

cannot achieve her dream of becoming a Pharmacist as an international student despite being an honours member. Jende Jonga, through his decision to go back home where he belongs and where his identity will not matter, clearly shows resolve, but also the bruising challenges of trying to fit into an alien country no matter how hard he tries.

It was a difficult decision to make but he had to in order to stop the life of misery he is living in, despite being inside the famed glitter of a magnificent city like New York. As most people believe, New York is 'paradise.' But the Jongas embody what Hill Collins identifies as the 'Outsider within'. Mbue exposes the insensitivity of the immigration judge through the events that surround Jende Jonga's family and other immigrants seeking American citizenship. Their American dream was thwarted as a result of their blackness, which poses a big problem, as well as the harsh American immigration policies that categorizes and drives a certain class of seekers into the vast underground of illegal migrancy. The novel concludes that the American dream is a farce; it is not the end of all life's challenges as is believed by many Africans and other immigrants who suffer through the broken American immigration system.

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Tijan M. Sallah. *Saani Baat: Aspects of African Literature and Culture*.

Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2021, 186 pp.
ISBN 9781569026984, paperback

In the large frame of modern African literature, particularly in the anglophone tradition, Gambia is stuck in the armpit of giants. Well, that's the general view, until we read Tijan Sallah's, *Saani Baat: Aspects of African Literature and Culture*, which offers the reader of African literature some new perspectives. In the first eight chapters of this ten-chaptered book, Sallah guides the reader to a new appreciation and apprehension of the range and vitality of Gambia's literary production

and engagement, from its modern to its oral forms. What connects Phyllis Wheatley, Alex Haley, and Lenrie Peters? The Gambia, even as it is, 'just a narrow sliver of land along the river that gives it sustenance' (Jon Woronoff, in Hughes and Perfect, xiii). With a population of about 1.5 million people, Gambia is a small country – in fact, the smallest non-island nation in Africa – nestling on West Africa's Atlantic coast. Although its population is overwhelmingly Muslim, Gambia's national cultural identity is a very complex mix of animism, Islam, and Christianity – particularly Roman Catholicism – as well as the English or, rather, Anglican, texture of its colonial experience. Gambia forms a part of the quintet of Anglophone West African nations. Gambia, however, achieved independence from British colonialism in February 1965, stuck in a most awkward geographical location surrounded by French Senegal. As Jon Woronoff declares in his Foreword to Hughes and Perfect's *Historical Dictionary of the Gambia*, 'of all Africa's artificial boundaries, none is more artificial than that surrounding the Gambia' (xiii). This very artificial boundary first drawn in 1889 by British and French delegates in Paris gives important weight to both the significance and implications of the scramble for Africa, as well as to the axiom that geography is destiny.

The demarcation sundered the natural ethnic lines of the region, and confined the modern nation of Gambia into a strip of land 'approximately the size of Lebanon or Jamaica'. As a result, today this 'exclude[s] the Gambia from free access to its natural hinterland and divide[s] the Gambia Wolof, Jola, Mandinka, Serere (Serer), and Fula (Fulbe) people from Senegal' (xxxii). As Hughes, indeed, further notes: 'The present day boundary presents specific problems for historians. Much of its history was not confined to the narrow serpentine state, but extended over the broad savannah and Sahel areas that today compose Senegal. This is particularly true of the period extending from the 13th to the 16th century when the Gambia valley was populated by a series of complex migrations' (xxxii). The beginnings of what would become modern Gambia, in that sense, are rooted in that concatenation of movements from the 13th century, 'the period of Malian hegemony', of which the Mandinka, Hughes notes, formed its westernmost extension; a period of rapid Islamization, which also roughly coincides, around the 15th century, with the first European explorations of the Gambia river, starting with the adventurers the Venetian explorer and slave trader Alvise da Cadamosto and the Genoese Antoniotto Usidimere; then the rise of the Islamic theocracy in the Futa Toro, in the 18th century, with its large-scale conversion of Gambians, particularly the

Fula. Gambia became part of the British West Africa settlements with its headquarters in Sierra Leone on 19 February 1866.

Modern Gambian identity is thus irreducible to a single, linear formation. Like most postcolonial societies, it is hybrid. But Gambia's formal national culture, the basis of its national literature, is still rooted in its colonial experience and moorings. This, in some measure, is Tijan Sallah's subtle conclusion in his book, *Saani Baat: Aspects of African Literature and Culture*. 'To speak of a Gambian national literature,' writes Sallah, 'is to speak to that narrative which engaged with the colonial construction of a Gambia nation.' This does prompt the question: what therefore, is the Gambian nation? What are the grounds for contemporary Gambian identity? How does identity formation situate the shaping of a 'national mind'? Does the postcolonial African nation, with its historical fatalities, coming essentially from its distorted colonial boundaries, have a mind? Can it generate a true national literature; a symbolic order; a sustained myth of the nation around which should accrete its power of the imaginary and its rituals of collective memory, which is what a national literature enacts? These are important questions and aspects of the 'specific problems' which Sallah's books uncovers and with which it grapples.

