


BOOK FORUM

## Individual Epistememes in *The African Novel of Ideas*

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Chinua Achebe's gifts to African and world literatures are many, but an unheralded aspect is his textualization (and therefore popularization) of the Igbo proverb: "Egbe belu, ugo belu; nke si ibe ya e belu, ka nku kwa ya." In English, that is: "Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too, if one says no to the other, let its wing break." This proverb finds its corollary in the Yoruba saying: "Ojú ọrun tó ẹyẹ ẹ fò l'ára kan ra" ("The sky is wide enough for all to fly without colliding"). I offer these examples from Igbo and Yoruba—the two African languages I am most comfortable in—to register the accommodationist, tolerant orientation of African ways of being in the world. These proverbs, with correlations across African cultures and languages, index the rejection of absolutisms by making room for alternative possibilities and epistemologies. Enunciated in these vernacular expressions is a denunciation of the single story of a monochromatic Africa.

It is important to foreground the multiplicitous affordance of African epistemologies and praxis here because African literary studies, which stresses its social referentiality, often ignores its inheritance of complexity in the simplification of the field's commonsense. The dominant expression of this commonsense is in the emphasis on community or social collective in the determination of African literature's political stakes. Again, the interpretation of Achebe's work is significant in this regard for stressing the writer's commitment to decolonization within a communitarian ethos. As Simon Gikandi observes, "Achebe's novels were intended to both represent colonial history as it was—brutal, degrading, and destructive—while celebrating communities that had survived the detritus of this history."<sup>1</sup> African literary criticism has foregrounded the dissolution and celebration of communities in fiction and has pondered the imaginative possibilities in that literature for constituting counter-publics.

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Gikandi, "Between Realism and Modernism: Chinua Achebe and the Making of African Literature," in *A Companion to World Literature*, ed. Ken Seigneurie (Oxford: Wiley & Sons Inc., 2019).

This stress on communal or social sensibilities in African literature and its criticism has foreclosed the exploration of other epistemological possibilities, including of the place of the individual calibrated outside the demands of social expectations. Standing near the collective kite, to return to the Igbo proverb, is the lone eagle, invested in not belonging to the collective but to the self. At the least, this figure considers self-ownership as a crucial requisite for constituting belonging beyond the self. This I, in the margin of society, has been further marginalized not only in African letters and criticism but also in the postcolonial field more broadly with its thematization of collective resistance, hybridity, and solidarity. At least until now.

It is fitting that 2021—with a raging pandemic that has upended the world and instantiated social distancing—opened with the publication of two books in postcolonial or area literary studies atypically preoccupied with the individual. They are Kaiama L. Glover's *A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being* and Jeanne-Marie Jackson's *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing*.<sup>2</sup> Appearing at an epochal moment when the social condition has fallen apart or is out of joint, these studies demand a cultivation of the self as a locus of epistemological stakes. Glover's work, for example, analyzes women characters imagining freedom at the boundary of the collective in Caribbean literature. Like the African context that is the thematic of Jackson's project, Glover's literary Caribbean is a site of community forged out of the crucibles of slavery and colonialism, and so it is radically significant that she turns away from the nation or other collectivity in the search for freedom. In Glover's words, "A *Regarded Self* attends to literary configurations of individual refusal that not only transgress existing models of postcolonial Caribbean community but also caution against the codification of potentially constraining counterdiscourses."<sup>3</sup> Her book succeeds in demonstrating how women textualize individual freedom in societies that privilege social embeddedness. For these women, the encumbrances of collective belonging limit the attainment of autonomy.

