rich African proverb tradition is not included, and as I have already stated, we need a comparative proverb collection of this type for Africa or at least for language groups from Africa. The extant proverb collections, and there are many of them, need to be brought together, and the

ability to deal with large sets of data by way of the computer should make some of this possible. There is still much work to do regarding the universalism and internationalism of African proverbs.

Tadi also points out that there are shifts in how proverbs are used and by whom. It is not at all only traditional communication by way of proverbial wisdom spoken primarily by the elders, but there are also innovative ways of employing proverbs in oral discourse and in literary and media writings. And there are the new indigenous proverbs to which are added borrowed proverbs (primarily from the English) that are translated into the many native African languages or cited in English especially in Nigeria where that Germanic language serves as a *lingua franca* among the multitude of languages spoken in that country alone: "It is not very uncommon to find speakers using African and non-African proverbs in their daily conversations. In fact, some non-African proverbs seem to have been appropriated by Africans who use them in appropriate local contexts" (p. 61). While many proverbs from the Bible and also from the Koran were added to the proverbial repertoire of the African people, the colonizers from various countries also disseminated some of their proverbs. It is important to keep this in mind when trying to establish the origin of proverbs in the African languages. And, of course, "new proverbs are also being coined as the society experiences change. [...] We can therefore conclude that proverbs are as dynamic as the society that uses them. [...] Proverbs are viable, full of vitality and are dynamic" (p. 63). It is good that Tadi mentions this in one paragraph, but I wish that he would have expanded this to three or four pages. Quite a bit is known about proverbs in the modern age, and Charles Clay Doyle, Fred Shapiro, and I have now assembled the first scholarly collection of modern Anglo-American proverbs with historical and contextual annotations in *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2012). I might also mention my book *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season: Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993; rpt. New York: Peter Lang, 2012). There is much more research on this, but there is still little scholarship for the modern African scene which most definitely exists for proverbs. The already mentioned Aderemi Raji-Oyelade is spearheading some of these

efforts in Nigeria, but there are also such articles as N.F. Inyama, "Source and Adaptation in the Proverb: A Nigerian Example," *Lore and Language*, 3 (1980), 47-61; Liveson Tatira, "Proverbs in Zimbabwean Advertisements," *Journal of Folklore Research*, 38 (2001), 229-241; and Bode Agbaje, "Modernization as an Agent of Neo-Traditional Yoruba Proverbs," *Proverbium*, 23 (2006), 17-30. In any case, the chapter closes with a short discussion of the vexing problem of translating indigenous proverbs into other languages (pp. 63-66). Anybody having worked with proverbs from other cultures knows how difficult it is to translate highly metaphorical proverbs that might include obscure words and unknown allusions.

The important third chapter is an erudite treatise on "Theoretical Approaches to the Proverb" (pp. 69-105) that is of utmost importance for the understanding of how folklore in general and proverbs in particular originate, survive, and spread over time. There are sections on evolutionists and diffusionists with a particularly valuable discussion of the Finnish-Historical-Geographical School (pp. 76-85). While Tadi recognizes the historical-geographical method for emphasizing "typology, origin and spread of orature", he does quite correctly criticize the fact that it "fails to look at other aspects of orature such as the question of literary or social relevance of an oral text/performance. The school ignores the vital aspects of style, function and context of oral forms" (p. 84). With regard to the African scene, he concludes these comments with this valid observation:

We credit the Historical-Geographical School for its attempt to shed more light on orature materials through comparative and historical studies. African paremiologists may adopt the comparative and historical approach where materials have already been collected, classified and interpreted. This will certainly help in bringing out the complexity, diversity and shared areas of African aesthetic experience. In examining the proverbs of any African society, it might be fruitful and insightful to examine the variants that exist in other languages if only to see the commonality of certain human experiences and thought processes. (p. 85)

As stated before, I expressed this desideratum on various occasions, and it is good to see that Nereus Yerima Tadi as a distinguished African paremiologist is also arguing for the comparative analysis of African proverbs.