Tijan M. Sallah's approach in *Saani Baat: Aspects of African Literature and Culture* is expository. He dispenses with the hard, theoretical style in his analysis of the cultural systems of the Gambia. He argues for a broader, more complex look at the literary production of Gambia in the larger picture or context of Africa's literary tradition. Gambia, he suggests, has a very rich and complex field that demands closer, critical attention beyond the surface of our contemporary regard and canonizing acts. The proliferation of ideas about African literature has always, largely, circulated around the African literary power houses – Nigeria, South Africa, Senegal, Kenya, and, at the crossroads of African and Arabic/Middle Eastern literature, Egypt, for instance. But African literary culture and its system of ideas, as Tijan Sallah demonstrates, is far more complex and far-reaching. Essentially, this critical text is situated within this slice of the Senegambia cultural theatre, whose literary importance, but for the iconic presence of Lenrie Peters, is often either ignored or seen precisely as non-existent. This is why Sallah's book offers an important shift in the ways we must begin to see, redress, and reassess literary culture and its development in Africa.

The book begins quite audaciously with a chapter on 'Dreams of Katchikali: the Challenge of a Gambian National Literature', and the questions Tijani Sallah raises are: 'What does it mean to be a Gambian;

to be part of a population of about two million; to be dependent on a groundnuts or peanuts monocrop economy; to be geographically surrounded, except for the coastline, by Senegal; to be the confluence of some four major ethnic groups: Mandinka, Wolof/Serer, Fula/Tukolor, and Jola; to be defined spiritually by the predominant import of Islam mixed into a sumptuous syncretism with the folk beliefs of an atavistic past?' (1). He narrows his answers to these questions to certain basic principles: modern Gambia may be the sum of its imaginary, but Gambia's national literature cannot be restricted to the 'ethnic text' which, as Tijan Sallah conceives it, though drawing its body from the 'rich repository of folk repertoire', provides little spark, because these 'ethnic texts' have not broken parochial boundaries; nor could it in fact be literature written in the language of Islam – Arabic – a language which to Sallah, even in its 'transethnic appeal', is still restricted, and restrictive, because of its limitations to a 'religious milieu'. A national literature for Gambia, Sallah avers, must 'permeate the boundaries' of its multi-ethnic formation and language barriers, and to that effect therefore, because the colonial English language has become the lingua franca of Gambia, it must then carry the weight of this national literature: 'in this sense, ethnic texts could perhaps qualify if they get translated in the English lingua franca that all Gambians have the freedom and in some cases the opportunity to learn and use' (3). Needless to say, Tijan Sallah's conclusion and prescriptions may seem very problematic in the sense that they validate and promote colonial agency, and may ruffle the patience of critics and advocates of decolonization such as Ngũgĩ or Chinweizu, and disturb those who value their critique of colonialism and colonial mentality in African literature.

But if the English language must do the work which Tijan Sallah proposes for it, who best embodies this task but Gambia's iconic poet, Lenrie Peters – 'that pater familias of a national Gambian literature in English' (3)? Tijan Sallah projects Lenrie Peters' book of poems, *Katchikali* (1971), which appropriates and celebrates the sacred shrine of Katchikali, perhaps the pre-eminent centre of indigenous religious worship and a cultural heritage of the Gambia, as the exemplar of Gambia's national literature. *Katchikali* is remarkable for its symbolism, and so is the poet Lenrie Peters. Born Lenrie Leopold Wilfrid Peters in Bathurst, Gambia, in 1932, to one of the most prominent, well-established creole families of Gambia, the poet embodies the deeply Anglican values that Sallah valorizes. The creole aristocracy, of which Peters is a veritable product and embodiment, reflects a most critical study in ambiguity from its heritage of transatlantic crossings. Lenrie

Peters' father, Lenrie Ingram Peters, was the prominent editor of the *Gambia Echo*, and his family's roots went back to the foundation of the 'krio' community in Freetown from the Nova Scotia returnees, who founded the Freetown settlement. He studied the Classics at Fourah Bay, and worked as an accountant and newspaper editor, latterly in Bathurst, to which he migrated from Sierra Leone. It was in Bathurst that he met Lenrie's mother, Keziah Peters, who also came from a very prominent, privileged creole 'aristocracy', which counts among its members the Maxwells, the first African graduates of Oxford. Tijan Sallah lays this all out in excruciating detail in this book.

