

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

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This book's initial impetus sprung from a convocation of African and Africanist writers and scholars organized during the first week of December, 2006, by the Nordic Africa Institute in collaboration with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in Uppsala, Sweden. Tagged "Creative Writers' Workshop on War and Peace in Africa," the conference sought to provide a space for creative writers to foreground their participation in the discourse of war and peace.

Even before the conference ended, the organizers and participants recognized that the anthology of perspectives and experiences that were being generated deserved wider dispersal and dissemination. While conflict is often central in literature, it is somewhat rare that writers who have been touched by war – or by the unease that predates or spawns it – are asked to gather together to meditate on that experience and how it informs their art or scholarship.

The Uppsala workshop over, we were charged with editing its harvest for publication as a book. In that process, we were able to glean patterns, continuities as well as discontinuities in the variety of papers and stories. In the end, we decided to arrange the papers into two broad pods, the one encapsulating personal reflections and anecdotes, the other containing more scholarly offerings.

In carrying out our task, we soon realized that, whilst the Uppsala writers' forum yielded extraordinary insights, a book that was based only on the conference would not achieve the thematic aspirations and catholicity of appeal we felt the subject deserved, and demanded. This judgment led to a decision to call for contributions from a wider field, but retaining the focus on the modes of representation of conflict. The call proved a sagacious decision; we received submissions from, among others, a medical doctor detailing his work in Darfur, Sudan, one of the world's festering conflict sites, a Ugandan writer whose images of the horrors of war are tinged with stubborn nostalgic vistas of a beatific childhood, an artist from Zimbabwe who tells the pain of separation from the homeland through vivid drawings and paintings, and a scholar who gives a gripping insider's account of studying philosophy in a Jesuit

college as confusion, chaos and gunshots reign in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). There are also some conversations with writers telling stories of war, struggle and love. This book then is an entwined album, layering the papers and stories we shared over three days in Uppsala with the narratives of writers who deploy a variety of idioms to vivify their experience of the relationship between creative work, conflict and war in Africa.

If wars begin in the hearts and minds of men as they use language and other forms of human communication (and miscommunication) to create conflict, where else to begin in the diagnosis and healing than with the poets, story-tellers, singers, artists, painters, dramatists and essayists who know how to paint, in words, images and movement, the colours and smells of the scars left behind after every conflict.

That was, essentially, the exploratory journey of the Uppsala convocation, the seed that germinated into this book. It was, in many ways, a celebration of the power of words, but in others, an expression of the artist's capacity to doubt so many things about the fragility of art in the midst of conflict where bullets don't flower anymore.

For those of us who were privileged to join the conversation, and undoubtedly for those who listened in, the workshop more than lived up to its ambition to "give voice to the stories, songs, images and messages of creative writers, artists and critics, and bring African literature through the serene scenic beauty of Uppsala in winter to the Nordic world."

Cyril Obi, who served as the conference's central moving spirit, had envisioned it as a "forum [that] would contribute towards the dialogue between critical constituencies, open up new vistas and opportunities for understanding the creative spirit and celebration of life that underpins the dreams, tears and joys, the resilience, survival and triumphs of African peoples in the face of daunting everyday and global challenges." He wanted the participating African writers to underscore their "unique contributions...to the struggles for social justice, peace and development."

Part of the workshop's uniqueness and cache lay in its breaking of new conceptual grounds. African writers are frequently at the centre of the continent's crises and wars, often as bearers of scars – being primary and deliberately targeted victims – but also as bearers of witness. Sadly, they are all-too-often shut off from forums where the meaning and consequences of conflicts are discussed.

True, some African writers make the tragic choice of suborning their witness, even lending their talents to the powers-that-be out to

dehumanize and debase their fellows. However, the vast majority of the continent's writers—and here we include poets, novelists, dramatists, memoirists and journalists—have served, and serve—in the words of the conference organizers—“as the voices of the voiceless, holding up the mirror to reflect the true face of self and society...”

Ironically, African writers are hardly invited to make interjections or register their interventions at the plethora of conferences that are organized each year around the theme of their continent's bazaar of woes, conflicts and wars. It is as if the organizers of these conferences wish to consign the writers to minding their purely “literary” business. This stance is both misconceived and informed by a grave misreading of the historical data. The idea of pure art, an art uninfected or uninflected by the surrounds of political upheavals and pervasive social misery, is a myth. Art is shaped by, and shapes, all facets of experience. Each writer's aesthetic outlook is shot through by her or his ethics.