The next section of this loaded chapter is dedicated to the structuralist approach to proverbs (pp. 85-96). He deals with the work of such famous structuralists as Vladimir Propp, Claude Levi-Strauss, Ronald Barthes, Peter Grzybek, Alan Dundes, and Beatrice Silverman-Weinreich. Tadi recognizes the value of structural proverb studies, but he also stresses that there is more to analyzing proverbs than looking at their formalistic aspects:

The Structuralists see language as a model for orature studies. However, whatever the gains that may accrue through the application of the methods of structural linguistics, a mechanical, formalistic adaptation of the structure of language for the examination of orature materials is fraught with perils. It is true that orature springs from language, it is language in action, but an analysis of [an] orature genre like the proverb needs to recognize many other factors like the social values of the society, the context in which it is used at a particular time, place and circumstance. A mechanistic approach to orature studies such as is posited by Structuralists removes orature studies from the peculiarities of its environment. (p. 94)

This is true when the structuralist approach is taken to its extreme, but it must be recognized that many structurally oriented scholars add other aspects of the biology of proverbs to their work. And this is most certainly true for folklorists like Alan Dundes, who added a psychoanalytical bend to his structuralist approach and much more. And it is good that Tadi concludes this chapter with a discussion of the Psychoanalytical School (pp. 96-103). After short remarks about Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, he points out correctly that their approach is very much centered in European traditions:

Like the structuralists they [the psychoanalysts] universalize European archetypes and hence deny the distinctiveness and originality of African orature. Everything is explained within the contexts of European artistic and

philosophical thought. [...] The Psychoanalytical Approach to orature study seems to be mainly concerned with the issues of sexual symbols, dream interpretations, survivals, archetypal figures and universals. Its generalizing tendency, often from the perspective of Western thought, could be misleading and its approach is limited in view of the fact that it fails to situate proverbs in their social context” (p. 101 and pp. 102-103).

This might well be true in general, but a scholar of the renown of Alan Dundes, for example, went far beyond the limitations of the structural and psychoanalytical approaches that he championed. He was also interested in functional, semantic, and contextual matters as he interpreted various genres of orature. What we obviously want is a synthesis of various approaches in proverb studies that will help us to gain the best possible insights into proverbs.

Tadi did well to finish his survey here and to make his yet again extensive fourth chapter on “Theoretical Approaches to the Proverb” (pp. 106-129) the continuation of his insightful deliberations. As one might have expected, he now turns to the Functionalist School of such scholars as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski, and William R. Bascom, and once again he has a legitimate criticism – but only if scholars were to limit themselves purely to studying function alone: “While we agree that orature definitely plays a vital function in society, the Functionalist Approach to orature studies is, like the approaches of the Evolutionists, the Diffusionists, the Structuralists and the Psychoanalysts, limited in the sense of being mono-directional” (p. 110). And, of course, Tadi is correct by stating that “for a fuller understanding of the meaning of a proverb, the context within which it is spoken should equally be examined” (p. 111).

This leads him to a detailed discussion of “The Contextual School” (pp. 111-123) as practiced by Walter Ong, Roger D. Abrahams and Barbara A. Babcock, Peter Seitel, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Kwesi Yankah, and others. There can be no doubt that proverbs in collections are basically “dead” since they really only come to live in oral or written communication. This becomes immediately clear when Tadi discusses in but two pages “Other Approaches” (pp. 124-125) at the end of this chap-

ter, among them Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis, Feminism, Postcolonialism, New Historicism, Deconstruction, Poststructuralism, Ecocriticism, Gender/Racial Studies, and Marxism. Doubtlessly this list could be extended depending on the point of view one wants to employ when studying proverbs. Tadi once speaks of “the polyfunctionality of proverbs” (p. 103), and he could not be more correct. Some forty years ago the Estonian paremiologist Arvo Krikmann added two other aspects to this by declaring that proverbs are characterized by their polyfunctionality, polysemanticiy, and polysituativity (see his book *Proverb Semantics: Studies in Structure, Logic, and Metaphor*, ed. by Wolfgang Mieder. Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, 2009).

