Diamond in the Earth: The Poetic Imagination of Tatafway Tumoe

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In *The Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes asserts that man, in his “natural condition,” is in constant state of war, even in the absence of physical confrontation: “Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man against every man. For WARRE consisteth not in Battell onely, or the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known” (*The Leviathan* 64). This leads Hobbes to famously conclude that the life of man when he is in his natural state is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” (65). This observation is now considered by many as hackneyed truism. However, when you have read Tatafway Mani Tumoe’s six poems published in this inaugural issue of *Weave*, you will understand that there is nothing cliché about Hobbes’ characterization of the state of humankind. Hobbes’ assessment is as true for Tumoe’s Sierra Leone as it was for the pre-Commonwealth humanity the philosopher described in *The Leviathan* over three hundred and fifty years ago. Sierra Leone’s history, it seems, has been a long cycle of suffering. Even what we like to think of as peaceful and prosperous times have seemed to be only short moments of reprieve, indeed gestation periods, before the next conflagration.

In Tumoe’s six poems, the highly personal and the collective are woven together in language and attitude that are convincingly genuine. Together, they offer a snapshot of the human and geo-cultural tragedy of Sierra Leone even as they remind us of a time before human greed began to undo the land’s primeval beauty and bounty. They also give us a glimpse into the restless soul of the poet. As dark and tragic as they may seem, these are poems of hope, because they are poems of truth; truth told disinterestedly, with interest only in the human story they tell.

“Without Ceremonies” exposes the poet’s difficult birth. Evidently, he was not ready for this world: “they brought me out before my time./Unborn I came.” Paradoxically, the poet is brought into the world “unwelcome/Unwanted but wanted.” From this point, we know he is bound to live an unenviable life, unprepared as he is for it, and not really desired. His future, he tells us in the very first stanza, is already in pieces even before his existence begins: “My hopes shattered, my dreams in disarray.” The human world thus becomes for the poet a kind of purgatory where, like “wet clay,” he will be “undone,” “spoilt by humanity’s hands.” This powerful image of the wet clay—waiting to be molded into something good, or not—underscores the indictment of us, the human race. Children, like the land of which the poet sings and whose desecration he laments, are entrusted unto us by the Maker. What we do with them is up to us. Do we make good of God’s work, or do we make a mess of it? The poet certainly thinks that humanity has betrayed the Maker’s trust by not having taken good care of the ‘wet clay,’ of the child and the Earth.

A native of Kono district, Tumoe knows a thing or two about diamonds and their human cost. “Diamond Rhapsody” is a poem about the malediction that diamonds—“the
cursed stone”—have always represented for Sierra Leone. Moreover, in this poem, the poet expands on the theme of irresponsible stewardship of the earth by humans, in this case Sierra Leoneans. A major consequence of the exploitation of Sierra Leone’s diamond reserves is environmental destruction. Thanks to its citizens’ cupidity, a once beautiful land in which graceful nature reigned freely has been turned into a “tattered land” peopled by “broken hearts” and “bleeding souls,” and where majestic trees have been replaced by “gaping holes.” Like the poet forced out of his mother’s womb by impatient and self-interested humans, diamonds are being “torn from the wombs of my land” in service of man’s and woman’s vanity.

“Kalashnikov in the Sun” is an ambitious poem. It is an acerbic commentary on war, international arms trade, corruption, and inflation as well as a denunciation of foreign aid and structural adjustment programs. All these human-made disasters are united in a malevolent consortium that could justifiably be labeled ‘evil and co.’ As a consequence, a once lush land capable of feeding her children now has only guns to offer them. So her children die of hunger, if they have not been felled by the bullets from the guns. In place of relief from this perversion of nature’s intent, the people are forced to endure more austerity measures imposed on them mostly from the outside.

Given the poet’s passion for human rights, no subject harmful or potentially harmful to the health of people is taboo or beyond the reach of his incisive verb. In Tumoe’s poetic universe, criticism is an equal opportunity striker. Whereas in some of the poems we have already seen the poet directs his ire mostly at external purveyors of evil, in “Circumcision,” much like in the first poem, the focus is intimately inward. Fatima, like the ‘I’ in “Without Ceremonies,” is a victim of her own society. She is nipped in the bud, sacrificed, as it were, in appeasement of traditions and customs. The issue of female circumcision is indeed a delicate one. Credit must therefore be given to the poet for tackling it here in a manner both innocuous and humane.

“Fragments of Peace” reminds us of the precariousness of life, especially during times of war. War leaves no time to the weary victim to even contemplate the wholesomeness of peace, much less experience it. But even in this bleak landscape, where peace comes only in fragments, if it comes at all, there is hope and determination—“I may not have much to say / But I may say what I have.” The determination is born of the knowledge that “We have the power.” The themes of hope and determination in this poem are stretched to their logical and emotional conclusion in the poem, “We the People.”

