

exhibition review

Sane Wadu: I Hope So curated by Mukami Kuria and Angela Muritu Nairobi Contemporary Art Insti- tute, Nairobi, Kenya January 14–August 11, 2022

reviewed by Miriam W. Njogu and
Frankline Sunday

The retrospective *Sane Wadu: I Hope So* was the inaugural Kenyan show of the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute (NCAI) (Fig. 1). It was plentiful in themes of self-reflection, self-parody, resistance and Wadu's artistic brilliance. In a career spanning forty years, the painter, educator, and poet (b. 1954) initially depicted everyday struggles and ideals of the lives of ordinary Kenyans in watercolor and oil paint. After five years of painting full-time, Wadu started to reveal wider sociopolitical "manifestos"—often satirical—in impasto oil paint. Viewers of this retrospective were constantly implored to reevaluate their own understanding of Kenyan histories and narratives through Wadu's lens.

Originally named Walter Njuguna Mbugua, Wadu renamed himself Sane Mbugua Wadu as a typically wry response to his critics who labelled him "insane" for leaving a stable job as a teacher to make art that "did not fit" what gallerists were looking for in the 1980s (Nyache 1995: 185). As a whole, the exhibition made it evident that Wadu is a pioneer of the African modernist art movement, forging ahead with sensitive subject matters in a time of censorship of the arts in Kenya, where "safe" subjects were preferred by gallerists and the government (Mboya 2007). Wadu has been internationally recognized, featuring in the 1995 exhibition *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* and mentioned for his innovative modes of expression in publications such as *Contemporary African Art* (Kasfir 1990: 81–83), *Angaza Afrika: African Art Now* (Spring 2008: 316; see also Pruitt and Causey 1993: 135–55; Nyache 1995: 183–87).

The paintings gleamed in the new space of the Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute (NCAI), designed by the multi-award-winning architectural firm Adjaye Associates. Situated in the beautiful—but slightly empty—Rosslyn Riviera Mall, Nairobi, a ten minute-drive from the largest mall in East Africa, one could see why Wadu's work was chosen as the inaugural show for NCAI in Kenya. His egalitarian philosophy (Londardi 2020) diffused the international elitism of the NCAI and the mall itself. Curated by US-based Mukami Kuria and Nairobi-based Angela Muritu, the first room, entitled "The Early Years," showed Wadu's experimentation with painting styles. There



were successes in *Bless This Our Daily Bread* (1984), which referenced the arduousness of absolute faith, and in *Come Closer* (1984), where hens were exquisitely revealed with a few confident watercolor brush strokes.

In the following room, "The Next 30 Years," *Unidentified Fear* (1989), *Black Moses* (1993) (Fig. 2), and the haunting *Night Shift* (2000) (Fig. 3) showed Wadu thriving in his lucid artistic eloquence. Furthermore, a collage of eight observational works featuring natural subjects, beamed joyfully from one wall (Fig. 4). This collection included Wadu's familiar recurring anteater image, showered by stars in a night sky, and a sunflower (*Less Nectar*, 2004) as a commentary on food production systems and labor.

1 Opening at NCAI, *I Hope So: Sane Wadu*.
Photo: Julian Mainjali Courtesy of NCAI

2 Sane Wadu (Kenya, 1954)
Black Moses (1993)
Oil on canvas; 136 cm x 193 cm
Photo: James Muriuki Courtesy of NCAI

The final room presented archival documents showing how Wadu and his artist wife, Eunice Wadu, cofounded the Ngecha Artist Association¹ with artists including Wanyu Brush (b. 1947) and Chain Muhandi (b. 1957). Sidney Littlefield Kasfir stated that "Ngecha artists embodied 'art coming from art' organically instead of influenced from the patronage of gallerists" (Kasfir 1999: 83).





