

Hopelessness in Lenrie Peters' "In the Beginning"¹

By

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"In the beginning" is the first line of "45" one of the poems in *Satellites* by Lenrie Peters.³ This is a narrative poem that tells a story of the closing period of colonialism and the inaugural years of independence in Africa. The characters in it are ordinary people and political leaders with foreigners making fleeting but significant appearances. The poem takes the continent as its setting, plotting how betrayal gives way to betrayal and, ultimately, to nostalgic hope. A narrator, who is one of the ordinary people, tells this story that captures people's hopes during the anticolonial struggle, their euphoria at the achievement of independence and their hopelessness during the independent era.

The narrator uses the history of the continent just before and soon after independence in the 1960s to tell the story of betrayed hopes in ordinary people by political leaders, with whom they all as colonials were once united to struggle against exploitation and oppression. Exploiting the history, the poem captures events such as combatting colonialism, achieving independence, enduring the Cold War and founding the Organization of African Unity (OAU). In all this, hope springs eternal in the ordinary people who believe that the freedom and independence would usher in plenty and equality, unity at national and continental levels, and independence of territories still under foreign colonial rule—while colour and continental solidarity would cement the fulfilment of these hopes in the continent and its diaspora.

The story opens with great hopes with a galaxy of political leaders who symbolize collective anger at colonialism and, implicitly, personify people's hopes for the future engendered by the struggle for independence. Hailing from western, eastern and central regions of the continent, these leaders—Azikiwe, Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Nyerere, Kaunda—represent continent-wide anticolonial struggle. All this takes place "in the beginning" when people, full of hope, unite with leaders to defeat colonialism, as apparent in these are the opening lines of the poem:

In the beginning
one voice
one cry
one promise
out of the dark wilderness
One struggle
for paged history
Indivisible
in the clasped visor
of common purpose.
Rivers flamed with blood
echoed low hanging clouds
the yearning crowds
the rampant flow of tears. (80)

True, the "dark continent" stirs and wakes up from sleep with blessings of colonialists borrowing words Jesus Christ used during the Last Supper as he gave bread to his disciples, "Take and eat; this is my body" (Matthew 26:26)—making political independence appear as a parody of the Last Supper.

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³ Lenrie Peters, *Satellites: Poems*, London: Heinemann (African Writers Series), 1967.

Accordingly, the way the colonialists are portrayed as they let go of the colonies casts suspicion over their intentions quite early in the poem:

'Take and eat; this is my body.'

The dark continent
awoke from sleep
cocked up its tears
in the swelter of a dream
and heard the devil speak.

Take!

take and eat

Know yourselves—

Gods of the central East

the bone

in the white man's gullet,

assume the throne. (81)

Colonialists, to whom the words of Jesus Christ are attributed, are compared to his nemesis, the devil, who—as “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44)—by parodying the Last Supper turns its blessing upside down into a curse. Exploiting biblical terms and parodying the Last Supper, the narrator implies that independence was a poisoned chalice—like elements the devil would offer to his communicants to serve his wicked schemes.

All this was “in the beginning” when political leaders, whipping up passions in the ordinary people, castigate colonialism as they create glorious vistas and arouse noble hopes of an egalitarian, nonaligned and united continent free from and independent of alien control. The use as well as the repetition of the clause “we heard” below, however, distances the narrator from the political leaders, suggesting—because the narrator tells the story in hindsight—that political leaders were indeed political manipulators when they condemned capitalists, rejected Western imperialism and Eastern communism and extolled socialism:

We heard the politicians

Saviours of the nation

of the race.

We saw

bitterness of our hearts

in their eyes

their days of sorrow

years of prison.

We heard

voices hoarse with shouting,

saw faces rubbed in the mud

attempting to smile. (81)

We heard

'Down with Imperialists'

'Down with Capitalists'

about dogmas of the East

corruption from the West.

We heard

about Socialism

the equal sharing of goods

freedom, the new Africa

the African personality
then the word
which crazed and touched the sky
Unity.
Unity after the freedom was the cry.
Unity across the offal of Imperialism.
Unity after Uhuru. (82)

All this was "in the beginning" before anticolonial leaders stake their claim on their eventual leadership of independent states using the struggle against colonialism as their credentials. Yet, the manner in which the narrator tells the story of these events makes readers wary of the sincerity from departing colonial rulers and of arriving political leaders. In this respect, by repeatedly using "we believed" to underscore that that was then and to suggest that now they have discovered politicians' lunatic hoaxes, the narrator lets the cat out of the bag by revealing how political leaders had double-crossed ordinary people who had looked up to them for and naively entrusted them with their deliverance:

As innocents we believed
with love in our hearts
 we believed
with trust of zealous love
 we believed
Did not think then
the ravings of hot heads
or the promises of foxes (82-83).

In all this, "in the beginning" is more than an opening line, however: it introduces biblical allusions in the poem. Indeed, the story of creation in Genesis and the story of redemption in John open with this key expression. On the whole, the narrator uses such biblical allusions for ironic effect as evident in two instances. One, the words Jesus Christ used during the Last Supper were a blessing; in the poem they are curse departing colonizers utter to camouflage with ironically words borrowed the Holy Scriptures evil neo-colonial intrigues and schemes they would visit on independent nations. Two, in the course of the poem, a political leader—playing God—admonishes a peer who has ambitions to lead the OAU to first put his "house in order" (87)—the ominous message Isaiah gave Hezekiah from God that Hezekiah would die and, therefore, must set his "house in order" (Isaiah 38:1). In the context of the poem, the vainglorious political leader who uses the words on his peer has failed—like all fellow political leaders in the poem—to put his house in order.

