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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/9465>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.9465

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2007

Number of pages: 113-118

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Benaouda Lebдай and Lenrie Peters, "Interview with Gambian writer Lenrie Peters", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 29.2 | 2007, Online since 08 January 2022, connection on 06 November 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/9465> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.9465>



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Interview with Gambian writer Lenrie Peters

Lenrie Peters, poet and novelist (b. 1932), was educated at the universities of Cambridge and London. A practising surgeon, he has been a journalist (African programs with the BBC), President of the board of directors of the National Library of The Gambia and Gambia College, and member of the jury for the Commonwealth Writers Prize competition. His first poems were published in 1964¹ and his first novel in 1965. *The Second Round* (London: Heinemann) is about a British-trained African physician, a victim of the 'massacre of the soul' wrought by Westernization, who returns to the capital city of his native land full of 'noble ideas about progress in Africa' but ends up taking a post in a remote bush hospital, thus immersing himself more deeply in the traditional experience. In 1967, Peters published *Satellites* (Heinemann), a collection of fifty-five poems where intimate emotion is combined with a deep meditation on human dignity and justice. Four years later, he published another collection of sixty-nine poems under the title of *Katchikali* (Heinemann), which is a sacred crocodile pool in Bakau, in the Greater Banjul Area. In 1981, he published his *Selected Poetry*. The new poems in the collection castigate the corrupt greed of tribalized leadership elites and balance nostalgia for a pastoral past with cautious assertions of hope for a future built on that past. He is generally regarded as one of the most intellectual poets of his generation. Ideas about politics², evolution, science, and music inspire his images in the form of debates. The interview took place in Banjul on 3 June 2005.

Benaouda Lebдай: *Dr Lenrie Peters, good afternoon. You were born in The Gambia in 1932 during the colonial period. We are at the beginning of the 21st century, and times have certainly changed since, so can you tell me what The Gambia of your childhood was like?*

Lenrie Peters: It was unlike what it is now. It was quiet round here, very quiet. There were not so many expatriates. Besides, the Gambians were staying in The Gambia. On the other hand and to tell you the truth, in terms of studies, the education I was given then was very good. Our Secondary School in Banjul was very pleasant indeed.

BL: *You use the expression 'pleasant'; apart from the memory of your childhood, Proust's 'madeleine' as we say, it was nevertheless colonial times ...*

LP: Indeed, I was a child! I used to enjoy the things around, my friends, nature, the sea, the little jobs I used to do to earn some pocket money which I used to spend with my friends of the time who were happy to be with me then! You know,

¹ Lenrie Peters, *Poems*, Ibadan: Mbari Publications, 1964.

² See Peters, "Quo Vadis Africa: No More Executive Presidents in Africa," *Africa News*, 7 May, 2001.

I ran a business at the age of fourteen, selling all sorts of products. For me then, there was no politics. On the other hand, to tell you the truth, I did not take school very seriously. I did not know what to make of the school. The whole experience was very exciting for me.

BL: *I know that after your studies at the Gambia Secondary School, you left for Sierra Leone in 1949: why Sierra Leone?*

LP: Science was not taught in The Gambia, so I went to Sierra Leone to the Prince of Wales school in Freetown. My father wanted me to study science and we had some family there, it was my parents' native home, so I went. I was independent very early.

BL: *The Gambia, Sierra Leone, two colonies, a real witness. What was life like in Freetown at that time?*

LP: My family comes from Freetown. I had a house for myself and an aunt cooked for me, so I was completely free, and so I just did not go to school for a whole term! My father was very, very angry. In the end I got by, I studied for two years there, walking three miles every day to reach the school. As my results were fairly good, I was sent to Cambridge. Coming from Africa, I spent one year at the Technical College to study Latin and Physics in order to do medicine. I was involved in opera singing too, can you believe it? But I had to give that up.

BL: *I know the Gambians were not particularly well off, so how did you manage? Did you have a grant from the British?*

LP: My father paid for everything. He worked very hard. It was a huge sacrifice for him. He wanted me and my sister to study. And you know, my sister Florence, today Florence Mahany, was the first Gambian girl to go to school! She was the first Gambian to become Doctor in History. My father was very attentive that we studied in order for us to succeed in life.