3 Sane Wadu (Kenya, 1954)
Night Shift (2000)
Oil on canvas; 121 cm x 111 cm
Photo: Miriam W Njogu. Exhibition view.

4 Opening at NCAI, Sane Wadu: *I Hope So*.
Photo: Julian Mainjati.

Further documentation in the final room showed Eunice and Sane Wadu's ongoing commitment to providing art workshops in their hometown Naivasha, an artist profile video on Wadu² (Fig. 5), and *The Wadu Suit* (1986) (Fig. 6). This thick canvas suit was sewn using a cobbler's technique and painted with Wadu's poetic critique of everyday life in Kenya. Wadu explained at the opening of the exhibition that, contrary to urban myth and to the exhibition text descriptor, he had not worn the suit on several occasions around Nairobi to promote his work, but only once, at the Watatu Gallery (Nyache 1995: 185). This is significant because if Wadu wore the suit once, this is a time-based artwork rather than the recurring "promotional stunt," as it is misrepresented in online reporting (Whalley 2009, 2017; 50 Goldborne 2022).

The inadequacy of African art studies in Kenya (Labi 2013: 100–101) influences how art is perceived. It's interesting that *The Wadu Suit* has not been documented as an avant-garde performance such as those of his contemporaries in countries with more established art studies, such as Senegalese El Hadji Sy (b. 1954) and Dutch Francis Alys (b. 1959) based in Mexico.

The exhibition showed a beacon of hope for artists to confidently forge a path without adhering to the current art market trends. In an interview with Massai Mbili artist Kevo Stero,³ it was noted this is reminiscent of the approach of the late artist and his closest confidant, Davis Kabala, a.k.a. Tola (1979–2021).



Tola was an autodidact like Wadu and often spoke of a lack of substantial evaluation of visual art in Kenya. Stero recalls a typical conversation Tola would have in colloquial Sheng with writers who visited Massai Mbili.

*"Wacha kubonga mob!
Sema kenye unasema tufanye!
Tutashinda ooh! Aah??
Tunapiga hii biz sahii mrasta ama?
Apa naona nikama ... we ishia tu ntakustua."*

Stero translates this conversation's philosophy as "We are all writers [communicators], and we all go on our visual paths, notwithstanding our education, literacy, and method of communication."⁴ Tola would dismiss the current state of art criticism in Nairobi as, "they know nothing but references that hold no meaning to artists 'on the ground' and often using 'Kizungu ngumu'—elitist difficult language" (Stero 2022). In spite of initiatives such as artist-curator Thom Ogonga's *Nairobi Contemporary* magazine (2020; the magazine published only six issues) and the opening of ContemporaryAnd's⁵ office and reading room in January 2022, which meaningfully connects with artists in Nairobi, a mainstream collaborative ecosystem for artists, writers, and media houses is still lacking in Nairobi. Foreign art centers such as the Alliance Française, Goethe Institute, and Italian Institute of Culture, who organize regular exhibitions and talks, have provided support, but a Kenyan-led initiative beyond the artist community is evidently missing. Wadu, as an artist "of the people," negotiated his career with integrity and panache, using the confluence of "on the ground" organic initiatives and the foreign-led art centers to emerge as a powerful visual narrator. In the absence of a substantial art critique highlighting his

achievements (notwithstanding the work of journalist Margaretta Wa Gacheru who, almost singlehandedly, has supported the mainstream reporting on Nairobi art for decades), he has made his own narrative.

Moving to the work once more, the glib title *I Hope So* is in keeping with Wadu's retrospective perspective, where there is no right or wrong entrance; nor preferred vantage point, order, or checklist. It is a parody of the language of certainty we lug around. *Si me ndio nakushoo* (colloquial Sheng: "I am telling you/I know what I am telling you"). Viewers navigated the exhibition through a map of feelings which included the agony of indecision, the "nowhereness" of the traveling beings, and the lingering chaos shown in *Night Shift* (2000) (Fig. 3). In a previous interview, Wadu, now 68, says he does not consider himself religious but strives towards a certain spirituality. In *Black Moses* (1993) (Fig. 2), a politician occupies a disproportionate share of the canvas and his people prostrate before him, hungry for Canaan. Moses the Politician, the savior, has his back to the promised land, and the people have a better view of where they are all going.