“We the People” provides a litany of woes plaguing the poet and his people: blackouts, hunger, police brutality, injustice and the inefficacy of the legal system. In short, horrible living conditions which once again remind us of the urgent truth in Hobbes statement. In this poem, the poet capitalizes on the plurality of experience to call for concerted action against the state guarantors of human misery. Reminiscent of the first three words of the United States Constitution, the poem is a veritable declaration of independence, agency and the concomitant desire and determination on the part of the downtrodden to rise up in a phalanx and reclaim their God-given rights.

Tatafway Tumoe somehow reminds us of three promising African poets who died in their prime. (The first two are quite well-known.) The first is the French-Senegalese-Cameroonian, David Mandessi Diop. Diop is known mainly through his collection of 22 poems published in Hammer Blows (translated from the French original, Coup de Pilon,
It is believed he lost everything else he had written—including a second volume of poems ready to be published—in the airplane crash that killed him and his wife in 1960, just off the coast of Dakar. He was only 33 years old. Diop belonged to the Negritude movement founded by Senghor, Césaire and Damas in the 1930s in France. His unapologetically militant poetry, so powerfully represented in two of his most popular poems, “The Vultures” (5) and “Africa,” (25) took Europe and Western civilization to task for their role in slavery and colonialism. Gerald Moore sums up Diop’s worth thusly: “As it is, this little volume suffices to put him ahead of his strict contemporaries in poetic achievement as well as promise. In him we hear the voice of a new generation determined to rebuild Africa by its own efforts, unencumbered by constant demands for internal payments on loans spiritual and cultural as well as financial” (24).

The second poet Tumoe reminds us of is the Nigerian, Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo. In There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra, his last published book before his departure for the land of the ancestors, Africa’s most famous novelist and writer Chinua Achebe has this to say about his friend Okigbo: “I have written and been quoted elsewhere as saying that Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo was the finest Nigerian poet of his generation, but I believe that as his work becomes better and more widely known in the world, he will also be recognized as one of the most remarkable anywhere in our time” (Achebe 114). Okigbo, killed at age 35 in 1967 during the Biafran war, is assuredly weaving his way into the annals of poetic excellence and immortality.

Finally, Tumoe reminds us of a poet much closer to home: Gaston Bart-Williams. One of the first seriously committed writers of post-colonial Sierra Leone, Bart-Williams was particularly concerned about the issues of race difference and racism. According to Eustace Palmer, Bart-Williams "is an accomplished poet whose terse, crisp, ironic style suggests he could have gone on to become a major African poet had he not been cut down early by a tragic ferry accident in Sierra Leone” (26).

While Tumoe may not have been as prolific as Diop, Okigbo or even Bart-Williams, and may never be as celebrated as they, we can certainly say, echoing Gerald Moore’s evaluation of Diop, that Tatafway’s voice is that of a new generation of Sierra Leoneans no longer content with the role of the passive spectator in the unfolding tragedy of their lives and country.

When he passed on in 2012, the journalist and poet, Tatafway Mani Tumoe was 48 years old, eight years beyond the current average lifespan in Sierra Leone. So by this measure he lived a long life. But compared to between 70 and 80 years of life expectancy in rich and developed countries, Sierra Leone is Azrail’s paradise, a really miserable place to live. In a general sense, Tatafway was epitomical of Sierra Leone itself. Like his country, he was gifted, endowed by the creator with so much intelligence, courage, and promise. Yet a tragic figure bedeviled by circumstances and cut down so soon by the contradictions in his own life and society.

Tatafway has not died? A poet cannot die. How can he who sacrificed himself to unearth truth die? He has only returned home to his Maker who, for all these years, has been waiting to welcome him back in order that He may make him whole once and for all. And Tatafway, in spite of his lament that “No one sang dirges for me as I went,” has been mourned and continued to be by those who know what he represents. But over and beyond mourning, we celebrate his life and the significance it carries for us and our
country. Tatafway was and is a mirror to us all; and we can only but thank him even if we notice our faces are lopsided.

We are certain Tatafway wrote more poems than are published here. But these are the only ones he gave to Patrick Bernard (Editor of Weave) when they met back in 2008 in Freetown. Bernard had spoken to him about our plans for starting a journal of Sierra Leone studies. Tatafway indicated that it would be an honor to have his poems published in the new journal. Sad that he is not here to see his wish fulfilled. But wherever he may be, we hope he is smiling. It is our wish you, the reader, will enjoy the beauty and depth of these poems, and that you will remember the genius who created them and who was generous enough to bequeath them to us.
**Works Cited**


