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After the Ceremonies

Ama Ata Aidoo

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AFTER THE CEREMONIES

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

Ama Ata Aidoo

Edited and with a foreword by Helen Yitah

University of Nebraska Press / Lincoln and London

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FOREWORD

Helen Yitah

This gathering of poems by Ama Ata Aidoo is an act of recovery (of many poems that were thought lost) as well as a reaffirmation of the scope, diversity, and importance of her poetic oeuvre. The poems were selected to give as wide a representation as possible of her wide-ranging subject matter, her flexibility in style, and the complexity of her thematic and formal concerns. *After the Ceremonies* brings together many new and collected poems written over the course of three decades. The new poems comprise her most recent as well as others that she refers to as previously “misplaced or downright lost poems.” The published ones are mainly selections from her two collections, *Someone Talking to Sometime* (Harare: The College Press, 1985) and *An Angry Letter in January* (Coventry, Sidney, Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1992), as well as others that appeared in anthologies, journals and magazines.

The poems in this collection are arranged in a way that foregrounds historicity and chronology. Part 1 comprises mainly new poems, together with a few previously uncollected ones, all arranged in a prelude and four other sections. The other sections in part 1 are “Fires and Ashes,” “Grieving for the Living,” “The National Corruption Index and Other Poems,” and “Ghana: Where the Bead Speaks.” Parts 2 and 3 consist of selections from Aidoo’s two collections, *An Angry Letter in January* and *Someone Talking to Sometime*, respectively. In these two parts, the original arrangement of poems has been maintained.

Aidoo's poetry occupies an important space in her oeuvre, because even though most of her poems were published after she had established herself as a writer through her plays—*The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa*—her book of short stories—*No Sweetness Here*—and her first novel—*Our Sister Killjoy*—writing poetry was her childhood dream, and she wrote poems and won prizes for them before she began writing in the other genres. In addition, unlike her other works, which portray fictional worlds, Aidoo's poetry is “real” (with all the illusory dimensions of that concept); personal (in the sense of her being willing to unabashedly treat her biography as source material for the themes and ideas explored in the work); and of “this nightmare world” where the persona is,

just learning to cope
in places where
I cannot take anything at all for granted,
 (“An Insider's View”)

Not surprisingly, it is in Aidoo's poetry that we see most of her creative and emotional energies. Here, for example, is how she depicts a moment of bewilderment in “Homesickness” when “my memory had slipped away” at a fish market in a foreign land, where she cannot remember the *Fantse* names of fishes that she has known from her childhood. She is forced to confront a “terrifying truth”:

the names and tastes of fish are also
simple keys to unlock
secret sacred doors.

And I wail to foreign far away winds:

Daughter of my Mother and my Father's Orphan,
what is to become of me?

And those like me?

This passage illustrates one of the abiding themes in Aidoo's poetry: exile and the experience of being an immigrant, and the personal, intimate manner in which it is depicted here could only have come from one who has felt it deeply. It demonstrates how her poetry embraces the span of her experience and her cultural reach.

Yet even as her poems plumb her interior life, they also articulate its negotiation with an outside and often complex historical, political, and aesthetic community. This, in part, explains the many and varied sociopolitical subjects that her poetry deals with, ranging from the history of slavery and its role in the fraught relationship between Africa and the Diaspora, to motherhood, love, childhood, friendship, relationships, hope, loss, crime and punishment, politics, family, nationalism, the decolonization process, education, poverty, despair, dreams, happiness, travels, and exile. And these subjects are often treated against the background of shifting personal and communal bearings.

But one thing that has not shifted is Aidoo's radical vein of thought and how it is reflected in her writing. This is why the relevance of Aidoo's poetry should also be seen in the way it positions her to the left of African politics, alongside the anti-imperialists, the nationalists, and the women's activists.

Aidoo started writing her longer works, beginning with *Dilemma of a Ghost* (1961), during the heady days of Ghana's independence, when the nationalist fervor fueled by J. E. Casely Hayford, J. B. Danquah, and Kwame Nkrumah, among others, had been transformed into postindependence euphoria, not only within the country, but also all around Africa and across the Atlantic. As the first nation in Sub-Saharan Africa to win back power from colonial rule, Ghana quickly became a symbol of racial freedom, political and intellectual emancipation, and the unity of black people. This, coupled with Nkrumah's pan-Africanist ideology and agenda, drew many intellectuals to Ghana from within and without the continent. Notable Diasporans who were moved by this spirit to come to Ghana include W. E. B. Du Bois and George Padmore, both of whom lived in Ghana for some time before they died.