Between the choice of a conventional postcolonial communal consolidation and a neoliberal individualism, Jackson, like Glover, opts for individualism outside the collective even as she rejects the trappings of imperial constructions of the individual and market determinism of the neoliberal subject. There are other differences between Glover's and Jackson's project worth mentioning for underscoring the significance of *The African Novel of Ideas* in this contribution. For even though Glover attends to all practices of individualist refusal and disorder in her elaboration of the "regarded self" of her title, Jackson limits the scope of her inquiry to narrative space that makes "space for the thinker," one "where ideas, that is, are granted a force and even ontology of their own by a turn to narrative designs that advance individual integrity as against porosity or dissolution."<sup>4</sup> In short, the ground of enunciation here is philosophical

<sup>2</sup> Kaiama L. Glover, *A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021); Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Glover, *A Regarded Self*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 2.

individualism as inflected by the African space of intellection. Faced with the choice of global theorizing unaffected by place, and an African theorizing that is nativist in its particularities, Jackson opts for engaging with universal categories such as individualism, reason, rationality, and subjectivity without losing sight of the affordances and constraints of the context. The contextual puts pressure on the contours of the transcontextual in Jackson's readings of literature drawn from across sub-Saharan Africa.

The four chapters of Jackson's book illustrate various dimensions of individual philosophical intellection. The first chapter analyzes J. E. Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* for its figuration of "intellectual cultivation," for the textures of individual philosophical argumentative force in anticolonial discourse as against the dissolution of individuation for nationalist consciousness. Chapter 2 interprets Stanlake Samkange's turn to philosophy as providing the opportunity for articulating a moral individualism against the political tempest of the nationalist present. Makumbi's representation of reason as neither priori nor outcome but as a contemplative process of decision-making in *Kintu* grounds the third chapter, and the final chapter attends to novelistic occasions in "which intellection signals not just social illegibility but literal death," that is, how individual thought is linked to dying in writings by Tendai Huchu and Imraan Coovadia.<sup>5</sup> Across these chapters, Jackson foregrounds the thinking African subject who embraces philosophy and interpretive decision-making as preconditions for social reform, for coping with social dysfunction, as an escape from social quandaries, or for its intrinsic, non-instrumental value. Taken together, *The African Novel of Ideas* challenges the narrative that the social upheavals in African societies have constrained imaginative forms and content in African letters. In short, the book's declaration might be this: thinking is characteristically African; it is the norm rather than exception. By its democratization of thought in African literature, the emphasis on the interplay of African literature and philosophy, and the positioning of the continent as generative site of ideas, Jackson's learned monograph constitutes an important contribution to scholarship in African literary studies, global and comparative literature, and the broader humanistic sphere.

Although Jackson devotes her introduction to "disaggregating liberalism" from the capitalist taint of neoliberal subjectivity, I am struck by how her primary texts themselves resist cooption by the global marketplace with their form and dissemination channels. In the twenty-first century publishing ecology where African narratives command hefty advances and are ubiquitous on syllabi and in airports across continents, Jackson emphasizes that the contemporary novels in her book's second half were published by small presses. Take the example of *Kintu*: the difficulty of placing the novel with a publisher is not dissociable from the text's formal difficulty, its departure from the transparent expectation of the "born-translated" novel that characterizes the dominant global literature category.<sup>6</sup> Experimentalism, formal fragmentation, and opacity

<sup>5</sup> Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

mark *Kintu* and the other texts discussed in Jackson's book. These texts demand from the reader the same "slow, careful habits of mind" that Jackson recognizes in Hayford's character in *Ethiopia Unbound*.<sup>7</sup> These novels shun (or are shunned by) the market with their formal demand of slowness and the pleasurable reward of interpretation that could emerge only from a difficult style. The global literary marketplace is full of easily digestible texts that are easily forgotten because they fit an established pattern of thematization and uneventful form. The texts analyzed in *The African Novel of Ideas* model a slow, solitary, thoughtful reading that is commensurate with their enactment of the philosophy of individualism. Rejecting the speed and textual transparency demanded by late capitalism, the philosophy of individualism in this context rebuffs the advances of neoliberal mercantilism with its embrace of slowness and complexity.

