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Listening to African Voices: Adesanmi's Love Letter From the Grave

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Who Owns the Problem? Africa and the Struggle for Agency by Pius Adesanmi. Michigan State University Press, Michigan.

In January 2020, when Ugandan climate activist, Natashe Nakate, was cropped out of a group photo with four other Caucasian activists after a climate meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland, by press agency AP, it once again spotlighted the question of African agency in a world where every decision for and about the continent is made outside the continent. The problem is further compounded by another agency, Reuters, denying Nakate a name by misidentifying her as Natasha Mwansa.

In cropping Nakate out of the photograph and denying her a name and by extension, a space and voice in a global conversation, Western media once again prove that when it comes to global issues and problems, it is not an African matter unless they—the Western folks, as represented by their media—say it is. Africa does not even have the right and the power to partake in global problems that are outside the ascribed ones of poverty, war and crime. This is the disconnect between global possibilities and realities that makes the question of African agency to be one that is relevant at the dawn of a new decade, a decade that the African Union in its charter assures will witness a rebirth on the continent.

Pius Adesanmi, incidentally, is one of those who believes in that rebirth, one where Africa regains agency that was lost to colonialism and the postmodern evolution of neo-colonialism—the capacity to act independently in global affairs and make choices for itself and its inhabitants as opposed to the dictates of the structures of politics and economics. That capacity includes owning and defining its own problems without recourse to outside influence. That is the message that permeates Adesanmi's latest book, *Who Owns the Problem: Africa and the Struggle for Agency*. In what is perhaps the last testament of the late erudite Nigerian scholar and Pan Africanist, Pius Adesanmi, we see a scholar with a vision that transcends his academic discipline. Adesanmi describes Africa's problems, tells the stories of its origin and proceeds to prescribe viable solution in the book that follows the straight-talking

style of its predecessors, *You're Not a Country, Africa* (2011) and *Naija no dey Carry Last* (2015).

Who Owns the Problem is a collection of 16 keynote speeches and essays that Adesanmi delivered across the globe from 2010 prior to his tragic death in March 2019 on the Ethiopian Airlines crash. Characteristically unapologetic, Adesanmi tackles the question of agency through the framework of problems and issues that beset Africa. Adesanmi addresses issues such as the ever-present socio-economic problems that have plagued Africa as a continent and continuously make it the subject of “development” issues at global conferences. This book is a powerful statement to the strength of African Studies as a discipline; it is Adesanmi’s love letter to his people from the grave. In the book, he strongly argues for an African voice and an African presence in any discussion about development and the definition of the problems, or challenges that face the continent. This is needed if Africa wants to be developed and relinquish the image of a beggarly continent. And in a clear homage to his oral African background, Adesanmi keeps the speeches in their original form, complete with opening greetings and acknowledgement of the people in the room as well as sponsoring agencies. His reason? He explains this decision thus:

By keeping the exact mode and format in which each lecture was delivered, I not only invite the reader of this book into the full spectrum of the affective responses of the audience in situ, but I also hope that I am performing an act of resistance. In the last two years as I prepared this book and revised content as necessary, I came to resent the pressure to also revise form. There are certain disciplinary protocols of discourse and delivery—all Western—which confer the title of scholarship. In a book about Africa’s agency, I was not going to revise and rework form to conform to Western ideals of the packaging, standardization, and delivery of knowledge. Form may very well be the next battle ground in Africa’s long struggle for agency.

It appears that Adesanmi is putting himself in the forefront of the movement to reclaim Africa’s voice, and by extension agency from the dictates of Western ideals. And if the question of agency is about equals having a conversation, then he equally invites all his readers, particularly those of African extraction to come and have a conversation with the economic, political and social leaders that he was engaging in his speeches.

However, despite the fact that the speeches were made over a period of time that involved specific and significant shifts in the socio-cultural milieu of the African continent (for example, the political transition in the two powerhouses of the continent, Nigeria and South Africa), the book manages to stay close and relevant to contemporary issues. This is due in no small measure to the thematic division of the book into three distinct sections that, despite their individual distinction, still manage to contribute to the central thrust of the book.

In Section One, “Crossfire,” Adesanmi foregrounds his arguments by highlighting the fact that the world prescribes a solution to African problems without listening to Africa. This could partly explain why the prescribed solutions never work. Global economic institutions, especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, come under heavy criticism in this section for their prescriptive Western solutions that are ever incompatible with African problems. In fact, in the title essay, “#WhoOwnsTheProblem,” he spares nothing in condemning Western institutions for their focus on the problems. War, Hunger, Genocide all seem to be the sole preserve

of Africa and as such must be tackled on African soil. Yet, he counters that in the face of these narratives of horror that have come to define Western dialogue on Africa, similar problems abound in territories across the globe. Therefore, to have an African solution that will probably work, Africa must own its problems. And when Africa owns its own problems, then it can proffer an African solution. For that to happen though, there has to be a cultural shift in mentality. A shift that must acknowledge that Africa can come up with solutions to its own problems, or maybe it only needs to draw on the abundance of its cultural heritage in arriving at the solution. Nowhere else is this argued stronger than in the essay, “The Disappeared African roots of Emma Watson’s Feminism.” Here, Adesanmi takes on feminism as a Western concept and points at some of the strong female African thinkers who said most, if not all the things Emma Watson is credited with saying, long before the Hollywood actress was born. Yet, it appears Africans actually need a Western voice, Western codification for permission to own what is theirs and in the process, forever play catch up in a game that they practically invented.

