



BAMBOO LEAVES

A Collection of Poems

by

S. Ngwele

DEDICATION

My parents
To whom this anthology
is respectfully dedicated.

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A Collection of Poems
by
S. Ngwele

Commonwealth Youth Programme,
South Pacific Regional Centre
and the South Pacific Creative Arts Society
1989

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INTRODUCTION

The publication of their works is a problem faced by Pacific Island writers, especially young writers whose works are little heard of. This problem is due to the lack of financial support and secondly, it appears that publication bodies are only interested in supporting works of already well-known writers.

Recognising this situation, the Commonwealth Youth Programme, South Pacific Regional Centre, has formulated broad objectives to encourage and support young people in the process of national development including those activities involving the Arts. The C.Y.P. and South Pacific Creative Arts Society joint publication of this Poetry Book written by one of the South Pacific's young writers is a demonstration of such support. The South Pacific Creative Arts Society has almost a twenty year history of support to young Pacific Island writers, poets, playwrights and artists.

S. Ngwele is one of Vanuatu's upcoming writers. This is his first attempt in putting a collection together and we hope that this publication will encourage him as well as others to write even more.

On behalf of the Publishers, I am indeed honoured to introduce such a fine volume of writing. S. Ngwele's skillful organisation of words says a lot in so little space, cutting the mind with sober thoughts. His poems will certainly speak and sing to you as you turn each page.

H.G. Alatoa
Regional Director, C.Y.P.

“....poetry is a kind of unconscious autobiography. You later stop and wonder why you are drawn to write about certain things. Certain characters. Problems. Situations. Landscapes. Certain long-forgotten events. But most of all you wonder why you ever wanted to write in the first place.”

— Robert Penn Warren
America’s first Poet Laureate

FOREWORD

The title BAMBOO LEAVES is drawn from a parable. It is the opening poem in this book and appears as a “terca rima”. Unlike other leaves, bamboo leaves when they fall and get blown off by the wind must nevertheless return to fall by their roots. The last poem repeats that idea. In between these two poems, the experience is vast and varied and this is where you come in. You are allowed to be blown about in the wind of ideas and experiences that may be yours as well. For me, much of that life occurred between 1980 and 1986 whilst I was in the largest Melanesian city of Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea.

Attempts have been made to arrange some of these lines into formal poetry patterns but the rest were written from the “inside-out”. The poems have been deliberately kept short for those who subscribe to short verses. While some of the poems took minutes to write, others took years to complete.

BAMBOO LEAVES I trust will entertain the casual reader, educate the serious and encourage the budding writer.

S. Ngwele
Port Vila, VANUATU (S.W.P.)
October, 1989.

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BAMBOO LEAVES

In the wind, they whisper
And sing soft tunes
To the lonely reaper

O, how gentle are those tunes,
Wafting in, in finesse like Beethoven
Or those great Negro tunes.

In the wind, they've fallen :
Floating over the valleys
O, how free they're floatin'

Like morning butterflies
At midday
Over red lilies.

And remember : one day
Those bamboo leaves shall return and fall
Silently

By the same green tree, that bore them all.

BEFORE DAWN

The whole village lies asleep
in the stillness of the night
the moon high above the trees
casting shadows in the breeze
silence falls all over the land
all the villagers, silent in their dreams.

But in that old thatch hut
a haggard soul sits quite awake
silhouetted against the warm fire
she sits baking, baking
taro and tuna for her son
who will travel far at
dawn.

WHERE ARE THE PEOPLE?

I followed that old path
Which old feet have trod
Soon it disappeared

Into tall, tall grasses
The houses once stood
Now the creeping vines
Plant new roots
The village once alive
Now a cold virgin forest
Gardened with shrubs
And wild flowers.

The place now quiet
Deserted and lonely:
Where are the people?

WHAT FAMINE?

The old gamali has fallen;
The grasses have now covered the by-ways,
The plantations are left desolate,
and the gardens abandoned.

The youths have gone to towns,
after the bright lights.
The elders left alone —
squabble over land, women and pigs.

What evil befalls us?
What famine?

RUSTIC NO MORE

My people!

I scream

The rustic life:

carving, hunting, gardening —

are now yours alone.

