

REVIEWS

Tijan M. Sallah. *Before the New Earth: African Short Stories*.
Calcutta, India: Writers Workshop Publications, 1988.

The title of Tijan M. Sallah's excellent collection of short stories derives partly from Margaret Walker's poem "For My People":

Let a new Earth rise.
Let another world be born.
Let a bloody peace be written
In the sky.

The title indicates, however, that any new beginning is still far off. The rest of the title shows the firm setting of these stories—Africa, or more specifically, The Gambia, the home of the author. In his preface, the author states that his is a "country without an original voice" and that these stories are the "moral tales of a society attempting to find and redefine itself." With these lively and probing stories, The Gambia now has an original voice.

In addition to portraying complex strands in a "multiparty" country, Sallah has astutely woven the various parts around the central theme of a longed-for "New Earth." Unlike the goldsmith's despair in "The Fate of Timbuktu," these fragments do coalesce. The author explores his theme in various ways. In "The Arrest of Dumo," the title character, a charismatic "man of the the people," has been swallowed by the maw of authority, tortured, and perhaps killed. Skillfully, Sallah never introduces the prophet, focusing instead on the stunned reaction of followers. The strength of the story rests on the commitment of Dumo's followers even against the test of his arrest and disappearance. Despite official masks of indifference, the followers lead a public protest which finally subsides only like flame from an unquenched fire.

Other signs of moral corruption, public and private, appear in the stories. In "Innocent Terror," the perpetrator of a senseless killing goes free because of family wealth and pull. In another story, "Shit-Eaters," Africa's anguish under the callous exploitation of the major powers is depicted. Treating Africa as a "refuse-bin," the Germans send tainted milk from the fallout at Chernobyl as food-aid to The Gambia. Other types of fallout are even more insidious. Elders worry about their children "imitating every decadent star under the western sky. . .breakdancing into an aimless and non-selective future." Even the well-meaning tourist who has "heard about your country and its beautiful people. . .in the television series *Roots*," seeks to reduce

Gambian culture to stolen Nikon images on a roll of film, objectifying people who should be treated as subjects.

Sallah's stories sometimes diagnose the depth of Africa's wound and suffering from western powers, in the past and at present. In a remarkably sustained piece of satire aimed against British colonialism titled "Weaverdom," the author reaches one of the high points of the collection. The weavers are "legendary birds," speak an English accent and "do not care where they build their nests." The weavers are blind to any local greatness, seeing the grass as only material for their own nests, as they plant in foreign lands replicas of their own culture. Myopically, the weavers surround themselves with rituals of "self-worship and self-glory." The longer they stay, the more baleful is their presence on the indigenous culture. Even local birds unwittingly share in the celebration of "Vampire Day" (Empire Day) and proudly accept membership into the "Order of the Weaver Vampire" as "Obedient Servant of the Weaver Vampire."

Alongside these indictments of public corruption are scenes of private failure and the unnoticed efforts to endure. Like the parallel banks of the Gambia river, these two aspects are mutually reflected in the moving current uniting this collection. In one of the stories, when a father has an affair with his son's girlfriend, the son kills himself, but his sister resists suicidal temptations by recalling the sayings of her Gambian grandmother. In "The Call," Challo is told by the police to come immediately to the hospital, where his mother is dying. Challo must face not only news of his mother's death but the rote consolation of a Catholic nun and the brutal insensitivity of the surgeon. Only by drawing upon a previously unexpected inner strength does Challo persevere.

Quite realistically, Sallah shows that not all of the sufferers of the modern malaise in his stories maintain self-control. In several instances, feelings of outrage and despair surge in passages of powerful invective. One example appears in "The Arrest of Dumo," as the followers of Dumo, in impotent fury, long for that day

. . . when all priests wore their robes as priests. . . and all the pot-bellied, bribe-eating officials loosened their arrogant puffings like squeezed ballons, and when public entertainment was no longer reduced to the spectator-sport of eye-feeding on the supple contours of large buttocks-women. . . .

Despite dissatisfaction with status-quo and longing for a new day, many characters in *Before the New Earth* show that features of the new order are present already in the best of Gambian culture. Their is celebration of the worth in every self, even those who sorely try such celebration. This is the basis of one of the best portraits in the book, th

wonderful tribute, "Ebom Gaye." This character is incorrigible but endearing. A lover of the Qur'an, he loves food more. His mystical ecstasies are reserved for the delicacies of the plate, not the "mysteries of Allah." With short, sure strokes, Sallah makes this "chicken with the body of an elephant" unforgettable.

Perhaps my favorite piece in the collection is "The Unforgettable Choice." In this masterfully understated gem, Morr Demba, "son of the well-respected Njai Demba," leaves his ancestral village to go, as many others have, to Banjul, the capital city. The normally even temper of Morr Demba is disturbed at the outset by an ominous sign—a "wild black cat. . .with a partially devoured pigeon in its fierce teeth." Finding a cold welcome in the capital, Morr Demba searches unsuccessfully for even the most menial job. Passersby are locked into themselves, and a former neighbor is reduced to beggary. In the worst of times, one can go to the wharf and throw in one's measly hook. Sallah weaves the cat-omen beautifully into the conclusion of the story as Morr Demba, assisted by other poor fishermen, throws in his hook and catches a catfish. With money guaranteed for his large catch, Morr Demba looks at the fish, all "whiskers and funny face," until it dawns upon him that this is what the wild cat omened. "He rejoiced in silence." This simple but magnificent ending says much about the wisdom of Morr Demba and that of the author. To take a common theme—the eclipse rural culture by the all-consuming city—and create a pearl for reflection, this shows more than master in the author.

Before the New Earth is prose fiction rendered with poetic precision and, with his rich characters and engaging delivery, Sallah stands now as an African writer of abundant promise.

Samuel B. Garren