

Of Bonds and Commitment: In Memoriam Ama Ata Aidoo

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Aidoo has said quite often that she wrote poetry and won prizes for it before she began writing drama and prose, the two genres for which she is better known. She often recalled her teacher's snide comment, whenever she declared that her dream was to be a poet, that "poetry does not feed anyone." For her, however, while her other works portray fictional worlds, her poetry is "real" and personal, because she is willing to unabashedly treat her biography as source material for the themes and ideas explored in the work. Thus, her poems are not only insightful and startling in their craft, but also "painfully" honest. As she put it, poetry "is so painful it has a way of bringing out the inner layer of any writer" (Jane Bryce, "*Someone Talking To Sometime: A Dialogue Across Time and Space*" [in Anne V. Adams, ed., *Essays in Honour of Ama Ata Aidoo at 70*, Oxfordshire: Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2012], 305), and poems are "veritable tsunamis of woe" (Esi Sutherland-Addy, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Kati Torda Dagadu, eds., *Ghana: Where the Bead Speaks* [Accra: UNESCO, 2011]).

Yet while her poems plumb her interior life, they also articulate her negotiation with an outside and often complex historical, political, and aesthetic community. Practically every poem is dedicated to "family—close and extended," friends, and "peers too: academic, intellectual, and sundry other learned ones" ("An Interrogation of an Academic Kind"). Each poem is a "laying bare" of emotions and experiences generated by the exigencies of these relationships. But more than the baring, it is the abiding nature of such bonds that gives her poems their distinct flavor.

I have always found this quality intriguing, perhaps because it resonates with my own relationship with Aidoo as we worked together on various projects between 2008 and 2019, and thereafter maintained contact until her death in 2023. Our first encounter was at an event organized by Aidoo's Mbaasem Foundation in 2002, but at that time we barely spoke. More than five years passed before our next meeting, perhaps because I spent most of those intervening years abroad. In 2008, she had just started a "Writers Page"

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in one of the national newspapers in Ghana, *The Daily Graphic*, and needed an editor for it. Manu Herbstein had mentioned me as a possible candidate and put her in contact with me. I took up this task and edited the “Writers Page” for some years. As she would later put it, “serendipity brought us back together” the second time. She had laughed as she said this, adding, with a twinkle in her eye, “Isn’t that something?”

Late one April night in 2014, while working on the manuscript for Aidoo’s collection of poems, *After the Ceremonies* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017), I received an email from her. We had spent a considerable time discussing a format for presenting poems selected from her two earlier collections before she gave her approval, after which I had prepared and sent her a draft manuscript. Unknown to me, she had felt uneasy about the approach, but had been too “charmed” by the project to complain. Her email came with a quip that by raising the issue so late in the process she had thrown “not just a monkey wrench into the works, but a veritable boomerang,” and she apologized for doing so. After further discussion with Aidoo and Kwame Dawes, the series editor for the African Poetry Book Series, I revised the format. Other issues came up later, and eventually the manuscript stalled for more than two years. But Aidoo, not one to be overcome by the gnarliest issue, especially with so much at stake, initiated a resolution, and production of the book was completed.

One more example should suffice. Shortly after the release of *After the Ceremonies*, some colleagues and I had interviewed Aidoo for a research project on radio as a platform for Ghanaian literature. However, when she saw the transcript, she had misgivings about having the interview published. When I did not hear from her for some months, I decided to visit her and find out what was happening. One Saturday morning, I phoned her to let her know I was planning to visit her. She was none too happy about it. “Even an Ama Ata Aidoo has the right not to face the public if she so chooses, you know what I mean?” she chided me. As this conversation went on, she mentioned that she was not feeling well, whereupon I persuaded her to let me see her and find out how she was faring, and I immediately drove over. Hours later, and well into the late afternoon, I was still conversing with Aidoo in her room after a sumptuous meal of fufu. And need I say it: she allowed us to publish the interview transcript without making a single change! This is the Aidoo I have come to know: unafraid, unabashed, unflinching, yet endearing.

