

Foreword to Journal of Humanities Special Issue: Normalising “incompleteness” through Sino-Malawi Cultural Exchanges

Asante Lucy Mtenje 

Guest Editor, Journal of Humanities, University of Malawi

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jh.v32i2.1>

The articles in this Special Issue are a continuation of a dialogue of ‘incompleteness’, which formally began in 2016 through the Confucius Institute, as a way of facilitating ways in which China and Malawi can learn from each other through multiple perspectives, including culture, language, politics and economics. Francis Nyamnjoh (2015, p1) argues that “incompleteness is the normal order of things and that conviviality invites us to celebrate and preserve incompleteness and mitigate the delusions of grandeur that come with ambitions and claims of completeness.” Delusions of completeness are usually if not always, accompanied by arrogant claims of a civilisation that surpasses others and by assumptions of a universal knowledge-making system that delegitimises all other ways of knowing. To claim completeness is to put on a façade, to erase the notion that cultures continually collide, coalesce, and exchange through movement and migration, to echo what scholars such as Paul Gilroy (1993) have alluded to. Cultures are, therefore, always in a state of incompleteness, shifting, borrowing, losing, and gaining; always in a state of flux.

These articles are a result of the third Sino-Malawi cultural exchange conference whose express focus was on Malawian Ontology/Cosmology, including medicine and medical practices, sociology, history and politics, epistemologies, poetics, and how, in other instances, they compare with Chinese ontology. For example, looking at local practices, in their article, Kokota, Stewart, Abbo and Bandawe explore explanatory models and treatment practices for mental illness/bio-psycho-social disability by traditional healers in Blantyre, Malawi. Their study finds that although traditional healers in Blantyre were capable of recognising

mental illnesses, they mostly identified as unwell patients who exhibited significant behavioural disturbances. In their article, Lusaka and Chiwaura focus on the potential of museums and cultural heritage centres in facilitating Sino-Malawi diplomatic relations. They observe that the absence of a centralised national museum in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, and the lack of initiatives on the engagement of community museums and local cultural heritage centres deter efforts on cultural exchanges, which are necessary for the facilitation of cultural diplomacy between China and Malawi.

Considering that there are many Malawian students who are studying for various degrees in China and that international students face a number of challenges as they adjust to cultural differences and the learning environment, Ngwira and Kondowe examine the level of acculturative stress and social support Malawian international students in China experienced. Their findings, which are crucial for educators and administrators of international students, as well as Malawian students in China, indicate that the graduates who participated in the study did not experience high acculturative stress even though homesickness, perceived discrimination, to mention but a few, were reported as the topmost causes of their acculturative stress.

Three articles in this issue turn to the various cultural and artistic productions in Malawi to demonstrate how they carry various epistemologies, philosophies and world views of the people who compose them. Galafa's article focuses on animality as a vital aspect in the moral interpretation on proverbs. He examines Chewa, Chinese and French proverbs and how they deploy animal metaphors to depict various common moral experiences, such as unity of purpose, courage and bravery, virtue and life's fluctuating seasons. On his part, by focusing on Malawian lore, Mfuno-Mwanjakwa's article aims to show how an existentialist outlook, which is considered to be a measure of civilisation according to Western standards, is, in fact, not a preserve of the postmodern Western European. The article makes a case for the presence of an existential outlook in Malawian proverbs and songs. Finally, through discourse analysis, Likongwe analyses two plays, *The Rainmaker* by

Steve Chimombo and *Nyamirandu* by Du Chisiza jnr. Here, he argues that the two playwrights make a case for the decoloniality of knowledge and for the validity of indigenous Malawian cultural and religious beliefs.

These articles emphasise the fluid nature of cultures and the value of embracing incompleteness as a pathway to greater insight and connection. They highlight the importance of recognising and respecting different ways of knowing and being in the world while also identifying common threads that connect seemingly disparate cultures. Through this lens of incompleteness, together, we can foster a more open, humble, and receptive approach to cross-cultural interactions, acknowledging that no single culture or perspective holds all the answers. It is our hope that the articles in this special issue will provoke more debates and dialogues on the necessity of cultural exchange initiatives to eliminate assumptions and biases that limit human interactions and potential.

References

- Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.
- Nyamnjoh, F. (2015). Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the currency of conviviality. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 1-18. [DOI: 10.1177/0021909615580867](https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909615580867)