



# Recognitions

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## Francis Nyamnjoh: African Hero of the Year\*

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Former Head of the CODESRIA Publications Programme, Professor Francis B. Nyamnjoh has been named the 'Africa Hero of the Year 2013'. This recognition and the prize-giving was part of this year's annual African Hero Day celebration of the African Students Union of Ohio University, USA. Each year, the union honours one person from the African continent who has made a significant contribution to the lives of its inhabitants. The award ceremony took place in Athens, United States on 16 March 2013.

As the award plaque reads, Professor Nyamnjoh has been so honoured in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the advancement of Africa through his scholarship and teaching practice.

Anthropologist Nyamnjoh follows a long line of distinguished African Heroes, the first of whom was former South African President Nelson Mandela in 1993. According to the award-winner, 'The award means a lot to me, for the simple fact that it comes from students who have followed my work from a distance and are able to appreciate it .... This is most humbling and

encouraging. I hope I am able to live up to the challenge they have thrown my way'.

Francis Nyamnjoh currently chairs the Social Anthropology section of UCT's School of African and Gender Studies, Anthropology and Linguistics and boasts a prolific publications profile. His impressive bibliography includes work on media and democracy; mobility and citizenship, and of the social shaping of information and communications technologies.

According to him:

There are African scholars and scholarship of global stature in all disciplines, and Africa is increasingly the continent to turn to for new ways of theorising and understanding our world. It offers fascinating everyday examples of the complex, nuanced and accommodating negotiation and navigation of myriad influences by ordinary people.

Below is an excerpt from his Acceptance Speech, which vividly reflects his ever strong confidence in Africa's continued contribution to scholarship, globally.

## African Hero of the Year 2013

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### Nyamnjoh's Acceptance Speech\*\*

As far as Africa and being African is concerned, this award pushes me to revisit an important scholarly debate on Africanness we had in the pages of the CODESRIA Bulletin during my days as Head of Publications. What does it mean to be African? Who qualifies to claim Africa? Is being African or claiming Africa an attribute of race and skin colour (black, white, yellow), birth (umbilical cord, birth certificates, identity cards, passports), geography (physical spaces, home village), history (encounters), culture (prescriptive specificities), economics (availability and affordability, wealth and deprivation), sociology (social configurations and action, inclusion and exclusion), psychology (mind sets), philosophy (world views), politics (power relations), or collective memory (shared experiences and aspirations) – to name just a few of the many possibilities that present themselves? These are questions which have deep roots in debates on citizenship and identity – and, therefore, in the definition of rights, entitlements, duties, responsibilities, and in our case, the very idea of heroism.

The questions of course, are, not uniquely African – indeed, similar issues have been posed and debated with considerable passion in other parts of the world both historically and currently, and contestations around them have also often been played out in violent communal confrontations, civil wars, and inter-state conflicts. And while they may seem straight forward to answer, the questions have been rendered much more complex by the dynamic inter-play of race, ethnicity, gender and religion in the structuring and exercise of power and opportunity.

Precisely for this reason, they are not questions that can be addressed in the abstract.

How one answers the questions that are generated by any attempt at grappling with Africanness is not only situationally determined, but is also a function of how selective one is with regard to the various indicators available. Some individuals and communities on the continent and elsewhere might claim Africanness for various personal, collective, historical and political reasons. But it is not always straight forward to say which of these claims may be legitimate and why, especially as identity is both how one sees oneself, and how one is seen and categorised by others, particularly where the absorption of new populations is involved. This is all the more so as identities are themselves always in mutation, shaped as they are by changing historical contexts and circumstances, including internal and international migrations, shifts in social power relations, and so on.

It is, however, safe to say that to most ordinary people in Africa, Africanness is more than just a birth certificate, an identity card, or a passport – documents that many of them may not have, even as others coming from elsewhere and waving the flag of Africanness may have all of these documents and more. For the ordinary person, to be African is not simply to be labelled or merely defined as such. It is to be a social actor enmeshed in a particular context that has been and continues to be shaped by a unique history that, among others, is marked by unequal encounters and misrepresentations often informed by the

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arrogance and ignorance of the economically and politically powerful who take the liberty also to arrogate a cultural superiority to themselves. For the masses of Africans, Africa is above all a lived reality, one that is constantly shaped and reshaped by their toil and sweat as subjected and devalued humanity, even as they struggle to live in dignity and to transform their societies progressively. For these people, the fact of their Africanity is neither in question nor a question.

In CODESRIA circles where Africanity has been debated at length, pan-African dimensions of Africanity have been emphasized. Given my personal experience of multiple dimensions of being African, and in view of the fact that my election as African Hero for 2013 is by a Pan-African Student Union based in the United States of America and in regular conversation with other (students and Africans) on the continent and in the diaspora, permit me to dwell a little on the pan-African dimensions of being African.