Irit Rogoff—writer, curator, and professor at Goldsmiths College, London—grapples with the "problem of universalism that assumes that culture can transcend the conditions of its production and the effects it has on different places as it is exposed" (Rogoff 2020: 3). This certainty of universalism flattens what Rogoff calls "local densities" and, in some cases, catalyses the reproduction of self-indulgent, hierarchical, and extractive art economies that have excluded specific publics from participating in narratives that are ostensibly of and for them. *Black Moses* was completed in 1993, just over ten years after Kenya's



5 Artist Portrait: *Sane Wadu* (2020); video filmed by Matteo Lonardi, commissioned by Haus der Kunst and NCAI.

Photo: Miriam W. Njogu

This image shows an exhibition view of the video in the third room of Wadu's retrospective, with the artist discussing his egalitarian philosophy.

6 Sane Wadu (Kenya, 1954) *The Wadu Suit* (1986)

Stitched canvas and paint; dim Collection of Yony Waite.

Photo: Miriam W. Njogu; exhibition view

1982 attempted coup that emboldened the then president, Daniel Arap Moi, to suspend civil liberties and embark on a campaign to eliminate opposition through torture, murder, forced disappearances, jailing, and exiles so he could run the country uninterrupted over the next two decades.

From specific perspectives, *I Hope So* is a collage of the making and remaking of a contemporary artist working in Kenya. Earlier Wadu pieces speak to a certain “Kenya” whose image is somewhat standardized and packaged in the psyche of local and international audiences by the mainstream. But as Wadu grows into his craft, he gets more abstract as the real Kenya he knows mutates, and his seclusion gives him a better perspective of the chaos he brings out so well. In the first decade of his work, Sane Wadu is introspective, confident, and preoccupied with the immediate as the artist from the margins pushes to center himself on the canvas. Many of his subjects in this phase bear his trademark sideburns, picking tea or praying for bread. More subjects appear. The lines are bolder, and the connections between them are less subtle. Later in his career, the work advances as his “personages” develop: political exile, avant-gardist, career artist. Shapes blur into each other, abstract forms resist containment, hues darken and often hide unknown fears as multiple themes interlope in layered narratives. In this phase, the yardsticks that measure creative output like form and progress are less certain and falter.

We can glean tenuous associations from observing how Wadu portions the world within and outside his canvases. Despite the chaos in the extraordinarily creative *Black Moses*, the power dynamic between politicians and the masses sways and shifts with ever closer scrutiny. *Black Moses*, it appears, has the masses where he wants them, gathered around and begging to lap up his rhetoric. However, the people are not static but keep moving in waves. From the right and left of the canvas, figures tumble and stampede to get closer and soon, the confident look and smirk of a lying politician become an uncertain grimace as the promised land rises further beyond reach. NCAI invited elite politicians to the opening (Capital 2022), and it would be interesting to see the response of those politicians to the irony of *Black Moses*.

NCAI is spearheaded resourcefully and tirelessly by the well-connected artist Michael Armitage. His mother is Gikūyū and father is English, and he is based in both Kenya and the UK. NCAI as an institute facilitates exhibitions, symposia,⁶ as well as expanding the archive of Kenyan artists, both digital⁷ and material.⁸ Armitage values and shares Wadu's passion for educational practices in Kenyan art⁹ and has a long-term plan for NCAI to develop a permanent space and an education program that will provide a three-year post-graduate fine arts degree partnering with Transart Institute for creative research.

Two criticisms in particular may be made of this exhibition. First, there was a missed opportunity because none of the eight established artists interviewed in Nairobi in January 2022 were invited to either the private view or the three-day weekend opening.¹⁰ Secondly, although the photography and part of the narrative of a Sane Wadu catalogue had been completed, it was not published in time for the exhibition due to limited NCAI resources. This again, seems a missed opportunity for Wadu's legacy.