BL: *You have been known for a long time as 'the' Gambian poet in literary studies. What motivated you to write poetry, when you were seriously involved in studying medicine?*

LP: Well, you know my father was very keen on literature. He became deaf, and broke away from family gatherings. He read a lot then. He had all these books, and he used to read poetry in the evenings. I began to be attracted by poetry thanks to him. I started to write poetry myself then. I certainly had feelings to express too. Later, at the age of twelve, the British Council in Banjul organised a sort of literary competition for short story writing. I submitted a story and won. From then on, I was encouraged by my friends, so I started writing. When I was in Cambridge I met poets. Then, I sent some poems to a publisher in Nigeria, to

the Yoruba country, to Ulli Beier who was encouraging African writing, encouraging people like Wole Soyinka, to express themselves, to write. He published me, he published my poems. I was happy!

BL: *What inspired you at the time?*

LP: I started looking at Africa. The theme and the perceptions of the Africans in the world were controlled by colonial people. I was inspired and hurt by the question of slavery which touched me particularly, as my family was involved directly. In fact I was writing for myself. In the process of writing I was not thinking of being published. I showed some of the poems to people, to friends who pushed me to send them to a publisher.

BL: *I understand you became aware of politics, aware of the social and political situation around you.*

LP: Yes. As I told you, my father was deaf but he was involved in local politics, in municipal politics. He was also the editor of *The Gambia Echo*, a Gambian newspaper from the 1930's to the 60's. Often in the evenings I helped him edit articles, so I read things which started to interest me; that is how things began in terms of politics. I was reading about African issues, it became an opening; my father's newspaper was a good newspaper on that matter.

BL: *Let's come back to literature. Later, you became more attracted to the novel, so you wrote The Second Avenue. Why did you move from poetry to prose? Was it a need to tell a story, a fiction, without having to focus on rhymes, on precise and meticulous style and images?*

LP: In fact, I continued to write poetry along with this project of writing a trilogy. You see I wanted to portray positive things about Africa. I also wanted to write an experimental novel, whether I succeeded or not, that is another story. I published the first, I wrote the second which has never been published. Besides, my brother was involved in cinema, so I have written a script of the novel for him, but he left for the United States and we lost contact.

BL: *Why didn't you finish your project, publishing the trilogy?*

LP: It was purely a question of time. Because I was in England at the time, I was working as a surgeon in different hospitals, outside London, and if you add to that the actual life itself, you have the explanation...

BL: *I would like to link our interview with today's writing. I know that you have just finished writing a new novel - you have just sent it to Heinemann in London. So, did you have an urge to write after so many years of silence?*

LP: It is curious, it is something within you, inside, deep down, and all of a sudden you want to put it in writing. The silence was also due to the fact that I am a surgeon here in Banjul, and it is a very demanding profession, I can assure you - there is so much to do here. My friends kept telling me that I should be writing. So there was also an outside pressure on me, and I felt I had to do it before I exit. I wanted to write something before leaving forever.

BL: *Is it a sort of testimony through the form of a novel? What is the theme of this forthcoming novel? It will be published soon, I was told.*

LP: Well, I hope so. The title is *The Way Through*. What kind of novel is it? My main protagonist tries to find a solution for Africa's problems.

BL: *In terms of fiction, how did you go about it? I mean, what did you do to avoid writing a political programme?*

LP: We do not have to wait for a collective action - that is the message I wish to convey through a story. My main protagonist shows that everybody has the right and the possibility to take action. For example, in The Gambia - but it is also the case for the whole of Africa - I have never seen a demonstration. You know, sometimes it is necessary!

BL: In some countries like Algeria they do demonstrate. But let's go back to a question which interests me particularly, the question of publishing in Africa. It seems to be a problem. I'd like to hear about your experience and point of view.

LP: It is definitely a tremendous problem. I am gratified that in The Gambia, writers such as Nana Grey Johnson are being published. I am convinced that we must organise ourselves to publish in Africa, but there are many difficulties, which we should overcome.

