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*African-American Proverbs in Context* by Sw. Anand  
Prahlad (Book Review)

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Growing up in Hanover, Virginia, "surrounded by people who cast the world in vibrant and poetic colors," Sw. Anand Prahlad "fell in love with proverbs at an early age" (ix). This lifelong love affair has resulted in a rich collection of African American proverbs that expanded as Prahlad went through college and graduate school, and did post-graduate research. All the while, he was sharpening his critical skills and developing the theoretical framework to establish a model for use in examining the varied components of proverbial speech in the African American community, proceeding on the assumption that in order to understand a given

folkloric speech event, one must explore the entire situation surrounding that event. The result is *African-American Proverbs in Context*.

Prahlad introduces his discourse by providing an extensive review of prior studies of proverbs, acknowledging their strengths and contributions, but projecting his goal of going beyond the mere presentation of texts, discussion of meaning, historical analysis, and structural analysis and developing a new model for explicating the African American proverb. The resulting Prahlad paradigm, which owes much to speech act theories and contextual studies, approaches proverbs through four levels of meaning: the grammatical, the situational, the social, and the symbolic. Using his model, he proceeds to analyze selected proverbs from slavery to the present. His concern is not only with the functional sphere of proverbs, but also their aesthetics, for, like Kwesi Yankah, he views proverbs as creative performances and not mere quotations.

The organization of this work is an apt illustration of the proverb "Brick top o' brick makes house." In this carefully planned and meticulously orchestrated study, Prahlad first explicates proverbs taken from the "ex-enslaved." After considering slave narratives, diaries, letters, sermons, and literary works by European-American authors and noting some of the problems of these sources, which are often indirect, of questionable authorship, unreliable, and lacking in contextual detail, he decides to focus in this chapter on the interviews with former slaves, which, despite certain problems, offer the most proverbs and a greater sense of the context of proverbial usage. Prahlad analyzes the manner in which rituals of defense/attack and masking are used in these interviews with White collectors. This fascinating discussion is based on the dichotomy of the White interviewer and the Black subject, but one wonders why none of the interviews conducted by Black interviewers was used.

In the ensuing discussion of proverbs in the blues Prahlad notes that, despite the emphasis here on gender relations as opposed to race relations in the previous chapter, the most popular proverb continues to be "You reap what you sow." The application of this proverb in the blues is different, however; earlier it had religious connotations, whereas in the blues the religious connotations are subverted. Prahlad notes that the proverbs in the blues also illustrate the ritual of defense/attack, but that here the singer is responding to other African Americans.

His last two chapters, "Proverb Masters and Symbolic Meaning" and "Proverb Speech Acts Among Peers," focus on proverbs collected from individuals in the field—his field being the home and family, schools, pool halls, bars, auto repair shops, construction sites, retirement homes, medical offices, churches, basketball courts, and football fields. He reminds us of the difficulty for the collector here, who must just sit around and wait to hear a proverb (one doesn't simply ask a subject to tell him some proverbs, particularly if the study of the context in which they normally occur is central). Prahlad also uses collections from the University of California, Berkeley, folklore archives. His own collecting was greatly facilitated by what he calls "proverb masters," whom he describes as individuals who grew up in a home with a proverb master, often an older relative to whom they continue to be emotionally connected. These people are conscious bearers and active guardians of a cultural tradition, and their role in the community is comparable to that of storytellers, musicians, and teachers. The proverb master is, Prahlad informs, "known as a contemplative person who is in touch with past knowledge and, implicitly, as one who remembers those who have gone before and through whom they continue to live and speak" (125). Whereas proverb performances in the interviews with former slaves and in the blues are connected with rituals of masking and defense/attack, the proverbs in chapter 4 between a proverb master and a child are connected to the rituals of "healing" and of "bonding." Proverbs between peers, however, are reminiscent of the rituals of defense/attack, though they might in more contemporary terms be described as rituals of putting down, capping, or signifying.

Throughout this remarkably conceived and executed book, with its detailed discussion of scores of individual proverbs, Prahlad illustrates the necessity of viewing the full context of the expression of proverbs and the importance of exploring the different levels of meaning that the same or similar texts might have within diverse social, cultural, or political contexts. His probing and provocative analyses illustrate the old proverb "The deeper you dig, the richer the soil."

The book ends with an extended Appendix, which includes a collection of proverbs with contextual data, informant data, and interpretations by the proverb masters from whom they were taken. Finally, his "References" provide a useful bibliography for anyone interested in African American proverbs.

While there is not much basis for questioning Prahlad's selection of sources of proverbs that allow for an overview of the African American historical experience in America, I would certainly like to see him bring his model to bear on works of African American *literature*, which one might contend provides the context so critical to a full explication of the proverb.

Prahlad argues that proverbs are not instrumental in teaching traditional values, but that their use is "much more tied to issues of power and control, and to attitudes and dispositions, than to what are generally considered values" (123). His argument here seems much more one of semantics than fundamentals, since, I would maintain, values are not something diametrically different from attitudes and dispositions; nor is the teaching of values something removed from control (is not the teaching of honesty a method of controlling dishonest behavior?). His own explications often illustrate what many would call the traditional values taught by these proverbs, and the discussion by his informants clearly indicates their sense of the values inherent in some of them. He even slips occasionally and mentions, for a couple of examples, "the possible instructional *value* of the proverb" (173; emphasis mine) and "a concern with the truth *value*" inherent in responses to proverbs (128; emphasis mine). Certainly "value" is no more "nebulous" and "ambiguous" a term in these instances than it would be in the discussion of "values" in proverbs elsewhere.

But this is much ado about nothing in the context of a truly remarkable study that leaves little anyone can attack. *African American Proverbs in Context* firmly establishes itself as the finest collection and study of African American proverbs to date. I expect this work will revolutionize the way we all collect, study, and analyze proverbs in the future. This work, I am sure, has already found its way into classrooms throughout the country as an invaluable handbook and guide for students of African American proverbs. Humankind's wisdom is contained in proverbs, and Prahlad has certainly taken us to the water. I expect that most readers will not only drink, but (to mix proverbs further) lick the dish.