

NKARC Letter: Fall 2013 (2)

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**From:** [Bill Bhaneja](#)

**To:** [undisclosed recipients](#)

**Cc:** [Rais Neza Boneza](#)

**Sent:** Wednesday, October 09, 2013 2:08 PM

**Subject:** NK Arts RC: correction, essay, poem and interview

Dear friends,

You sent my way interesting material to read. Let me share some here. First of all a correction regarding the title of Salman Rushdie's memoir. Yes, the correct title is "Joseph Anton" (not Joe Anton), a pseudonym Rushdie was asked to come up with by the UK secret service while in hiding. He chose a combination from the names of his two favourites, Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekov.

Continuing on the theme of Arts and Politics, thanks for well researched paper from the recent issue of Journal of Peace Psychology, entitled, "Khrushchev visits the Bolshoi: [More Than] a Footnote to the Cybul Missile Crisis" by David G. Winter, University of Michigan (2013:vol.19,no.3, 222-239). An excellent work which contends that the Russian opera 'Boris Godunov' that Khrushchev attended during the Cuban missile crisis may have influenced the Russian leader in changing his mind in his confrontation with the US, in particular the opera's plot and libretto passages. Winter uses the psychological concept of "generative historical consciousness" showing that psychological resonance of the opera narrative with K's own situation and memories may have affected the Soviet leader's choices and behaviour during that period. This fascinating paper with serious research underpinnings provides a good model for work we are striving for in our various Nonkilling Research Committees.

Another captivating work received was from NKARC colleague Rais Neza Bonaza. See below Rais's poem and an interview with him by Serubiri Moses. It is a beautiful poem written in exile about love in violent times. Rais elaborating on his poetry writes: a poem "can be a purely political statement arranged in a love bouquet. While love is kind and gentle it can be subversive; it is actually a revolutionary act."

For those who don't know Rais, his bio describes him [b.1979] an artist, fiction writer, poet and peace activist originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Currently, he lives in Trondheim, Norway. He is a member of the TRANSCEND Network for Peace, Development and Environment and received an honorary doctorate degree (Honoris Causae) from the Institute of Management (ISGM) and the University of CEPROMEC in Burundi. Inspired by the reality of exile, Rais' work presents a successful mixture of the universal and the particular in a search for freedom and wholeness. His writing has been published in different magazines worldwide. More below.

Thank you Margaret, Glenn, and Rais.

Nonkilling Regards,

Bill

[www.nonkilling.org](http://www.nonkilling.org)

"Nonkilling is THE measure of human progress."

----- Original Message -----

**From:** [Rais Neza Boneza](mailto:Rais_Neza_Boneza)

**To:** [tap-art-peace@googlegroups.com](mailto:tap-art-peace@googlegroups.com) ; [editors@currentconcerns.ch](mailto:editors@currentconcerns.ch) ; [leo.semashko@gmail.com](mailto:leo.semashko@gmail.com) ; [billbhaneja@rogers.com](mailto:billbhaneja@rogers.com) ; [cookcomm@ameritech.net](mailto:cookcomm@ameritech.net)

**Sent:** Monday, October 07, 2013 9:27 PM

**Subject:** A Bird of Love in Exile,Written by Serubiri Moses

In 1910, a relatively unknown [Igor Stravinsky](#) composed his first orchestral dance suite *The Firebird*. Stravinsky drew on Slavic folklore to orchestrate the magical firebird; a ballet that alighted the Russian composer's career. By June of 1912, and following its London debut Stravinsky would be hailed for his great imaginative power

Whilst recently reading *The Battle of Birds*, a poem by Rais Neza Boneza I was once again reminded of Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. Naturally it would be misleading to make parallels between [orchestral music](#) and poetry. However aside from sharing the obvious metaphor of the bird, I instinctively felt the fearlessness in both artists' approaches and their daring to break free from convention. Whether it be with words or with music each produced an intense honesty, a space to discover the indescribable – the power of limitless imagination. Whilst Stravinsky went on to receive rave reviews, Boneza's bewildering poem however put the 23 year old poet in jail.