However, the entry into the Nairobi contemporary art scene of the energetic and multinational NCAI, with its intriguing mixture of privilege and altruism, is a hugely



welcome addition. The retrospective of Sade Wadu was a well overdue triumph of a modernist master.

MIRIAM W. NJOGU is an independent researcher based in the UK. miriamjessicak@gmail.com

FRANKLINE SUNDAY is a journalist and an editor of downriverroad.org, based in Nairobi. franklinesunday@gmail.com

Notes

1 A forty-member collective that built and sustained a thriving art community providing support, training and opportunities to generations of artists (Otieno Sumba 2022).

2 Commissioned by Museum of Contemporary Art, Haus der Kunst, and NCAI. Haus der Kunst is a museum of contemporary art in Munich. It curated a show with NCAI entitled *The Paradise Edict* featuring the work of Michael Armitage, artist and founder of NCAI. This was exhibited at Haus der Kunst from September 2020–April 2021 and also featured a side show called *Mwili, Akili na Roho*, showing works of six pioneer Kenyan artists who had influenced Armitage: Meek Gichugu, Jak Katarikawe, Asaph Ng'ethe Macua, Therese Musoke, Elimo Njau, and Sane Wadu. The show moved, expanding its curatorial scope to feature further prominent Kenyan artists, to the Royal Academy of Arts, London, from May–September 2021.

3 Kevo Stero, interview with the author, Maasai Mbili, January 23, 2022.

4 Kevo Stero, Facebook correspondence with Miriam W. Njogu, September 26, 2022.

5 Contemporary And (C&) is a growing organization that produces two magazines on visual art and biannual publications on its full program. It also mentors and provides a network for prominent cultural producers.

6 Sane Wadu spoke to Yony Waite in a conversation moderated by Gakunju Kaigwa, February 19, 2022, and NCAI hosted a panel discussion with Wangechi Mutu, Magdalene Odundo DBE, and Challenge Van Rempelberg, September 7, 2021.

7 NCAI held three virtual Wikipedia editathons with a focus on editing and creating profiles for East African women artists (Jepkorir 2022).

8 NCAI holds a library and resource center, currently gathering books and other resources from institutions in the city and abroad.

9 The Eunice Wadu and Sane Wadu Arts Trust provides community and arts education in

Naivasha.

10 Based on studio visits and interviews by Miriam Njogu with eight established Nairobi artists studios based at Maasai Mbili, Kuona Artist Collective and two private workplaces held in January 2022, it was established that none had been contacted to attend the NCAI show.

References cited

50 Golborne. 2022. "A joy to discover the NCAI." Facebook, February 2022; <https://www.facebook.com/50golborneart/posts/pfbid02pgXyF89AxAJ2gqAQ TG3QzND5GeG92KZazbbYBbGokCCR3HxU2mtD9gbCvf23an4ML>.

Capital LifeStyle. 2022. "Sane Wadu: I Hope So showing opens at Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute." Capital FM, January. <https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/lifestyle/2022/01/17/sane-wadu-i-hope-so-showing-opens-at-nairobi-contemporary-art-institute/>.

Jepkorir, Rose. 2022. "Giving Back to the Continent, Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute (NCAI)." Contemporaryand, January. <https://contemporaryand.com/magazines/nairobi-contemporary-art-institute-ncai/>

Kasfir, Sidney Littlefield. 1999. "Patrons and Mediators." In *Contemporary African Art (World of Art)*, pp. 64–101. London: Thames & Hudson.

Labi, Kwame. 2013. "African Art Studies in Kenya." *Third Text Africa* 3 (1): 99–101.

Lonardi, Matteo. 2020. "Artist Portrait: Sane Wadu, Filmed by Matteo Lonardi, Commissioned by Haus der Kunst and NCAI." NCAI254, September 2022; <https://www.ncai254.com/post/manage-your-blog-from-your-live-site>.