Beyond the focus of Section One, “Crossfire,” on the problems tagged “African,” Section Two provides the road map to tackling those problems the African way. Titled “Imagining Culture, Figuring Change,” Adesanmi once again proves himself to be a sage with farsighted vision. Adesanmi argues strongly for a cultural approach in the quest for solutions. With poignant essays that explore the loose definition of culture from clothing (“Aso Ebi on my Mind”), urban spaces (“Ara Eko, Ara Oke: Lagos, Culture and the Rest of Us”) to food and drink (“Ode to the Bottle: For Ken Harrow who laughed”), Adesanmi points to the values inherent in African culture, the ones being neglected as backward and rural, and identifies culture as the starting point of the march towards what can be defined as the African solution to African problems. His convincing and yet witty explanation of the problems is profound, and so are the solutions that he proffers. If anything, he puts the African back into the sphere of the human as opposed to some disembodied construct without agency.

The final part, Section Three, is a pointer to what an Africa for Africans can look like if leaders take advantage of the culture and people for the purpose of creating a harmonious society for all— an Africa with agency and self-determination. Aptly titled “Variations on Self and Love,” it is in this section that we see the Adesanmi that is lost to the world of letters. Embodying Africa as a lover with many suitors, Adesanmi amplifies the good of the continent and the beauties that go unreported in the Western narrative of Africa. In “Dowry: Managing Africa’s Many Lovers,” Adesanmi highlights the ongoing, and so far successful, quest by China to court Africa and how it is being hampered by Western colonial powers, afraid to lose the beautiful bride that they hadn’t cared for properly until being noticed by Eastern powers. Human agency is imbued in the ability of a bride to choose her groom from the many suitors and he extends this to African agency as well.

However, a book that advocates for Africans to own the definitions of their problems cannot be complete without a discussion around the major causes of such problems. The author minces no words in locating the problem facing Africa: bad leadership. In the final essay, “Post Centenary Nigeria: New Literatures, New Leaders, New Nation,” he laments the poor leadership that has bedeviled Africa’s most populous country and his country of origin, Nigeria. Yet, even when he laments, Adesanmi manages to find a glimmer of hope, a witty celebration that points to a better future. That future he believes lies in the people of the continent. The brains that dot the African diaspora and serve as better ambassadors than the politically appointed ones. “Africa is blessed with talented people,” he writes, “[y]et, this vast amount of talent is

managed by a corrupt and clueless few in leadership positions.” So to whom are we to turn for redemption? Adesanmi does not leave readers in doubt as to his belief in the youths of the continent. In the essay, “Face Me, I Book You: Writing Africa’s Agency in the Age of the Netizen,” he points to these active and agile minds that seem ever buoyed by new ideas as Africa’s hope for a future where Africa’s destiny lies in African hands.

Given that these are individual speeches collected into a volume, some readers may find the repetition of facts off-putting, especially in Section one where the speech by Chinua Achebe to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1999 is repeated in almost all the essays and still manages to find its way into another essay in Section Two. Paraphrasing and referencing of the material would have sufficed in certain places.

Readers who are also looking for big answers to burning questions, especially of the political kind, may also find themselves disappointed. While the book touches on the problems of leadership or lack thereof in the continent, it does not delve deep into the issue of how it can be resolved. Rather, the book raises more questions than answers and invariably invites readers to move the discourse beyond the pages and unto the public sphere of academic and social engagements. The book is designed to generate these kinds of conversations: conversations that constantly challenge the African populace to rethink their position on issues surrounding their immediate environment and to engage where possible. There are a few lessons that can be learned from past mistakes that the continent and its populace have made, mistakes that are well outlined in the book, and some ways in engaging them.

However, the ultimate triumph of the book lies in its ability to reposition the human agent at the heart of the discourse on African agency. Through anecdotes, witty tales of human failure and success as well as an elevation of the oral cultures of Africa, Adesanmi provides a way of seeing African studies through African eyes, beyond the study of a geographic area. He shows that within that geographic space are people with knowledge and talent that are good enough to not only tackle their problems, but also offer input into global issues. And rather than cut them out of a conversation like the Associated Press did to Nakate or deny them a voice, the world can engage them for the good of the world. And that is Adesanmi’s love letter from the grave.