

## **Tongo Eisen-Martin and Bonface Nyamweya Interview of Jun 3, 2023, 8am-9am, at Dagoreti Corner Nairobi-Kenya**

On a flyover bridge next to Lexo Petrol Station at Dagoreti Corner, the 2018 American Book Award winner and the current Californian poet laureate, Tongo Eisen-Martin and Bonface Nyamweya who is a young Kenyan poet, novelist, law student, and philosophy student; are having a dialogue on African unity. Tongo has just spent around two weeks in Kenya where he has visited St Paul University, Cheche Bookshop, Goethe Institute, and Nuria Bookshop. In all these places, he has performed spoken word and as well watched local poets perform. He has thus interacted with young students who are passionate about poetry and especially about moving the current African to the trajectory that is admirable.

*Q. Good morning Tongo. For the few days you've been in Kenya, what can you say about the Kenyan people in relation to their passion for literature and their culture generally?*

**Ans.** Good morning bro. I would say the Kenyan people have a consciousness that is wonderfully prime for the necessary internationalism and diasporic unity that is required for us to survive and also to gain real intellectual liberation. Really inspiring in their electric minds. I found some people with a dedication and proficiency and craft that I will put before any people. So it has been a trip, a second home for a wandering vagabond like me.

*Q. You've interacted with a couple of authors, poets, here in Kenya and even with those from South Sudan and you have maybe read a few of their lines or even watched them present like the other day we were at Nuria Bookshop, St Paul University Cheche Book Shop and Goethe Institute; Collectively, what can you define poetry as presented from their works and your experience with them?*

**Ans.** Poetry as I have experienced it here is like a cosmic subtitle for the collective biography or collective interpretation of current events. Also poetry is a kind of a landmark or a kind of a recreation of all of our sorrows in a kind of like in a molecule of meaning that is just as powerful as if you were to try to take all the entirety of struggle. It is almost like an access point for someone to really make themselves vulnerable to the entirety of what we are resisting. Poetry is also as it is you know the human spirit is invisible. Regardless of atrocity, and tragedy, there is almost an aggregate of us that cannot be turned into a ghost. That will not be made into a ghost. We will not

be made into ghosts. We will be human beings and we will vibrate consciousness accordingly. Right. This is just a little bit of what poetry is as I have experienced it here. And also, just like some kind of wizardry, craft is a kind of the mathematics of language that was blast up here has been really stimulating.

*Q. You gave me one of your books: Blood on the Fog, that I have actually read. I could feel the spirit of a revolutionary inside. I would feel the spirit fighting for freedom. Fighting for human rights. Fighting for equality and many other themes. Now, why did you write Blood on the Fog?*

**Ans.** Blood on the Fog, for me, was just a necessary task of transmutation of the experience of oppressed people from diaspora, in the United States. A transmutation both of the kind of the voices from the gallows, the voices from the fiery squares, and also the overtures of liberation that would not allow the story to end in just absolute repression and defeat. So the book was really coming close to the bleeding guts of the experience in Babylon. It was also a strategy of minimising my own tendency to quest for personal territory to deserve my individual adventure into the musician ship of more selflessly constructive voice. I was doing the best I could to deserve the treaties of ego.

*Q. Frantz Fanon, in his book Toward the African Revolution, mentions that racism keeps on changing its manifestations. It disguises itself in many ways because the oppressors keep on realising that their racist ways have been realised by the oppressed. For the few days you have been in Kenya, what are some of the disguised ways of racism as a disguised phenomenon have you spotted?*