I will only be a part-timer

Or, perhaps more so an observer.

For I am a rustic no more:

money madness, bureaucratic pretences

and exclusive

invitations to some bourgeois soirees

are now eating deep into my bones.

My people!

I scream

No-one hears.

My people!

I scream

No-one cares.

WHALE AND SARDINE

A whale is a huge fish,
Trailing deep seas where numberless
fishermen cast their nets.

A sardine is only a tiny fish,
hiding among rocks on the shore
where no fisherman dare cast his net.

But to catch a whale or a sardine
matters not here : they are both fishes,
alike in nature and indifferent in taste.

So let me cast my net
where there are no other nets.

BOTANY OF THE BANYAN

Even the non-botanist knows
that it springs forth from mossy grounds:
be it from a house-beam, from a tiny shrub
or from a tree-trunk.

As the days wear on,
the out-growth buds : first into a seedling;
then into a delicate and skinny weakling,
with random leaves here and there.

But allow more days to fall
and this alien will choke
its own source of existence,
(to non-existence).

Often times,
to become the biggest and tallest
tree in the vicinity.

EQUALITY IN INEQUALITY

The high ranking chief slaughters
a thousand tusked boars
and rises in social status.

The simple villager works his land
goes to church and remains
titleless.

Both fight the wind and rain
equally.

WALKING-STICK : A SESTINA

Brown palms are lined with vast experience
Grey hair tells of the dying past
Words come forth with ripening wisdom
From the man who uses the walking-stick
And follows the same pathway, which you
Must proudly take at old-age.

That pathway is called "Old-age"
In the Melanesian experience;
The aged is highly respected, you
See: once his early days are past
He may carry a carved walking-stick
To symbolise his status and wisdom.

The aged is honoured for his wisdom
That is the golden prize for "Old-age".
When he uses the walking-stick,
He's recognised as a man of experience.
The historic account of his past
May even amaze you.

Listen to him : he may advise you
So thirst for his ripening wisdom
And the gaindumu he learnt in the past —
For these are often told at old-age:
To educate or to support an experience
Gained before the status of the
walking-stick.

A gaindumu is like a walking-stick
It teaches, and it supports you
Through life's slides of experiences.
A gaindumu is a word of wisdom:
Hidden power of the aged
And those who know well of the past.

Within an old man's past
Lives a gaindumu : life's walking-stick
That is the key to Old-age.
A gaindumu may enlighten you
If you humbly seek this wisdom
To enrich your own experiences.

So respect an old-man's past experience,
Search for life's walking-stick : gaindumu
wisdom.
For at old-age, it will be a hidden power in
you.

TALE OF TWO BIRDS

To' banga : Bird of the Banyan

If we should trace this bird
We must strain our eyes
Beyond the lower ties of the canopy
Skyhigh, on banyan branches
Where it would feed, sleep and play
Only with its own kind.

Lakalaka : King Bird

Our eyes could not be mistaken:
From the tall banyans, we could see them
From the lower tiers, we could find them
Even from the grasses, they would feed
O these little birds,
They mean much more.

SNAKE-EATING PIG

The snake-eating pig
at the sight of a harmless snake,
would intimidate and attack
the snake fearlessly.

The snake would struggle
and protest in pain,
but the pig would strangle
its prey to its merciless death.

Whilst eating it,
the pig is scared to death —
Lest the snake bites from within.

GOSSIPERS

They would sit all day long
under the mango tree —
fabricate rumours, gossip wildly
and laugh loudly

to attract by-passers.

At the close of the day
their minds are filled with
the latest fictions from
the day's gossips

tomorrow, these fictions will turn to "facts".

A VILLAGER MARVELS: AN AFTER-THOUGHT

The old villager stares
and shakes his head in marvel
at a colourful science journal,

wonders:

the tuturani is a god,
he invents items that can
fly
walk
talk.

after-thought:

**he has also invented atoms that
can explode
and we die.**

WORKERS : TWO PROFILES

The well-educated public servant
draws up self-reliance policies, signs
official letters and answers the phone
in his air-conditioned office.

The un-educated subsistence grower
slashes and burns the bushes,
plants his crops,
sweats under the sun.