The people coupled with the narrator were "in the beginning" in darkness over all these ironies of looming treachery from their political leaders. Consequently, fired with optimism, the believing innocents worked hard, each playing one's part to avenge "the slavery of the past" (83) to actualize hopes the struggle for independence wrought. The reality of independence began to disabuse them of the optimism, however: the cost of living went up, taxes rose, the per capita income fell, people continued to die, independent countries resorted to hand-outs beggars, and class cleavages became accentuated with the ordinary people becoming impoverished while political leaders were doing very well for themselves.

Yet, the people clung to hopes that their children will enjoy amenities that leaders with whom the people were one "in the beginning" enjoy. That they have been treated shabbily however begins to sink in when political leaders throw into detention ordinary people who question why promises of economic independence and expectations of unity between leaders and people are stillborn. Looking at "the beginning" from the perspective of the present, the narrator reveals trajectories political treachery has taken and how threadbare people's hopes have become as treachery becomes evident. Now, pessimism is palpable in this tragic dramatic interlude and this fatalistic internal rumination that demonstrate the

chasm between the people and the leaders—as slowly truth dawns, treachery becomes evident, but despite its progressively wearing thin hope springs eternal:

But excuse me, sir;
We're free.
Why do we have to beg?
Industrial development
Dams, factories, the lot—
change the face of the Continent.
'I see
But my children—
beg pardon Sir,
will they go to school?'
Later!
'Will they have food to eat
and clothes to wear?'
Later I tell you!
'Beg pardon Sir;
a house like yours?'
Put this man in jail. (84)

They promised once
led us to believe
it was our only hope.
We starved as
then home-made slaves again
we'd starve a little more
for Unity. (85)

In the face of this betrayal, however, the whole truth is yet to fully dawn on, to borrow a graphic phrase from Franz Fanon, "the wretched of the earth."⁴ Now, uncomfortable because of betraying independence hopes, political leaders employ diversionary tactics: They dream up an organization to foster continent-wide unity—the OAU. This grand organization does not work because—wait for it—because it is not designed to work but to keep foreigners guessing what schemes the continent they have humiliated and ravished has up its sleeve:

I'll tell you what!
We'll have an OAU
to keep them guessing
don't for a moment
think it'll work (86).

No wonder: the OAU cannot handle two emergent crises in the continent. It fails in the Congo, and the outsiders have the last laugh. It threatens liberation but cowers shame-faced, and "like some nocturnal creature/retired at noon-day" (89) in the face of the unilateral declaration of independence in Rhodesia by a handful of white settlers. In the meantime, the Chinese—under the pretext they are the continent's elder sibling—come into the continent and with them yellow imperialism in the wake of both the white imperialism of the colonial era and the black imperialism of the independence period.

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, London: Penguin, 1990.

In the course of all this, the political leaders—now powerful and wealthy—have ready answers to questions the increasingly disillusioned, restive ordinary people pose: The colonial masters cleaned out the coffers before they left, they are quick to blame the erstwhile rulers when the people ask, "Where are the schools, hospitals, jobs/the sharing of goods"? (84) One must be raving mad, they further pontificate, to advocate for the solidarity of black people on the continent and in the diaspora that the people had expected to be cultivated once independence was won. On these scores, the narrator captures political leaders' treacherous duplicity in their careless, cynical, rambling and selfish grandstanding as they shamelessly rationalize their actions and inactions by using the wiles learnt from of their onetime colonial masters:

As for unity
go have your head examined
What do you want it for?

We have enough to eat and drink
Have just negotiated aid
those people over there across the Continent
Have problems hot as hell—
Do you want to tote the
black man's burden?
Besides we have little in common
(except black skins) with them.
Let each look to himself—
that's what the white man taught us,
 be content.

We earned our Independence
Let South Africa do the same.
The brotherhood of race,
Of Man's myth
Only your social status counts. (84-85)

Now, the narrator is coming to the end of the story of internal betrayal and external treachery executed by political leaders that the people identified and wept with "in the beginning." Now, instead of expectations, betrayal and woe rule the roost, crying out for retribution:

There is hunger and sickness
 in the land
I say there is a cauldron burning
 on that plain
red earth, red vengeance
 all aflame
 must it be born in vain? (89)

The now "raped, plundered, decimated" narrator will not avenge the ills political leaders have visited on the people: hope and prayer temper the thirst for the cry for retribution, as the narrator calls for unity to salvage the shell independence has become as the poem comes to an end:

Save it; save the wreck
your lives a pledge
Unity come back
embrace it

hold it
as in the beginning
In the end
One voice
One people
out of the dark struggle. (90)

These concluding words resonate with—indeed take us back to, the opening words—of the poem. The resonance creates cohesion, with the introduction and the conclusion linked by the repetition of especially “in the beginning” which the narrator appears to have borrowed from the Bible which the poem on the whole uses the Bible to parody the experience of independence in Africa. Yet, while the biblical “in the beginning” in Genesis and John ushers in two great themes: creation and redemption, here in the poem, independence is neither creative nor redemptive. Instead, the poem exposes neo-colonial intrigues by the political leaders, as well as by imperialist outsiders, and captures the resigned mood of a disenchanted people, who do not know where to turn except to do the impossible—roll back the clock to “in the beginning.”

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