

BOOK REVIEW

A DESCRIPTIVE SYNOPSIS OF AONDOWASE MNGUVE AND KATOR SOMBO'S *CANTOS OF THE WAILING BARDS*

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INTRODUCTION

At various times in history, the poet has been worshipped, honoured, feared, despised, or ignored. Yet always, poets have continued to write and read poems. There are many poets and poetry collections the world over. In Nigeria, for example, the greatest poets over the decades include John Pepper Clark, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Adedayo Agaru, Hussain Ahmed, Niyi Osundare, Hyginus Ekwazi, Aondowase Mnguve, and Kator Sombo, just to mention a few. Poetry is, of course, one form of literature, and literature is, to put it simply, the expression and communication of human experience in meaningful language. Poetry is the language of emotion; its musical rhythms and patterns of sound can make a deeper, more direct impact on the reader than the ordinary language of prose. Thus, writers may use it to express a moment of joy or sorrow, to tell a story, or to make ideas more memorable. The two poets, Aondowase Mnguve and Benjamin Kator Sombo, in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*, express and explore complex emotions through their poems. In other words, their poems are drawn from personal experiences and observations. The poets also used their poems to comment on social issues, politics, or cultural norms as well as explore fundamental questions about life, existence, and human nature.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Cantos of the Wailing Bards is a collection of poetry, creatively packaged in three sections: 1. Tribute, laurels, and eulogies, 2. God, nature, and life; and 3. Politics, conflict, and society. While the first section basically concerns itself with tribute, respect, and honour to distinguish fallen heroes who have left this world with footprints on the sand of history and deserve to be remembered, the second section of this collection draws inspiration from nature, exploring themes of spirituality, existence, and human experience. Simply, it depicts nature's beauty, often incorporating spiritual or symbolic elements. The final section of this collection dwells a lot on social cohesion-politics, and conflict, which can either unite or divide societies, depending on how they are managed. In other words, the way politics and conflicts are handled can affect trust in institutions and social stability.

Among the emotions and ideas that have always inspired poets, "love" probably takes first place. However, in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*, our poets Aondowase Mnguve and Benjamin Kator Sombo have not just relied on love ideas alone but have also decided to consider the vast exploitation of other areas or themes as well.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Cantos of the Wailing Bards is a collection of thirty-eight poems. The first four poems mourn the loss of some people. Specifically, the first poem titled "Threnody of a Legend" is written by Aondowase Mnguve. The primary purpose of the poem is a tribute to a community District Head who has done so much for his community before kicking the bucket. The poem concerns itself with the life and times of this noble man:

Where are you today?
Though you have slept in soft peace
It is difficult to believe you have gone home
Your virtues still stare us in the face as though you were here... (Stanza 2).

The message presented here by the poet is that one should do well while alive so that when one dies, society will remember one for that. The poem, which is an elegy, mourns the loss of someone special. It has simile as a figure of speech in the last stanza: "Are like attempts to fill a basket with water", "Like the biblical Sarah", which helps create vivid and evocative language.

The second poem is titled "Tortoise of Africa", written by Sombo. In the poem, tribute is paid to a great hero, Mahmud. The mood is one of sadness:

Though you are dead, your words live
We feel you more than the living dead (Stanza 2).

The notion it is trying to deal with is nature and death. This poem is also an elegy.

The third poem in this collection is "A Man for all Seasons", written by Sombo, in honour of Dennis Orkuma Nev. The elegy mourns, describing him as:

The lion hearted one that spreads his elephant back
For the needy to climb and seek refuge
The one who God has lit a candle in his head
To see where his pear cannot venture
The three on which we lean in the times of storms (Stanza 2).

The most common figure of speech in "A Man for all Season" is a simile. Some of the examples are: "Like the magical song of an enchantress", "That clings like the leprosy of Naaman", "Spreading hope like shrubs in the early rains".

The fourth poem, titled "Teacher," written by Kator, is a decastich with specific rhyme or meter. It is a stanza poem written in free verse style without adhering to specific forms of structure. The poet highlights the duties of a teacher who suffered a lot to train others to become well-to-do people in society, in no distant time. Yet the teacher remains one of the poorest in society.

Yesterday
You raised the kings
You nurtured the priests
You decorated the knights
But where is your reward today
Dying wretched by the road
Bypassed by heroes you raised

For the teacher, especially in Nigeria, society feels that his reward should be in heaven. The poet strongly believes that the teacher's reward should also start here on earth, just like others:

Let thy reward come
Let it be done to you here on earth
And it will please heaven

The fifth poem, "Mysteries of the Night," is written by Mnguve. The poet uses these mysteries of the night as a metaphor for personal struggles, hopes, or fears:

Night comes in layers
Like an onion bulb
To some an end to dusk
And the start of a new dawn (Stanza 1).

