

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 8 No. 2, August 2024

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Garuba, Harry, *Animist Chants and Memorials*. Kraft Books, 2017, 84 pages. ISBN: 9789789184286/ 978918428.

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Reading Garuba's *Animist Chants and Memorials*

Irish modernist poet William Butler Yeats once said, "A work of art is the social act of a solitary man", by which he meant the lived experience of social strata in the poet's mind. These words finely reflect Harry Garuba's social concerns in his poetry collections *Shadow and Dream* and *Animist Chants and Memorials*, which latter marks the shifting position towards a historical landscape while the former is deeply engaged in post-independence crises emerged out of longstanding states of failure and disillusionment.

Animist Chants and Memorials is divided into two parts. The first section, entitled "Past-Unto-Present," engages the question of language and body, seeking the linguistic transference in a corporal sense. Personas are preoccupied with indeterminacy inflicted with "words," "rhymes," "lines," "verses," and "songs".

The second part, called "Chants, Spells and Memorials," delves into the historical embodiment of language that sustained the important paradox of critique - animistic and colonial.

Garuba's poetry in many ways is inspired by African and European modernists as it is manifested in either his dedications or through a deep engagement with poetry. Amongst them are Derek Walcott, T. S. Elliot, Niyi Osundare, W. H. Auden, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Amiri Baraka, and Countee Cullen.

Garuba's poetry is focalized through remembrances and memories, which issues a strong invocation to the material body of culture, that of the animist world of African people; where nature and body cannot split or alienate from each other. That starts off "naming day," a poem deeply infiltrates into nature to evoke the spirit of the day. Let's look at the following lines precipitated with natural images:

"This is the name the wind and the water will whisper to you
The name by which the trees will know you,
the name that will come with the night when the moon visits you
the rousing name that will stir your dreams with a star" (From "Naming day")

How could you "recall but not remember," that only be "chants" so as to awaken "your secret name, holy and sacred." In calling for names, Garuba reminds us of the genesis of animist cosmology hidden in the spirits.

Language can dictate forms and compositions in a way to expel the spirits of life, as a child persona, while boarded up in a new dwelling, has been separated from the language he embodied once. And he cries:

"I miss the coarse and colorful words I can no longer use
The power and potency of the curse uttered with a gob of spittle
Let loose in the language of the body and the spirit" (From "Leaving home at 10")
The poem suggests that the basics of education, which the persona calls "a new home," are to suppress the mother tongue, which will later create a state of longing and even melancholy. As soon as the persona steps into school, they move away from the meaningful world of nature and spirits, and alienation penetrates their core with this foreign language. Even the curse expressed in saliva has its own inherent power.

The persona seeks the essence of the language previously introduced to their body because it is almost impossible to inject a foreign language into the body. Yet, the native language is literally body language.

The first line of "Poetry don fin' me" reads "a poem is a pain," and that pain can only be felt in the form of language embedded in the body. It captures and confines the soul in the form of alienation that defies all challenges, because "words that move through caesuras into a sentence, into songs like birds on the wing, refusing to perch" (20).

"I found words unfettered" seems to be a person's way of trading with poetry. Since the wording disciplines poetic self, the poet is tempted to resort to the past dwelling before this insidious encounter. They then lament:

"Can we ever again shred the drapery of the word
and return to the fullness of the spell and chant?" (from *In the house of the tongue*)

For language cannot free itself from imagination, which haunts the persona's mind to manipulate reality. It invokes memories of childhood and the language

encapsulates the body, leaving indelible marks forever. It seems the only way to exit the conscription of the language of empire is to invoke the distant past that has left no memories.

Animist Chants and Memorials draws on the idea of animist and memorial in Africa. As well known, "animist realism," coined by Garuba himself to recapture the literary production in Africa, which has mostly been exposed to anthropological exoticism. In his latest interview*, Garuba attributed the lack of "object-memorials" in African culture to the animistic culture as well, while taking the whole African oral culture as a means of memorials in Africa.

Garuba provides a delicate description to account for the fundamental urge for the book, saying:

"Unlike a sculpture that can age with time and fall apart, a memorialization in poetry often does not age and fall apart in the same way that a physical object memorial can age. What that poem does is to create a memorial that does not exist as an object that can decay."

Most of the voices in poems invite us to reflect on the linguistic transformation, which is a way of knowing. Yes, "a poem is pain" because it contains images of harshness, brutality. Poetry seems to be the only way to transmit but at the same time to get rid of the unwanted, such as when the persona makes a wish: "I wish I could write this poem in verses that do not age." I think This has something to do with experience and its relationship with memorialization.

Garuba truly creates a new concept of memorial as a living entity based on linguistic composition through the literary tradition.

How is this memorializing act embedded in African subjectivities?

I think Garuba's latest collection directly speaks to this sort of memorializing act and likely mourns the disappearance of such memorials throughout the lines.

The poems in this collection oscillate between social accountability and self-questioning; indeed, this turbulence reflects Garuba's handling of the past, that of memory. As a poet of 'recuperative memory', Garuba's speakers take refuge in the cage of memory. In this regard, memorials and chants echo the past songs through morning rituals. The poems alert us immediately to the slaves' bodies outlasting death under waters for centuries. The lines below suggest a question akin to the poet's memorial wish that often recurs in a passionate way:

"I wish

I could let the language of the chained roar
Let loose rivers of rage to cleanse this land

And build for you a memorial ageless as your love."

Because only language could bear witness to serve memory.

The poetic grammar is mending wounds of the past by reproducing African historicity and culturality against modernity in a linguistic context.

Here is a poem titled "Cryptic chants: a slave memorial," which is a pure and lyrical elegy for slavery. It begins with a questioning line, "meaning is all I crave tonight," which appears like a refrain. The bones of slaves are invoked and unearthed in many ways.

"Memory echoes through the night, slowly
Flowing through blood and marrow and bone
The ebb and flow of a trade in blood
Hidden in the depths of the sea, unmarked
...

When the night dies
And the day is reborn
Joy returns to the wings of the eagle

Will joy return again like sunrise to these bones?"

Persona hardly makes a wish but seeks a monument that does not age like poetry. Garuba paves the way for postcolonial poets and writers to re-imagine and rethink spaces carrying the core body of Africa. Only the remains speak out under waters. This very past keeps haunting the poet to say a word, to invoke the spirits of the buried, calling for those not buried properly, only to find a way of flourishing through chants and rituals.

"With a song and a sail, I seek the sea,
Where the bones of unburied dead lie
The waters in endless wake watching over them

That they may finally rest when the dirge
Washes over them and brings the centuries to rest

A song to bind open wounds, soothe festering souls,
Give meaning to the scars that mark the age of blight."

The strong wish of the persona is "the resurrection of love
In an ageless memorial for all the restless dead."

Animist Chants and Memorials is not just a poetry collection that evokes memories and images; its profound critique invites us to rethink Black Atlantic and postcolonial grammars as well.

Works cited:

Harry Garuba (2017). *Animist Chants and Memorials*, Kraft Books.

Harry Garuba (2023). *Shadow and Dream*, Langaa RPCIG.

*Ahmet Sait Akcay (2019), Interview with Harry Garuba on Modernist African Poetry and his latest collection *Animist Chants and Memorials*. This unpublished interview with the late Professor Harry Garuba was conducted in his office at the African Studies unit at the University of Cape Town three months before his unexpected death came over.

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ISSN 2575-6990.