BL: *What are the reasons behind these difficulties?*

LP: You see, we have an oral tradition anchored in Africa. People here are used to talking. The process of writing is foreign to us. Young people are not familiar with foreign languages and there is a great lack of bookshops. In The Gambia, we have only one bookshop but a fairly good one, the Timbuktu. Today, I must say, and I reckon that the publishing house 'African Writers Series' helped our literature to stay alive, to be known in the world. That was a great help and opportunity. But I understand that now in Europe it is getting difficult to be published. Money, marketing, profit, all these things are involved.

BL: *Can you say a few words about Gambian literature, which is not well known, one must admit.*

LP: First, there is a Gambian literature and a lively one too. It is published in The Gambia, that is why it is not known outside The Gambia. When you are not published in London or Paris you are not distributed. Nevertheless, I think that a literature becomes known when it is in the curriculum. Besides, The Gambia is so small, it is inside Senegal. So there is a problem of language in this part of the world. I think that we must accept for example the role of language across borders.

BL: *Since you mention the language question, can you tell me if Gambian literature is similar or different from Senegalese literature, as one is written in French and the other in English?*

LP: Different but also similar, in a way. But there are not enough translations between the two literatures. For example, I have not been translated in French! Senegal does not know that I exist! If you do not speak French, people there think that you are not educated. It is strange in conferences in Dakar for example. We have to break this problem between Senegal and The Gambia.

BL: *Certainly! English is the official language in The Gambia, is this choice due to the fact that there is a language problem in The Gambia?*

LP: No, I don't think so. Very few people speak English in The Gambia, good English, I mean. Of course, the official language is English, in the administration, in the schools etc.... but the problem exists and what people often do is that they mix English with other African languages, which is very strange. Today, they speak neither in English nor in the African language.

BL: *So English has been chosen as the official language of The Gambia, because there are many other local languages?*

LP: If it was for me to do, I would change the whole government system on the matter. Something must be done. As in Senegal where French is the official language, English is the official language in The Gambia.

BL: *What are the other languages?*

LP: There are twelve languages in The Gambia, twelve languages available after the departure of the British. So which one to choose, indeed? You see, it's not easy.

BL: *Today questions are being raised about the reception of the texts in Africa. Do you know who reads your books today?*

LP: First my books are out of print. But there are some of them which may circulate. I was told that in some countries, when they think about Lenrie Peters, they think that I am dead, that I died a long time ago.

BL: *But you are known in The Gambia from what I have gathered since my arrival in Banjul. You are very much respected as a surgeon and as a man of letters.*

LP: What is sure is that I have given my life to the Gambian people. I am a surgeon, I ran a restaurant, I used to have a farm. So indeed people know me, some have read my poems.

BL: *Today the United States, Europe, China and India are somewhat the heart of the world, but Africa is only mentioned when there is war, when we speak about hunger, AIDS...*

LP: I know, it is sad, so what I say is to ask for 'African Unity' as a piece of history. In Africa we shall come together as a power one day. Africa will have its turn. Civilisations rise and fall. It is true that today we do not have technicians, we do not have the know-how, we are given sometimes money but we do not have the capacities. The Americans do not realise that they will have their end too. As I said civilisations come and go. Africa will have its turn. But when we become a Union, we have to discuss the Nuclear question, as in Africa, there is uranium in some countries! This problem has to be solved peacefully, indeed peacefully!

BL: *What will the future of Africa be then - how do you see it?*

LP: I am optimistic. The problems will be solved but it will not happen in my time. We should have groupings; we should develop a real unity.

BL: *My last question will be about literature, our main concern. How do you see its role in African society?*

LP: Its role is important, more than ever in this commercial world we live in today. Literature will help us live in a dynamic way, if not we must prepare to expire. I believe that literature helps to see things differently. You see many people said that computers will kill literature but one has to admit that it is booming. Listen Dr Lebdaï, as you know, there is nothing like a good book!

*Benaouda LEBDAI
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