Poem number six, "The Chameleon," is written by Mnguve. In some cultures, chameleons are associated with transformation, wisdom, and patience.

Sluggishly, sluggishly, the Chameleon
Makes to cross the road
As "the moon moves slowly
But day by day
It crosses the sky" (Stanza 2).

The truth is that Nigeria will become a better place to dwell in if the principles of transformation, wisdom, and patience are adopted.

Poem number seven, titled "Almajiri Industry," is written by Mnguve. It is one of the most worrisome poems in this collection. The Almajiri struggle for survival day and night, eating remnants, even from the dustbin. The poet is concerned about their condition:

Almajiri, oh! Almajiri,
I commend your high spirit of endurance
"Quizoting" all day long for survival
As the moon moves slowly and by daybreak, crosses the sky.
So shall you (Stanza 3).

"The Sky" by Mnguve is the eighth poem in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*. The sky often represents limitless possibilities, freedom, and endless opportunities. A clear blue sky can evoke feelings of hope, optimism, and joy. The memory and wandering of a childhood fascinated by the sky is creatively presented by Mnguve.

Poem number nine, written by Mnguve is titled "ORMEE", meaning "Satan". Ormee can symbolize rebellion, free will, and the struggle between good and evil. Ormee is depicted in this poem as a symbol of rebellion or evil tormenting so many individuals in our society from time immemorial:

"Ormee" a bloody liar
An armless robber
Who robs
With cunning (Stanza 1)

Leading souls astray
To the smooth road of doom
Where destruction awaits like goats
With unbroken tether at festivities (Stanza 2).

There are similes in the poems. For example: "where destruction awaits like a goat", "Like scanty drops of rain in the desert".

Poem number ten, titled "A Doll at Stake," is written by Mnguve. "A doll at Stake" here implies a metaphorical meaning, mainly a fragile situation. It represents something delicate or fragile, and at stake suggests risk or uncertainty. It implies that something precious or emotionally significant is at risk.

Poem number eleven, titled "The Foolishness of God", is written by Mnguve. It is the paradox and mystery of divine wisdom, which may not align with human expectations. The poet has tried to distinguish between God and man:

"The foolishness of God is greater than the wisdom of men
Refrain from all evil

In poem number twelve, Mnguve titled it "God is Love". The subject of Love is so basic that the expression of it in poetry has an enormous appeal for humanity in general. In this poem, the poet raises questions about the nature of God, the relationship between God and humanity, and the role of love in spirituality.

Poem number thirteen, which is written by Mnguve is titled "Vanity upon Vanity". The book of Ecclesiastes in the Holy bible explores the theme of vanity and the fleeting nature of human pursuits. This is likely where the poet got his title. In all five stanzas, the phrase "the world is vanity" is mentioned. The poem suggests that something is futile, empty, lacking in substance, in most parts of the world.

Poem number fourteen by Mnguve is titled, "Nothing Lasts Forever". In this poem, the poet considers the fact that everything in life is transient, including relationships, experiences, possessions, positions, and wealth. Change is a natural part of life, and nothing remains static:

Nothing lasts forever
I wish they know
That nothing last forever

Also:

The Politician enjoys the siren and the convoy movement
Through the dark spectacted caravans
Blowing "pim-pim, pim-pim" And "pom-pom, pom-pom"
Their tenure is endless

They are not different from myopes
I wish they know
That nothing lasts forever (Stanza 4)

Poem number fifteen by Sombo is titled "Dreams". The poem points to the fact that dreams often use symbolism, metaphors, and imagery to convey messages. Poem number sixteen, written by Sombo, is titled "This World". In this poem, the poet highlights the good, the bad, and the ugly of this world. The first Stanza particularly states that:

This world is full of good and bad
This world is full of good and evil
This world is beautifully created
This world is wonderfully done
It is spherical in shape

Poem number seventeen by Sombo is titled "Endless Journey". Endless Journey in this poem represents the search for life's purpose, meaning, and significance. It symbolizes spiritual growth, enlightenment, or transcendence. In the beginning lines, the poet has this to say:

The endless journey is when you are born in this world
The endless journey is chasing the air, and not his will
Chasing the air is endless (Stanza 1).

Poem number eighteen by Sombo is titled "Decision". The phrase decision-making as applicable in this poem involves evaluating choices and considering potential outcomes. Decisions can lead to personal growth as individuals learn from their choices and experiences.

