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*Under the Palaver Tree
(Miscellaneous Contributions)*

Lenrie Peters: The Eagle-Eyed Socio-Political Observer

Pierre GOMEZ*

Dr. Lenrie Peters is one of the premier writers to come out of The Gambia within the last century. Peters wrote primarily in the 1960s and 70s and published three noteworthy collections of poetry entitled *Satellites*, *Poems* and *Katchikali*. He also published other works including a novel called *the Second Round*. And in all his works, Peters writes very emphatically about the African predicament as he perceives it. Thanks to his vocation as a medical doctor, his works are heavily tinted with images of the human body to highlight the problems he sees. This proved to be a very effective way of “diagnosing” the problem with the African social and political atmosphere which is his primary concern. In all three of his poetry collections, Peters uses his pen to identify the ills of his society and proffers possible solutions to them. The combination of medical knowledge, biting wit and kin insight into the society makes Peters’ literary contribution invaluable when it comes to understanding the problems Africa is facing.

Peters’ poetry is preoccupied with a host of themes central to his perception of the world. Peters is disgusted with many politicians in Africa, a feeling he unequivocally communicates in his

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poem entitled *Plea to Mobutu*. He despises the effects of colonialism within African societies and is, in an equal measure, alarmed by the lack of programmes inherent in many an African system since the advent of independence and is disappointed by the unfulfilled potential of the African continent. With this in mind, he believes that the way forward is through writing, unity of ideas, unity of people, unity of the continent and unity of purpose. Peters firmly believes that Africa, perhaps the greatest continent on the planet, has a birthright that it is not fulfilling. The inability to exercise this birthright constitutes Peters' greatest disappointment in that Africa exists in squalor, decay and violence. But all is not doom and gloom in the mind of the great writer. He is hopeful that the continent can, like a phoenix, raise itself from the ashes of war, social conflicts and decay with which it is now characterised and ascend to its rightful place among the ranks of the great countries of the world. This is Peters' political posture. His social ideas follow the same pattern of disappointment and hope.

Peters' social submissions are perhaps the most biting of all. Unlike Senghor and other African poets, Peters does not let himself totally seduced by the imagined splendour of African societies. Rather, like a physician, he diagnoses the sicknesses which, placed alongside the good things, are far more apparent and glaring and in definite need of urgent solutions. Peters focuses on the complacency which characterises his society; he despises this almost as much as he despises the politicians who procrastinate the implementation of the possible solutions. The politicians are not the only ones who fall under the verbal lash of Peters' poetry. The common man is not spared of his rod because he too has a hand in perpetrating the problems that afflict them. Though the social bit of Peters' literature sometimes intermingles with politics, it loses none of its relevance and continues to hold true in the society which Peters addresses and in many others on the African soil, as many of the issues Peters decries remain issues afflicting today's Africa.

Peters is preoccupied with politics in many of his poems but perhaps one of the most important of his politically charged poems is “*Where are the banners now*» which seals his collection entitled “*Poems*” to a close. This is one of the most important of his political poems because it is about the entire Africa, which, having freed itself from the yoke of colonialism now wallows in hopeless complacency. The poem begins with “*Where are the banners now / which once we carried / When we led the people / to the shrine of freedom*”. The poem reminds the reader of the promises and slogans used by freedom activists before the European colonizers evacuated themselves from the continent. The fact that it is a question shows that these slogans of hope, potential and the promise of a free African society have been forgotten in the light of the problems that the continent faces. Peters reveals the failure of African leaders to fulfil their promises and the result is that “*the children are cut in pieces / and their cries will still be heard tomorrow*.” This demonstrates the violence characterising post-colonial Africa and at the same time warns of the future problems which will grow out of it. All in all the poems depict a situation in which hope has filtered or even failed and in the light of this, the poet calls for a revival of the banners of promise and slogans of hope which once united the African people. There we see the poet’s obsession with unity in that he shows how unity, under those banners, once freed the continent and now this same unity must be summoned to remove Africa out of her current decadence.

