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The Bavino Sermons
by Lesego Rampolokeng
Gecko Poetry, 1999 116pp.
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Review by Richard Bowker

the bomb bullet blade poison
or just silence
can ease the itching sore in my mind
as my tongue twitches
i know i might encounter the death
of speech
but it's said memory is a long road
made worse by the heavy load
of violence

("Lines for Vincent")

These lines are from *The Bavino Sermons*, Lesego Rampolokeng's third volume of poetry to be published locally – it follows his groundbreaking *Horns for Hondo* (1990) and *Talking Rain* (1994) – and Gecko Books' fourth recent publication of South African poetry under the Gecko Poetry imprint.

Some of the poems in Rampolokeng's latest book date from the early and mid-1990s, but most are new, advances on his previous work. The voice is more critical, the insights more searching and the conscience is as unapologetic as ever.

The Bavino Sermons picks at many of the unsettlingly familiar scars on the South African landscape. The section headings and poem titles provide a perspective of the poet's concerns.

Under Rampolokeng's relentless gaze comes the 'forged simunyeness' ("Ranterlude") of a railroaded yet unfinished transition – 'drugged minds hidden behind illusion/ & outside the grenade-reality-cracked window the botched moment' ("Habari Gani Africa Ranting"); the washed-up rainbow nation describing our 'gnu consciousness', our localised, globalised history – a story that has 'fallen by the wayside' ("Belo Horizonte on my mind"); the abject despair and violence of an everyday social malaise, a society that 'has gone sick on itself' and been brought to 'this dead-end' – 'this land's balanced on a bubble/ one prick & we're fucked obsolete / extinct' ("The Cry of Disillusion").

The narrative depth of the poems is shattered in a rush of emotionally charged images of excrescence and mutilation, while the narrative, our social history, has been crushed by atrocity, crime and capitulation.

As in the opening quotation, this necessary occupation of a critical locus is dangerous and temporary, even contingent: 'the WORD is a lethal weapon … permanence is pure romance", he reminds us.

It is nevertheless more feasible than to follow blindly the mandatory realpolitik of international sanction: 'life is a bitch yes disease & pestilence/ commerce dictates you fuck her in silence' ("The Fela Sermon").

The focus of Rampolokeng's anger at the waste of opportunities and resources we have created – and lost – is as much current as historical. As 'poet not ornament in cabinet / house of parliament' ("The rampster comes straight") his rhythm 'was created in the toilets of the nation it stinks of the rot of my society' (from "Into the Death Zone"). In the face of 'blacker-than-thou politics in a kaleidoscope country' ("A play, this land is the stage") where 'the revolution's pantomime is broadcast/ in an audio-visual bomb-blast' ("To Gil Scott-Heron"), the poet, 'guerrilla … at the microphone' (from "Into the Death Zone"), finds his pen turned to 'a grenade the page is a battle-ground & the stage explodes …'

Everywhere he is aware of the limits of his own discourse. With 'nothing intelligent to tell' ("Rap Ranting") Rampolokeng performs a self-deprecating 'script-tease' ("Rant notes from here to dela"), screaming his 'hysterical irrelevance cloaked in pseudo-intellectual garb "they can't relate to the mess in the verse i create"' (from "Into the Death Zone").

Ultimately, however, both the direction and the intention are clear: he has felt 'the poem stir from foetal slouch to sub-bestial ROAR/ swell charge in EXPLOSION streetwards' ("The Poem & I rant"), making 'the poem arrow explode on impact/ sift hype from facts' ("The rampster comes straight").

It is possible to see Rampolokeng's work as developing the tradition of poet as social critic, a tradition that has been operative since the precolonial izibongo, which first came to widespread attention as Black Consciousness-inspired poetry in the 1970s. While this may be the acknowledged roots, Rampolokeng has added significantly to the mix. His vocal fluency and formal experimentation place his work at the forefront of revolutionary poetry.

While his work is not popular (or populist) in the way that Mzwakhe Mbuli's has been, Rampolokeng is not in want of audiences. In recent years his work has been performed in South Africa and Europe and two of his works have been published in Germany, with the German translation and English on facing pages.

Significantly one of these, *Blue V's*, includes a CD with rapped versions of some of the poems. In an interview in June [2000], Rampolokeng, talking about poets such as Benjamin Zephaniah, Lemn Sissay, Ike Mboneni Muila and himself, said: 'You can put us all under the spoken word form, it's all the word in motion, the word moving from mouth to ear, the word lifted off the page.' It is this mediatory factor, the human voice, that underpins his work and from which it derives its energy.

Having said this, Rampolokeng has stressed that what is often called oral or performance poetry should be seen just as poetry – whether on the stage or on the page. The use of these qualifiers can 'ghetto-ise' local poetry, making it seem something other, or less, than the real thing.

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