Mboya, Joy. 2007. "The Story of the Godown Arts Centre: A Journey to Freedom through the Arts." In Kimani Njogu and G. Oluoch Olunya (eds.), *Cultural Production and Social Change in Kenya: Building Bridges*, pp.169–86. Nairobi: Twaweza Communications.

Nairobi Contemporary. 2020. "Nairobi Contemporary, Edition 6, 2020." Issuu.com, September. <https://issuu.com/nairobicontemporary>

Nyache, Wanjiku. 1995. "Concrete Narratives and Visual Prose: Two Stories from Kenya and Uganda." In Clémentine Deliss and Jane Havell (eds.), *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa: An Exhibition*, pp. 158–89. Paris: Flammarion.

Otieno Sumba, Charles. 2022. "Documenting Sane Wadu's Kenyan Allegories." Frieze, March. <https://www.frieze.com/article/sane-wadu-nairobi-contemporary-art-institute-2022-review>.

Pruitt, Sharon, and Thomas Causey. 1993. "Art in Kenya." In Mario Azevedo (ed.), *Kenya: The Land, the People, and the Nation*, pp. 135–55. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

Rogoff, Irit. 2020. "Scaling Up—Local Densities and Global Arts Circulations." In Marissa Moorman and Monica de Miranda (eds.), *Q-Notes: Questions in Theory and Art Practices #1*, pp. 2–14. Lisbon: Hangar Books.

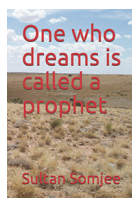
Spring, Chris. 2008. *Angaza Afrika: African Art Now*. London: Laurence King

Whalley, Frank. 2009. "Insanely Good." *The East African*, April. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/magazine/insanely-good-1294722>.

Whalley, Frank. 2017. "ART: Respect after the Age of Dinosaurs." *The East African*, October. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/magazine/art-respect-after-the-age-of-dinosaurs-1376314>.

book review

***One Who Dreams Is Called A Prophet* by Sultan Somjee Amazon (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform), 2020. 641 pp., 12 b/w illus., glossary, appendix. \$30.90, paper**



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 art curriculum as part of the 1985 educational reforms, wrote a guidebook for art teachers on how to teach African material culture, 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 (for an overview of Somjee's work, see Somjee 2008). 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—contact information and a list of twenty-nine current peace museums and their curators are included at the end of the book. 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 (see Somjee 2018).² 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 his *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. Indeed, the art of the personal is illuminated by Somjee as the art of the "interpersonal" 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* (see Pandurang 2018). 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 (see Munos 2020). 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 (Somjee 2012: 316–22). 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 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*.³ 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 Kalenjini (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.⁴ 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 while 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 become 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.⁵

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.

JONATHAN SHIRLAND is Associate Professor of Art History at Bridgewater State University. jshirland@bridgew.edu

Notes

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

2 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.

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

4 Uttering the word “*Leketyo*” is itself an admonishment to “calm down.” The placing of *Okila* skirts between fighting individuals works in a similar way for the Maasai.

5 Sultan Somjee, personal email communication, January 21, 2021.

References cited

- Munos, Delphine. 2020. “African Entanglements and Generic Ambiguities in Sultan Somjee’s *Bead Bai*.” *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* 52 (1): 188–207.
- Pandurang, Mala. 2018. “Imaginations of Khoja, Maasai, and Swahili Aesthetics in Artist Ethnographer Sultan Somjee’s Narratives.” *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 4: 3–4, 204–20.
- Somjee, Sultan. 2008. “Building Kenyan Identities: Art Education, Material Culture, Indigenous Aesthetics and Community Peace Museums.” In Marion Arnold (ed.), *Art in Eastern Africa*, pp. 179–202. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers.
- Somjee, Sultan. 2012. *Bead Bai*. Amazon Create Space.
- Somjee, Sultan. 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.