Earlier in *Poems*, ‘*Open the Gates*’ sends a message or suggestion as to how to solve the problems Africans are confronted with. “*Open the Gates / To East and West / Bring in all / That’s good and best*” is the opening stanza of the poem and it clearly calls on Africa to learn its lessons from the rest of the world. The poem calls for openness to outside ideas not an invitation for the rest of the world to rule. Peters believes that only Africans can heal Africa and this is apparent in the poem as he pleads with Africans to learn from the rest of the world in order to strengthen their own

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society. Peters understands that there is much to do towards improving Africa and 'Open the Gates' shows only one of his ideas and how to do it.

Later in this same collection 'We have come home' highlights the despair felt by those returning to Africa from the war at the apparent helplessness of the continent and the corrupt influence of the foreign war. In the second stanza, Peters depicts the gloomy issues Africa is confronted with "Nights threatens / Time dissolves / and there is no acquaintance / with tomorrow." The war veterans have come home from "The massacre of the soul" devoid of hope themselves "Singing songs of other lands" wishing only for peace. When they arrive at home, they are confronted by "the lightening flash / and the thundering rain / the famine the drought" and must continue to fight for their dignity. This poem is a valid criticism of the effects of colonialism. The European powers employed Africans in their foreign wars and perpetrated injustices on them until only "The tortured remnants of the flesh remained" crying for dignity.

Sadly so, these are but a few of the politically charged poems in the anthology of Peters' poetry. The rest of the poems express disgust with some African politicians and on the effects of colonialism. The poet calls for improvement in Africa by laying emphasis on the unfulfilled promises which characterize post colonial Africa and suggesting how to improve it all.

Peters' social observation follows the same methodical thought process. He identifies the problems in society, expresses his disgust and disappointment with them and suggests ways of solving the problems. It can be seen here that Peters takes a very medical approach to his poetry, he diagnoses the illness, explains the symptoms and then prescribes a solution.

In "Does death so delude us" Peters examines the mindset of his new society. The first stanza depicts the all encompassing "we" following "the hunted tanks [...] into the disappearance of facts"; this paints a picture of men departing from reason and plunging themselves headlong into fruitless practices and later into death. This sentiment spills over into the next stanza where Peters shows

the same “we” “*refusing the sun’s welcome hand*” and “*Preferring the refuse-littered shore lunatic abyss*”. This indicates that “we” are architects of the problems around us and thus proceed unwittingly toward death.

The question “*Does death so delude us?*” buttresses this as it gives the impression that “we” presumably Africans are plodding like drones toward death by refusing to acknowledge the issues that ensure this death. This is very powerful in that the poet identifies the people as one of the main contributors to the problems in society. Here it is not the government or the colonialist who are spurring Africans toward the “lunatic abyss” but the people who chose to ignore the issues.

Earlier in “*Poems*”, “*After they put down their overalls*”, identifies several of the main problems which are presumably ignored in “*Does Death delude us*”. The poem depicts men who when the work is finished “*do not return to the women / After they have bathed / Isatu with hyena’s thirst / they run to the open air bar / to swallow the hook of imported liquor.*” Obsession with liquor is a problem in any society but Peters depicts in this poem how it negatively affects the world around the drinkers. The wives of these snared by the “*hook of imported liquor*” remain unsatisfied and unhappy and the men themselves remain stagnant. This complacency is one of Peters’ main gibes against Africans. The hours they spend being “*hypnotized by the bus*” are hours that could have been spent improving the world around them or doing their basic duty to society.

