



In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture

By Kwame Anthony Appiah

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The beating of Rodney King and the resulting riots in South Central Los Angeles. The violent clash between Hasidim and African-Americans in Crown Heights. The boats of Haitian refugees being turned away from the Land of Opportunity. These are among the many racially-charged images that have burst across our television screens in the last year alone, images that show that for all our complacent beliefs in a melting-pot society, race is as much of a problem as ever in America.

In this vastly important, widely-acclaimed volume, Kwame Anthony Appiah, a Ghanaian philosopher who now teaches at Harvard, explores, in his words, "the possibilities and pitfalls of an African identity in the late twentieth century." In the process he sheds new light on what it means to be an African-American, on the many preconceptions that have muddled discussions of race, Africa, and Afrocentrism since the end of the nineteenth century, and, in the end, to move beyond the idea of race.

In My Father's House is especially wide-ranging, covering everything from Pan Africanism, to the works of early African-American intellectuals such as Alexander Crummell and W.E.B. Du Bois, to the ways in which African identity influences African literature. In his discussion of the latter subject, Appiah demonstrates how attempts to construct a uniquely African literature have ignored not only the inescapable influences that centuries of contact with the West have imposed, but also the multicultural nature of Africa itself.

Emphasizing this last point is Appiah's eloquent title essay which offers a fitting finale to the volume. In a moving first-person account of his father's death and funeral in Ghana, Appiah offers a brilliant metaphor for the tension between Africa's aspirations to modernity and its desire to draw on its ancient cultural roots.

During the Los Angeles riots, Rodney King appeared on television to make his now famous plea: "People, can we all get along?" In this beautiful, elegantly written volume, Appiah steers us along a path toward answering a question of the utmost importance to us all.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A wonderfully crafted collection of essays."--*In My Father's House*

"Appiah's book on the place of Africa in contemporary philosophy powerfully exposes the dangers of any simplistic notion of African identity in the contemporary world....Tellingly, his reflections upon the calling of philosophy and the relation between post-traditional and not-yet-modern African culture(s) offer a welcome perspective on the increasingly shrill debates over "multiculturalism" that rend the academy. The epilogue on his father's funeral alone more than justifies the whole book."--Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Common Knowledge*

"Interesting and thought-provoking."--Safro Kwame, *Lincoln University*

"Montaigne invented the modern essay;...Appiah has the brilliance to extend it."--*The Village Voice*

"A groundbreaking--as well as ground-clearing--analysis of absurdities and damaging presuppositions that have clouded our discussions of race, Africa and nationalism since the 19th century....Mr. Appiah delivers what may very well be one of the handful of theoretical works on race that will help preserve our humanity and guide us gracefully into the next century."--Charles Johnson, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Appiah's essays are exquisitely and painstakingly argued."--*Washington Post Book World*

"An exceptional work, whose contextual sweep and lucidity provide a refreshing intellectual tone away from yahoo populism. In many profound ways, Kwame Appiah's *In My Father's House* ushers in a new level of discourse on race and culture, placing it within a universal narrative--and where else should it belong?...Without question, a first of its kind."--Wole Soyinka, from *Race and the Rout of Reason*

"*In My Father's House* is a remarkable book that brings previously invisible cultural assumptions to the surface and obliges us to rethink our conceptions about African identity. Drawing upon a variety of elegantly analyzed historical examples and relating them to his own personal experiences of the African world, Anthony Appiah convincingly demonstrates the need to go beyond stereotyped notions of race and futile laments about past injustices. His observations about authenticity movements, the persistence of Western

constructions of African realities, and the emergence of new syntheses of knowledge among African peoples represent a major breakthrough in the ongoing debate over the future of African culture."--Richard Bjornson, *Ohio State University*

"This is an absorbing and path-breaking book by a gifted philosopher. Appiah rescues the philosophy of culture from Herder by insisting that we drop notions like 'authentic negritude' and that 'African culture' is the name of an important project rather than of an available datum. The book's range of reference and the vigor of its argumentation are equally impressive."--Richard Rorty, *University of Virginia*

"Appiah's concern is, he modestly states, 'with the situation of African intellectuals.' In the growing literature on the subject, nobody has defined that situation, as it exists now, more sharply; nobody has built so many bridges to a discourse that might be shared universally. Learned yet unpretentious, serious and witty, critical and kind--this book is bound to infuse debates among African intellectuals with new vigor and to engage philosophers, literary critics, anthropologists and others everywhere. One also wishes it would be read by politicians for its lucid analyses of racism as well as its demonstration of intellectual independence tempered by colonial and post-colonial experience."--Johannes Fabian, *University of Amsterdam*

About the Author

Kwame Anthony Appiah is Professor of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University. His books include *Assertion and Conditionals* (1985), *For Truth in Semantics* (1986), *Necessary Questions* (1989), and the novel *Avenging Angel* (1991). He is currently editing the *Oxford Book of African Literature*.

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