"The Cold Lonely Earth" by Sombo is poem number nineteen in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*. It is a short poem of eight lines that talks about life after death.

The next poem, titled "Love" by Sombo, is poem number twenty. It demonstrates the true meaning of love. To some, love is all about sex. To the poet, love is "the solid rock of friendship".

"Desire" by Sombo is poem number twenty-one. It is also a short poem of eight lines, which concerns itself with passion and drive. This can motivate individuals to pursue their goals, dreams, and aspirations.

"Prophecy" by Sombo is poem number twenty-two. It is a lyric poem, in two stanzas, which expresses the poet's feeling or thought on the true meaning of prophecy.

"Nothing is New" by Sombo is poem number twenty-three. In this poem, the poet points out the fact that, "there is nothing on earth that is new". Therefore, while alive, cognizance should be given to the fact that:

The world will remember you
Not for your coming in, but going out.

Poem number twenty-four, titled "Campus at Night," is written by Mnguve. It portrays some of the atrocities and societal vices committed on Nigerian university campuses, especially amongst the female students. In the quest for survival, some of the female students engage in prostitution with customers who patronize them. But this act is bad, and it should be discouraged.

Poem number twenty-five, written by Mnguve is titled "Metropolis". A Metropolis is often a large, bustling city with a high population density. Metropolises often serve as centres for commerce, culture, innovation, and entertainment. Abuja is an example of a metropolis. In this poem, the poet is concerned with various activities that take place in any given metropolis, especially by traders in the quest for survival of the fittest. While some of these activities are genuine, others are fraudulent.

Poem number twenty-six by Mnguve is titled, "At the NYSC Orientation Camp". In this poem, the poet takes a critical look at life during his National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) orientation camp. Come sun, come rain, corp members are always at work. Though the NYSC orientation camp is hectic and tedious, the poet concludes: "It is fun". Endurance is indeed the key to success.

Poem number twenty-seven is a short poem of twelve lines written by Mnguve. It is titled "Friendship". True friendships are supposed to last for a lifetime, providing a sense of continuity and stability. During the Nigerian oil boom era, Nigeria had a lot of friends as "Greedy nation scrambled for the sake of gain". The poet draws a distinction between true and fake friendship. In times of trouble or difficulty, a true friend will stand with you, whatever happens. But fake friends abscond immediately they sense that you are in trouble.

Poem number twenty-eight, written by Mnguve is titled "Master of the Sahara". Sahara is a desert area in Africa where poverty is so alarming. The subject matter of this poem is on how the Sahara areas can work hard to get rid of poverty and embrace wealth. In the poem, the poet suggests:

I charge you
Free yourself from a fathom venture
That earn you nothing but carnage

To crush your race
To save my ears from slap and bangs
My palms from stains and stench
And my body from your plight (Stanza 3).

Poem number twenty-nine by Mnguve is titled "The Peva Crimson Clash". It is a lyrical poem that expresses the poet's feelings or thoughts. To the poet, the killing of innocent people in Peva community is too rampant and should be stopped:

There has been a crimson clash
The land irrigated with blood
Turned black and bare
Corpses piled up the fields
Like dead flies (Stanza 1).

"Watch Dog" by Mnguve is poem number thirty in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*. It is written in eight stanzas. The purpose of the poem is to take a critical look at the phrase "watch Dog," a person who guards against loss, waste, theft, or undesirable practices. A watchdog gathers information about the actions of the people in power and informs the public in order to hold elected officials to account. In Nigeria, those referred to as watchdogs include: the police, the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), the military, the paramilitary, and the Department of State Services (DSS). The concern of the poet here is whether the present-day watchdogs are sincerely doing their work as expected, since corruption is on the increase:

Watch dog, watch dog, watchdog?
The 21 century, watch dog
What different are you from the concept
Known phenomenon?
There are doubts on the minds
Are you really watching over? (Stanza 1).

The message in this poem is on the war against corruption, that those saddled with the responsibilities of watching over must have to wake up from their slumber to sanitize the society.

Mnguve's "War without End" is poem number thirty-one in this collection. The poem is all about war against terrorism, which is today, so rampant all over the world, including Nigeria. The truth of the matter is that, terrorism has caused so much destruction in our society. The poet feels it is time to put an end to terrorism in our society because:

One thing is for sure
There comes the Day of Judgment
Where the Master of the day
Shall demand every soul to account for his deeds (Stanza 8).