Before sun-set both men retire:

The public servant goes to the
Supermarket,
buys imported food.

The subsistence grower,
he reaps his harvest.

THIS TREE I PLANTED : PROGRESS

Ten years ago
I planted this tree
From a mere seed.

Today, ten years later
That same tree has grown taller,
Even taller than me.

Showing off its fruits,
It looks down upon me
And asks mockingly:

**What fruit have you borne
in all these years?**

AID NEWS

Under the blazing mid-day sun
Villagers till the fields with
primitive tools.

Later, in a simple thatch-hut
The transistor radio blares with
the evening news

Of the latest treaty
signed today
for more aid.

STILL MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

For ages we've drawn graphs
and learnt prescriptions from
some classical or neoclassical

theories,

now hidden in thick textbooks
and taught only by professors
to middle-class kids.

Despite this, I read everyday
in newspapers of economic crisis,
hunger

and strife.

Did anyone bother at all to
end their beginnings?

WAYS OF ANCESTRAL HEROES

My folks
used to tell me
of ancestral heroes

Who man-handled wild boars;
moved volcanic rocks with bare hands,
shouldered trees whole to the homestead
and fist-fight banyan roots till they snap.

Nowadays
We see no more heroes
amongst you, they tell me:

**You only buy guns
and breed biting dogs.**

CHAIN-SMOKER

He lights his cigarette
Puffs intensively
Coughs violently

and lights another cigarette

ROUTINE OF THE WRETCHED

In the morning;
while the rich feasts on his table
mother would gather her children
around the earth-fire,
distribute the day's meal:

fried flour, lemon-leaf tea
and crumbs of meat/bones
from last night's remains.

Late into the night;
while the rich dines and dances
mother's black pot still sits on the fire
the children after weeping, retire
with empty bowels.

That is the day's routine:
unplanned, wasted and wretched.

O, how wretched are these children —
Living in poverty and misery
while the rich dances on their land.

HOUSES

In that yard, owners
of the white house drive
two cars, dine with wine
and watch T.V. after dinner.

Outside, dwellers
of the tin-shack cook
on the firewood, wash
in a rusty drum

and share their fears.

SPEAK! O, WOMAN

Speak! O woman

Why does it have to be this way?
Like today, searching for firewood
Outside tall metal buildings?

Speak! O, woman

Was this not your land
and of your ancestors
who roamed this land

a million years ago?

COUNTRY ROAD

The road down the country
was once earth-trodden
Ten years ago, strange men came
Ploughed down the trees and
Dug the earth with rough machines.
Today that same road lies
Breathless, beneath the hard tar-mac
In the name of development for
Exclusive politicians and
Executive businessmen:

Who'd wave to the natives
As they whiz down the lane
In their luxurious limousines.

Country Road! Were you not betrayed?

MANDATE

Having assembled before their
elders

Speeches were delivered
Orders were given,
and to each man and woman
a mandate was given:

protect the land
bang the hammer
replace the master,
master-mind.

Sing
feast
and rule

even from freedom tombs.

OF LOVE

The embracing arms of a mother
The tears for a lost father
The kiss of a departing husband

Do they not speak of love?

LOU LOVONG : MEMOIRS OF MANUS

Tan' Kuok

Sacred thermal soil
Where once, cannibals steamcooked
Their enemies' flesh.

Ke l

Long dugout canoes
Powered by forty-horse power
Cutting through green seas.

Suksuk

Karamut drums, beat
Aloud as frenzied legs shout:
"loo e hehe!"

REWRITING HISTORY

Archeologists dig the ruins for prehistory,
discover that even our history
does not begin with sailors and settlers
(Let's pardon the educationists).

Colonial days : Our history discontinued.

Now, our historians must rewrite that:

Place Irian Barat on the chart
Maubere; Niugini, Solomoni,
Vanuatu, Viti, Kanaky —

ALL, as one chain of archipelago.

DANCING SHADOWS

A few islands away
From here, shadows
Dance in agony.

Voodoo-like : spilling
blood, war-cries under
modern machine guns

until the last man dies.

Yet these lone shadows
persist to dance
in great agony.

At sunset; they will
become human bones,
grow flesh

and dance freely with us.

