

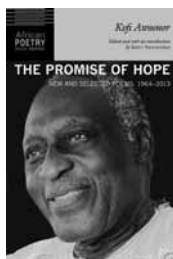
African Poets Book Series

By Ron McFarland

Book Reviews:

The Promise of Hope: New and Selected Poems, 1964–2013, by Kofi Awoonor, edited with introduction by Kofi Anyidoho, University of Nebraska Press, 2014.

Madman at Kilifi, by Clifton Gachagua, University of Nebraska Press, 2014.



In defiance of what most major university presses appear to regard as axiomatic, that poetry does not sell, the University of Nebraska Press has launched a poetry series, and not just a poetry series but a series of books by African writers. Unlike the Heinemann African Writers Series, based in England, which published more than 250 titles starting in 1962, with republication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and aimed to produce books of fiction and poetry that African readers could afford, the Nebraska series will be distributed largely to markets in the United States. The Heinemann books opened markets for poets like Dennis Brutus (South Africa) and Okot p'Bitek (Uganda), but the series was not readily available in the United States. That series, including several out-of-print titles, is now accessible online.

Some might argue that anthologies such as the *The Heinemann Book of African Poetry in English* (1990), *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Poetry* (1995), and the *Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* (2007), edited by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier and now in its fifth edition, are sufficient. That latter volume runs nearly 450 pages and represents poets from more than 20 sub-Saharan nations, arranged alphabetically from Angola to Zimbabwe. The first edition, entitled *Modern Poetry from Africa*, appeared in 1963, just half a dozen years after Ghana led the continent in declaring its

independence from Great Britain. More recently, *Reflections* (2013), a slim volume of poems by African women has appeared, edited by Anthonia C. Kalu, Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, and Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka.

The Penguin anthology lists 17 poets from Nigeria, the most populous nation on the continent (it ranks seventh in the world) and the country with the largest economy, nine poets from South Africa, and six from Kenya, which is usually regarded as the literary capital of eastern Africa. Led by Christopher Okigbo (1932–1967), Nigerian poets are represented by nearly 80 pages of text. The much smaller nation of Ghana is represented by eight poets in the anthology. Ghana's Kofi Awoonor (1935–2013) is allotted nearly as many pages as the dozen given over to Okigbo, who was killed during the Biafran War. Like Okigbo, who is celebrated throughout the continent as poet and martyr, Awoonor was himself murdered, at age 78, by Al Shabab terrorists at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi in September 2013.

It seems particularly appropriate, then, that the inaugural volume of the University of Nebraska's African Poetry Book Series would be Awoonor's new and selected poems, *The Promise of Hope*, a title that echoes U.S. President Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). Of course, the press could not have anticipated Awoonor's murder, but as fellow Ghanaian poet Kofi Anyidoho makes clear in his 16-page introductory essay, death and intimations of mortality permeate Awoonor's poems. Editor Anyidoho—who holds the Kwame Nkrumah Chair of African Studies at the University of Ghana—has collected nearly 140 poems and several pages of lyrical prose from Awoonor's seven volumes of poetry and eight books of prose, including the novel *Comes the Voyager at Last: A Tale of Return to Africa* (1992). Seventeen poems represent Awoonor's most recent collection, *Herding the Lost Lambs* (2013).

Awoonor was 22 in 1957, when Ghana declared its independence from Britain. A member of the minority Ewe people (about 14 percent of the Ghana population; the Akan dominate with about 47.5 percent of the 24.5 million), Awoonor attended the University of

Ghana and University College London. His adherence to the values of traditional Ewe oral poetry, some of which he translated in the mid-1970s, is evident, at times, and it was his intention to have his most recent poems, which open the book, presented in both English and Ewe. Printing problems made that impossible. In "To the Ancient Poets" and elsewhere, however, Awoonor threads several lines in the Ewe language.

