Book Review of Under One Roof: Gikuyu Proverbs Consolidated

By Gerald Joseph Wanjohi

Paperback, 238 pages.
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Reviewed by Joseph G. Healey

This new synthesized, comprehensive collection of 1821 Gikuyu (Kenya) Proverbs draws from various sources mainly:

1,000 Kikuyu Proverbs by G. Barra.
Gikuyu Proverbs by Ngumbu Njururi.
Kikuyu-English Dictionary by T.G. Benson.
Ng’ano na Thimo Cia Ugikuyu by Stanley Kiama Gathigira.

Through the use of certain devices, it was possible to reduce the 2411 proverbs in these four collections to 1527 proverbs. An announcement on the national radio in Kenya produced 168 additional proverbs. Other proverbs were found in Gikuyu literature: books, newspapers and magazines.

By bringing all the known Gikuyu proverbs "under one roof" or one umbrella Wanjohi facilitates research and reference, exercises that have been tedious and time consuming due to scattered sources. The book gives the literal translation in English of each Gikuyu proverb in order to enhance its symbolic power and applicability, but at the same time safeguards brevity, a characteristic of proverbs. Bearing in mind that this is an age of gender sensitivity, inclusive language is used wherever possible. Proverbs are cited in the current Gikuyu orthography although the critical marks are not used in this book review. The book contains 13 illustrations.

After Swahili Gikuyu is the African language spoken by the most people in East Africa and is considered one of the major languages on the continent of Africa. Despite very different research statistics and estimates it is reliable to say that seven million people in East Africa
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A content analysis of this collection of 1821 Gikuyu Proverbs reveals the following information and insights. Proverbs are cited in 18 letters of the Gikuyu alphabet including:

544 proverbs beginning with M.
264 proverbs beginning with N.
216 proverbs beginning with K.
174 proverbs beginning with G.
138 proverbs beginning with Ŭ.

The 22-page "Index" indicates that the following words appear most frequently in Gikuyu Proverbs:

mundu (person): 8 lines of citations.
mwana (child): 5 lines of citations.
arume (men): 4 lines of citations.
mwene (owner): 4 lines of citations.
goro (heart): 4 lines of citations.
nyina (mother): 4 lines of citations.

This pattern of important person-related words in proverbs is common in African languages in sub-Saharan Africa.
Certain important African values are emphasized in the following clusters of Gikuyu proverbs:

**Cooperation:**

One finger does not kill a louse.
A small organized group of people is capable of lifting a mortar.
A group of men should not be passed over.
The voice of the people is like that of God.

**Family:**

The wealth of the poor consists in having children.
Love for one’s child is greater than love for one’s life.
To praise the child is to praise the mother.
A leopard’s cub scratches like its mother.
A parent has no temper.
A child does not belong to only one parent.
Every man’s brother is his heart.
An animal will suckle even its deformed young.

**Moving Out/Mission Spirit:**

Staying in one place begets lice.
Traveling is learning.
Traveling opens one’s eyes.
Traveling is seeing.
A person who does not travel says that only his mother knows how to cook well.

**Person-centered:**
People are wealth.
People who love one another do not dwell on each other’s mistakes.
One’s lover’s place is never too far away.
It is only mountains that do not meet.

Wisdom:

The advice of the old is never overlooked.
A wise person learns though other people’s mistakes.
We speak in proverbs; he who is intelligent will understand.
Two waterfalls do not hear each other (said about two people loudly arguing with each other).

There are certain Gikuyu proverbs that are found in other world languages and reflect universal values:

Charity begins at home.
A long journey/trip begins with one step.
The bird that wakes up early eats the best worm.
Prevention is better than cure.
A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

Under One Roof: Gikuyu Proverbs Consolidated clearly shows that African proverbs are relevant to today’s world. Some examples with themes:

Availability and preparedness: The water that is not at hand does not quench the thirst.
Death: Death’s thirst is never quenched.
Evil of war and fighting: War is not porridge.
Humility and hiddenness: A little, contemptible path is sometimes the one that leads you to the highway.
Spiritual values: A religious person is never overcome.

Wanjohi had made a major contribution to African proverbs scholarship by compiling this
collection of all known Gikuyu Proverbs. His work challenges other scholars to make similar collections in other major African languages. These ongoing contributions to African oral literature are echoed in the Gikuyu proverb: A river is enlarged by its tributaries. Wanjohi is commended for wanting to continue to collect more proverbs in order to reach and surpass the 2000 mark: both traditional proverbs that have not been recorded in a printed version and new proverbs that have been coined recently but have not been recorded in a printed version. The ongoing collection of contemporary Gikuyu Proverbs will provide insights into changing cultural and linguistic patterns and influences in Africa. It is hoped that the next printing will correct the misspellings and typographical errors in this 2001 Edition. Also an extensive bibliography including booklets and articles on Gikuyu Proverbs would be useful. In a future edition when Wanjohi reaches 2000 Gikuyu Proverbs, a detailed "Subject Index" in English would be valuable to scholars and ordinary readers alike. This would be similar to Ferdinand Walser's Luganda Proverbs (Kampala: Mill Hill Missionaries, 1984) from Uganda.

The compiler and editor, Dr. Gerard Joseph Wanjohi (E-mail: wakuraya@alphanet.co.ke ), taught philosophy in the Faculties of Arts and Education of the University of Nairobi, Kenya where he also served as chairman of the Department of Philosophy. He retired from active teaching in 1993. In 1997 he published The Wisdom and Philosophy of African Proverbs: The Gikuyu World-View (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1st Reprint, 2001). Since 1985 he has published the quarterly: Wajibu, A Journal of Social and Religious Concern.

The publication of this new collection is in conjunction with the ongoing African Proverbs Project (APP). Some of the Gikuyu Proverbs in the book Under One Roof: Gikuyu Proverbs Consolidated can be found on the African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website (www.afriprov.org) and in the African Proverbs CD ROM produced by Global Mapping International (GMI). Paulines Publications Africa based in Nairobi, Kenya is commended for its commitment to publishing books on African oral literature and culture and promoting the importance of inculturation and contextualization.

Joseph G. Healey, M.M. has worked in East Africa since 1968. Presently he is the Coordinator of the Mission Awareness Committee of the Religious Superiors' Association of Tanzania based in Dar es Salaam. He is co-author of Towards An African Narrative Theology (Paulines Publications Africa, 3rd Reprint, 2000 and Orbis, 3rd Printing, 2001). E-mail: JGHealey@aol.com