This complacency is again decried in “*Stand up for yourselves*”. Peters pleads with Africans to stop being the “*fettle, uninformed / work-a-day public*” and to include themselves in the discussions concerning their own culture. He asks them to play a part in their own development, to “*not hesitate to plead / for what you need*” and to stand up for themselves for discussions that concern them. He wants Africans to take the initiative and take charge of the issues which have for so long been dominated by outsiders, by “*Men who have fled too long and too quickly.*” Peters desperately needs Africans to do what this poem commends, to stand up for themselves and take their destiny into their own hands because if they do not they will never be free from being “*bought and sold.*”

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In *Kachikally* Peters again emphasizes the need for Africans to take responsibility for their problems and work towards finding solutions to them. In “*You Talk To Me of “Self”*” perhaps the most striking of Peters’ poems on the African society the author ridicules the idea of the magnificent African beauty written by the Senegalese poet, Senghor. Peters depicts an African defined by “*squalor [and] degradation*” which is indeed the reality of many African villages. Peters commends his readers to see this reality rather than the imaginary resplendent beauty depicted in Senghor’s poetry. He commends his readers to see the problems so that they can be focused. The poem requires Africans to accept the problems which to this day plague the continent rather than see the shiny beauty which is a rather cosmetic reality of Africa. It forces the reader and those who may be tempted to ignore the problem to take responsibility for the situation and fix it. The last stanza is a powerful new definition of ‘self’, characterised by ignorance not by beauty.

“*Walking in the dark*” again calls to light one of the main problems which weigh down most Africans, the lack of electricity. In the poem, a physician gropes in the dark for his medical equipment upon receiving a call for help but is unable to heed that call because he cannot see to collect his things. This poem falls into both social and political realms.

Another poem which falls into both of these categories is “*Kachikalli*”, this time not as the title of a book, but as a poem. The poem chronicles the history of the sacred crocodile pool in Bakau which at one point in history was a revered spiritual site but now a tourist attraction. The poem laments the fact that people of the Gambia have allowed this sacred place to lose its sanctity. Peters shows here that the world Kachikalli used to give life to is crumbling and everything withering around it. He is presumably crying out to the god who used to inhabit the pool to return to the site and restore its mysticism. Peters blames both society and the tourism industry for allowing this to happen. By

commercialising Kachikalli, the pool has been stripped of its powers. Consequently, as society crumbles, the people have nothing more to do but cry.

Peters poems "*It is Time for Reckoning Africa*" calls on the people to stop being complacent, to stop tolerating the lack of progress and step up and seize what is theirs. The poem talks about the many injustices Africans have tolerated at the hands of some politicians who perpetuate "*disorder, incompetence and self defeat*". The poem is purely political in that it accuses politicians (of course not all politicians) of being the ones who are arresting the progress of the African soil. He deftly describes them as vultures who feed on eggs, a metaphor through which politicians are seen to be the ones consuming the future of Africa. The first line in the second stanza calls on Africans to stop condoning this untoward behaviour of their politicians and to confront them during the time of reckoning.

Finally, in "*The weaver birds are nesting*", Peters offers a solution to the problems he identifies. Work is the answer and the weaver birds are Peters cherished metaphorical medium to portray this idea. The weaver birds work all day to build their nests. Therefore Africans must wake up now to build their societies. Like the weaver birds, Africans must work tirelessly to build their own homes. The fact that Peters chooses the birds implies yet again the need for unity in this endeavour. The birds become the primary examples of what Africans should be like: they should be working non-stop to guarantee a better tomorrow. That is Peters' trusted solution to the problems the continent is faced with.

Peters, very effectively, uses his poetry to identify the problems in his society. With the precision and skill of a surgeon, his other profession, the good doctor diagnoses the problem, explains the symptoms and prescribes a solution. This direct no-nonsense type of social criticism is exactly what is needed in Africa as the problems Peters talks about are becoming only too glaring.

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Sleep well, dear Doctor! Africa is listening and perhaps
ready to lay down the “bayonets” and say, there will be time

*To take a fellow
By the shoulder saying
“We two are common citizens
Without tribe, caste, nation, race
Without the mischievous
Cloak of fiscal shrouds”
Time to dip clean fingers
In the bowl together
Unity of God*