Although the independence celebration quickly gave way to

disillusionment and despair as the political leaders betrayed their people's hope for big and beautiful things, this radical vein has remained an integral part of Aidoo's thought-scape. In her prose, drama, poetry, and critical essays, her radical thought and activism are evident in her identification with the ordinary people, as can be seen in her classic collection of short stories, *No Sweetness Here* (1970)—an identification that places her with the left-oriented politicians fighting for equality, emancipation, race consciousness, nationhood, and African cultural integrity. In her poetry, however, it is also seen in the widely recognized icons (mentioned throughout this volume), whom she addresses directly in her poems or to whom she dedicates them. These would include political figures like Kwame Nkrumah, Malcolm X, Sitting Bull, Stokely Carmichael, and Kojo Tsikata and literary figures such as Anna Rutherford, Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa, Chinua Achebe, and Efua Sutherland. These are not just names dropped to impress the reader, but “kindred spirits” whose lives and work connect with Aidoo's at a deeper level. Her poems engage with the full weight of the intellectual significance of these personalities, and this in turn points to the personal, historical, and political import of this book.

As is to be expected, relations across the Atlantic also continue to be a big interest in her work. Thus, Aidoo fractures in her poetry socially censured issues such as slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade (which she also invokes in her other works including *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa*), together with the complex, timeless questions of inequality regarding race, class, and gender that are implicated in such subjects. This is illustrated in “Speaking of Hurricanes,” a poem in which storms hurled “across the Atlantic to / the poor Americas / and the poorer Caribbean” are juxtaposed with the “political and economic tornadoes” in Africa that

blew our hopes
up, down, left, right:
anywhere and everywhere . . . except
forward to fulfillment.

The damage done by Africa's economic and political hurricanes, clinched in the line "blew our hopes," is reinforced by the imagery of uncontrolled and uncontrollable movement. A gender dimension is brought in when Aidoo makes it clear that women suffer the most as a result of the vagaries of these storms, while able-bodied men, who in the days of the slave trade, used to pick cotton on "our conquerors' doorsteps," now sit idle while "African women in various forms of / civilized bondage" are still subjected to "wiping / baby snot and adult shit." In such a world, "Just reckoning the damage is a / whirlwind of sorts."

After the Ceremonies bears testimony to Aidoo's stature, that is, her glaring celebrity as a pioneer writer, and a poet, who has stood out from the crowd of mainly male authors of African origin. As Jane Bryce affirms in the prelude to a recent film in honor of Aidoo, *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* (Fadoa Films, 2014), Aidoo "functions as a front-runner, a forerunner, a person who can put on the table a series of issues which contemporary women can deal with, and continue to deal with." Most importantly, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has declared in a recent personal essay, Aidoo is "a writer of the world in the world" and "a writer for all seasons."

I hope that readers will enjoy *After the Ceremonies* and that this book will generate greater interest in Ama Ata Aidoo's poetry.

AFTER THE CEREMONIES

PART ONE

New and Uncollected Poems

Prelude

For My Mother in Her Mid-90s

Aunt.

Don't ask
me how
I come to address my mother thus.

Long
complex, complicated stories:
heart-warmingly familial and
sadly colonial.

You know how
utterly, wonderfully
insensitive the young can be?

Oh no. We are not here talking adults
who should know better
but never do.

Aunt,
I thank you for
being alive today, alert, crisp.

Since we don't know tomorrow,
see me touching wood,
clutching at timbers, hugging forests:

So I can enter young,
age, infirmities
defied.

Hear my offspring chirping:
“Mummy, touch plastic,
it lasts longer!”

O, she knows her mama well.
The queen of plastics a tropical Bedouin,
she must travel light.

Check out the wood,
feel its weight, its warmth
check out the beauty of its lines, and perfumed shavings.

Back to you, My Dear Mother,
I can hear the hailing chorus
at the drop of your name.
And don't I love to drop it
here, there, and everywhere?
Not missing out by time of day,

not only when some chance provides,
but pulled and dragged into talks
private and public.

Listen to the “is-your-mother-still-alive” greeting,
eyes popping out,
mouth agape and trembling:

That here,
in narrow spaces and
not-much-time,
who was I to live?
Then she who bore me?

Me da ase.
Ye da ase.