

( 1 September 1932 - ) ( LENRIE PETERS  
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Lenrie Peters was born in Bathurst (now Banjul), The Gambia, in 1932. After primary school in The Gambia and secondary school in Sierra Leone, Peters studied medicine at Cambridge and trained in surgery in Britain in hospitals in Guildford and Northampton. Since returning to Africa he has worked as a surgeon in Sierra Leone and The Gambia. His chief recreation has always been music, and he is himself a fine singer. As he makes clear in a number of autobiographical poems, from his undergraduate days onward he has felt compelled to pursue his literary avocation in the face of a demanding professional schedule.

One early product of this compulsion is Peters's novel The Second Round, first published in 1965. Initially well received, it was praised by a number of foreign reviewers including Gerald Moore, who called it " a distinguished and memorable work of the imagination." But it has fallen subsequently into a not undeserved neglect. Set in Freetown, Sierra Leone, just before independence, it tells of the return to Africa of Dr. Kawa, a British-trained physician. Kawa is a somewhat autobiographical character possessed of a "subdued temperament and tendency to reflection" and of "noble ideas about progress in Africa." He is quickly caught up in the lives and trials of his Krio family, neighbors, and friends. The result is a series of conventional plot elements handled without great distinction--an unfortunate love affair, a neighbor's unhappy marriage, etc. The chief

weakness is that this material is not Africanized; it could happen anywhere. In one passage Peters says that "political events flared across Africa like a trail of gunpowder," but he deals neither with these events nor with the problems of tradition and the hearth under the stress of change. The most interesting element in the novel is Kawa's sense of doubleness--of being both a ~~Western~~ physician and an African. The story ends with Kawa preparing to immerse himself more deeply in Africa by accepting a post in a lonely bush hospital.

The Second Round is Peter's only published novel, perhaps because he realized early that his great literary gift was not for fiction but for poetry, a craft at which he has worked steadily for a quarter of a century. The results of this labor have been four collections of verse beginning with Poems (1964) and continuing through Satellites (1967) and Katchikali (1971) to Selected Poetry (1981). Because Peters lives and works at a great distance from the literary centers of Ibadan, Lagos, and Accra, he has not received the attention he deserves; but he has earned critical respect as a thoughtful, even intellectual, poet. O. R. Dathorne attributes to him "a wider range of ideas than any other African poet." There was an early attempt by critics and reviewers to "deracinate" Peters's verse, but more recent criticism has tended to emphasize his African qualities and themes. Again Dathorne points out that "certain qualities of his verse and the selective nature of his experiences identify him as an African poet." <sup>Romanus</sup> ~~Romulus~~ Egudu confirms this view: "The psychology portrayed cannot be other than that of an African."

Poems, published by Mbari Publications of Ibadan, is a slim volume of thirty-three poems. These are early works, written for the most part when Peters was still in his twenties. Collectively they communicate an excessive youthful melancholy unrestrained, for the most part, by the irony and anger that give bite to the later collections. They are marked by expressions of grief, loneliness, suffering, hopelessness, and futility-- emotions which are presented as responses to specifically African problems, the most important of which are the disconnectedness between the present and the past in Africa, the cultural clash between traditional Africa and the West, and the disoriented psyche of the Westernized African. Those poems Peters considered the best in this initial volume were incorporated into Satellites, the first of the three major collections.

In Satellites Peters is the poet standing in the harsh African present reacting to nature, to history, and to the contemporary human condition, especially in Africa. Most of the nature images are violent or decadent. For instance, the poet sees a "skyflood of locusts." When it descends,

A bleeding earth  
ferments in agony  
success goes up in smoke,  
returns a deluge of ruin.

Elsewhere the destructive violence below the surface of nature is revealed as "a sabre shark / lifts and plunges / cutting the emerald / sea." In the poet's response to such a world the affirmations are infrequent, and they come as a demand for faith in a faithless world. "I believe / shout; I believe."

In this natural setting the images of human life are bleak. Futile youth "burns out its fuel"; maturation brings "the panic / of growing older." Hands fumble and shake. Thus as one reads through Satellites and through it again, one senses an attitude toward the human condition more akin to the despair of the existential pessimists than to the aggressively confident rhetoric of the political leaders of newly independent Africa. In Peters this attitude is made specifically African because it is linked tropologically to experience that is specifically African--to cold hearthstones and crumbling huts--and that grows out of the history of Africa.

