

One Who Dreams Is Called A Prophet

Sultan Somjee

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Reviewed by Jonathan Shirland

Written over a period of fifteen years but really the distillation of four decades of work, *One Who Dreams Is Called a Prophet* is an extraordinary summation of an extraordinary career.¹ The story is about the epic walk of Alama, a pastoralist elder from northern Kenya, who is an alter-ego of the author; his arduous pilgrimage to find the source of peace is a journey that Dr. Somjee has also undertaken. Somjee lived among various pastoralist communities during his field work at the University of Nairobi in the 1970s. He then helped to introduce material culture into the Kenyan school curriculum as part of the 1985 educational reforms, served as Head of Ethnography at the National Museums of Kenya (1994-2000), and from 1994 established sixteen village peace museums based partly on principles derived from the acclaimed Kamirithu Community Theater and Education Center that was destroyed in 1977.² This project has evolved into the Community Peace Museums Heritage Foundation (CPMHF) and has spread from Kenya into Uganda and South Sudan. The museums affirm the role indigenous languages and the visual arts play in establishing peace in and across communities.³ These methods of reconciliation have been threatened by colonialist and post-independence atrocities but they are not extinguished, and remain more effective than conflict resolution methodologies imported from Euro-American academic traditions.⁴ This is one of many insights embedded in *One Who Dreams* for a deeper understanding of African art.

Somjee's literary development was spurred when he left Kenya for exile in Canada in 2003 and he is now an accomplished historical novelist. *One Who Dreams* is a companion of sorts to *Bead Bai* (2012) and *Home Between Crossings* (2016) even though its origins precede them. Alama is a very different narrator to embroidery artist and beader Sakina/Moti Bai whose story unfolds in the other two novels but all three are linked by their emphasis on reciprocal exchange and dynamic relationality in enunciating profound understandings of the art of East

African personal adornment.⁵ Indeed, the art of the personal is illuminated by Somjee as the art of the “inter-personal” and in this respect, *One Who Dreams* does for walking sticks and leketyo (beaded waist belts that support pregnancies) what the earlier stories did for bandhani, emankeeki and kanga. Yet ‘historical novel’ is an inadequate term for the complex interweaving of personal memory, communal biography, parable, history, fiction, and poetry in all three books; Somjee’s writing has been linked to such genre-bending labels as “ethnographic creative nonfiction” but even this falls short of conveying its potent blending.⁶ The rhythmic patterns of words oscillate between sparse and dense, simple and complex, poetic and prosaic, allusive and elusive, gentle and incantatory carried by elliptical loops.⁷ This melding of storytelling genres facilitates both an expansion of the audience for written explorations of the visual arts of Africa and a novel means through which to illuminate them.

The rhythmic loops of Somjee’s writing style adds to the disorientating way time functions in the book. Temporal coordinates kaleidoscopically fold and unfold with references to recent conflicts in Kenya and Sudan, allusions to the Mau-Mau struggles, the ‘deep time’ of pastoralist wisdom encoded in songs, proverbs and riddles, and distilled memories of Somjee’s own journeys across the East African landscape spanning thirty years, yet all are held together by the passage of each day as understood through “Swahili time”, highlighted by the list of hours of the day at the start of the book (p.viii). Throughout the story, the passage of time is experienced through the impact of the sun on the land and the body, for example, “the sixth hour of daylight when the shadows walk between the legs” (p.44). One of the effects of this is an unmooring of the reader’s conventional grip on historical and narrative progression, facilitating a deeply meditative immersion and a slowing of urgency which is critical to Somjee’s hypnotic invocation of pastoralist life rooted into the landscape. Yet the poetic licenses of the book are themselves tethered - and rooted in – real physical objects and the profound work they accomplish.

The story is structured around the exchange of ten walking sticks that are carried during Alama’s journey across northern Kenya and that Somjee looks after today (they have been glimpsed in the background of various zoom conferences connected to the publication of the book). The walking sticks are also peace staffs, carved from sacred trees (such as the fig, African olive, and sand paper trees), and are agents of the living peace heritages of East Africa and the five-sided relational embodiment necessary to have “utu” and thus be “mtu” or fully human. The

witnesses to “utu’ as expressed in the diagram on p.556 of the book and that comprise its five sides are the Supreme Being, Ancestors, Nature, Elders and Family. This concept has many iterations across the continent of course (the most well-known being its expression as “ubuntu” in South Africa), but the most vivid of these relations throughout the book is the natural environment. Many times Alama senses each salient feature of the landscape as a companion to be greeted and respected, highlighting this ecological component of “utu”.⁸ Trees, in particular, are established as facilitators of peace and dialogue between elders, symbolized by the exchange of weapons for staffs made from them and this is one of many insights Somjee offers into the significance of walking sticks for the communities he has worked with. As the book explains, “elders...carry peace staffs of their people to support their frail bodies, control the anger of young men and spread wisdom” (p.56).

The walking sticks are far more than just literary devices, and the periodic insertion of photographs of the peace trees they derive from and other artworks connected to the (re)establishment of peace throughout the book, carries a powerful emotional jolt that ruptures immersion in the circulating narrative by reasserting the material reality of the objects and the real stories of conflict reconciliation they are indexed to. Somjee’s enunciation of Leketyo in the book functions in analogous ways: these beaded belts made by the Kalenjin (called the ‘Kot’ in the book) and tied to the waist to support pregnancies are symbols of the sacredness of motherhood and of the earth itself. When dropped on the ground between individuals or groups, fighting instantly stops.⁹ The material reality of the artworks underpinning Somjee’s narrative is movingly affirmed by awareness that the book has itself been used to create an entire curriculum for peace education through material culture and heritage learning and publications of children’s artwork in Kenya and Uganda, establishing another elliptical loop of arts based learning as a result.