**Ans.** What I have seen generally in East Africa is a vicious neo-colonialism. It has been interesting to me how similar the conditions are, how similar the kind of the ideological suffering is, to African people to how the diaspora face the same. I see the same structures of exploitation, inequality, resources, and really like a whole lot of people suffering just to keep European powers, including the White power structures in the United States, to keep it wealthy and automatically superior. It is almost like the same task, the same revolutionary task, is required here. The same cultural projects would do well just as they would in the West where they are less executed. Disentangling our consciousness from the European value systems, from these imperialist values systems, because we have everything we need here to transform our societies but because of the aggression of the imperialist powers, economic aggressions, medical aggressions, cultural aggressions,

military aggressions, kind of a mass suffering is the temperature of the day. It is interesting being here has actually reinforced my analysis that I subscribe to, what in Jamaica we call domestic colonies where black people live, we have the same colonial relationships regardless that we are not from the same country. We therefore negotiate the same social, economic matrix. The same ideological matrix, and suffer the same kind of crisis of consciousness. But it is also a place of optimism. I have been made hopeful here because I do feel hopeful because we do have great ingredients all over here. Ingredients for resistance. All it requires is you know, for some people to figure out the right equation to free our collective imagination. To start to organise ourselves for liberation.

*Q. What are some of those oppressive ideologies that you have mentioned that we may be embracing unknowingly that are a manifestation of oppression and deprivation of our own culture and what are the examples of the ingredients of hope and optimism that you just spoke about?*

**Ans.** For me, it is vicious diabolism. There is over-valuation of money. Of currency. The only way to over-value money is to devalue your own humanity and the humanity of your people. This is all across the diaspora, this addiction of money as the centre of self-worth. The acceptance of the imperialist power. Because ultimately, we should be dictating the terms of our economic reality. We should be dictating the terms of our productive reality. But this acceptance of an economic system imposed by imperialist powers is a great psychosocial affliction. We have seen this happen both here and in the diaspora. When you devalue humanity you devalue your cultural values hence become a shadow identity, like the Kenyan economy is a shadow economy of the West.

*Q. What are the forms of optimism witnessed?*

**Ans.** The optimism is wonderful counterparts like yourself, who have committed me to liberation, committed me to the mass imagination, committed me to craft. That, you find all over the place. I don't know who sends us but apparently they keep sending us and we will never stop to return the world to humanism. To return the world to a humanism that has never existed before. The more the world is made to suffer this ridiculous condition the more we spontaneously wake up. The more we spontaneously say enough is enough. Enough of, you know, just random conversations with random people and they had a good diagnosis of what is going on and a good diagnosis of what needs to happen. What was just missing was the ingredient of praxis. Of putting into practise to motion, what you know to be true. Organizing yourselves appropriately to your analysis of

what is going on. And you find this all over the world. Not necessarily that people just have no clue, or are just completely convinced that we should not have a human existence. It is just the aggregate psychological experience, is inhibiting and a lack of confidence in our collective capacity is also keeping people away from joining a revolution process. It is something we should work on. We should establish trust for each other, possibly a trust that has never existed for a long time that people imagine the world should exit like this, the sum of the paranoiac competitions.

*Q. I've been just pondering on what you just mentioned about Africans to own their values. Recently the first lady of America visited Kenya and two days later, a law was passed by the judiciary to allow registration of LGBTQ. Some Kenyans believe that the first lady influenced that. Uganda's case too, where America has given sanctions to Uganda because of passing the anti-LGBTQ Act. In your wise opinion, what can you say about America purporting to own the moral yardstick of other countries?*

**Ans.** That's a tricky question because on one hand I think the LGBTQ people should have equal rights, equal participation, equal social extraversion. I don't think we should assume their sexuality is legislated. One way or the other, political repression of one group is political repression of all. You cannot claim freedom for one group and exclude another. As soon as you create an alien group, we all become alienated. I don't think the LGBTQ people should be relegated to be outside the society. Policy-wise, what America does is it absorbs the marginalised groups just like it tries to absorb the Blacks into their liberation policies. They will have LGBTQ imperialists. There is no move that the USA makes out of benevolence to social evolution. But when you take the USA out of the equation, people are going to get over with it.