In some of the best poems in the collection Peters portrays the African as the victim of history, bereft and adrift.

Bartered birthrite

Like the chaste membrane

Is lost for good

. . . . .

Early strength never returns

to oppose the grinding artificialities.

In several densely structured ironic poems the persona is located in a shattered present from which he contemplates the past, the process of change, and the present point to which both the person and the continent have come. Speaking for all Westernized Africans, he says,

We have come home

From the bloodless wars

With sunken hearts

Our boots full of pride

From the true massacre of the soul.

As a result of the "massacre" of Westernization, he comes back alienated to a confused moment "when the dawn falters / Singing songs of other lands." And the Africa to which he returns is a "house without a shadow / Lived in by new skeletons."

This is a grim picture sketched by a realist who will not blink or turn away. Near the end of the volume, in the longest poem in the collection, the realist turns satirist. Peters was one of the first ~~Anglophone~~ poets to use satire, and he uses it to accuse the new black leadership of perpetuating the "massacre" of the African soul and expropriating the shadowless house of the modern African state. The guilty are the politicians who "came and went / Meteors about the sky," learning "to beg in style."

Katchikali, a volume of sixty-nine poems that appeared in 1971, is one of a half dozen important collections by ~~Anglophone~~ West African poets to appear in the early seventies. It is not a happy or a hopeful book: its predominant theme is the painful isolation of the individual. But again Peters speaks of this isolation as an African. To the degree that one can judge these things, a great deal of the person of the author has gone into Katchikali. In different poems he writes as an artist, a parent, a physician, and an African. This last is the most important and is seen in the design of the book. He places the specifically African poems at the beginning and the end of the volume, creating a parenthesis of Africanness within which the other poems are enclosed.

He depicts the isolation of the spirit in several poems through references to the transitory character of an interracial love affair, but most of the poems focus on the uprooted mind rather than the broken heart.

The mind  
Is like the desert winds  
Ploughing the empty spaces  
Listless, fastidiously laying down the dust.

In a later poem he personalized this pain by lamenting his inability to impose meaning on experience.

There where all the opposites arrive  
to plague the inner senses, but do not fuse  
I hold my head.

In another poem this personal tragedy has its counterpart in nature itself

Around me  
dead winter trees  
wolves howling

This alternating between <sup>#</sup>he internalizing and generalizing of the theme of isolation is important in Peters's poetry. As Edwin Thumboo points out, Peters is "mainly concerned with the dissociated sensibility as a contemporary problem" in ways that are both speculative and personal, intellectual and existential.

In "Katchikali," the title poem, Peters examines the possibility of a return to African tradition as a solution to existential isolation. He uses a sacred pond in The Gambia to symbolize an indigenous past in which crocodiles are "as tame as pumpkins." But the pond and the past are defiled by colonial

intruders who force pressgangs into the labor of desc<sup>e</sup>ri<sup>a</sup>tion. The result is not that the African is transformed by a return to roots but that he finds himself almost hopelessly trapped in the rubble of the present when "all the institutions crumble." The uprooted call in vain because the pond's "wisdom is silent." But if the conclusion of the poem is pessimistic because "there are no more answers," the form of the poem is hopeful with a hope signaled by a grammatical shift. Beginning by talking descriptively about Katchikali, the poet ends by talking to Katchikali. What begins as a lament ends as an invocation. Like Christopher Okigbo, Peters is "waiting on barefoot," learning perhaps that the most hopeful thing about prayer is not that one is answered but that one can pray at all.

The remaining poems of the collection alternate between cautious expressions of hope in an African future built on an African past and cries wrung from the isolated heart and from the angry citizen. In the latter role, with what Mphahlele calls his "rejection of cant--honesty of purpose," he repudiates the political and manipulative exploitation of the Africa<sup>a</sup> past.

Octogenarian breasts at twenty  
    enthroned in pools of urine  
    after childbirth, whose future  
is not theirs to mould or flirt with mirth  
  
    There is your 'self' crushed  
    between the grinding wheel  
of ignorance and the centuries.