The most important equivalence of Somjee’s writing patterns is to the act of walking; when Alama speaks, “he repeated and repeated over again the same sentences that he spoke in the rhythm of the walk. His breathing paced his words like how it paced his steps” (p.193). Somjee wrote much of the story whilst out walking with one of the sticks in his hand (recording in his notebook how his body felt) and these sensations are carefully transcribed, particularly how each staff necessitated a new gait and posture. The book regularly falls into an ambulatory cadence and this distinctive tempo is one of the most important to an

understanding of African visual culture alongside the other 'motions' of song, dance and performance yet remains perhaps the most underexplored art historically. Somjee's book synchronizes appreciation for the rhythms of walking and their importance for pastoralist art. He establishes this cadence through the repetition of songs and poems, the visual spacing of text on the page to slow down the reader, and the use of riddles with distinctive rhythms. The 600+ page length of the book is also important as without it the loops, recitations and walking pace of the (narrative) journey would be lost. It is also striking that the explosions of violence in the narrative occur when Alama is not walking but rather riding in vehicles or indoors – symbolically this affirms the elision between 'walking stick' and 'peace staff'. In one of many passages connecting language, land, walking and peace, Somjee explains, "a nomad's heart is in his language. The language that's nourished by music, stories, and songs of the walk that he must not lose. I know this because I make verses when my feet touch the land... language of the land makes rhythms of peace" (p.27).

The evocation of walking in the book relates to a central armature of Somjee's career: the importance of embodied understanding, and the language and speech acts of the body itself. This is symbolized by the ways in which parts of Alama's body becomes distinct characters with different agencies and voices, the most vivid example being his ankle. There are also many passages about sensory engagement with artworks, food and the landscape as diverse forms of nourishment – we encounter them through touch, taste and smell even though we cannot conventionally see them. This relates to my main disappointment with the book: the limitations of the black and white illustrations. Somjee's insights into the peace staffs, leketyo, headrests, and okila skirts are so evocative that it is easy to be frustrated by the limited optical access the book provides. Yet - perhaps inadvertently – this reaffirms that to really know them we must open ourselves to more embodied routes of understanding. Words often confound Alama – he is puzzled and frustrated by the riddles and stories of the elders he meets. But he apprehends their meaning through the rhythmic sensations he physically experiences; as Alama's father puts it, "your mind may not hear or remember but your body will" (p.113). This insight is fundamental to the methodology of the CPMHF; violence breaks the body so peace must also be felt in the body. It is also a profound contribution towards a deeper appreciation of African art. As Somjee has reflected, "I use metaphors in stories in a repetitive rhythm of walk, walk, walk, to peel the complex layers where the mind staggers and the body (heart

influenced by the senses) leads the way. There is more research from science labs coming out now like ‘embodied cognition’ but there is no reference to the sense-based relational knowledge of the indigenous peoples”.¹⁰ This book is a step towards correcting this myopia.

One Who Dreams is Called a Prophet offers many gifts – it is a deeply touching story of human dignity and resilience, a passionate advocacy of living African peace traditions, a privileged entry into pastoralist utu, and an invitation to listen to the wisdom of the body and its rhythms. Each of these can enrich our understanding of African art and its histories, and all will be rewarded who take the transformative journey of walking with Alama.

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¹ The title is a Turkana proverb derived from the fieldwork of Professor Rev. Anthony Barrett who read the first draft of Somjee’s manuscript in 2007.

² For an overview of Somjee’s work from 1972-2002 see, Sultan Somjee. 2008. ‘Building Kenyan Identities: Art Education, Material Culture, Indigenous Aesthetics and Community Peace Museums’, in Marion Arnold (ed.), *Art in Eastern Africa* Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 179-202.

³ Contact information and a list of 29 current peace museums and their curators are included at the end of the book.

⁴ See Sultan Somjee. 2018. ‘Decolonizing Reconciliation: Changing the narrative to the indigenous museums of peace in Kenya and South Sudan’, public lecture, Florida International University, Miami October 23, 2018. The power of the visual arts in reconciliation processes is encapsulated in a saying common among east African pastoralists: ‘where there is beauty, there is peace’. This is a powerful refrain in the book.

⁵ For an analysis of the symbolism of emankeeki, bandhani and kanga in these books see, Mala Pandurang. 2018. ‘Imaginations of Khoja, Maasai and Swahili Aesthetics in Artist Ethnographer Sultan Somjee’s narratives’, *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, 4: 3-4, 204-220

⁶ See for example Delphine Munos. 2021. ‘Afrasian Entanglements and Generic Ambiguities in Sultan Somjee’s *Bead Bai*’, *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* (forthcoming).

⁷ Sultan Somjee. 2012. *Bead Bai*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 316-322.

⁸ The chameleon and kokoloko bird are among the animals considered symbols of peace in Kenya that play roles in the story.

⁹ Uttering the word “Leketyo” is itself an admonishment to “calm down”. The placing of Olkila Skirts between fighting individuals works in a similar way for the Maasai.

¹⁰ Personal email communication 1/21/2021.