TROPICAL NIGHT

The moon is calm tonight,

There,
somewhere along the end of this water
the sea dances in unbroken silences.

Here,
the air is purified with the scent
of freshly dyed mats.

There,
out on the dancing grounds ebony feet
dance to the non-stop bolo chants.

Here,
in a simple thatch house
the bride sleeps at ease.

Tomorrow, the wedding day.

LISTEN FURTHER

From sun-up to sun-down and from sun-
down to sun-up;
Machines peep, buzz and blast aloud,
Leaving no mercy for the ears:
 O, how I wish I was deaf
 at times.

Yet amidst this noisy planet, take time to listen:
Listen to the soft tunes of the paramana strangers;
 Singing, strumming and plucking strings
 of ukaleles and acoustic guitars.

Listen further to an old woman's echoing bolo chants;
Listen to the gaindumu of the sesea,
Listen to the dukuni of the tusi-tala,
Listen, even to the murmurs of the grassroots —
 for these are not uttered without good cause.

MY BROTHER'S MARRIAGE

On that day —
chattels were distributed
lengthy speeches were made
and red mats were displayed
before a thousand eyes.

Will mine follow suit
Or, will it be just

a private affair?

WHY, MY CHILD?

I, who have rocked you to sleep
I, who have held you in mine arms
I, who have breast-fed you

You have despised and destroyed
To utter ruins
You have hanged me by the neck
To my death

Now, mine eyes are closed to the dust
And while you bury me
You torture me still

Why, my dearest child?

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

I have brought you gifts
to your doorsteps
I have fulfilled all
Your wishes
Even wrote you letters
From distant places

Now, you don't reply
Why?

MANARO

A thousand years ago,
You blew up:
spurted molten rocks
and hot lava down
the ravines,
Slept permanently.

Today,
You blow up
in the minds of men:
Willie blows up over his sister
and beats her boy friend,
Sleeps behind bars.

HARD WOODS

Our children and our wives
like their flowers
for their beauty, or perhaps
for their fragrance.

Our men and our elders
like their trunks
for building, or perhaps
for burning.

But I for their uncommon values:
their barks, their inner cores
and their roots. For I will tell —

continuity from their barks,
count years from their cores
and carve spears from their roots.

THREE BOWS TO KUNG-FU

Under dim street-lights
Thugs choose broken bottles
and iron-bars to intimidate
innocent by-passers

and call that heroic.

Under his Sifu
Lee took up Kung-Fu,
fights bare fists:

springs like a tiger
punches like an arrow
walks like a cat

and calls that art.

Difference : Kung-Fu
has both heroes and artists.

CITY LIGHTS

City lights
offer you office jobs
and attractive wages.

City lights
offer you fast cars
and fine clothes.

City lights
offer you a lot of fun
and a lot of friends.

City lights
make you go broke
and crazy

sometimes

TREES

Green trees planted by secluded waterfalls
Remind us of Eden's sacred beauty
In the moon-lit nights, they whisper to us
Amidst silence.

Ancient trees are said to have borne children
The Malauhi Tree, the Rara Tree, etc...
Did they have sacred wombs that gave us
Existence?

Ageing trees interest the archeologist; perhaps
For their age, but I for their knowledge
Secretly revealing to us
Through their roots, barks and leaves.

Could God : therefore, speak to us
Through trees?

WOMAN

Woman —

Mat-weaver, clothing naked household.

Woman —

Child-raiser, determinant of future leaders.

Woman —

Soil-tiller, mother of subsistence economy.

Woman —

Human-bridge, uniting divided and broken tribes.

Woman —

Cream of God's Creation.

PERIPHERAL POLITICIANS

The banyan has become their House
They would convene and talk
for hours

agendaless

They would speculate, make
premature conclusions
or misinterpret

ideas and concepts

bureaucratic policies may
dominate the day's session
despite ill-information

at sun-down
they all adjourn
to drink kava

and return to their
thatch houses.

OUR COMMON WEAKNESSES

Absolute power in corrupt hands,
Over-paid and under-worked,
In-house fightings, privilege-abuse.

Globe trotting on public funds,
Perennial borrowings, big spendings
Riotous living.