In 1981 Heinemann brought out a collection of Peters's verse under the title Selected Poetry. Along with selections from the previous volumes, it contains fifty-eight new poems. They are not always as good as the earlier poems; they exhibit less control of the brief, clear line, and there is less use of the vivid structural metaphor. But there are still fine lines and strong poems. Here as in the past Peters writes of and out of the moment. The mood and subject shift from poem to poem, but there is a kind of weaving or pulsating of dominant concerns. The sense of discontinuity is always strong in Peters, but it is especially so in the new poems. And it is presented in terms of the African past, present, and future. The primary focus is again the present, depicted in the lives of individuals, in the clash of cultures, and in the exploitation of neo-colonialism. Juxtaposed against this is an intense nostalgia expressed in pastoral images of the African past. A third concern is the future of Africa. Especially toward the end of the volume, he considers how it will happen and what it will be like.

Among the interweaving themes the broken dream of the present prevails. It is presented as a generalized reflection on political and economic life--the greed of the elite and the poverty of the people. Often Peters is compelled to simple, sad assertions: "It has been dismal / since the new freedom came." In one of the best of the new poems he depicts the painful present as the center of both Africa's dilemma and his own poetic consciousness.

Sand castles on the beach  
within easy reach

of the white tide's  
menacing graces

I start in my dreams  
calabash world in fragments  
my pillow wet with tears  
acid centuries of bitterness.

The first quatrain is a superb image of the vulnerability of traditional Africa. The second links the poet's consciousness to the torment of the continent through the dream of the broken "calabash world."

In a number of the new poems his response to this broken world is an intense nostalgia--a longing to return to traditional Africa as depicted by pastoral and domestic images. He speaks longingly of "messages / from wood fires and the warm / pungency of cooking." But he, the modern African, is disconnected--cut-off. This sense of separation from the healing past is expressed in one of the best poems in the collection:

Men are roasting nuts  
on wood fires  
their laughter like sheet lightning  
in the night,  
girls dancing by firelight  
among green-flowing fields of rice crop.  
I, always one removed  
from their fun and laughter,  
cannot reach them.

They know where sorrow ends,  
and I, the broken bridge  
across the estuary,  
across worlds, cannot reach them.

The whole thrust of the new poems is an attempt to connect the traditional past to some bearable, livable future through the shattered present. And Peters is ambivalent about the possibility of such a connection. In one poem he sees traditional Africa welcoming its lost children with singing, drumming, and dancing. In another he warns that "the nearness of nature / has not taught us self-reliance." But he is a realist as well as a humanist. In the final analysis continental self-reliance is the only message the past can communicate to the present to create a future.

the tom-toms are saying

'This is the time to know yourself.'

Self-knowledge will make possible a collection<sup>ve</sup> action, "a mass uprising / from the Atlas to the Cape / to ravage the puppets / pervers<sup>t</sup>, iconoclasts." But as this harsh indictment of the new African elite makes clear, Peters offers no easy answers but only a slim hope and a stern warning.

Ogun will not help us

Christ will not help us . . . .

we hold our destiny

in rugged palms.

In Peters's poetry what we see over and over again is the interaction of a strong sense of negation and a rather desperate

hope for the future. The center of his poetic vision is the African present with its grief, violence, oppression, loneliness, and death. From this he moves toward a past now lost and a future that may never come. From this center of the shattered present even nature is filled with menace unless cleansed by association with an idealized past.

But there is a progression of feeling and focus in ~~Peters~~ from one volume to the next. Satellites contains many poems that explore the relation of the African past to the harsh present "when the dawn falters" as well as poems that record his own involvement in the modern African's cyclical journey to the West and back. The two poems that begin "We have come home" and "The present reigned supreme" are among his best and most ironic. And running through the volume, providing a kind of figurative unity, are images of the indifferent harshness of nature. The poems in Katchikali are often less specifically African. In this collection Peters writes more of the condition of modern man generally and of the problems facing the world. Even the political satire tends to be more generalized. But here also it still seems that the center from which he writes is the broken dream of the African present. This is made clear in those poems near the end of the collection in which he uses images of present suffering and future disaster to attack the rhetoric of African politicians. Although the pictures of the present in Selected Poetry are still harsh and bitter, the new poems express increased nostalgia for the pastoral African past as well as a cautious assertion of hope for the future. Like the other poets of his generation, Peters has found that the conditions of life

in contemporary Africa are tragic. As a poet he depicts this tragedy while trying to reclaim the past and point the way to a viable future.

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Poetry:

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Educational Books [African Writers Series, 103],  
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