To me, pan-Africanism is best seen and articulated as a flexible, inclusive, dynamic and complex aspiration in identity making and belonging. Pan-Africanism, far from promising a single identity, is about offering a mental space for disparate identities to co-exist in freedom and dignity. Pan-Africanism emphasises African unity beyond identities confined by geography, primordialism and narrow nationalism, and champions socio-political inclusiveness for all those who willingly claim or are compelled to identify with the 'Black' race and with a place called 'Africa'. As a quest for a global Black or African community, Pan-Africanism is an aspirational project towards a world informed by solidarities and identities shaped by a humanity of common predicaments. It is the glue to hold together the dreams and aspirations of Blacks divided, among other things, by geography, ethnicity, class, gender, age, culture or religion. Far from overlooking the divisions that these factors give rise to amongst Blacks locally and globally, Pan-Africanism promotes a strategic essentialism around the fact and experience of being Black in a world of hierarchies of purity shaped by being White. The fact of the forced or voluntary mobility that has made of being Black and African a global and dynamic reality, means pan-Africanism as an ideology and an aspiration is realisable anywhere in the world.

Little wonder that Pan-Africanism is claimed not only on the continent called Africa, but globally. Indeed, as a movement, Pan-Africanism originated not in Africa, but in the West Indies, amid feelings of nostalgia about and occasional dreams of an eventual return to a lost home land – mother Africa. We are all familiar with the literature and music of nostalgia and dreams of an idealised Africa by diasporic writers and artists claiming descent with the continent. Just as we are familiar with the growing number of African-Americans who are tracing their DNA ancestry back to various regions and countries in Africa.

If being African or pan-African is permanent work in progress, is there any sense in defining and confining Africa and Africans to what Joseph CONRAD infamously termed 'the Dark Continent'? And what is there to stop Europeans, Asians and others from claiming their places in the African sun through relationships

with the places and peoples currently associated in problematic essentialist terms with the labels 'Africa' and 'African'?

When I shared with your President Kingsley Antwi-Boasiako, a number of papers I had published, to choose from as a theme for my short address to you this evening, he settled on: *'Potted Plants in Greenhouses': A Critical Reflection on the Resilience of Colonial Education in Africa*. This is a 15,000 word long paper. It would take me the whole night to read it out to you. Given we've got pots of food and exciting music to keep our evening alive and entertaining, I have opted to share with you only the highlights of potted plants in greenhouses, with a firm promise to make the published version available to whoever wants to read the full paper.

Education is the inculcation of facts as knowledge and also a set of values used in turn to appraise the knowledge in question. When the values are not appropriate or broadly shared, the knowledge acquired is rendered irrelevant and becomes merely cosmetic or even violent. In Africa, the colonial conquest of Africans – body, mind and soul – has led to real or attempted epistemicide – the decimation or near complete killing and replacement of endogenous epistemologies with the epistemological paradigm of the conqueror. The result has been education through schools and other formal institutions of learning in Africa largely as a process of making infinite concessions to the outside – mainly the western world. Such education has tended to emphasize mimicry over creativity, and the idea that little worth learning about, even by Africans, can come from Africa. It champions static dichotomies and boundedness of cultural worlds and knowledge systems. It privileges teleology and analogy over creative negotiation by Africans of the multiple encounters, influences and perspectives evident throughout their continent. It thus impoverishes the complex realities of those it attracts or represses as students.

*'Potted Plants in Greenhouses...'* draws on Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and other critical voices to argue that education in Africa is victim of a resilient colonial and colonizing epistemology, which takes the form of science as ideology and hegemony. Postcolonial African elite justify the resilience of this epistemology and the education it inspires with rhetoric on the need to be competitive internationally. The outcome is often a devaluation of African creativity, agency and value systems, and an internalized sense of inadequacy. Education has become a compulsion for Africans to 'lighten their darkness' both physically and metaphorically in the interest of and for the gratification of colonizing and hegemonic others. The paper calls for an epistemological conviviality through the creative reconciliation of the myriad ways of being African epitomised by the competing and often conflictual ways of being African as depicted by Okot p'Bitek in the characters of Ocol, Lawino and Clementine. Such reconciliation requires an articulation of being African that is simultaneously cognizant of history and the ethnographic present, structure and agency, blood and choice, elite and non-elite, cosmopolitan and particular, tradition and modernity. It calls for listening to ordinary men and women who, like p'Bitek's Lawino, are challenging the prescriptive gaze and grip of emasculated elite, while at the same time imploring them to marry recognition and relevance, continuity and discontinuity, dependence and independence in the interest of accommodation as an external aspiration. The paper thus argues



for recognition of ongoing popular creative processes of negotiation as Africans seek conviviality and interdependence between competing and conflicting influences.

I hope these reflections are in tune with the reading of my work and scholarship that convinced you to elect me African Hero for 2013. Thank you immensely for this award. It means a lot to me. It is an honour I will cherish for the rest of my life.

### Notes

- \* This is an edited version of an article that appeared in University of Cape Town, Newsroom & Publications, Daily News, 11 April 2013, under the title 'Nyamnjoh is 2013's "African Hero"'.

- \*\* Excerpt from Nyamnjoh's Acceptance Speech at "African Hero" 2013 Award Ceremony.

### Bibliography

- Nyamnjoh, F.B., 2012, 'Potted Plants in Greenhouses: A Critical Reflection on the Resilience of Colonial Education in Africa,' in: *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol.47(2):129-154.