

Thoughts on Poetry for World Poetry Day - 2021

Kólá Túbòsún

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For World Poetry Day 2021 today, we ask some of our leading contemporary writers to give their thoughts on what work of poetry they will recommend that everyone read at least once in their lifetime. Here are the responses:

There is a long and rich history of poetry coming from all the different countries and regions and tribes in Africa. Our poets write to chronicle the intellectual and emotional and philosophical history of our beauty and complexity, and so reading the work of many African poets, poets who are charting our lives with language, is something we should all do. On World Poetry day, I say find a poet from your country or your people and read their work as a gift from them to you, and in reading, you will be making a gift to them. Remember the often-silenced people, the regions with fewer poems, and remember the rich and varied voices of women that are becoming louder and louder, today.

Kwame Dawes, often called 'the busiest man in literature', is currently the Glenna Luschei Editor of *Prairie Schooner* at the University of Nebraska, where he is a George W. Holmes University Professor of English, a faculty member of Cave Canem, and a teacher in the Pacific MFA Program in Oregon. Kwame Dawes is the editor of *American Life in Poetry* and a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

"I Laugh with Idi Amin" by Dr. Susan Kiguli, Uganda It's a poem filled with bitter irony, about Idi Amin's impact on Uganda's social and political economy. The persona captures

the vileness, the unknown, and the tone shifts to derisiveness, creating a deceptively light mood. "Things that were lost in our vaginas" by Lydia Kasese, Tanzania. A compelling piece about sexual assault on a woman, and the darkness from repressed memories, injustice, etc

Beverley Nambozo Nsengiyunva is the founder Babishai Niwe Poetry Prize in Uganda.

In her book, Create Dangerously: the Immigrant Artist at Work, Edwidge Danticat notes, "All artists, writers among them, have several stories—one might call them creation myths—that haunt and obsess them". Some of us grow up severed from our ancestral creation myths or reject them in favor of other myths that speak to us, or that speak over us. But what if the mythic structures that we know best are actually traps? As the title itself suggests, the central project of Ladan Osman's "Refusing Eurydice" (from Exiles of Eden, 2019) is to interrogate which mythic structures we allow to shape our experiences and identities in the first place. Its closing lines, "We are looking for a better myth./We've only been looking since Eve" attest that some of us may go lifetimes without the guidance of myths that do our lives justice. The poem encourages us not to settle for less if we are shortchanged by the myths we know best. It implores us: "Go to the place between dreams"—seek guidance from a time when we thrive in balance. Envision and enact lives that will inform the very myths we need.

Dina El Dessouky teaches writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her poetry chapbook, "From the Zabbala's Cart" is part of New-Generation African Poets: A Chapbook Box Set (Sita) (Akashic Books, 2019).

It is no easy task to pick a single poem from the vast corpus of Wole Soyinka; I would perhaps settle for the title poem in Samarkand. Here the notoriously abstruse poet is accessible, and brings the Yoruba trope of the world as a marketplace in creative intercourse with James Elroy Flecker's 'The Golden Journey to Samarkand.' For my second recommendation I will (reluctantly) skip Christopher Okigbo to suggest a more recent poet: before the tour de force that is The Sahara Testaments, Tade Ipadeola had proved himself master of the lyric form, in poems like 'Maputo Olive'. This ars poetica explores the paradoxical motion of time in Zeno's arrow, its choice of imagery as delectable as a black olive.

Niran Okewole is the author of *Logarithms & The Hate Artist*.

The poem I will suggest is Lenrie Peters' "We Have come Home". In timeless tone and tropes, it captures the ambivalence of the encounter between Africa and Europe. It is still relevant today, several decades after independence.

Gbemisola Adeoti is the author of *Naked Soles* and a professor of dramatic literature at the Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Christopher Okigbo's "Love Apart" captures the essence of forlorn love and grapples

with the validity and importance of failed romances. Recruiting vivid twilight imagery of the moon, pines and shadows, Okigbo is subtle and thorough in his delivery of metaphors and symbols. What is left on the page is a deft cipher suffused with that uneasy silence that communicates disconnection. There is a recognisable visceral sadness readers take away with them.

Dami Ajayi is the author of *Clinical Blues* and *A Woman's Body is a Country*.

