

The— MUSIC — of —— POETRY

Poems from Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere

Compiled by Waveney Olembo



Edward Arnold

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Text set in Plantin by D P Press Limited, Sevenoaks, Kent Printed and bound by Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk This anthology is dedicated to all teachers of English and their students, especially to graduates of Kenyatta University. I hope that this will make your work a little lighter.

W.O.

Mother always said
sing child sing
make a song
and sing
beat out your own rhythms
the rhythms of your life
but make the song soulful
and make life
sing

Micere Githae Mugo

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Introduction

This anthology is a testimony to my belief that poetry in any language can be a delight to anyone who speaks that language. I believe that when poems dwell on things that are familiar or on things that matter, then it will be easy to get their meaning and to find joy in reading them.

I have selected poems which I believe have something to say to adolescent students. The poems in this anthology deal with topics such as Africa, Love, Suffering and Thoughts about Life. Moreover, some of them have actually been written by young people or by people who have taught young people. I have tried to avoid poems which are too abstract or too personal.

As you know, there are different types of poems, just as there are different types of prose writings. I did not forget this. Therefore, I have included oral poems (that is, poems composed for singing) of either long ago or of modern times, and also, narrative poems, satirical poems and so on. I have put the poems of well-known poets beside those of new poets.

The choice of poems was also guided by a desire to have poets from several parts of the world share their thoughts and feelings with you. The range is wide – it includes East Africa, England, Southern and West Africa, the Caribbean, the U.S.A., Latin America, Asia. This means that some poems have been presented as translations from the tongue in which they were originally written.

You will see, if you look at the aims of teaching English in several countries, that a mixed anthology like this one provides just the material that the syllabus requires. For example, in all three East African countries, it is clearly stated that students should be exposed to literature from Africa as well as elsewhere in the world. It is also made clear

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that students should be able to relate the literature which they read to experiences which are familiar to them and to their cultural heritage. I expect that you will be able to relate each poem in this anthology either to a first-hand experience or to experiences which interest you.

READING POETRY

It has been my experience that if someone can *read* a poem well, i.e. with attention to pauses and stress, and with appropriate tone, then he/she is more likely to appreciate the qualities of that poem. Let us take, as an example, the extract quoted below from a poem by Marjorie Oludhe MacGoye. Read the lines in a monotone, i.e. without any particular emphasis on any word:

Atieno washes dishes,
Atieno plucks the chicken,
Atieno gets up early,
beds her sacks down in the kitchen,
Atieno eight years old
Atieno yo.

Now, read the same lines, emphasizing the words which are in italics below, and also, reading the last line in a mildly wailing fashion:

Atieno washes dishes,
Atieno plucks the chicken,
Atieno gets up early,
Beds her sacks down in the kitchen,
Atieno eight years old
Atieno yo.

I have heard students read the above lines in a monotone and then asked them to read it as suggested above. After this latter reading, they obtained a different *tone*. Suddenly, they realised that the girl Atieno seemed to be doing a lot of work and she was really only eight years old. Suddenly, the

¹By tone, we mean the feeling or the attitude communicated to the reader (or hearer) of the poem.

students realised that the poet seemed to want us to be appalled by the little girl's situation. 1

READINGALOUD

Teachers and students are often advised to read poetry aloud. This is so, partly because the flow of words in a poem often creates a euphony (pleasant sound), or cacophony (ugly sound) when this is appropriate. This is so also, because the rhythmic patterning of words needs to be *heard* to be fully appreciated. Therefore, as far as possible, it is advisable for students in school to say/sing poems aloud or listen to them. However, at times when it is not possible to vocalise a poem, a person can at least hear its sounds imaginatively.

I am pleased to provide some tips below to help you attend to certain aspects of poems when you are reading them.

PAUSES AND PITCH WHEN READING POETRY

Poets use punctuation marks as one way of indicating pauses of different degrees and level of pitch of the voice. For example, full stops, commas, semi-colons and dashes are to be treated in the same way as when reading prose. Look at the punctuation marks in the first seven lines of the poem 'Mother to son' (p. 68):

Well, son, I'll tell you: Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. It's had its tacks in it, And splinters, And boards torn up, And places with no carpet on the floor – Bare.