We must ask at this juncture: What is the cost of philosophical intellection in Jackson's archive? In distinguishing her model texts from others such as Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*, Jackson laments the degeneracy of Baako, Armah's protagonist, who suffers nervous breakdowns. It is worth remarking that despite Jackson's distinction between the conceptuality of the novel of ideas and the experiential novel, nervous breakdown or some form of psychological disturbance haunts the narratives discussed in *The African Novel of Ideas*, whether it is Baako or Miisi in *Kintu*. We should not forget the thinking characters who die in the book's final chapter. What do these distressing conditions mean for intellection or for the individual's relation to the community? Is there room for wholeness in the space of individual intellection? Is the collective escapable when the ground of philosophizing is African? Jackson compels her readers to ponder the limits of collective thought in African letters, but what exactly are the pitfalls of an individualist intellectual consciousness?

Finally, I wonder what Jackson would think of a middle ground, of the indissoluble individual philosophizing in an irrefutable social space. I am thinking here of the prewar congress of intellectuals in Chimamanda Adichie's novel on the Nigerian civil war, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, more particularly, of the grounded, but worldly, wildly contested individual ideas of that space. Like the philosophy club in Huchu's text with which Jackson opens her book, the congregation in Odenigbo's flat at the University of Nigeria Nsukka campus is concerned with such matters as "a priori truth, the possibility of pure form, and the search for resilient sources of moral authority."<sup>8</sup> The Nsukka space of Adichie's narrative space is one that conforms to Jackson's criterion: "the ambition to give ideas and those who pursue them their own space" animates the prewar gathering in the novel.<sup>9</sup> Participants in such exchanges of ideas are easily dismissed as lunatics or deranged professors by the larger society, as is the case in Huchu's novel. It is productive to read Adichie's novel with Jackson's notion of intellectualism as conceptual orientation (rather than a subjective one) as the guiding framework even if the novel challenges the binary framing of the relationship between conceptuality and subjectivity in *The African Novel of Ideas*. Adichie's novel also

<sup>7</sup> Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 56.

<sup>8</sup> Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 2.

enthrones the question of gender in the space of intellection with the shifting dynamics of Olanna's membership and of the prior participation of characters such as Miss Adebayo.

Reading Jackson's book shortly after Glover's on Caribbean female characters makes it inescapable to ask what "philosophical individualism as a fantasized space" would mean if that space is occupied by women thinkers in Jackson's book.<sup>10</sup> Asked differently, not as a critique but in the spirit of the deliberative ethos of Jackson's work, what would be the mood of the African novel of ideas underpinned by female thinkers, and what would be the grounds of comparison and comparability in such examples? Jackson rejects Baako as exemplar of the philosophical individual partly because his grandmother's "ruminations on Akan cyclicity" opens the text.<sup>11</sup> Is it possible to recuperate Naana for a philosophical individualism or a proto version at the least? And to what extent is Jackson's distinction between intellection as "a conceptual rather than subjective orientation" or between "the prioritization of concept" and "a more visceral experience" militating against the appreciation of the range of individual thinking in African literature?<sup>12</sup> Is it even possible to maintain the wall of separation between the conceptual and the experiential?

Again, these questions do not detract from the enduring significance of *The African Novel of Ideas*. In fact, given that the book's central concern is to broaden our thought on the conceptualization of African literature, that is, the consecration "of thinking about thinking," then the questions raised here can be considered evidence of the cumulative achievement of Jackson's book.<sup>13</sup> As she pushes the communal and social boundaries of African literature and its criticism, Jackson is generous enough to highlight other works—on literature and the urban, literature and ecology, literature and music—extending the frontier of African literature. These works—constituting the future of the field—"ask how African literature's meta-analytical investments can sharpen those of a field that is less geographically bound, and vice versa."<sup>14</sup> We must congratulate Jackson for exemplifying her valuable principle: for modeling a continuous interrogation of African letters for their significations for universal truths and for their shape-shifting possibilities for broader fields such as comparative literature and philosophy.

**Author biography.** Cajetan Iheka is Professor of English at Yale University, specializing in African literature, ecocriticism, ecomedia, and world literature. He is the author of *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), and *African Ecomedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics* (Duke University Press, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 62.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 33, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 186.

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