

By Nadia Stewart

From The Eye of the Beholder

I AM BECAUSE WE ARE AFRICAN WISDOM IN IMAGE AND PROVERB

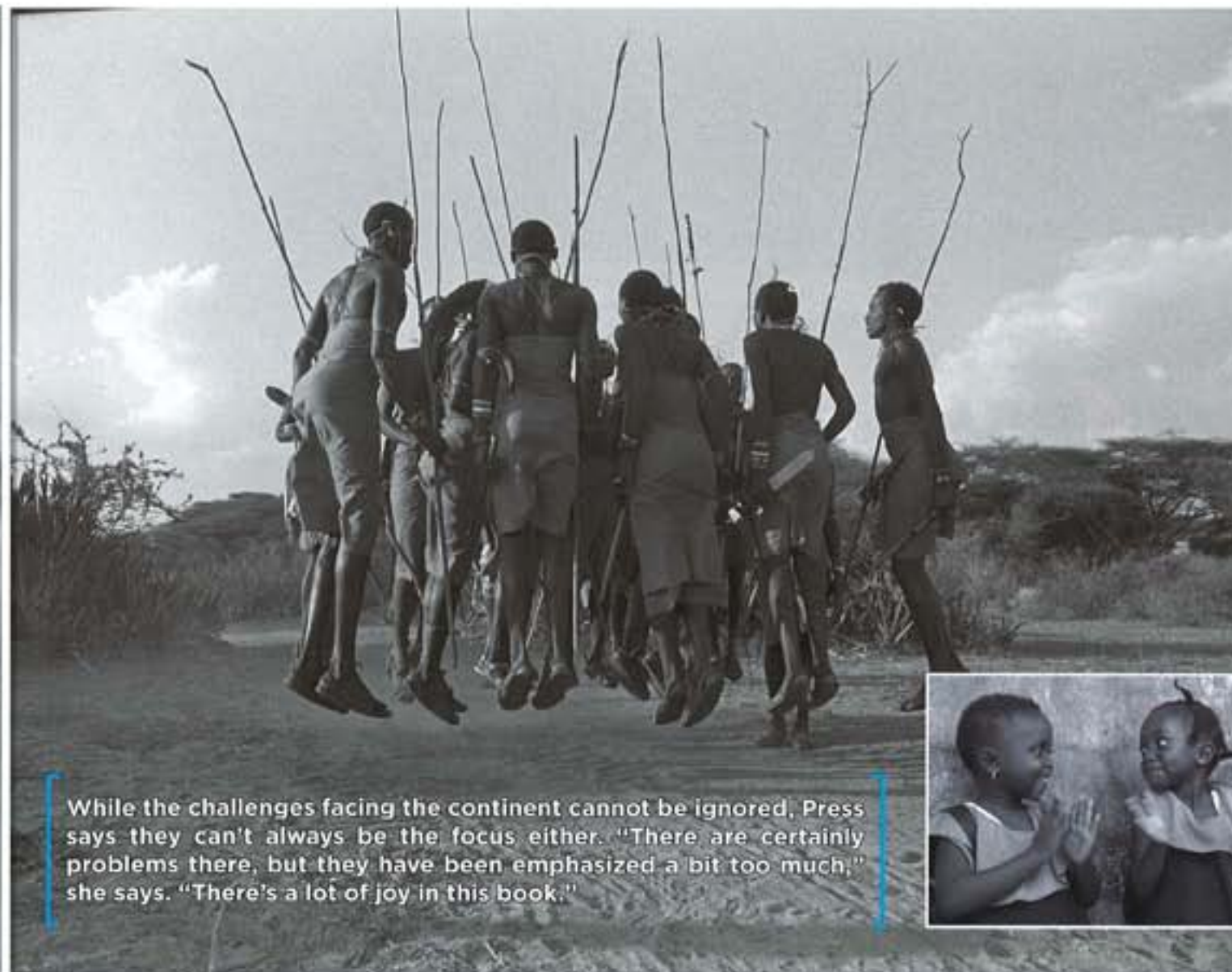
BY BETTY PRESS
PROVERBS COMPILED BY ANNETTA MILLER



As you flip through the pages of *I Am Because We Are: African Wisdom in Image and Proverb*, it's impossible not to be captivated by the photographs. Big, bold pictures are the heart of the book: pictures of bouncing babies in Rwanda, of young men lifting weights in Nigeria, of a beautiful traditional warrior dance in Kenya and of a determined woman in Togo working away at her home-based baking business. All the photos carry depth—you know there is a story behind each and every one of them. Many of these stories are ingrained in the memory of Betty Press, the woman behind the pictures.

Capturing Africa has been Betty Press' life's work. The world-renown photographer lived and worked in Kenya as a freelance photojournalist from 1987 to 1995. Even just a snapshot of her resume is impressive: photographing Audrey Hepburn on her historic visit to Somalia as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador in 1992, capturing Harry Belafonte's trip in Rwanda in 1994, having her photos featured in the book *The New Africa: Dispatches from a Changing Continent*, published by the University Press of Florida in 1999.

However, it was her love of the continent, the people, the cities, the everyday beauty she saw, that inspired her to produce *I Am Because We Are*. Throughout her years of working in Africa, Press says she always felt there should be a book like hers that focuses on the positive side of Africa.



While the challenges facing the continent cannot be ignored, Press says they can't always be the focus either. "There are certainly problems there, but they have been emphasized a bit too much," she says. "There's a lot of joy in this book."

"I want them to see a fuller picture of what Africa is, because the media portrays war, famine and poverty," said Press in an interview with *Planet Africa Magazine* from her home in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. After 20 years of taking photos, Press said she had amassed a large body of work. As for the proverbs, those are courtesy of her friend Annetta Miller. For more than 30 years, Miller has been collecting proverbs. An American born in Tanzania, she has worked in East Africa for most of her life. Press says the book wouldn't have been as strong without the contribution of Miller. Between the bursts of wisdom and the timeless photos, the book is a feast for the eyes and the soul.

"We were very careful how we laid out every picture, every proverb," says Press, adding that she and Miller put a lot of thought into the process. Many of the pictures, and the proverbs too, are timeless; snapshots in time coupled with timeless words of wisdom. While the challenges facing the continent cannot be ignored, Press says they can't always be the focus either. "There are certainly problems there, but they have been emphasized a bit too much," she says. "There's a lot of joy in this book."

However joy isn't the only emotion the book evokes. "There's also a sense of Ubuntu," says Press. Ubuntu is a philosophy of life, one that focuses on humanity towards others. That sense of Ubuntu

resonates throughout the book and Press says, with readers too. "It rings a bell with people. A lot of people who are ordering the book have an African connection."

When asked which one of the photos stands out to her the most, Press admits it's a tough question to answer. However, the cover picture was an easy choice. "I knew it would be the one," says Press. "The young women were so beautiful." On page 125, a picture of Liberian women, including 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee, praying against the war is also special to Press. "It's a connection to the present moment," Press added.

The book's desire to reach hearts and minds doesn't end with the pictures and proverbs. It was published in partnership with Books for Africa, a non-profit organization that ships books to different libraries and institutions across the continent. "Their mission is to end the book famine in Africa," says Press.

Meanwhile, the author says she's happy with the way the African community has embraced the book. In January 2012, Press traveled to Calabar, Nigeria, after being invited by the Bassey Andah Foundation, an organization that promotes research and cultural development. Press says after this trip, she'll spend the rest of 2012 sharing the book with anyone who's willing to embrace this beautiful piece of art.