

Suspect notes can also be found in poems bewailing the corrupting influences of Western ways and the loss of traditional roots.

On the other hand, there are distinctive, promising, new, controlled voices in this volume, and these include Doris Adabasu Kuwornu and Damasus Tuurosong. The latter succeeds with his sorrowful depiction of Africa as 'The Mourning Continent' in which we read:

The white fly's belch of satisfaction
The sad victory song of the black victor,
Ring out loud in my ears.
The flapping wings of owl
Disturb the silent, solemn song
Of the mourning continent

Annotations on each poem are included in an appendix and are yet another praiseworthy aspect of the volume. However, on occasions the commentary suffers, like some of the new poets, from oversimplifying poetical nuances. This is certainly true when faced with baffling images such as those used by Kojo Laing in 'Africa Sky':

Once in the storm,
Africa is handled in a dance by lost girls,
who meet to make my thoughts wander
into places where roots are suddenly
fewer than the threads that bind them.

As the publisher's Preface states, such detailed analyses of the poems as are provided are to be viewed in the context of the use of the book in schools. One could add, they will also recommend this publication to school and college librarians.

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Tayo Olafioye, *A Stroke of Hope*

Lagos: Malthouse Press, 2000, xxxviii + 82 pp. \$8.95 / £4.95 pbk
ISBN 9780231242.

Tayo Olafioye, *Arrowheads to My Heart*

Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1999, 83 pp. \$8.95 / £4.95 pbk; ISBN 9780230521

Tayo Olafioye, *Ubangiji: The Conscience of Eternity*

Lagos: Malthouse Press, 2000, 101 pp. \$8.95 / £4.95 pbk; ISBN 9780231226

All volumes in Malthouse African Poetry series, distributed by the African Books Collective, www.africanbookscollective.com

Let's start with the wholly good.

One ought not dismiss the sensual pleasures of books: thus I note how appealing I find the shape and size of these volumes from Malthouse; almost like pamphlets, though weightier; tall and narrow, inviting you to slide them in your back pocket; suggesting, even, in their feel, folded maps (the critic in

me begins to wonder what sort of terrain does Olafioye chart?). I have always been a sucker for maps, poring over them, isolating cities, tracing out routes between cities, towns and hamlets, imagining what lies between.

Imagine too, someone pinching a book of poetry. Just imagine. These three books, long and narrow and just thin enough to be able to slip comfortably into back pants pocket, almost beg to be nicked by some pickpocket, be it on the streets of New York, a Lagos market or the Paris Metro. If only all the world's vices were so deliciously edifying.

Yet the question before us is whether the poetry lives up to the promise of the books' form. In part the answer might be found in the fact that as I delight in the shape and feel of the books we must acknowledge the unfortunate deficiencies of form in some books published on the continent: the thin, almost transparent paper, the occasionally splotchy ink, and the folded, mis-trimmed or mis-bound pages.

As for the poetry itself, there is an earnestness to many of the poems which is ... what? Disconcerting? Cloying? Well, just a bit too earnest. In this cynical age it is perhaps far too easy to dismiss and take potshots at such earnestness. But in this or any age earnestness cannot and should not be used as cover for sloppy or banal or just plain bad versifying. Perhaps that's a bit too strong, but when you encounter poems such as 'O.J. — the hound dog' and 'Celine Dion' (both collected in *Ubangiji: The Conscience of Eternity*), where the earnestness is the very thing about the poem that makes you cringe, it is difficult to be forgiving: 'She wonders what / heavenly voice seems, / if Celine Dion sings / the ethereal tunes of angels. / The world legend of peace and harmony.' ('Celine Dion' p. 73); 'Nicole, not only earthly / Babiari, white too - / if their honey-pots / cement his psycho-shells / The ghost of Marcus / in the shadow. This hound of blemish.' ('O.J. — the hound dog' p. 40).

These are minor poetic travesties.