Amal Donqol came to be known as the Prince of Refusers after writing his poem 'Do Not Reconcile' - an appeal and condemnation of the Camp David Accords, which normalized relations between Egypt and the state of Israel. In the case of Palestine, Danqol's words have always and will always be apt. Donqol's words have long served as a rallying cry for both hope and to not give into corruption and tyranny - invoking bravery and solidarity in even the most futile of situations. The full poem can be found here in English, and here in the original Arabic.

Nour Kamel (she/they) is perfectly lit and writes/edits things in Egypt. Their chapbook *Noon* is part of the New-Generation African Poets series and their writing can be found in *Anomaly*, *Rusted Radishes*, *Voicemail Poems*, *Ikhtyar*, *20.35 Africa*, *Sumou* and *Mizna*. Kamel writes about identity, language, sexuality, queerness, gender, oppression, femininity, trauma, family, lineage, globalisation, loss and food.

Truly a call to exhibit a partiality of choice from the huge chest of poems produced by Africans over two centuries, my instinctive wager points first to Atukwei Okai's "Rosimaya", a lamentatory love poem of impulsive lyrical expression. Then, I will recommend that the potential poet, reader or literary enthusiast should, before their twentieth birthday, read the pair of poems entitled "Abiku" by JP Clark and Wole Soyinka. For apprenticeship, edification and a learning from a cultural heritage of Africa, read these poems.

Remi Raji is the author of *Lovesong for My Wasteland* and a professor of literature at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Happy World Poetry Day!

A difficult request - choose ONE African poem that I think everyone should read at least once. How to choose? What parameters to apply? Gender? Age? Number of awards? On the continent? In the Diaspora? And whose work to leave out? Christopher Okigbo, Niyi Osundare, Odia Omeifun? Ama Ata Aidoo? Tade Ipadeola? Molar Lesley-Ogundipe? Titilope Sonuga? Wana Udobang? Warsan Shire? Jumoke Verissimo? Dami Ajayi? Bernadine Evaristo? I applied none of these parameters. I went for the intangible and dancing words. My choice is "Abiku" - Wole Soyinka. First read in the hand-me-down copy of the poems that were to be studied for my exams in form four. And never forgotten. The reason why everyone should read it? Oh several and varied - allegory, Yoruba mythology, motherhood, grief and the rhythm of the drums you can just catch in your ears if you read it aloud. But the real reason? Under the appreciation for its stunning beauty? Read it and putting your word-envy to the side, sigh and wonder -

"When can I ever write like this?"

Aduke Gomez is currently the Chair of the Steering Committee of Art4Life – an initiative of the Lagos State Ministry of Health established to introduce art and the practice of art into the entire healthcare process. Her recent children's book "Lost And Found In Lagos" – a collaboration with Biola Alabi Media was selected as one of Channels TV Book Club Top Twenty Books for 2019.

"Telephone Conversation" by Wole Soyinka is a poem everyone should read at least once for its perspective and nuance in the discussion of race. The first time I read it I didn't understand why the speaker in the poem was doing all the work for the landlady to understand their Blackness. Everytime I have read the poem, I have taken away something new. Most recently, that prejudice has no bearing on the effort of the one being discriminated against. Also, the poem should be read for its inventive use of language. It's the first time I saw "West African Sepia" as a shade of Black, which was surprising.

Ajibola Tolase is a Nigerian poet and essayist.

For the international poetry day today, I celebrate Gabedon Baderoon and JP Clark. I recommend Baderoon's "The Sun Rising," as a must read poem because of her fresh use of dream as an alternative reality to present sex within which she captures the erotic act of sex as transcendental. Even when the experience is over, it lingers because it is divine. She displaces time in such a way that sex is immortalized in memory. JP Clark's "Night Rain," is also a must read. He effectively utilizes a typical African setting and a common phenomenon, an African storm, to present the need for travails to be embraced as a way to solutions and resolutions. JP Clark's powerful use of similes and metaphors in this poem is quite unique.

Unoma Azuah is the author of *Edible Bones* and teaches writing at the Illinois Institute of Art, Chicago. Her research and activism focus on Sexual Minority rights in Nigeria. Recently, she concluded a book project on the lives of LGBT Nigerians entitled, "Blessed Body: Secret Lives of LGBT Nigerians".