Widespread malpractice,
Nepotism, mass corruption
And graceful ignorance of

'what really goes on'.

UNMASKING SUBTLE THINGS

Early profiteers tricked island chiefs
To give away vast tracts of ancestral lands
For a few bottles of whiskey.

Today, foreign businessmen and diplomats
Toast champagne instead
With local colleagues.

Then within the next few days;
We would hear of fatal accidents,
Wife-beatings and divorces —

But these are only salient things.

**Brain damage,
The more subtle phenomenon.**

ISLAND PORTRAITS : FOUR HAIKU

I. Sun-Islands

In the moon's eyes
Sun-Islands stretch in stillness
The water, splashing.

II. La Cascade

Down in the ravines
The rocks are the audience
Of the lone cascade.

III. Tropical Tree

In the cool forest hall
She leaps skyward, towering
Casuarina.

IV. Colours

Orchids, ferns and moss
Are my inner eyes colour
Of the Universe.

INVITATIONS

Down town
People talk parties
And invitations:

If you're invited to a
Birthday Party
You go with a card.

If you're invited to a
Wedding
You go with a present.

If you're invited to an
Important Government function
You go with your spouse.

If you're invited to a
Business luncheon
You go alone.

Back in the village
We do not know invitations
For there is no
Elimination/selection/limitation.

Our invitation is our reputation
And every man our guest.

VOICES FROM THE VILLAGE

I.

From the ageing trees above
The call of the lonely dove
Knocks upon an unmarked grave.

II.

From hidden mud-ponds below
The chorus from the frog orchestra
Raises the hopes of the rain-maker.

III.

From the ancestral dancing grounds beyond
The bouncing beats of the wooden gong
Celebrate the raising of a flag.

IV.

From the creek-bed beneath the woods
The soothing sound of the bamboo flute
Heals a broken heart.

RENAISSANCE

The village will rise again at dawn
Mighty men will speak of goodness
That once cuddled this land.

Heroes will tell the story
Not of revenge, but of glory
Won at dusk.

Gardeners will reap their harvest
And bring them to the village
For the feast.

Fishermen will brag about their
Catch, to the song-maker
To compose a new song.

Warriors will dance to the gongbeats
To welcome the dawn of
Renaissance.

CAPTIVE

In this hectic city life
You are
Caught in the rat-race,
Captive.

Come with me to the village —
Where we lay on woven mats
And dream in serenity.

Come with me to the village —
Where we greet strangers
With intimacy and humanity.

Come with me to the village —
Where I, a villager
Will carve your

name in my heart.

HOME

Home —
The mecca of the soul and
The nostalgic paradise of every man.

Home —
Where the village stands
Secluded and secured by its natives.

Home —
The entrepot of our broken routes and
The barter place of our ideologies.

Home —
The perfect place to be
After long years of exile.

NOTES

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gamali — traditional meeting house

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tuturani — white man

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paramana strangers — popular Papua
New Guinean String Band

bolo — traditional chants

gaindumu — parables, illustrative object
lessons

sesea — elders, mature persons

dukuni — legends

tusi tala — Samoan word for story-teller

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sifu — Kung-Fu instructor



ABOUT THE POET

Born on Ambae, the island which the American writer, James A. Michener, dubbed as "Bali Hai" in his famous book, **Tales of the South Pacific**.

S. Ngwele began formal education on Ambae and later attended Malapoa College in Port Vila where he won a Government scholarship to study at the University of Papua New Guinea.

At the University, S. Ngwele was inspired by Papua New Guinean writers to write seriously. The writer also became involved with the Ondobondo Poetry Recital Club at the University. His poems have appeared widely in regional literary journals including **Mana, Ondobondo, Poetry Australia, Westerly** and so forth. As well as organising poetry readings, the author has co-ordinated a creative writing workshop held at the USP Centre in Port Vila during Christmas of 1982. In September 1988, he also participated in the 18th Waigani Seminar held in Port Moresby on 'the state of the Arts in the Pacific'.

Besides interest in the Arts, the writer also holds a Bachelor of Laws and a Bachelor of Economics respectively from UPNG and is now working with a private consultancy firm in Vanuatu.

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