The mystical phoenix appears throughout numerous great civilizations: Greek, Roman and Egyptian. According to the later it symbolised immortality. It was said that after living 500 years the bird would fashion a nest of 'aromatic boughs and spices, and set it on fire to be consumed in the flames; a new bird would a rise from its 'father's ashes.'

Birds in many cultures are allegorical creatures; emissaries over domains that men could not cross like the famous white dove and [olive branch](#) after 'The Great Flood' in the Bible. The image painted in verse is of a dove journeying to a place beyond fathomable reach that returns with a symbol of hope.

In steady view of the bird as an emissary and the intended allusion to the immortal the poem becomes quite tragic. The violence of burning to ashes mixed with heartbreak and tears denotes the sacred passage into another existence. This sense of a coming to an end of one home and the birthing of another home.

Stravinsky's *Firebird* remains a mystery as critics have yet to be able to unravel its magic, but not to the degree of isolation. [Art](#) of great imaginative power can often lead to controversy. Three years after the *Firebird*, his ballet *The Rite of Spring* sparked contention leading to riots at its Paris premiere. In Boneza's case his intoxicating piece *The Battle of Birds* quickly became entangled in the volatile politics of Burundi when critics of the day misunderstood his poetry.

It was the late 1990s, the young poet had escaped his native République [Démocratique du Congo](#) and was living in exile. When news of the poem spread throughout the capital city of Bujumbura, officers of the national intelligence (The Documentation) immediately jailed Rais. There he'd be interrogated for three days, questioned about his intent, the bird, and to whom it allude to. Conceivably shocked at the uproar Rais revealed that it was simply about love. I had a chat with Rais from his current home in Trondheim, Norway.

**Serubiri Moses | I was struck with this poem *The Battle of Birds*; it is a very mature poem.**

**Reza Neza Boneza** | Well, I was briefly jailed for it. The *Documentation Nationale* interrogated me for writing this poem. They wanted to know the meaning behind the bird fighting and also the phoenix rising from its ashes. So I told them it was just a love poem. However, I do agree with Zimbabwean poet, [Chengerai Hove](#), when he says that *The Battle of the Birds* is a purely political statement arranged in a love bouquet. While love is kind and gentle it can be subversive; it is actually a revolutionary act.

**SM | Can you elaborate?**

**RNB** | In my view, the best love situations are the tragic ones when you can't hold on to it, the lover you cannot possess ... like the birds or the lonely wolf under the full moon. I like observing it from a distance, to make a better (oral) sculpture. It is more powerful when from this distance you look at love... even if it is quite torturing.

I remember when I stayed at a safe house in Uganda; I was not allowed to go outside. So the space was limiting physically but also restrained psychically. There was this tree in the back garden. Every morning and late afternoon I climbed it, as it was my only moment and chance to interact with the outside world.

From above I could see people going in opposite directions, *boda bodas*, and cars passing by over the wall that separated the street and my tree. But I was more drawn to this estranged woman with her kid, a young mother. She was just on the other side of road. At exactly the same time every morning and evening, she used to go to work. Seeing her coming back from work with her child; I drew my inspiration from her and wrote a few poems (*The Stranger, The Gazelle, The Runner*). We met and became friends at some point. I had to bribe the guard to get outside the "security house", as it was called.

**SM | That is a very Ugandan thing to do, to bribe the security guard \*laughs\*... Looking back to the 9 years old version of yourself (known for writing love letters in your community), how would you interpret this poem if you had read it then?**

**RNB** | I would experience it as a very pure poetic kind of love. Where you find the struggle, the distance between the object of your desire and the obstacles to reach it. It happens without happening. Even a 9 year old could understand that. As a kid, you'll probably have the imagery of birds flying, the beauty or the action. But beyond the fighting is first a tragedy, then hope too, because the bird does not vanish but rises from its ashes. Even without having much of an understanding of love as a young kid, you sense a strong experience of a painful joy.

**SM | It is very universal...**

**RNB** | That is why in my poetry I use a lot of imagery, and because of my background I use a lot of Greek and Latin imagery, but I embellish it with African images.