*Q. You said the other day that you are not an African-American rather an African living in America. Elaborate on this.*

**Ans.** It is geographically incorrect to call one part of the western hemisphere American when that is not the original name of that place. It is stolen land; it is stolen with mass murder. So really no one is an American. There is no such thing as American in the first place. And then, secondly, as far as black people relate, born in the United States, our entire existence has not been one of citizenship or any kind of equal participation. There was literacy a less than animal existence forced upon us through insane acts of violence that the modern imagination could not possibly handle. The torture, the murder, to enforce that kind of slavery and exploitation, that's not the

birth of a citizen. And later, a new slave system was put in. At no point have we been integrated. No one wants to be integrated even. No evidence that I have the same existence; medical, economic, social, political, military, educational, and also spiritual, psychic and cultural existence because a few cyclones plop up like black celebrities are supposed to mean that all of these mass exploitation do not exist. At least every 28 hours the police kill someone black. How am I part of that country? How can I be part of that when my cousin was killed a year and half ago by the police? Guess what they gave as compensation. Three hundred and sixty days in jail and 5000 dollars fine to court and 8000 dollars for his mother. That's the value of a black life. And I don't know how the system is in Kenya but there is a big difference in America between jail and prison. Jail is a walk in the park. It is nowhere near the conditions of a prison. They call it a walk house. So I am supposed to identify with that system? That 5000 USD is mine? Am I supposed to condone that? Why would I want to be even part of that? Why would I be part of such a system that would allow a white man kill a black man and be jailed for just 360 days? How am I supposed to take pride in that? You want me to identify with mass murder? With imperialism? I am an African in diaspora.

*Q. Sorry for the loss of your cousin. Now that you are an African in diaspora and I am aware that your book Blood on the Fog is being translated to Kiswahili; suppose today you master Kiswahili, would you be willing or interested to write in Kiswahili then have them translated to English?*

**Ans.** Absolutely. As soon as I master Kiswahili, I will. I will start to write that way. Not all the time. There are so many idioms. Poetry is flip after flip of idioms. There are so many idioms I am conversant with in English. It will take time. It is more than communication. To get the musical potential of a language requires being submerged into the universe of that culture. Poetry is not just about playing with words but also playing with the psychic experiences. Interesting convergences of cultures. I will need a lot of people in diaspora to speak Kiswahili. That will be a shortcut to master it. Culture is taught through language itself. The rules of a language reveal the culture that caused it. This is not to say it will take me thousands of years to learn. The shapes of our consciousness do not change just because I am speaking English.

*Q. You have said that you will be happier to see many Americans speak Kiswahili...*

**Ans.** Americans brother?

*Q. Oh no, ok, sorry Africans in diaspora. As part of promoting Kiswahili speaking among these people, do you think it will be of benefit to have a Kiswahili Magazine for the Africans in diaspora even as an e-zine?*

**Ans.** Absolutely. We need much cultural collaboration where we read each other's works online. Getting resources together so that we can have exchanges. Getting guys there or here, reading each other, that is the crucial foundation for the unity we need.

*Q. What can you tell the Kenyan author revolutionary that will sustain them in their artistic and revolutionary life?*

**Ans.** Revolutionary unity is the only objective. Do not worry about demands or reforms of imperialists. There is only one demand for imperialists- go. Take the fingers off power. Preparing people for power, for unity. Commitment for love and care for each other. We need to keep each other safe even emotionally. Growing even spiritually. Revolution is not a sterile act. Be cultivating yourself as a human being. The only true tool a revolutionary has is the revolutionary itself. No one should just be reduced to a to-do list. Taking care of the whole human being. Stay curious, stay learning. Stay pushing yourself. No rest on some fit on craft. Keep your mind thinking about what you can do. All human process is not about accomplishments but how we enter a moment individually or collectively. Enjoy each other, enjoy each moment, enjoy liberation.

*Q. Wow. Wow. Thank you most kindly for visiting Kenya. All the dialogues have been quite enriching. God bless you.*

**Ans.** Much love and appreciation.