The poems range from his sojourn in the United States, notably at SUNY Stony Brook, where he taught in the early 1970s, to Brazil and Cuba, where he served as ambassador in the 1980s, and to China, where he traveled as Ghana's United Nations representative. His Ewe heritage and its traditions remain central to his most appealing poems, as in these lines from "I Heard a Bird Cry," the title of which becomes a plaintive refrain throughout (the poem runs about a dozen pages in this text):

My people, where have you been
And there are tears in your eyes?
Your eyes are red like chewed kola
and you limp toward the fetish hut.

Like many of his poems, including the widely anthologized lyric "The Weaver Bird," from his first book, *Rediscovery* (1964), "I Heard a Bird Cry" comes across as both a lament and complaint over the cultural identity effaced by colonialism.

In nine succinct lines, "The Cathedral" may be said to express this postcolonial perspective in microcosmic form:

On this dirty patch
a tree once stood
shedding incense on the infant corn;
its boughs stretched across a heaven
brightened by the last fires of a tribe.
They sent surveyors and builders
who cut that tree
planting in its place
a huge senseless cathedral of doom.

Awoonor's year-long imprisonment, for assisting a political fugitive upon his return to Ghana from the United States in 1975, led to what may be his most powerful book, *The House by the Sea* (1978), the "house" in question being Ussher Fort, built by the Dutch in 1649 and now restored as a museum (it hasn't been used as a prison since 1993). With the poems of his *Latin American & Caribbean Notebook* (1992), the poems from his incarceration make up about half of the contents of the book, and they reflect an occasionally strident political voice, at times reminiscent of Pablo Neruda's. In a section from "Going Somehow," dedicated to Neruda, Awoonor celebrates his heroes Mao and Ho Chi Minh; elsewhere, his heroes are Ché and Fidel Castro. In "After the Exile and the Feasts," he finds Chicago in a "blue haze" of "daily hate," but the United States is also the home of jazz and Greenwich Village and of such poet heroes as Walt Whitman, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder.

In the short poem "Us," referring to himself and fellow prisoners, he writes, "We clutch our hopes like pebbles." Throughout the poems, amidst the expressions of sorrow and anger, the word "hope" recurs. The last poem from *The House by the Sea*, "The Wayfarer Comes Home," runs more than 14 pages, where he surveys his world travels and contemplates his release from prison. Kofi Awoonor was 41 years old when he left the prison in September of 1976. As it happens, his most satisfying and fulfilling years lay ahead.

The poem "Ezeki," from *Until the Morning After* (1987), welcomes "the festival of hope." This poem provides the title for the new and collected volume and suggests a fresh spirit of hopefulness, although it rises from "crammed tenements / and burning snow fields," from "negros dying in Memphis / the same death once enacted in Ulundi" (the last battle of the Anglo-Zulu War in 1879—a massacre at the Zulu capital of Ulundi). Writing from Brasilia in 1985, Awoonor concludes by adding his name to the list of a dozen notable African writers, including Achebe, fellow Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo, Okigbo, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. I assume the title refers to South African novelist Es'kia or Ezekiel Mphahlele (1919–2008).

Probably the most difficult poems for many American readers to appreciate will be those of the *Latin American & Caribbean*

Notebook, written when Awoonor was in his mid-50s and at times censorious of Western policies. Awoonor appears here to support the fatwa or death sentence leveled against Salman Rushdie by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and Awoonor's voice turns shrill:

Then all the hypocritical money-lovers
 the historical assassins and conscientious slavers
 destroyers of forests and hills
 the sackers of cities and homesteads,
 plunderers and pederasts
 organized a hysteria—
 and with the support of the empires dead and new
 they beat the drums of war against "terrorism."

In the new poems added in 2013, Awoonor returns to China 16 years after the Cultural Revolution and presumably just a couple of years after the Tiananmen Square protests, but his poem "Xiansi, Pou Tou Dalla" celebrates the new China that speaks out against oppression and proclaims, "more than a Sun / shall blaze shower / its lightlets / on a weary world." Meanwhile, Americans are depicted as "overburdened with wealth / and guilt."