It is against this background that Vincent Odamtten’s observation that Aidoo’s poems in *Someone Talking to Sometime* and *An Angry Letter in January* invite us to forge abiding relationships makes much sense. According to Odamtten, her poetry is collectively calling us “to form new, stronger bonds, insisting that, despite the negativity of all we see around us, despite what her poetry often reveals, an organic relationship is possible between human beings” (Vincent Odamtten, “For Her Own (Works’) Quality: The Poetry of Ama Ata Aidoo” [in Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs, eds., *Fontomfrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theater and Film*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000], 216).

Certainly, organic relationships take a central place in Aidoo's poetry, as is evident in poems such as "A Birthday Gift," written for Micere Mugo's daughter Mumbi. In this poem, Aidoo presents an unusual gift to Mumbi: "a bowl of petals/ possibly coloured,/ dried and scented/ *artificially*" (my emphasis). Commenting on the poem during a private conversation I had with her in February 2014, Aidoo remarked that she had considered "fresh flowers too *organic*" (my emphasis), and that in giving this bowl of dried petals she had thought about "the idea that a gift should be useful" (personal conversation, Café Des Amis, Afrikiko, Accra, February 8, 2014). The bowl of petals is a gift given for its emotional value rather than for its material worth. Thus, it is the relationship, not the gift, that needs to be kept alive.

Some relationships portrayed in her poetry are less straightforward, but the bonds abide nevertheless. "Of Love and Commitment," one of the poems in her first poetry collection, *Someone Talking to Sometime*, captures Aidoo at her most passionate. Written for Omafumi Friday Onoge, a professor, Marxist scholar, and social anthropologist who was the poet's one-time true love, the poem expresses a sentimental longing for lost love. It creates a capacious private-public space that is shared by memories of political figures such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Kwame Nkrumah, who are recurring figures of revolution in Aidoo's work. These personalities help to set the mood for the upheavals that occur in the poem—turbulent emotions, violent rainstorms, a painful breakup. For a woman such as Aidoo, "doing/ things I had never done before...things I always knew I should never do" is not out of character; therefore, these lines at the beginning of the poem should come as little surprise to familiar readers. However, the "unthinkable" things that the love-struck speaker does in this "Dido and Aeneas" affair take us through the most tender emotions manifested in a keen devotion to, and adoration of one who is "larger than life."

Theirs is a bond fortified by a common political consciousness roused by the pan-Africanist vision as articulated by Kwame Nkrumah and the American Civil Rights Movement, among others. Therefore, the poem is as much about the strong chemistry in a union of subversive souls as it is about love found and lost, as we watch the couple pack and part ways. Aidoo explained to me that she "rejected his offer of love because it was put opaquely" (personal conversation, Café Des Amis, Afrikiko, Accra, February 8, 2014). Not surprisingly, this falling out does not sever their relationship; in fact, the night of their parting lingered so long that:

we wrote a poem a short story three long plays a novel finished our formal studies saw the kids through school solved other personal problems frustrated neo-colonial scholarship, and made the revolution.

Their expansive love is deflated by their separation, but not defeated, and it will receive a boost when it matters the most. Through the long night, the

cords of love do not weaken, and the sound of storms only strengthens her commitment to him and draws her closer:

I hear the thunder
I see the lightning
Is my love's window open?
Is my love's window ajar?
Perhaps the rain gets into his room?
Perhaps the wind blows out his clothes?
Leave the rest of my hair unplaited, sister.
Leave the threads hanging loose.
I must hurry to my love's room.
I must hurry to shut his window.
I must hurry to my true love's room,
before the rain gets in, sister,
before the rain gets in.

I imagine Aidoo reading this piece and saying to me with her charming smile and that sparkle in her eye: "Isn't that something?"

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