The first two words of the first line will be read in a conversational pitch with a very slight pause after 'Well' and 'son' as in everyday speech. The colon at the end of the first line guides us to read the word 'you' in such a tone as to anticipate that some detail is to follow. Then comes the full stop at the end of the second line where the pitch is lowered

¹You may read the whole of this poem in: Kariara & Kitonga (eds.) An Introduction to East African Poetry, Nairobi, O.U.P., 1976.

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as at the end of any sentence. The following three lines all end in commas and so, at the end of each line, the pitch of the voice would be expected to indicate that there is another item yet to be mentioned in the list of bad things in the poet's 'stair'. The sixth line ends with a dash. Here, a good reader will, by tone of voice, (and gesture, perhaps) show that the sentence is not complete. After this comes this one word, 'bare', standing out on its own line, with the full stop guiding the reader to lower his/her voice.

READING RUN-ON LINES (ENJAMBMENT)

One important thing to note always is that a poem has a certain shape or form. Whether the poem is of a regular metrical pattern or whether it is free verse, the length of each line and the relationship of the lines to each other is purposeful. Therefore, while paying attention to the punctuation marks or absence of punctuation marks in each line, we should also pay attention to the shape of the poem. The shape of a poem can be suggested in the way a poem is read aloud just as such shape is evident on the printed page.

Let us read the following four lines from the poem, 'I shall return' on p. 17:

I shall return again. I shall return To laugh and love and watch with wonder eyes At golden noon the forest fires burn, Wafting their blue-black smoke to sapphire skies.

Try to read the lines as suggested below: ('Level pitch' means that the word which is referred to will *not* be said on a noticeably higher or lower note.)

I shall return again. ¹ I shall return²
To laugh and love and watch with wonder eyes²
At golden noon the forest fires burn, ³
Wafting their blue-black smoke to sapphire skies. ⁴

¹Slight pause and lowered pitch.

²Slight pause and level pitch.

³Slight pause, more definite.

⁴Lowered pitch.

Because there is always some kind of pause at the end of each line, the shape of the poem is retained in the reading.

READING WORD-MUSIC

One of the ways in which words make music is through alliteration. In the same lines quoted above from the poem 'I shall return', there are clusters of repeated initial sounds (alliteration) as in:

to laugh and love watch with wonder eyes forest fires smoke to sapphire skies.

The poem 'Busia border' (p. 64) also abounds in a play on sounds. These sounds can be a delight to the ear, if we allow ourselves to *hear* them by enunciating them as we read.

We should also read with attention to assonant sounds and to repetition of whole words for appropriate effect.

READING RHYTHM

All of us show a sense of rhythm as we speak. We obey the conventions of stressing some words or syllables and not stressing others. We are unconscious of this habit most of the time. Someone who has not thought about it before, can be made to recognise that rhythm is an integral part of speaking, if that person is asked to speak any sentence with equal stress on *all* syllables. For example:

Í sháll stréss évéry sýlláblé.

The result is a ridiculous droning. Immediately, it becomes obvious that what really happens is that always, some syllables are said or read with greater stress than others, so that we will say something like:

I shall stress évery sýllable, or Í shall stress évery sýllable.

Note that:

(a) there is a slight difference in the *meaning* of the above sentence when the emphasis shifts from the word 'stress' to 'I'. Thus we realise that *stress affects meaning and vice versa*.

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(b) stressed syllables are not all stressed to the same degree. In each of the sentences above, the first stressed syllable/word (i.e. 'stress' or 'I') is stronger than the other stressed syllables in the sentence.

It can also be said that in ordinary statements, certain parts of speech are often unstressed, for example, the article (a, the); verb auxiliaries like 'shall', in 'shall see' etc. But even these normally unstressed words can be stressed for emphasis in certain situations, for example, 'Give me á book, not several.' 'I sháll see him even though you forbid me to.'

