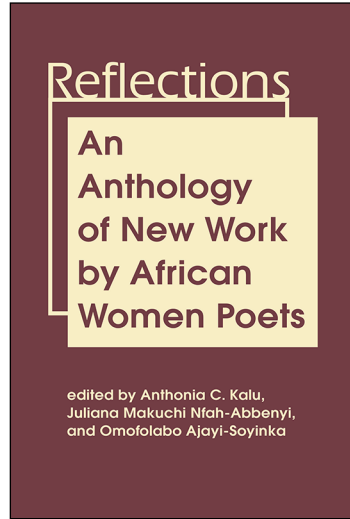


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**Reflections:
An Anthology of New Work
by African Women Poets**

edited by
**Anthonia C. Kalu,
Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi,
and Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka**

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Introduction

*Anthonia C. Kalu,
Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi,
and Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka*

Although a number of African women writers have made their presence felt in prose fiction and drama, the voices of women poets are relatively in short supply on the contemporary African literary scene. This anthology of previously unpublished poems by African women is a tribute to their enduring creativity and an acknowledgment of their individual and collective efforts to enrich African literature. Their poems reflect the diversity of African women's experiences, observations, and thinking about a wide range of issues on the continent and globally—love, identity, family, politics, sexuality, motherhood, hunger, hope, war, peace, and more. The poets' new perspectives propel readers to a contemporary Africa and beyond popular stereotypes of African womanhood. The subjects addressed in this collection are accessible and of broad interest.

A brief examination of these poems confirms Africa's violent social and political transitions as questions of individual and national identity are challenged daily. The poems showcase the nature and pervasiveness of the current cultures of violence while revealing the extent to which Africa and Africans are struggling to maintain normality. This view of normality does not ignore precolonial violence or suffering; rather, it highlights indigenous social norms that existed before European incursions in Africa.

African poetry, one of the continent's most fully developed

verbal art traditions (there are poems for every occasion and for every age), features a variety of forms and styles arising from the varied nature of life and experience on the continent. Thus, one cannot speak of a representative African poetic tradition. However, although there are great variations in poetic form, style, and theme, it is possible to recognize shared features in poems from various parts of the continent. These features arise from an unstated but commonly known core of African principles and experiences. Most of the traditions that characterize the poetic styles are transmitted by women who keep both content and form current by passing on knowledge and practices to subsequent generations.

Praise poems, like many other types, vary in focus, style, and delivery from group to group. Often recited, these poems speak of ordinary individuals, warriors, family and friends, and even about cattle and other possessions. Contemporary African women poets also use praise poetry to explore political, historical, and social life, as well as women's status in the family, society, and the nation. Some works acknowledge the trials of being wives, mothers, and sisters. Susan Kiguli's "Guilty," for example, portrays the African woman as an enduring and loving mother. Other contemporary praise poets celebrate African women's physical beauty and their self-determined leadership roles in the continent's history. Lydia E. Epangué's "Mamazon," an accolade to the physical and symbolic beauty of African womanhood, concludes:

And when she finally hands over that baton,
 Mamazon will soar like a star to watch over me.
 And it is not a gravestone I shall place over her head.
 It shall be a Crown.

Toyin Adewale-Gabriel, in "Sister Cry," asserts the bonds of African women leaders across generations and issues a strident call for rethinking decades of the "herstory" of successful Nigerian women leaders. In addition to incorporating the Western feminist concept of sisterhood into the thinking of educated contemporary African women, Adewale-Gabriel also appropriates traditional praise poetry's exhortative role in times of war and calls attention

to African women's leadership in local and national arenas. Summoning African women to action, "Sister Cry" begins:

We are women of the corn rows plaits,
 Wrapper rooted, song strong, waists fastened with
 determined cloth.
 We are herstory, our stories sit in our wombs.

These contemporary praise poets have found ways to advance this traditional poetic form while engaging in discussions about African women's efforts to assert their rights and to defend their ability to be active as local and national leaders without neglecting their responsibilities as mothers and teachers.

African children are introduced to poetry through lullabies, chants, and songs that are embedded in folktales to encourage retention of content and meaning. Some children's chants and songs are used to settle minor disputes and to accompany various events, including rites of passage. As children age, praise poems are introduced to enable and propel individual identity and identification within the group. Several poems in this collection are used in this manner as the poets continue efforts to rebuild, revise, and maintain childhood memories about Africa's paths to independence, including the dilemma of maintaining African identities in the long postindependence battle over the use of African and European languages. Some of the poems retain rhythms and cadences of traditional forms and styles; others speak across growing social and political divides, remembering, bridging, and healing differences while looking for ways to tell new stories that reveal new truths to today's children. Still others tell stories that are old and unforgettable, but unspeakable: stories of incest, rape, and female genital surgeries and the use of children as soldiers and prostitutes. Those growing up in Africa today have much to fear, as seen in Oghomwen Adeyinka-Edward's "The Fear of Broken Dishes"; however, as Adewale-Gabriel advocates in "Sister Cry," African women should continue to write poems that confront transformative change and to participate in the discussion by "asking for what we must give, a sacrifice of gold / a basket of courage, a strident voice."

