

Fears that the public disclosure of restitution debates might produce a ‘culture war’ (as discussed in a 1978 letter Savoy references) are evidence that the rhetoric and tactics employed to undermine restitution efforts a half-century ago do not simply remain with us but were formative in the production of today’s contentious cultural property landscape, an ongoing and enduring haunting. As such, *Africa’s Struggle for Its Art* is both a warning sign and a roadmap that helps clarify the mechanisms through which postcolonial defeat is reproduced across generations. While the book ostensibly examines the spectre of decades-old European restitution debates, its richness lies in its pertinence to the multiple intersecting ‘crises’ through which we are living and, perhaps optimistically, a parable for ways to navigate the pitfalls and failures of our forebears as we move through this current moment of institutional decolonization.

Cresa Pugh

The New School for Social Research, New York, USA

Email: pughc@newschool.edu

doi: [10.1017/S0001972023000323](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000323)

Maher Habbob, *Nubian Proverbs (Fadijja/Mahas)*. Goleta CA: Dotawo (pb US\$21 – 978 1 68571 018 7). 2022, xiii + 146 pp.

Africans generally value their proverbs more than Westerners do. But Western scholars often take the lead in publishing collections of African proverbs. Therefore, any collection of 500 proverbs prepared by a mother-tongue speaker of an African language, well translated into English, is a noteworthy event. Happily, this book is freely downloadable, as well as for sale in print form. Habbob reports that these Nubian proverbs were chosen from his collection of 2,000 proverbs. He had previously published a collection of Nubian proverbs translated into Arabic.

This collection is notable for an additional reason: it is from a community speaking a Nilo-Saharan language that is surrounded by speakers of Arabic in southern Egypt. This facilitates comparison with Arabic proverbs and with sub-Saharan communities further south. The book is also important as, according to Habbob, many Nubian children in Egypt have a diminishing identity and competence in Nubian.

Some of the Nubian proverbs are part of broad African patterns. For example, proverbs about animals being unburdened by a prominent part of their anatomy are common across Africa, such as the Nubian ‘The camel does not get tired of carrying a hump’ (p. 51). Elsewhere in Africa, we find proverbs about elephants not being burdened by their tusks and cattle not being burdened by their horns. Another proverb from this collection is documented in several African countries, including Ethiopia, Tanzania, Burundi and Nigeria: ‘A bitch in haste gave birth to blind puppies’ (p. 77). It has been documented in only one form of Arabic (not Egyptian but Iraqi).

The collection also includes proverbs that have clear links to proverbs in Arabic and the broader Islamic world. The following is found widely in the Arabic-speaking world, from Turkey to Pakistan: ‘A hand holds [only] one watermelon’ (p. 90).

In addition to specific proverbs that are found in Arabic, the book also contains five examples of a proverb construction common in Egyptian proverbs but not in proverbs of sub-Saharan non-Muslim communities: question and answer proverbs. These include 'What did the blind find? A basket of eyes' (p. 130).

Each of the proverbs is presented with four translations/transliterations, as seen in the following example:

ἄΔΕΜΙΡΙΝ ΜᾶΦ ΚΙΔΤΑ ΚΟΡῸΕΝ.

Aademiriin maany kidta korjeen.

The eyes of people crumble the rock.

[Advice about avoiding envy/evil eye of other people.]

Each proverb is first given in Nubian script, an old script using many Greek letters. (Spelling is explained on pp. 16–21.) Then, the proverb is transliterated with Roman letters, showing both vowel and consonant length. This is followed by a translation of the proverb. Then, in square brackets, an explanation of the proverb and its application. The explanation of the above proverb raises the matter of 'envy/evil eye' among the Fadijja/Mahas-speaking community. The evil eye is very widely known across the Maghreb but is rare in sub-Saharan cultures that are non-Muslim. Including these multiple components for each proverb entry provides more useful detail and context than is typical of many proverb collections.

The importance of including explanations is shown with the following proverb: 'May fearful things not be absent from the place.' This may sound negative, an imprecation. But the explanation is positive: 'Advice that fear is necessary in order for people to act well.'

In the epigram at the beginning of the book, the author quotes Onyeka Augustine of Tanzania, who says, 'Proverbs give a wonderful insight into a culture.' Family is a topic typically found in proverbs in both Arabic and sub-Saharan Africa, and these Nubian proverbs are no exception. Some mention kinship terms, such as 'father' and 'brother', but there are many more that mention 'mother' (though, interestingly, none that mention 'sister'). Of course, many proverbs about family use metaphors, such as #42 and #122, which refer to a family as a tree that shades its members.

This book is a welcome addition to the documentation of proverbs in Africa. The proverbs are generally translated, explained and transcribed well. There is much here for those who study proverb lore in Africa – and Nubian in particular.

The largest amount of proverb documentation and analysis in Africa has been in Nigeria and Ghana. South Africa has also seen a growing amount of proverb study. This volume, along with a burst of recent work in Ethiopia, adds north-east Africa as another region that is seeing growing local scholarly interest and production. It also serves as an example and encouragement to other African scholars to produce similar collections in their languages.

Peter Unseth

Dallas International University, Dallas, USA

Email: pete_unseth@diu.edu

doi: [10.1017/S0001972023000335](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000335)