African writers, like writers elsewhere, respond to the stimuli, provocations and challenges of their specific political and economic realities. Their art seeks to reflect as well as transform their people's immediate and historical experience. They vivify, as the organizers of the workshop in Uppsala recognized, Africa's “beauty, scars, oppression, inequities and hard-earned victories.” By the very nature of their vocation, writers commune with the people. Their stories, poems, and recollections touch others, and leave them open to be touched in return.

Art is often engaged with the task of reinforcing memories. African creative writers discharge this burden “in song, prose, poetry, drama, pictures and paintings,” wrote the Uppsala organizers. In doing so, they risk “arrest, detention and torture, at the very worst, death, or life in exile.” Even when the artist is not subjected to exile, detention, torture or death, art remains a powerful and potent tool. It is a transformative instrument, a veritable vehicle for engaging (again to quote the conference organizers) “the struggle for survival, identity, equity, dignity and freedom. It is also about the celebration of life in peace and without fear.”

Several of the participants at the Uppsala Workshop embodied the varied drama of the writers' direct involvement in conflict. Dennis Brutus, the South African poet whose back bears the scar of an apartheid bullet, lent a measure of revolutionary gravitas and hard-earned moral capital to the workshop. When Brutus spoke or read his poems, his voice, though slightly enfeebled by age, still rang out with stunning range and power. Chenjerai Hove, his spirits intrepid despite the travails of

loneliness, was the workshop's raconteur-in-chief. He told his stories, and that of other fighters against repression, with zest and verve, aware that memory is the exile's ultimate weapon and comfort.

Other absent "spirits" haunted the workshop. As we shared our stories and insights, we had the sense that other African writers, intellectuals and revolutionaries, some of them dead, needed acknowledgment. Such martyrs as Amilcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, Steve Biko and Christopher Okigbo have a claim on our attention whenever we discuss the writer's role in Africa. These writers and intellectuals had laboured in the African vineyard, and they had made the supreme sacrifice. We also had for company and encouragement the examples of resilience and fibrous struggle provided by the likes of Nelson Mandela, Wole Soyinka, Lewis Nkosi, E'skia Mphahlele, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi wa Thion'go, Jack Mapanje, and Emmanuel Dongala – writers who have paid dearly for championing noble causes.

What emerged from the Uppsala Workshop was recognition of the importance of inviting writers and literary scholars, African as well as non-African, to weigh in on the predicament of conflict and wars in Africa. Each speaker at the workshop touched on the complex confluence of forces, domestic as well as global, that produces and sustains conflicts in Africa.

Writers mine conflicts at all levels for some of their most psychologically rich, dramatically arresting, and emotionally complex creations. By their very nature, conflicts and wars can lend tension and gravity to a writer's outlook. But a writer is not so fascinated by conflict that she or he fantasizes about consecrating it as the norm. A writer ultimately looks beyond the anxiety and unease of the moment and towards some vision of humane enlargement, to borrow a phrase from Wole Soyinka. The writer's search is not for the stabilization of conflict but for some form of resolution, a healing of the breach.

A writer cannot be too sentimentally invested in conflict—for conflicts also constitute a hazard for the writer. Conflicts prey, often decisively, on a writer's imaginative work. This may well provide a psychological explanation for why writers are drawn to the exploration of the character, meaning and impact of conflicts. Conflicts frequently ravage the writer's spirits, sometimes to the point of compelling the writer's delicate sensibility into shocked silence. Just as frequently, conflicts displace the writer, cast her or him into physical or spiritual exile, or even dislocate that sense of centeredness that is essential to the creative enterprise.

The African writer faces no more deadening challenge than the savage unsettlement that is a by-product of war and repression. Many a speaker at the workshop underscored this insight. True, the African writer is far from unique in this respect; all around the world, writers are besieged to one degree or another. Even so, the huge feast of wars and political conflicts in Africa translates into a plague for the continent's poets, novelists, dramatists, journalists—and indeed the broad spectrum of conscientious intellectuals.

The Uppsala Workshop provided participants with an opportunity to bring their unique light to the vexed question of the paradoxical relationship between art and conflict. Some gave highly personal and anecdotal account of their engagement with the hydra-headed monster of conflict. Others offered analytical interventions based on examination of African writers' texts dealing with the subject of conflicts and strategies for resolution.

"If only the politicians who declare wars could read poetry, novels, listen to the songs of the sorrows and pain of war," one participant was heard to say.

Those of us who were in Uppsala, and those who were not there but have now contributed to this book from different addresses, are beginning a conversation that is of the utmost significance and pertinence in a world filled with possibilities for recreation. Taken together, the contributions collected in this book amount to a rich harvest of perspectives and witnesses, and an invaluable, if not unique, contribution to the literature on African conflicts and their resolution.