Mnguve's "Flood in the Valley" is poem number thirty-two in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*. It is a sonnet with a specific rhyme scheme. The poem is about the flood that happened in the Benue valley in the past, which was devastating. The message in this poem is that, as a matter of urgency, something should be done by the government to control or avoid future occurrences.

"The Middle Belt Region" by Mnguve is poem number thirty-three in this collection. In the poem, the writer is worried that the Middle Belt region, which used to be the land overflowing with milk and honey, has now become a war zone as a result of anarchy. Thousands of lives have been lost, widows and orphans are all over the land, while millions of homes are also deserted. To the poet, enough is enough of these atrocities. The poet calls on the Middle Belt to embrace peace.

"Senator of a Republic" by Mnguve is poem number thirty-four. Politicians are often known for campaign promises during electioneering periods. It is a truism that after winning elections, some of them become inaccessible as they care less about the communities that voted for them. Such politicians are only seen in their various communities after four years-during the time of another election. In the Poem, the writer puts it this way:

Sooner than later,
We shall receive the august visitor
Appearing like an eagle
Once in a long while
Only for the senate race
Disappearing in the horizon soon afterwards
The glimpse of him becomes a wishful thinking (Stanza 1).

A change of attitude is needed on the part of politicians.

"Living in the Present Day Africa" by Mnguve is poem number thirty-five. It is one of the longest poems in this collection— a narrative poem that tells the story of the African continent. The poem has a total of ten stanzas. The writer is seriously worried that we live in present-day Africa, where we have lost our pride and dignity, and nothing is working. The collapse of the agricultural sector, engineering, health, education, and governance is worrisome. The poet in the last Stanza is of the view that:

But we need a change
A reconnection to our root
That's for the old
For the younger generation needs
Redirection and reorientation. We must be proud as a people
To stand tall in the committee of nations.... (Stanza 10).

"I am a Nigerian Soldier" by Mnguve is poem number thirty-six in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*. The poem is written with a figurative inclination. The creative inspiration is apparently a mirror into the life of the poet who happens to be in active service in the Nigerian military. His personal experiences, as stated in the poem, prove that the life of a soldier is indeed NOT an easy one.

The soldier always risks his life, misses church services and sermons, misses sleep and pleasure, misses his family, misses special occasions to protect his fatherland. Despite all these sacrifices, a Nigerian soldier is not well appreciated or rewarded. Despite all these, the poet considers the military job as a noble one, and to him, there is no going back:

Until a warhead shatters my skull
Or I drop the barrel and the national raiment (Stanza 8).

The phrase, "I am a Nigerian Soldier," is repeated in the poem seven times. This is obviously for emphasis, considering the poet's military background.

"The Saracened Benue Siege" by Mnguve is poem number thirty-seven in this collection. In this poem, the poet has tried to convey to his readers the incessant activities of the nomadic herdsmen across the Benue valley. They come well-armed not only to graze but to fight a jihadist war. And in the following words from the poem by the poet:

The continuous siege is a harbinger to plague of starvation
As farmers meet untimely death
And survivals fled their abode and cocoon But only living to tell the tell
(Stanza 4).

One thing is sure:

Alas, Benue may seem defenceless
The voice of the voiceless
And the defence of the defenceless
Shall rise for her people against the heretics sooner
And the once weak shall become strong
And victory shall adorn her poor breast.

The final poem in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards* is titled "Sunset at Noon". The poem is a sonnet written by Aondowase Mnguve. Like "The Saracened Benue Valley," "Sunset at Noon" also laments herdsmen's activities in the Middle Belt, Nigeria. This has brought about more harm than good, and it must be resisted.

THE BOOK'S STRENGTH

Considering the thirty-eight poems analysed above, it is crystal clear that the poets have exploited quite a good number of themes. For example, love, morality, the evil in humans, death, poverty, politics, flood, etc. The subject matter and language of the poetry are well handled. The poems try to express the inner nature of objects or experiences. Most, if not all, the themes are so basic that the expression in poetry has an enormous appeal for humanity in general. The writing style of the poems by Aondowase Mnguve and Benjamin Kator is commendable, and the themes are captivating. The collection is indeed one of the best creative works in Nigeria in recent times.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have critically focused on the description and synopses in Aondowase Mnguve and Benjamin Kator Sombo's collection of poems titled *Kantos of the Wailing Bards*. The poems focus on several themes, ranging from love, war, societal vices, poverty, corruption, insecurity, and flooding, among others. The poems argue that Nigeria as a nation is full of the good, the bad, and the ugly. However, members of the society are encouraged to work hard to bring about positive change. All hands must be on deck, and the poets and readers should not be exempted.