Now it is not for the chosen topic that the poems suffer, but the treatment. Consider the brief poem 'Euro Disney' collected in *Arrowheads to my Heart*. The ideological position staked out in this 8-line poem is a familiar one:

An American colonization of your folly
An idiotic universal celebration
Of pleasant stupidities.
Perhaps a needed anti-dote
To a world gone bunker
Disneyland: the American magic land
An eternal happiness for a second
After all: life itself is Empty. (p. 69)

We are well used to the notion of American culture as neocolonialism, and the commonplace that closes the poem — of fleeting 'eternal happiness' and the emptiness of life — are, well, commonplace. But there is both a nuance and a properly poetic quality to the 'pleasant stupidities' and 'needed anti-dote / To a world gone bunker' that gives a depth to the poem that too many others are lacking.

In many ways, Olafioye's is an attempt at crafting a 'popular' poetry — perhaps of the Osundare style, though using a very different frame of reference and register. This by no means is meant to minimize the creative effort behind

the works in question. However, too often it seems as if the desire to connect with the concerns of the day in verse leads to a disconnect from poetic underpinnings and the reader is left wondering 'Why?' It is a question that is asked of many poets and much of the poetry published today.

Olafioye is perhaps most appropriately self-reflective, if unintentionally so, in the note he appends to the poem titled, 'The *Matterhorn* of Kindness' (*Ubangiji*, p. 72): in it he writes that the *Matterhorn* is 'A gorgeous mountain in Switzerland, and also a replica in Disneyland, California.' It is such an unintentionally appropriate diagnosis of the trickiness of Olafioye's work that one wonders why someone in the editorial process could not have picked up on the hint and sent the works back for some more editing, or perhaps reselection. Olafioye is very much trying to straddle a series of paired worlds: Nigeria and America, literature and popular culture, poet and scholar, poet and memoirist, success and failure.

Poetry is such a personal art and form that one hesitates to judge too harshly; although, I might add, such intimacy does not seem to dissuade those given over to effusively praising poets. The best poetry is that which rings true to the reader, in which she hears echoes of her own cries and joys, and sees bits of her own world reflected back; warped a bit, perhaps, fragmented, but recognizable nonetheless. Too unlike, too fragmented, and the image is unpleasant, and the picture nonsensical or cartoonish. Yet too similar, too unmediated by a poetic voice, style, sensibility, or form and we feel ourselves (and the poet) to be superficial and vapid. Poetry cannot bring us the *Matterhorn*, only a sense of its majesty or a poor replica.

Too often Olafioye falls back on the banal, on cliché. And the self-congratulatory wisdom paraded before us in his verse makes the earnest clichés grate that much more; clichés don't need emphasis, and when given point the reader feels doubly abused. In the poem, 'Sexual Harassment in the Land', we come across the following:

The male specie, the Criminal,
And the guillotine:
His moral disinfectant
Gender oppressor as charged.
Soul-brother-original,
Beware
However innocent you may be.
Not all men on the haunt
Even when affable. (*Arrowheads to my Heart* p. 78)

It's an easy sentiment in an easy (that is, almost non-existent) poetic line. There is nothing really challenging, thematically or formally, in these lines. There is a visceral, almost audible appeal to 'Soul-brother-original, / Beware' – and the nod to Achebe is pleasantly understated – but the jokey defensiveness and seething rhetoric of the piece ('But what plaintiffs puke / Is self righteousness / Very laughable') tell us more of Olafioye's anger than lend any insight or poetic pleasure.