This collection of Kofi Awoonor's poems is important, in part, because Awoonor, with the help of Kofi Anyidoho, goes beyond simply selecting poems that reflect his love of nature, of his Ewe culture, of Ghana, of his remarkable fusion of themes connecting death and hope. The God of Awoonor's world, after all, is no longer "white, bearded / and inexorable," as he writes in the poem "New Rain."

* * *

The new African Poetry Book Series from the University of Nebraska Press also debuts a first collection of poems by Kenyan poet Clifton Gachagua, winner of the Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets. The 52 poems that comprise *Madman at Kilifi* could hardly differ more from Awoonor's poems, which in many ways embody the views of most postcolonial writers from

sub-Saharan Africa. In a brief foreword, the poet Kwame Dawes, who was born in Ghana but grew up in Jamaica and has taught in the United States since 1992, presents Gachagua succinctly as “cosmopolitan.” Currently chancellor’s professor of English and editor-in-chief of *Prairie Schooner* at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Dawes observes of Gachagua: “He writes his poems no longer from the position of a person inscribed in the British colonial presence, but from that of a man fully consumed by, and in lively contention and engagement with, American cultural imperialism through films, television, and technology and its political power.”

There is something postmodern rather than postcolonial in Gachagua’s poems. He expresses no particular longing for tribal heritage or cultural vestiges, nor does he exhibit much interest in settling old colonial scores; he does not rush to embrace any particular political ideology. His apparent disaffiliation partly defines him; he prefers the urban techno-world of Nairobi and matters metrosexual. Also, unlike Awoonor, whose poems often flow loosely to a dozen or more pages in length, Gachagua, in this collection, prefers briefer, more compact canvases. A little more than half of the poems in Gachagua’s book come in under 20 lines, and even the eight or 10 poems set up as prose poetry (it’s difficult to discern at times) rarely reach beyond a single page.

The first poem in Gachagua’s book to offer a sense of where he is and where he’s headed would be “At the Confucius Center.” It opens, “All he could do was quote the great philosophers of our times; / Žižek and some other obscure men from the motherland / who praise violence as virtue.” Slavoj Žižek is the Slovenian Marxist philosopher and cultural theorist (b. 1949) who has been called the Elvis of cultural theory and an intellectual rock star. The male persona in this 16-line poem could be the poet himself or an everyman: “He forgot how to talk. What he did was quote / coded messages from the postmodernists.” He is described near the poem’s end as, “Basho in skinny jeans and a Samsung tablet.” All of this is so much as to say that Gachagua’s representative man is a character of this instant, thoroughly absorbed in the popular culture and technology of the moment and thoroughly at ease in a world of

multiculturalism, cultural pluralism, and moral ambivalence.

In his introductory observations, Kwame Dawes asserts, "Gachagua's poems are urgently present"; Dawes says, the book is "arresting and full of surprises." A screenwriter and filmmaker, Clifton Gachagua may be said to represent the poets of now and the future. He is connected via Facebook and Twitter, and you can open up an array of images showing him as an earnest-looking young guy, probably in his 20s. He maintains a website presently featuring a multi-part poem entitled "The Drums of Shostakovich," any piece of which tends to startle us out of any complacency we might be nurturing. May 30, 2014, #XIII begins, "let us talk about pity and syntax / the box of heads you keep under your bed." On the same site, one may find "songs for james vii," listed January 29, 2014, a terse couplet: "deliberate assemblage: / a chair, a wheel, a penis."

Also readily accessible online is some of Gachagua's prose, including "Sketch of a Bald Woman in the Semi-Nude," posted January 27, 2014: "She opens the door slightly to tell me to buy some lotion soon. Closes it shut." The text ends: "I consider her words, take apart the sentence, examine it carefully like a zoologist with a new animal on the table, seek out the subtleties, find none, decide she wants me. Yes, that's our sex language. She wants me and she wants me. I decide I will not go in, not after she has used my towel."