

H-Net Reviews

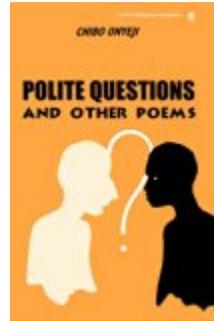
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marjorie O. Macgoye. *Make It Sing and Other Poems*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998. xii + 112 pp. Å£4.25 (paper), ISBN 978-9966-46-647-1.

Lupenga Mphande. *Crackle at Midnight: Poems*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1998. xv + 147 pp. Å£6.25 (paper), ISBN 978-978-129-347-4.

Chibo Onyeji. *Polite Questions and Other Poems*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1998. xvi + 70 pp. Å£2.95 (paper), ISBN 978-978-156-445-1.

Reviewed by Simon Lewis (Department of English, College of Charleston)
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Improvising from Two Lives

Each of the poets under review expresses, albeit in widely different ways, what it is like to live as a migrant: Chibo Onyeji responds angrily to the “polite questions” of hostile European (specifically Austrian) hosts; Lupenga Mphande, exiled in the United States, recalls his beloved Thozza home in poems marked by nostalgic romanticism for the land and laments for the political oppression of the Banda years that originally enforced his exile in 1984; and Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye speaks from an unusual position as a white woman married to a Luo man in Kenya. Although Mphande and Macgoye are already reasonably well represented in anthologies of African poetry,[1] all three collections add valuably to our understanding the difficulties of “improvis[ing] from two lives” (Macgoye 59).

Chibo Onyeji’s anger at his racist hosts comes out both in his polemical introduction and in fiercely denunciatory poems such as “A Bird Called Krone” and “Fortress Europe.” In the former, “a white bird called Krone ... feeds ... on her own droppings for dessert” (p. 4), droppings that “irrigate hatred in vulnerable denizens—/ chanting segregation” (p. 5). Clearly Onyeji has in mind the right-wing propaganda of the Freedom Party of Austria, the irrationality of which he exposes in his preface. However, while the arguments in the pref-

ace are framed by detailed references to particular political figures, the poems paint in broader strokes of vituperation. They attempt to make a virtue of the force of language for its own sake (for example, in the racist language/birdshit analogy already quoted), but in the process lose the force of logic. In “Fortress Europe” the poet addresses an unspecified European “you” whose mind he can read without the “you” having to “breathe a word” (p. 12). Rendering the European voice valueless in this way may be supposed to be a strategic reversal of power but it leads to the philosophical and aesthetic dead-ends of lines like “Whatever is empty/ is empty/ because it’s empty” (p. 12).

Lupenga Mphande’s engagement with his beloved and lamented Malawi occurs at a much more subtle and poetically satisfying level. Although some of the first poems in the collection are marred by a sub-Hopkinsian over-reliance on alliteration (e.g., “arrows shine silver-shafts flickering,” “Pausing among poolside poinsettias” [p. 2]), the best evoke both a tremendous sense of nostalgic romanticism for the rural simplicity of Mphande’s birthplace and a clear-eyed respect for those who struggled, and struggle still, against destructive natural and political forces. “Where I was born,” for instance, is a skillfully constructed, movingly phrased poem opening

with an evocation of the landscape of Thozwa where “green hills ... merge with clouds,” but shifts gear in the second stanza when the poet claims to have been not just the herdsboy but also the “scout who sighted the dwellings of informers/ And guided the patriotic fighters at dawn” (p. 39). The poet’s voice thus becomes the repository of nationalist memory of Malawi’s “true heroes” (p. 40), including those prepared to risk opposition to Banda, “the tyrant who at a swish of his flywhisk/ Mowed people into dust” (pp. 40-41). The poem closes with an image that brings the reader back to the beautiful landscape description of the opening, but that landscape has now been overtly politicized—Banda may have “Mowed people into dust,” but he was “unaware that even dust/ Will rise in the wind and soar to the sky” (p. 41).

As a white woman, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye cannot voice such landscape-based nationalism. In fact, as one of her most famous poems explains, she is the “nyarloka” [foreigner], unable, intransitively, to “identify” as Luo, Kenyan, or African: “You can identify me as a national,” she writes, “but I cannot identify myself” (p. 17). Macgoye has turned this apparent difficulty to advantage, however. Not only does the insight give her the sort of ironic distance on herself that allows her to cope with locals’ scorn for a “foreigner on foot” (p. 57), it also prompts her to good use of a variety of voices of resistance. Already anthologized poems such as “Mathenge” and “A Freedom Song” show Macgoye making eloquent appeals to the spirit of national liberation, and bemoaning the post-colonial backsliding that now “squeeze[s] people] to slow, pale endings by eviction, delay in payments, hoarding, denigration” (p. 71), or simply exploits young women like Atieno, “soon replaced” (p. 75) once used up by her callous uncle/employer.

The real treat of the present volume comes, however, in two previously unpublished pieces, “Harry Thuku” and “Leonida in Fort Jesus 1697,” which more than confirm Macgoye’s poetic skill and clear-sighted political vision. The former rehearses “Mathenge”’s successful reminder to contemporary rulers of the original principles of the nationalist struggle by relating in the first person the story of Harry Thuku’s struggles against the British—including his successful 1922 opposition to the forced labor of women. The kind of political bargaining Thuku did is presented as being totally in the tradition of “a bargaining people” (p. 61)—it is *not* the same as the bargaining

for material goods of post-independence leaders and culture. As Macgoye has Thuku remark: “Only Kenyatta/ valued beads, leather, junk, and he outlived me/ to see it gain respect” (p. 62).

“Leonida in Fort Jesus” goes back even further in Kenyan history, to the Arab siege of Fort Jesus in 1697. In the voice of a questioning Christian Portuguese woman, Macgoye has found a very appropriate medium to probe the colonial presence in East Africa (although I suspect Leonida owes more to Macgoye’s tolerant idealism than to historical representativeness). One of the most striking moves of the poem (in line with the attitude of “Freedom Song”) is the effectively feminist identification between African, Arab, and European; Leonida sees the difference between Islamic and Christian culture chiefly in terms of the position of women and marriage customs which hold them equally in thrall to men—“for every woman there is the pain” whether pounding meal or “sitting listless in a window, sewing/ and chiding servant girls” (p. 51). The poem ends with a prayer of penitence for complicity with the forces that have led to the violent struggles among Swahili, Arab, and Portuguese. “I offer penitence,” says Leonida, “for what I know not/ that I am part of, beg one day a maid/ like me may compass all the contradictions/ and see a peaceful Kingdom come. So be it” (p. 52).

So be it, indeed. We’re still a very long way from that peaceful kingdom, and voices like Onyeji’s, Mphande’s and Macgoye’s are salutary reminders both of the goal and of the contemporary and historical obstacles to that goal.

All three books are distributed by African Books Collective Ltd., The Jam Factory, 27 Park End Street, Oxford, OX1 1HU, England. E-mail: abc@dial.pipex.com.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Adewale Maja-Pearce’s *The Heinemann Book of African Poetry in English* (1990) and Stella and Frank Chipasula’s *The Heinemann Book of African Women’s Poetry* (1995).

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