Having finished his impressive and informative survey of paremiology from a theoretical point of view in these four inclusive chapters, Tadi is ready to put to use what he has so clearly explained by looking in the fifth chapter at the “Themes of Proverbs” (pp. 130-164). It is here where African proverbial wisdom comes to life by Tadi citing numerous examples from various African languages and providing detailed linguistic, historical, folkloric, semantic, functional, and contextual explanations. There are sections on human behavior, speech or verbal art, conflict, work, togetherness, solidarity, disillusionment, patience, perseverance, foolishness, humans’ relationship with God, and children and youth. It is here where the proverbs come alive, and where Tadi shows his detailed knowledge of the treasure trove of African proverbs with a special emphasis on his native Tangle proverbs. As one reads these proverbs in their African languages with English translations, one is struck by the fact that the meaning of them is often quite similar to proverbs outside of Africa. In other words, as Tadi pointed out in the theoretical part of his book, the human behavior and experiences are not that different at all, but people from different parts of the globe express them in different metaphors depending on their own cultural and societal surroundings. This is not the place to cite numerous examples, but let me just choose this single one:

Proverbs also talk on speech or verbal art. This is because of the importance that people attach to conversation/discourse. People of different cultures value speech

very much because they recognize the problems that a wrong or inappropriate speech may cause and the good that truthful, honest and clear conversation would do. There are therefore many proverbs on the diverse aspects of speech: its defects, its good qualities and often situational needs for silence. (pp. 133-134 with several examples on pp. 134-135)

There are studies on "speech" proverbs from other cultures and languages, such as Frank de Caro, "Talk is Cheap: The Nature of Speech According to American Proverbs," *Proverbium*, 4 (1987), 17-37; J.L. Fischer and Teigo Yoshida, "The Nature of Speech According to Japanese Proverbs," *Journal of American Folklore*, 81 (1968), 34-43; and William K. McNeil, "The Nature of Speech According to Indian Proverbs," *Folklore Forum*, 4 (1971), 2-14. If we do more such studies for individual African languages and others throughout the world, we could get a fascinating comparative picture of attitudes towards the value of speech.

Just as there is basically an unlimited number of themes of proverbs, the same is true for what Tadi presents in the sixth (falsely labelled as the fifth) chapter on the "Functions of Proverbs" (pp. 165-213). He admits that "most of the proverbs are polyfunctional" (p. 165) and then presents numerous examples of African proverbs with an emphasis again on Tangle proverbs that function as education, advice, caution, admonishment, comments on human behavior, settling legal cases, consolation, reflection on life, and embellishment of speech. At the end there is a small section on the literary use of proverbs (pp. 208-209), where Tadi mentions what a profound role proverbs play in African literary works by such authors as Chinua Achebe, Eddi Iroh, Wole Soyinka, and others. Tadi as a literary author has studied this aspect in detail, and it might have been well for him to include a couple of contextualized examples from a novel or play here. In any case, we have an impressive number of proverb studies dealing with African literature, where they add much information regarding the distant cultures of Africa.

But much more work needs to be done on African proverbs, as Tadi mentions in his one-page conclusion (chapter seven): "Despite the numerous works on African proverbs it is still

morning yet on creation day! For example, in Nigeria with language groups of over three hundred, proverb research has hardly covered up to one hundred and fifty language groups. Paremiologists need to extend their work to the yet unexplored fields for they are bound to yield more utterances that provide delight to the listeners, help in effective communication, reflect the rich world views of the speakers, and consequently, enrich humanity as a whole” (p. 214). As mentioned above, Father Joseph Healey and members of his African Proverbs Project are conducting invaluable paremiographical field research by collecting and publishing the proverbs from African languages that have never been registered. And yes, although paremiologists have assembled a rich scholarly record regarding the proverbs of Africa, there is much more comparative and interpretive work to be done. But this is exactly where Nereus Yerima Tadi’s book *Theoretical Approaches to Paremiology in Africa* comes in! It is the perfect book at the right time, and in Africa it needs to reach all school and university libraries and all scholars and students interested in proverbs of their continent. But more than that: this is an excellent survey of paremiology with an emphasis on African proverbs, and is a superb addition to previous overarching treatises of this type. Nereus Yerima Tadi is to be congratulated on his magnificent scholarly achievement. Even though it has just been published, it will very quickly become a classic work in the rich field of paremiology!

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