Too often I am asking myself, *where is the poetry in this?* The verse here is really driving me to ask what makes a poem; perhaps a worthy and important question, but it does not bode well for my appraisal of these particular

collections. In *Ubangiji: The Conscience of Eternity*, there are a number of poems betraying a fondness for list making – 'The brain', 'Sometimes' and 'The Catechism of Nature' for instance – lists which I guess Olafioye assumes can provide form. But apart from the far too easy final lines of 'Sometimes' – 'Sometimes I do not know / Who I am' (p. 46) – there is no coherence to these poems outside of that implicit in this rather vapid linear ordering. I have struggled with the grammatical clunkiness of 'The Catechism of Nature' (p. 50), trying to find some meaning or purpose to it: 'Someone's humane to someone's beastliness' opens the poem and it's a pattern that continues for six five-line stanzas. We are led to the first quality (the good quality) by contraction, and its counterpoint (the bad quality) through the possessive. I stumble over the reading of it; the first reading of that first line causing me to pull up short – something sounds funny – and then read through the rest of the poem breaking the contractions though still it lumbers along: 'Someone is humane to someone's beastliness...' Yet *Ubangiji* has one of Olafioye's strongest poems, 'Song of the Sage (For Basic Nigerians)'. Its stripped down stylistics and tight, almost curt lines give it a pointedness lacking elsewhere: 'don't trust a buddy-buddy / their mattan smiles' (p. 99).

The collection, *A Stroke of Hope*, is organized, at least in the beginning, around his hospitalization and recovery from a series of life-threatening illnesses. The 'Gratitude' section, in the thanks offered and the fears expressed, brings to the reader the sense that herein lies a poetic last will and testament. It also forces one to ask the rather creepy question: I wonder if he survived his illness – am I reading the last words he wrote? It's a delicate question for the critic to pose himself. So I scramble to the computer to see if Olafioye survived. He did.

Unlike the other two collections, this one includes substantial prefatory material which, after a while, tends towards the tiresome. One wonders about the purpose of including these pieces – a rehashing of the course of his illness in prose, praise for the doctors, praise for Olafioye's poetry – they shed little light on the poetry itself. Are these the first faltering steps towards autobiography, memoir, 'life writing'? Though they avoid the worst excesses of self-pitying rooted in such self-reflection in dangerous times, one wishes that the verse would just begin.

And once it does? As with the other two collections there are striking lines but few poems that stand out as a whole. 'I will be history / after a season' (p. 15) gives poignancy to a poem of rather commonplace reflections on mortality. And there is a rhythm, a real music to the lines of "They start again":

They start again, politicians
Who gorge to fill
Their bowels to expand,
Despite the dry bleedings
Of ordinary Nigerians. (p. 41)

In fact, the poem totters on the brink of song. It is, unfortunately, song that is too much absent from the rest of the collection.

For those who are at all familiar with 'mainstream' contemporary African verse, there's not much new here, nothing to really excite the passions. Which is unfortunate. And there's no telling. These collections might very well ignite

the interest of folks who are new to African poetry. If the pickpocket who pinches them finds something that speaks to him, then he is right to pay no attention to this.

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Lola Shoneyin, *So All the Time I Was Sitting on an Egg*

Ibadan: Ovalonian House, 2001, 72 pp., £7.95; ISBN 978-027-026-4

Lola Shoneyin, *Song of a River Bird*

Ibadan: Ovalonian House, 2002, 72 pp., np; ISBN 978-36581-0-7

Before you Mama Opolo
naked I want to stand
This price for my innocence?
Astronomical! (*Riverbird*, p. 62)

Rewritings of Christopher Okigbo have been tried before and will be again, but rarely has the parody been exercised with such mischievous delight. Lola Shoneyin transforms 'Heaven's Gate' into 'Heathen's Gate' and goes on to establish a link between this gate and 'Asas Gate', glossed as 'a brothel in Ibadan that was prominent in the 80s'. Is this parody of a Nigerian classic bold or outrageous, impious or honest, affectionate or self-serving? Shoneyin, who is a performer, editor and arts administrator as well as a poet, clearly enjoys setting herself against the staid and stuffy. Not even the sainted Christopher Okigbo of blessed memory is immune from attack. This is what she does to him – and lives with *Labyrinths*. It is, we are told, one of her 'constant travel companions'.