Lenrie Peters himself attended the Methodist Boys High School in Bathurst, and the Prince of Wales School in Freetown, and from there went on to Cambridge where he studied Natural Sciences between 1953 and 1956, thereafter studying medicine at University College Hospital in London. He began writing poetry at Cambridge and contributed to the BBC. The publication of his first collection of poems, by Mbari in Ibadan in 1962, firmly established his reputation and his stature as Gambia's pre-eminent modern poet and writer – the grand old man of modern Gambian literature. Gambia's creole population, mostly descendants of the Aku returnees from Nova Scotia from the 18th century, is a minority – but a powerful minority – characterized by its cultural inbreeding. It was Westernized – Anglican, Christian, and alienated: it was the 'buffer class' between the colonizer and the colonized. Lenrie Peters fell firmly within this class. Cosmopolitan, and even solidly Pan-Africanist, Lenrie Peters' creolized identity, his 'uprootedness' and alienation, his cultural in-betweenness ironically fed his Pan-Africanism. As he said, quoted appropriately by Tijan Sallah from a conference on World Cultures in Berne: 'My family has been detribalized for nearly four generations. I am like Alex Haley. I am looking for my roots' (4–5). That kind of aloof nationalism (not 'deracination' thankfully) produces the 'detribalized' literature which Tijan Sallah idealizes and values as key in the emergence of a Gambian national literature.

Other chapters in the book deal with various aspects of Gambian literature and thought aligned to this question of its national imaginary and identity. Chapter 2, for instance, on 'Senegambian Wolof Poetry', focuses on the oral poetry tradition of the Wolof, across the Senegambian belt: the 'woi', 'tanga', 'baaku', and 'kassak' – each form of this oral poetic heritage is given appropriate context, to indicate the social and aesthetic worth of Wolof performative and philosophical expression. 'Wolof poetics is intimately linked to the propagation of

socially redeeming values,' (29) writes Sallah, to drive home the facts. Chapter 3 is a more extended version of Wolof hermeneutics: 'Towards Wolof Metaphysics and Philosophy: Some Preliminary Reflections'. It takes us through interpretations of the conceptual universe of the Wolof: from the Wolof concept of man, to its concept of time, space, and number. The Wolof concept of the human – '*Nit nitai garabam*' (a human is medicine to another) – presumably situates a not so strange idea of complementary humanity and social responsibility as a virtue of Wolof humanism. But crucial here is Sallah's disclosure of the relationship of Wolof with the Serer worldview, seen through the life and work of Wolof philosophers like Kochy Barma Faal. This, of course, should not be surprising as the Senegalese anthropologist Cheik Anta Diop in his own writing actually mapped a unity of cultural values and practices that extend within African cultures. The chapter on 'Jolla Verbal Arts on the Senegambia' lays out an important claim for the Jolla, the 'dominant ethnic group in the Casamance region of Senegal and the Fogni region of Gambia', but who are still the most marginalized in both national spheres as an ethnic minority. The question Tijan Sallah outlines in this chapter is quite simple: is there evidence of literature in Jolla culture? His answer is equally definite: 'Although it is difficult to point to any distinct texts that represents the existence of a Jola literature, the Jola do have a rich orature (the vast majority of which is not yet recorded) which characterize and enrich Jola life and attitude to the world' (71). The fact of Jola's cultural 'self-apprehension', as the basis of its cultural resistance to colonialism, and the rise of such resistance icons as its famous sibylline figure, the woman prophet Aline Siteo Jatta of Kabrousse, and of course the more recent rise of Yahya Jammeh, the maverick dictator of Gambia, are drawn out to properly situate the Jola, who inhabit three points, from the Casamance in Senegal, to Guinea-Bissau, and in the Gambia. The chapters on 'New Gambian Poets and their Poetry', and the extended, additional tribute to Gambia's national poet, Lenrie Peters, further elaborates on the theme of Gambia's national culture and literary production. Other aspects of this book, with chapters on Phyllis Wheatley, the Harlem Renaissance, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, and the poet Tanure Ojaide, complete the picture which Tijan Sallah inadvertently constructs.

It is, in a sense, an ironic picture: the book began by asking the important questions: what does it mean to be Gambian? Can a small, resource-poor, serpentine country, surrounded by the francophone behemoth, Senegal, produce great literature? What literature? Perhaps

that should have been the single remit of this critical excursion: to situate the Gambian imagination as its own primary experience of value. The book should have wholly made its own point on this matter. It does, to some agreeable extent, but it also seems that the additional element – the later chapters in this collection – belong to a different book. These last chapters feel like an intrusion in the specific frame of *Saani Baat*. In some ways, the book seems to suggest that modern Gambian literature cannot exist without riding on the back of a bigger concept of world literature – Anglophone, Diaspora, African – and therefore, the question Tijan M. Sallah asks at the beginning of this book seems very moot. In general, certainly, very substantial thinking is evident in the making of this text. There are very useful insights for the reader, for instance, that yield from the discussion of the poetry of the Nigerian Tanure Ojaide. However, not much is pathbreaking in the book in terms of approach, method, or even revelations. These lacks in themselves do not totally undermine the thrusts of the book, nor its vitality or value. In sum, the true point of the essays collected in *Saani Baat: Aspects of African Literature and Culture*, aside from its central project of ‘worlding’ Gambian literary thought and its production, is to remind critics and readers of Africa literature of the multifocality and the subtle dimensions of that literature.

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