

BOOK REVIEWS

Kwesi Yankah, *Beyond the Political Spider: critical issues in African humanities*. Makhanda South Africa: NISC on behalf of the African Humanities Association (pb £47 – 978 1 920 03380 4). 2021, xiv + 325 pp
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Only an elephant knows the length of its trunk.

In this stellar contribution to the field of African intellectual and ontological history, Kwesi Yankah furnishes us with his exploration of the multifarious aspects of the social power of a letter, even a ‘little word’; his eye is on understanding ‘language use in the enactment and expression of power’ (262).

The book has a prologue, sixteen chapters within five sections, *Defining Moments; Towards Academic Excellence; Language in Governance; Rhetoric and Social Power; Outstanding Humanists*; and an epilogue. This gives it an ambitious span of several integral aspects of contemporary African humanities scholarship and specifically the relationship between rhetoric and social power. Underpinning the text is the contested jockeying of African and Eurocentric knowledge systems – Yankah treats this with the contempt it deserves as he focuses on their complementarity and collaborative nature. A two-tier title with a proverb for each chapter pronounces the direct equivalence of both ontologies. The problems of acclimatising African and first world academia are easily overcome when the goal is excellent scholarship, which in itself is empowering and leads to even better scholarship, as Yankah clarifies in Chapter 1, ‘Rising with the African humanities’. Chapter 2 makes the more practical assessment that scholars in academic disciplines which receive financial support and social sanction do well – even in disciplines like maths with poor outcomes through school to university and postgraduate study. This point is especially pertinent to scholars in countries which likewise witness the defunding of their arts and humanities programmes as somehow fanciful, wasteful. Further, when work is supported, it is fruitful in deeply personal, academic, critical ways, rewarding the personal investment which is at the heart of the intellectual foray.

One compelling benefit of this text is that the chapters, although tackling serious and difficult issues, were originally presented as speeches. The same topics would be laboured in academic journals but here they are presented as light and easily digestible enough for an audience of an evening, in a celebratory mood, with the use of a wide range of visual aids from photographs to pictographic representations. Yankah reveals himself as a statistician, providing knowledge by numbers most fluently. Pictographic communication types engage the reader and lighten the load of the text. Yankah brings, nonetheless, academic and critical rigour to all angles of his

work and his excellent use of headings and sub-headings boost the accessibility of this information despite its complexity.

This also makes the book an excellent teaching resource for opening discussions. The chapters are easy to talk to. Chapter 5 highlights the historic assault on intellectual and academic freedoms and changing rights of police and security on campuses. Chapter 6, on gender parity in Ghanaian academia, is written in a celebratory tone within a history of Ghana University and its founders, and allows a purview of a particular bygone era and mode of being which easily will allow for comparative analyses in other countries. Chapter 9 on linguistic issues around educational provision is similarly topical and engaging.

Yankah explores how governments create meaning and social cohesion, including a vibrant and engaging analysis of objective decisions which inform the choice of print for the shirts of President Nana Akufo-Addo to promote and reinforce his meanings whilst he is giving speeches (Chapter 4). Yankah is particularly interested in Kwame Nkrumah, analysing Nkrumah's successes and charisma, his inspiration as the most influential leader of the decolonization movement across the continent, with 'vision to use the arts to forge a strong bond among Africans, which would transcend the artificial barriers erected by colonialists' (300). Yankah displays an ambivalent relationship to Nkrumah's later governance; he takes Nkrumah to task in more than one chapter, for Nkrumah battled political dissent with aggressive authoritarianism. This introduces a new narrative around Nkrumah which interrogates his hold on intellectual activity through closing down of dissent of any kind and thereby controlling the academic environment so that it is no longer democratic.

Chapter 11 on Nkrumah's praise poet, Okyeame Bofo Akuffo, who Nkrumah adored and was a constant companion to Nkrumah, also reminds us of how political power is enchanted and enthralled by arts and culture. Akuffo, trained as a cultural interlocutor, used cultural appropriation through interweaving traditions from different places and eras to create the praises he sang. That point speaks to the importance of the talent of the poet in society and to power, the 'critical role of the arts in defining and sustaining the royal charisma' (43). Yankah explores the long history of the function within African literary traditions of critique which permits blatant query of social rulers; southern African literary traditions share this, as certainly do others. Through discourse deployment, Salkey's 'political spider'¹ of the book's title can 'weave ... through a treacherous world of powerful and greedy animals out to devour him' (271). For, as Yankah reminds us in Chapter 13, public engagement must take place in words, speeches, tales, aphorisms, proverbs: everything comes back to words.

The book is also a compelling insight into and history of university life in Ghana. The position of the Ghanaian philosopher in African Critical Humanities is privileged because of the position of Ghana in Pan-Africanist Congress history and pan-Africanist consciousness. Yankah is well placed to give this knowledge. He too is a public intellectual who has spent his entire life within academia's halls, from leaving school to the present day: as a student, Dean of Students, Hall Master and CE of Mensah Sakhbour at Ghana University, later Pro-Vice-Chancellor, and then President

¹ Salkey, A. (1969) 'Political spider' in U. Beier (ed.), *Political Spider: stories from Black Orpheus*. London: Heinemann.

of Central University. This book constitutes a type of intellectual biography of Yankah himself which fits Said's Public Intellectual.²

The final three chapters provide short biographies of three 'Outstanding Humanists'; J. H. Kwabena Nketia, Efu Sutherland and Agya Koo Nimo, using incidents in history to portray each personal biography. Yankah's clear allegiance to and close relationships with these people reminds one that intellectual labour is a people job.

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Eyitope O. Ogunbodede and Olusanjo M. A. Daramola, *Great Ife at 60: advancing the frontiers of knowledge and culture (1961-2021)*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, Ile-Ife (price unknown, 978 978 136 092 3). 2022 376 pp
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This is a compendium on the historical development of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria during its sixty years of existence. It is the third major historical collection of essays on different aspects of the university's fulfillment of its academic, administrative and service mandates as one of Nigeria's first-generation universities. The two earlier works – *Ten Years of the University of Ife, 1962-1972*, and *Great Ife: a history of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 1962-1987* – were published in 1973 and 1989 respectively to mark the tenth and twenty-fifth anniversaries of the University. This book, published to mark the Diamond Anniversary of the University, is an authoritative work on the history of the University from its inception in 1961 and a collection of essays on developments in the University since 1989 when its history was last documented.

Edited by Eyitope Ogunbodede, the current Vice-Chancellor, and Olusanjo Daramola, one of his deputies, *Great Ife at 60* is divided into five sections with twenty-nine chapters written by thirty-three seasoned academics and administrators within and outside the University. The Preface is written by Owelle Oscar Udoji, current Chair of the Governing Council of the University, and the Foreword by Eyitope Ogunbodede.

The first section of the book, 'Historical background and general administration' contains five chapters: 'Unique horizons: celebrating sixty years of Great Ife' by Eyitope Ogunbodede; 'Interrogating history, prioritising culture' by Felix Ayoh Omidire; 'Milestones and structural changes in the University Registry' by Margaret Omosule; 'Financial administration and the prospects and problems of funding' by S. O. Ayansina; and 'OAU @ 60: challenges of the University' by Chris Olugbenga Ajila. In these, the authors who are mainly principal officers of the University's chronicle,

² Said, E. (1996) *Representation of the Intellectual*. New York NY: Vintage Books. See also Broodryk, C. (ed.) (2021) *Public Intellectuals in South Africa: critical voices from the past*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.