Poets manipulate stress to highlight aspects of meaning and to convey a desired tone. Examples of an ordering of words to provide a regular, patterned rhythm (stress pattern) can be seen in the following lines:

(a) I sháll retúrn again. I sháll retúrn,
 To láugh and lóve and wátch with wónder éyes
 At gólden nóon the fórest fíres búrn,

(p. 17)

(b) My hópe is búilt on nóthing léss Than Jésus' blóod and fighteousnéss;

(p.60)

There is a particular kind of satisfaction that many people get from being able to anticipate the rhythmic pattern of a poem or song or piece of music.

Even in free verse, where the pattern of stress in each line is not regular, there is an element of design; the poet organises stress to suit the meaning, the emphasis and the tone.

Certain words in a poem can call attention to themselves and thus be read with greater emphasis if they are placed, for example:

alone on a line; at the beginning of a line; at the end of a line

Find now, the words 'separateness' (l.4), 'indifferent' (l.9), 'identical' (l.11) and 'indistinguishable' (l.15) in the

poem 'Busia border' on p. 64. Read aloud those parts of the poem in which these lines occur. Does it make any difference that the words are isolated in their own lines?

See now, the poem 'at the old homestead' (p. 53). The first two lines are:

Their enthusiasm abashed by the hollow distantness in your eyes

What difference would there be if the word 'abashed' was placed after 'enthusiasm' at the end of the first line?

READING PRACTICE

The hints given above are intended to help you to actually read out aloud the poems you encounter or to 'hear' them in your mind if you have to read them silently. Try to experience these poems as much as possible – read them to yourself, with your friends, or sing them when you can. Any analysis which you have to make will then be much easier and more spontaneous.

Try also to write a poem every now and then but write about something which has really *moved* you. In this way, you will not only convey facts or impressions but feeling and tone. There is nothing that can help us appreciate poetry like composing some poems ourselves.

THE QUESTIONS AND NOTES ON EACH POEM

I have posed questions on each poem to help you to think about them and discuss them. I have not provided answers. If I did, you would not be encouraged to find out what your own response to each poem is. I believe that it is through enquiry and discovery that people really learn.

Africa

For the Third World

Oh my island, half asleep and so restless	
on the sea.	
And suddenly from the points of danger	
history makes the sign I had been waiting for.	
I see nations sprouting,	5
red and green and I greet you.	
Banners, throats filled with ancient air.	
Mali, Guinea, Ghana.	
And I see you, men	
not at all clumsy under this new sun.	10
Listen,	
from my distant island	
from my brooding island	
I call out to you – Ho.	
And your voices answer me	15
and what they say means:	
the day is bright. And it is true	
even through storms and night	
the day is bright for you.	
From here I see Kivu descend towards	20
Tanganyika by the silver stairway of Ruzuzi	
(a big girl at each step	
bathing the night with the rustling of her hair).	
From here I see, knotted together	
Benoue, Logone, Tchad:	25
bound together Senegal and Niger	
from here, I hear the Nyaragongo	
roaring.	

30
35
40
45
50
55

Our Africa is a hand out of a gauntlet, it is a straight hand, palm outwards fingers tightly pressed together.

Africa

It is a swollen hand a wounded open hand held out, brown, vellow, white 60

to all the hands, the wounded hands of the world

65

Aimé Césaire Translated from the French by G.L. Coulthard

NOTE

Aimé Césaire is a poet from the French-speaking island of Martinique in the West Indies. He is known for his commitment to Pan-African affairs.

OUESTIONS

金雅沙州

- 1. At about what time do you think this poem was written? Why?
- 2. What is the poet's attitude to Africa?
- 3. Trace the use of personification throughout the poem. How does this technique convey the poet's feeling?
- 4. Consider each of the following terms as they might apply to this poem - lyric, eulogy, free verse.

Africa

Africa my Africa Africa of proud warriors in the ancestral savannahs Africa my grandmother sings of Beside her distant river I have never seen you

5

But my gaze is full of your blood Your black blood spilt over the fields The blood of your sweat The sweat of your toil The toil of slavery

10