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Houstonian writes of African proverbial wisdom

By JANUARIUS ASONGU

Many African scholars have concentrated on not only tracing their roots but identifying with them. This is what Michael Foteh Fonge has set out to do with his book of African proverbs.

The author, an adjunct professor at the University of Houston and Houston Community College, hails from the Mbo ethnic group in Cameroon. For Discover Life's Treasures Hidden in African Proverbs (LeBlock Publishing, \$6.99), he draws largely from this typical African context, which formed a substantial part of his early life experiences.

But his book isn't purely localized, as in selecting from the rich store of African proverbial wisdom it reveals that wisdom's universal relevance.

Fonge's point is not only that African proverbs, like those from other cultures, contain wisdom but also that they are a great treasure that all should embrace. What makes this work significant is its appeal to the African diaspora.

His message is that no matter how far those of African descent are physically removed from their roots, they should never lose sight of their African identity, and that one way of doing this is by practicing these proverbs. This perhaps explains why the work is published here instead of in Africa.

In a prefatory note, Fonge defends the decision to publish the work in English and in the United States: "To the wise African elders, proverbs are self-explanatory, and building bridges between cultures means delivering the same message in language common to all the people."

He also quotes from Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart the familiar saying that "among the Ibos of Nigeria, the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten."

The five chapters of Discover Life's Treasures group 180 proverbs into five categories: treasures from

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elders, treasures from parents to children, ideas about alternatives, different views of life, and wisdom itself as it emerges from these sayings.

The first chapter demonstrates the role of elders in providing guidance to the young. We learn, for instance, that "the world belongs to nobody" (Proverb No. 1); that advice is good and "if he does not listen, let adversity teach him" (No. 5); and that "a promise is like a debt" (No. 9). These proverbs emphasize continuity and our interconnectedness with our elders.

The second chapter highlights family and communal values. Here Fonge speaks to both children and parents, pointing out the responsibilities of each. One interesting proverb says: "The children will eat the grass that their mother eat" (No. 31).

Among a variety of topics Fonge calls "alternatives," themes such as dependence, good company, open-mindedness and courage find expression.

Learning from mistakes and learning to collaborate are among the lessons of the fourth chapter. Elias Bongmba, a Cameroonian assistant professor of religious studies at Rice University, finds Proverb No. 103 especially significant. It states simply that "faces are always respected" - in other words, a person rarely speaks ill of another to his face.

In his last chapter, Fonge takes up the notion of wisdom in proverbs. Jealousy, wise timing, respect for differences, patience and divine providence are among the issues he examines.

In addition to being repositories of wisdom, proverbs are effective devices for persuasion and communication. Bongmba says that "all familiar with African proverbs recognize that they are generally employed as a rhetorical device and are often used effectively to make a point . . . entertain and engage listeners."

Proverbs are usually community-centered, but they also have a strong element of individual participation. This emphasizes the holistic aspect of African ethics, emphasizing individual responsibility and accountability as well as community.

By collecting, classifying and commenting on these African proverbs, Fonge has not only shown that they are universally relevant but also contributed to the dissemination of African wisdom. This effort is commendable.

Copies of Discover Life's Treasures Hidden in African Proverbs are available at the Sears store on Main Street, the Texas Southern University Bookstore and the Shrine of the Black Madonna Bookstore, 5309 Martin Luther King Blvd.

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