

Nick Makoha's *Kingdom of Gravity* – An Unsettling Journey to Post-colonial Uganda

At an Arvon writer's retreat several years ago, Kwame Dawes asked Nick Makoha, 'What type of poet do you want to be; one that obscures, or one that reveals?' Makoha's ambitious debut collection announces a poet of the latter disposition. *Kingdom of Gravity* is a revelatory work, which explores the history of post-colonial Uganda in an unsentimental, unsettling but, ultimately, hopeful way.

Makoha's influences are various – Derek Walcott, Pablo Neruda, Joseph Conrad and T.S. Eliot are all quoted within the book. These voices have informed Makoha's poetics and given him the breadth of scope required to create a mode of poetry equal to the task of elucidating the atrocities of Idi Amin's military dictatorship and the brutal civil war that deposed him. *Kingdom of Gravity* probes the literal landscape of Uganda as well as the metaphorical landscape of the human mind. The collection, however, is original precisely because it refuses to provide a single, authoritative narrative. Instead, the reader is presented with a multiplicity of voices; there are poems written in the voice(s) of Idi Amin, anonymous soldiers, an entire river village. In 'Legion', the speaker is Amin's mother, who laments: 'One memory's ignorance hides another; / it bends a man into something else – an Anholi / a soldier, a monster'.

Makoha moves, without warning, between the public and the private, the communal and the individual, the external and the internal; these are lyric poems that are epic in their reach. In many of the poems, the identity of the speaker is unclear. At other times, it is the ordinary Ugandan, horrified and bereft by the violence and wreckage the country has undergone. However, the collection goes far beyond journalistic reportage. While Makoha may use unadorned language to describe some of the more brutal scenes (in order to better hold the reader's gaze where we might be tempted to look away), these are poems of 'shadow and sound', language and imagery that bristle with violence and quiver with an insistent, haunting music. There is a surreal quality to the work, an elision between fact and fiction, between the felt and the perceived, and Makoha's handling (compression and expansion) of time is truly masterful:

The wounded have forgotten their words.
At this hour the earth slows down. [...]

That's not a man in pain, it's his body wrestling with the earth.
A bullet to the lung has dislodged his soul to the dirt. [...]

From the clays of the body, blood now blossoms.
The ruins of our land have become your museums.

(from 'A View of Kidepo Valley')

Interwoven among poems of Uganda's post-colonial history are more autobiographical pieces, which recount Makoha's memories of fleeing Uganda as a young boy as well as memories of leaving Kenya and Saudi Arabia, countries he has also resided in. Several poems explore the itinerant, nomadic identity of the speaker. One of the most successful of these is 'Prayers for Exiled Poets' in which the speaker

attempts to reconcile his identity as a Ugandan-born, London-based poet who has lived in four countries by depicting himself as a modern-day Atlas, carrying ‘the world on my back.’ He feels the burden of trying to ‘hold up the walls’ of Uganda, his birth country and the country of his forebears, but his ‘Ugandan passports are a quiet place of ruin’ and his only tangible connection to the country now is ‘my father’s name.’ Towards the end of the poem, he declares that the country he currently lives in (England) has released him from ‘bondage between earth and sky.’ The final line offers a characteristically well-placed rhyme: ‘You have given me back my eyes’ – a fitting statement from a poet whose work abounds with stunning visual imagery.

Kingdom of Gravity is preoccupied with memory: that which we remember collectively and individually, and that which we forget. It cautions that even the things we try to consign to the past (the devastation caused by colonialism and its aftermath) continue to influence the present. However, the collection is also testament to the redemptive powers of language and memory, demonstrating how stories of the past can be used as tools to help us grapple through the dark in order to reach light.