Another reference to the Nigerian literary heritage may be present in the very title of the collection from which the lines are taken. *Song of a River Bird* recalls J. P. Clark's 'Streamside exchange' that begins 'River bird, river bird'. In these intertextual ways Shoneyin, a graduate in English from Ogun State University, announces her arrival *vis-à-vis* an earlier generation of (mostly male) Nigerian poets. The daughters, daughters-in-law or grand-daughters of the Sixties generation are here having their say in a distinctive, confident voice. They are borrowing from their 'forefathers', transforming, changing, using parody and pastiche with a swagger that claims a right to being 'post-Sixties' writers.

Shoneyin's emergence has not been easy. Those birth attendants and teachers from OUP and CUP, Heinemann and Longmans who stalked the maternity wards, the primary school-rooms and the senior common rooms in those now far off Sixties have long since retired. Several, indeed, have departed for the great editorial office in the sky and their by-lines are not of this world. Now young women are doing it for themselves. In this case self-help includes establishing Ovalonian House, an independent outfit that announces its concern with high production standards through high production values in the volumes being reviewed.

It is significant that Asas Gate is described as 'prominent in the 80s' for these volumes bring together poems that are the harvest of some years of growth, observation, experience and writing. This is work that reaches back and then moves on through the Nineties into the new millennium. There are poems here for the victims of the thugs who brutalized Nigeria during Abacha's reign, both those who did not survive, such as Ken Saro-Wiwa (presented in an unreflective, messianic manner, *Egg*, p. 41), and those who did, including Ogaga Ifowodo to whom Shoneyin sends a 'ballad of rusty hinges' (*Egg*, p. 48).

The fact that pain has not been banished with Abacha's demise and that there is 'unfinished business' for the new era is indicated by the poem for 'Bola Ige that can profitably be read in conjunction with Shoneyin's contribution to Bookcraft's volume marking 'the Passage of a Modern Cicero'. It is also present in her barbed 'Epitaph' for a nation:

Here lie the vestiges of a national disaster
devised by soldiers in fits of laughter.
But wouldn't you be jolly and merry too
If Swiss banks couldn't thrive if it wasn't for you? (*Riverbird*, p. 35)

A wider, continental concern is shown in a poem for Rwandan Refugees who are sharply 'snapped' in a couple of lines: 'Shirtless ribs press through/ the Cyclops lane of misery'. (*Egg*, p. 37).

Tuning in to the voices in which Shoneyin speaks, one occasionally catches the expected legacies of British influence: nursery rhymes, and the Bible make their presence felt. There are also distinctive 'trans-Atlantic usages', possibly encouraged by the period Shoneyin spent on the writers' programme at the University of Iowa in 1999. Sometimes these are incorporated in a self-conscious manipulation of convention, as in 'Jesse Blues' ('to the memory of those who perished when pipelines exploded in Jesse', *Riverbird*, p. 40), sometimes they are slipped into the flowing, dancing verse through a reference to 'candy' or a command to 'listen good'. Despite these usages, and the assured command of English, one can detect an occasional West African trick of speech. It is present in the use of 'parlour' and pervasive in the frames of reference that include Asas Gate! The voice is, thus, 'Cosmopolitan Nigerian'; the address of the publishing house, appropriately, 'New Bodija Estate, Ibadan'.

The two volumes named above are divided into sections and the sometimes playful sub-headings indicate some of the poet's gender-specific concerns. Sub-headings include *Clitoranguish*, *Matriscope*, *Brooding*, *With Flustered Feathers* and *Clucking*. These provide a context for the effervescent verses in which a variety of forms are confidently handled. These are a quite naturally a young woman's poems, and reflect her concerns, relationships and experiences, the pressures on her, the attitudes she has encountered and those she has adopted to survive. Shoneyin expresses herself with an abundance of wit and sharp observation, and, not surprisingly given the context in which she makes her presence felt, she has provoked antagonism and name-calling. In an on-line interview she says she has 'been called everything from a man-eater to a lesbian to a feminist'. Certainly she adopts many roles and imagines herself speaking, as a dramatist might, for many different people in an