

at all by his next seemingly profound insight that 'The future is open to numerous possibilities.' This is a surprising statement coming from a historian, for what it amounts to, in effect, is that the future and the past have no connections whatsoever; the struggle is completely free to make the future as it wants. We have seen what happened to societies that believed and acted likewise.

Chapter sixteen is on Banda and the Malawi of his deranged imagination. A Malawian himself, Zeleza's account is intimate and harrowing, gaining power to move us by its studied understatement.

He devotes the next three chapters to praising Europhone (mainly Anglophone) African writing for its articulation of the struggles for democratisation on the continent. African writers, he says, had almost from the beginning been dissatisfied with post-independence politics on the continent: with writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Armah, and Ngugi, 'potential disillusionment turned into actual disenchantment' (p.431). He also discusses the two main ways Europhone African literature has been political-one being the 'political nature of the subjects, the banning, exiling, imprisoning and even killing of the writers by despotic regimes being the other. Chapter nineteen starts with an academic discussion of democracy in Africa before going on to examine it 'in practice'-as it were, in a novel each

by Nurudeen Farah, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Bessie Head. Chapter twenty, titled 'Cycles of Rebirth,' is given over to four West African novelists (Aidoo, Armah, Emecheta and Okri) in whose works he examines the very large subject of 'the complex clashes, contentions and conversions of cultures in colonial and post-colonial anglophone West Africa' (p.465).

The last chapter of this last part, as said earlier, consists of excerpts from Zeleza's own two short stories on pan-Africanism, prefaced by a rather lengthy disquisition on that subject. Clearly, the unity of all Africans (Black, Arab, White) and all other peoples of African descent in the new world is a subject dear to his heart: to him, it is the only way forward for the continent.

MAS&C is a very engaging book written by a passionately engaged intellectual with formidable knowledge and great analytical power, by a creative writer with a wry sense of humour. It is a 'political' book - i.e. a book meant to concretely intervene in African studies and crisis-the full value of which can only be realised if also politically engaged by the reader, especially the African reader. So, read, it is a book with all the potentials of causing drastic revisions in the study of Africa.

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A gathering of voices

Dapo Adeniyi

Nduka Otiono, VOICES IN THE RAINBOW, Oracle Books, Yaba, Lagos, 1997, 70pp.

I would dare, right from the outset, to suggest that the lone explanation for my election to render the following review is to bear witness to the plenitude of voices contained not merely in this book's title but also in the chorus that forms the bulk of the poetry collection. To identify possibly the lenders of every single voice, even if their whole contribution to our symphony is no more than a few syllables. And possibly also, to call them by their names.

Unless we put our emphasis on that one word - VOICES - we are not likely to fully appreciate the collection's peculiar experimentation with style, prominent among

which is the reportorial slant in sections by which topical identifiable elements such as shared national experience for example bouy up, often times thinly veiled, at other times with no veil at all. *Voices* therefore offer a clue to Nduka Otiono's textual strategy, to the switching of points of view, to the call-and-response mode by which more voices than one participate.

Voices in the Rainbow opens with the description of a journey undertaken across a desert. This represents the first of seven phases or movements, but we observe that the spirit of these opening lines impresses upon the succeeding sections significantly even if this was not so intended. For the poet's Sahel hike has its anguish, even its angst, but also its joy at both mid-journey - as when he comes by flourishing health-trees and oases and when his ultimate destination is sighted. Even so, the poet's journey through the length of the collection is marked by re-

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reflections on his socio-economic environment which are punctuated by much sad commentary, requiems or a sequence of threnodies, musings on the meaning of life to exultant love songs - comparable to the wayfarer's camping by the cooling oases or he is refreshing himself under the canopy of a Dongonyaro tree. The final phase, like a veritable homerun, is dedicated to earthsongs.

Whether or not this kind of journey may have been embarked upon in actuality is not very important. What is of interest is that this 'opening glee' resembles the collective experience of Nigerians at this point in time with all the frills accompanying it, not merely with regard to the experiences alone but more to the poet's choices of images. For example it is with open-mouthed surprise that we hear of a lonesome vulture appropriating and devouring the putrefying carcass of a whole sheep and a tired Tuareg camel

defying its master. Otiono reaches his greatest heights when employing alluring images to illustrate scenes of daily life which though are bizarre in themselves, have become too familiar and therefore shed the nature of their sordidness. He asks in the poem 'Rising Song', 'Can you see mottled images in the mirror?' And with his pen dripping 'bleeding lines' he tell us, 'I've seen sick men wail in the streets of this city - for want of chicken-change to save their children'.

Elsewhere he shares:

*I wake up each day
crying until a scarlet sun
sets in my eyes
mocking this plague that rules
the nation.*

*Who can heal this bleeding ulcer
Inflicted on my country's resources?
Who can deconstruct this art of madness
Sons of a soil sodden with oil
But queuing for fuel at dry
filling stations.*

Such imagery multiplies but sometimes felicitous lines pall, giving place to the not-so-felicitous, suggesting that despite all the brilliant sparkle in the rainbow, Otiono's poetic craft is still an anvil in the smithy, forming

Of course it is impossible to live in a time like this and be indifferent to the socio-political surrounding but Nduka Otiono's poetry escapes the banality that came to typify the work of many so-called poets of social engagement: this collection ranges from poems with formal metrical systems, to be encountered in the first four movements, to songs with lucid, free air, particularly where he pays tribute to his musical kindreds in Pablo Neruda, Fela Kuti and Bob Marley.

Tribute, we must note, is paid beyond the usual headnote notification or even stylistic resonances from the work of these artists but also in the adroit appropriation of catch-phrases in the more formal segments where these serve as effective triggers for memory and relevant sentiment or philosophy in such parts or poems.

Part of a public review at the presentation of the book at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos.

Book illustration,
'Moon Dance' by
Adenle Adewale