Although poetry continues to influence and shape a significant part of creativity in African verbal arts, it is one of the major casualties of colonization as is evidenced in contemporary African literature's debates about the language question. During the colonial period, the need for expertise in the colonizers' languages restrained indigenous self-expression as Africa's schoolchildren learned poems in European languages in Western-style classrooms. However, this volume shows that contemporary African artists did not lose the ability to harness aspects of cultural memory from indigenous languages. It is interesting to note the extent to which some of the poets in this book refuse to shun African verse and its rich layered meanings and have worked Africa's diverse language vistas into their poems by basing their work on the premise that all languages that have touched Africa's homeland and cultures are part of contemporary Africa, its experiences and expressions. Their approach is different from early Western-style educational and discursive strategies in Africa that perceived indigenous languages and indigenous poetic traditions as irrelevant. This contemporary approach is seen in Lamia Zayzafoon's "Milk of the Ogre" and Harriet Naboro's blending of five languages in "Leave Me Alone." Thus, some contributors strive for new rhythms that incorporate Africa's cultural experiences and values into the postindependence environment.

While influenced by indigenous poetic forms, the postindependence poetry of many African women reflects deep familiarity with Western feminism and feminist thinking. Some poems also explore African womanism (an alternative to Western feminism) and other analytical approaches to women's issues and experiences. Social criticism is central to their works; a prevailing theme is giving women's voices to Africa's current dilemmas. Part of the struggle includes the refusal of contemporary African women to adhere to views of African women held by Western feminists. Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury's "The Lost Throne" implicitly rejects the idea of the African woman as a beast of burden, always carrying heavy loads, by celebrating different parts of the African mother's body as a seat of power for her children. Seen from the point of view of the emotionally healthy child nurtured and shielded by the African mother's body, Kuoh-Moukoury's poem

acknowledges the African woman as both a responsible and a joyful mother. Sarah Navalayo Osembo's "When Daddy Had an Affair" points to the far-reaching consequences of infidelity as it details the pain children experience when they have to deal on their own with knowledge of the secrets of adults' untidy, complex lives. Temitope Azeez-Stephen's "Funeral Theme" and Arcrau's "You, and Your Four Loved Ones" keep discussions about relations between African women and men open to further appraisal and negotiation. It is encouraging to note the ways that several contributors address the question of romantic love. Refuting the assumption that romantic love is foreign to relationships between African men and women, some poems, like Edna Merey Apinda's "The Secret of the Night," are lyrical and sweet, while "Funeral Theme" roils with the unalloyed anger and frustrations of a relationship that has come to an end.

A brief look at the study of the oral tradition in Africa shows that practitioners and scholars tend to agree on the African woman's role as storyteller. She is perceived as one who straddles traditions and creates a bridge between generations. As a result, her responsibility to make sense of contemporary Africa accrues as the continent struggles with development that is stunted by violence in all areas of life. Although African women's roles as competent performers of the oral narrative are evident in the depictions of some female characters in contemporary African fiction, discussions of the creative potential of female poets remain scanty. Compared to material in the oral tradition, the dearth of published poems by contemporary African women might suggest either the absence of poetic vision in the oral narrative tradition of which women are said to be expert practitioners or the absence of African women's creativity in this area of traditional and contemporary African verbal arts. This collection's presentation of new works by seventy-one African women poets demonstrates that African women's interest in this aspect of Africa's verbal arts is vibrant. While they address enduring topics such as colonialism, negritude, corruption, and failed leadership, they also introduce new subjects of interest to readers. Some poems address infidelity, divorce, female genital surgeries, and HIV/AIDS, which until recently many African women preferred to address only in private.

Several poems in this anthology continue the discussion about the need to educate women, as well as the consequences that educated women face. Some of the poems also show how these new writers' skills are changing to accommodate Africa's engagement with important ideas and issues in the global marketplace. The poems as a whole illustrate the diversity in language, technology, and other bases of knowledge that are quickly becoming part of the lives of Africans worldwide.

Reflections complements Stella and Frank Chipasula's *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Poetry* (1995); Tanure Ojaide and Tijan Sallah's *The New African Poetry* (2000), a collection of poems by both women and men; and Irene D'Almeida and Janis Mayes's *A Rain of Words: A Bilingual Anthology of Women's Poetry in Francophone Africa* (2009). The poets whose works appear in this anthology are from Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Egypt, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Immediately apparent is the large number of contributions from Nigeria—understandable because in the history of African literature to date and for a reason that is yet to be understood, Nigerian writers seem to be enjoying a season of abundant creativity. The second largest group of contributors is from Kenya. Next, we acknowledge the versatile participation of the Uganda Women Writers' Association (FEMRITE), whose promotion of African women's collaboration through writing and publication is worthy of emulation.

Many of the contributors to the volume are well-known poets and writers. Their subjects speak to the issues that Africans face daily and to the efforts they make to confront and resolve them. The poets are from all walks of life, and their works point to a clearly developed self-awareness of contemporary African women's writing. *Reflections* corroborates the extent to which African women are paying attention to global issues and subsequent dynamics that affect their lives, roles, functions, and participation. It is difficult to ignore the prevailing sense of loss expressed in many of the poems in this anthology—even in the poems that deal primarily with love, understanding, and progress. Nevertheless, whatever their focus, the poems assert the fact that African women

continue to pool their resources as they work to subvert power and deny authority to both traditional and modern efforts aimed at silencing women and according them second-class citizenship on the continent and abroad. The assertion of self-worth is a pervasive theme in these poems, but what is instructive is the extent to which the contemporary African woman poet speaks out for positive change worldwide.