The Little Book of African Wisdom
AFRICAN WISDOM

THE LITTLE BOOK OF

Compiled by Patrick Ibekwe
Patrick Ibekwe lives in London, and follows closely political and social developments in Nigeria, his family’s country of origin.
Foreword

I have long been interested in and derived a great deal of pleasure from reading proverbial and aphoristic literature, with its fascinating combination of pith and point. The difference between the two forms is essentially one of provenance. Proverbs and aphorisms may be described as terse, general statements, often using figurative language, touching upon some aspect of life. But whereas the originators of aphorisms are invariably known Westerners, such as Samuel Johnson or Emerson, a proverb is a traditional saying, origin unknown, which has been handed down from generation to generation as a common inheritance.

A collection of African proverbs, it seemed to me, ought to encompass as many of the myriad cultures of that continent as possible; and while it would probably be impossible to include proverbs from every one of the hundreds of cultural and linguistic traditions that flourish across the
continent, it certainly ought to be possible to cover most of the major peoples.

Taking ‘African’ to include anyone of African descent, wherever they happen to be in the world, it seemed to me that the project could and ought to be broadened to take in diaspora culture. And so my work of collecting proverbs assumed its final form: proverbs traversing Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas.

Patrick Ibekwe
London

‘Tis better to give

Giving is a matter of the heart, don’t say it is a matter of wealth.

SWAHILI (EAST AFRICA)

Better the smallest present than the most magnificent meanness.

HAUSA (NIGER and NIGERIA)

Giving hands receive.

UGANDAN
Persevere!

Rest cannot shorten the way; going ahead does.

Tsonga (Mozambique)

Fe walk fi nuttin better dan fe si’ down fe nuttin.

Jamaican

To walk for nothing is better than to sit down for nothing.
Adaptability

When thrown into the sea the stone said, ‘After all, this is also a home.’

UGANDAN
Greedy guts

Do not run after a hen with salt in your hand.

THONGA (ZIMBABWE and SOUTH AFRICA)

Do not drink water in the house of a merchant: he will charge you for it.

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN

She who wants all, tells the rest to be contented.

UGANDAN
Business is business

A gift is a gift, and a purchase is a purchase; so no one will thank you for saying ‘I sold it you very cheap.’

YORUBA (BENIN, NIGERIA and TOGO)
Caution...

The grasshopper that sleeps forgetfully wakes up in the mouth of the lizard.  
IGBO (NIGERIA)

The wound we took care of has healed.  
OVAMBO (ANGOLA and NAMIBIA)

...and carelessness

If you have no time to take care of your sickness, you get time to die.  
TSHI (GHANA)