*I recall sitting in Freedom Park when someone said to me, as poets your sadness is not unique, the world is full of suffering, why should the world leave its pain and listen to you? I have been thinking about these words, especially now when most poems written and published are a bold declaration of pain, of sadness without saying anything other than this, look at me, leave your pain, I am suffering, I deserve to be looked at. In this saturation of poems comes Saddiq Dzukogi's *Your Crib, My Qibla*. Dzukogi's debut collection in America is a journey that takes us through the language of grief, the eyes of a dead daughter, the many ways in which memory serves as a map, not only of the past but also a road through which we can chart the future. This book is wake work, a ritual that lasts longer than the night and when we are done, what is left with us is not only sadness but celebration, for we have been granted a mirror to look at a child who is no more and when we looked we saw not only death but also Baha, the child of a poet, running through these poems, offering us her smile, saying to us, you are lucky to meet me, I am alive in your voice. Perhaps this is the greatest achievement of the book.*

Perhaps this is what wake work produces, an endless mourning that leads to life.

*Recently I have been thinking of francophone African poets, especially those writing today, poets who are in conversation with anglophone poets through themes, through poems that ask questions of history, that seek to understand the present through colonization and the process through which borders, villages, cities and languages have changed. Among francophone poets writing today in north Africa there are few poets that write with the same urgency that Samira Negrouche writes. Her book, *The Olive Trees' Jazz & Other Poems*, translated into English by Marilyn Hacker, is a work of devotion that queries exclusion, that looks at her homeland and seeks to understand the nature of borders, that seeks to understand personhood. "My ancestors know no borders," she writes, claiming for herself and for us a way through which we can ask the question, what is the African identity in today's world? I am in awe of the language of these poems, I am in awe of Samira Negrouche and I hope that one day poets writing in and about Africa can begin to be in conversation across countries, across colonial languages and every other form of divide that holds us back.*

Romeo Oriogun is Romeo Oriogun is the author of *Sacrament Of Bodies* (University of Nebraska Press) and the chapbooks, *Burnt Men* and *The Origin of Butterflies*. The 2017 winner of the Brunel International African Poetry Prize, he has received fellowships from the Ebedi International Residency, Harvard University Department of English, Oregon Institute for Creative Research, and The Hutchins Center for African and African American Research. He currently lives in Iowa, where he is an MFA candidate for poetry at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His currently shortlisted for Lambda Award for Best Gay Poetry.

Reading "A Field, Any Field" by Itiola Jones I am completely sold on the power of words to salve wounds. And if not that, to at least make room for us to contend with the harm done, to stand before some version of ourselves and excavate the treacherous landscape of memory and feelings. This poem embodies all that. It makes a complete mess of me every time I read it. It's one of those poems I wish I'd written. One of those poems that I feel was written specifically for me. For all of us. For anyone who knows what it means to sway between love and violence, how both can be placed at our feet by the same hands. How quickly they can become inseparable, unrecognizable from a distance. The poem invites us to sit and try to see the humanity in the villain—in those who have wronged us. It asks that we look at our own hands and consider the dirt that has accumulated there. By not assigning blame, the poem performs a kind of linguistic heist, but the harm is unmistakable. The blood is right there for us to see.

Precious Arinze's chapbook is forthcoming in African Poetry Book Fund Series edited by Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani.

J.P Clark's "Ibadan". It is a terse, visual, rhythmic, lyrical marvelous gem of a poem. It is also pithy and carefully worded piece of writing that sticks in one's mind and heart. In this poem, Clark gives a masterclass on the art of muscular poetic brevity.

Uche Nduka Nduka is the author of numerous collections of poetry and prose, including *Living in*

Public (2018), *Nine East* (2013), *Ijele* (2012), and *eel on reef* (2007), and so on. His work has been translated into German, Finnish, Italian, Dutch, and Romanian.

I choose "I am Bound to this Land by Blood" by Olu Oguibe. I performed this poem in 1996 at an event at the University of Ibadan. Over the years, it has come to mean different things to me. The poem captures the doggedness, the fury, but also the optimism of a generation who believed that some things were worth fighting for.

Lola Shoneyin has written three collections of poems: *So All the Time I was Sitting on an Egg* (1997), *Song of a Riverbird* (2002), and *For the Love of Flight* (2010). She is the founder of Ake Festival and author of *Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2013), a novel.