I am not one those of writers' that is very nostalgic or perpetuates a caricature of Africa. One in which everything revolves around the villages, colonial time, lions, etc... You know what I mean. We are young African writers; we should not be stuck in such exotic literary styles.

We live in Kampala, Nairobi, Kinshasa, London, Oslo but we are nostalgic at some point as we are confined generally to meander hidden library shelves throughout the world. However things are changing. For us, those stories about villages, the colonial era, uncle and aunty, or going back to the 'The Source' are unnecessary and are simplistic in their rhetoric. In fact, living in the West, I can see that people here are not that global. We are more global as we are more aware of global events and issues than the average educated individual in the West. It is within this context that I place the new generation of African writers. I tap into the global but express and embellish it with African imagery, proudly without any prejudice.

**SM | You mentioned you were in love back in Zaire, what did it mean to you then?**

**RNB** | The only thing that I know is that there is no special formula for love. In my poetry, I don't own it because it is given out ... but not entirely given up \*laughs\* ... Yes, you must keep the flow of love! Basically, according to me, there are no two ways in love; there is only one. You either love or don't. You should not wait to be loved back; it is a gift that is given out.

However, it is, at the least, courteous (for anyone) to love someone back ... \*laughs\*. Although this is true, it must be without condition. Let us say that love that we usually express is generally a very organic kind. The kind shared between familial relations : brothers, sisters, parents, boyfriends and girlfriends, husbands, wives. It is simply out of necessity because there should not be a condition in order to love. But what can I say! There are no PhD's in love. We only try, through our organic ways, to understand love but it is actually wordless. It's sublime, infinite and God incarnate. 'Love does not exist; only its proof exists', as they say in the D.R. Congo.

**SM | How have you experienced love through your poems?**

**RNB |** When I write poetry, I reach the sublime realm. When this inspiration is beyond and I feel overwhelmed, and cannot find words I paint to balance my mind and my heart. When I paint I am not a painter, I am a poet. My linguistic background is in French, Kiswahili and English. At some point I don't know which language to express myself in. Imagine, this pushes you further into exile. Sometimes you really have words and you want to say something but you don't know which language to use and to whom you will be speaking. When this happens, you totally lose all your words. The only thing you know is that there is a positive vibration; that you create that song because poetry is that song, that melody. That is why sometimes I just go and balance it out a bit. Painting is for myself, and when I paint I look at it and then I interpret it through words.

**SM | Tell me, how did love change after exile?**

**RNB |** Love hasn't changed too much; I am still the same passionate lover. Perhaps my perception of love has. Each society probably has its own specific ways of expressing feelings. So, it was just a kind of adjusting but keeping one's flame intact. You may find yourself in a place where people are not used to expressing or exposing their inner feelings directly. Also, if you act in a certain way, you maybe considered mentally unbalanced.

But oh well! Who is not living in a mentally unbalanced society by the way ... \*Laughs\*. Nowadays people are more comparable to robots than humans; they tend to express themselves more easily through social media than in a physical one-to-one interaction. Folks are handicapped because these feelings and love are synthetic. Living in a society where almost everyone has got a psychologist and the psychologist also has got a psychologist and so on, you ask yourself who is fixing who? Who is the healer?

When you know the people for whom expression—whether negative or positive—is such an integral part of life, you are surprised to see people in other places appearing helplessly unable to clearly express what they feel. People are just complaining, saying they've got a problem, it is absurd. Who has no problems or issues? You understand in these conditions that your love can frighten someone. We just need to maintain our sanity in such a social environment. In such a place, love can become more nostalgic, and also turn into another exile for the poet. More healing is needed around us.

**SM | So, you have become the quintessential writer of love poems?**

**RNB |** I think that through love, I better express my hope, my hunger and my thirst for justice and ideals. Though when it comes to political issues, I think that writing through love is better because love can really pierce any kind of armour.

**SM | How can something so tender, gentle and subtle be a force of rebellion, subversion or resistance?**

**RNB |** I am not a pacifist, but I believe in non-violence. I assure you the two are completely different. I understand that at some point we need to take a stand for our right to justice, but we can still do that through peaceful means. That is, tenderness instead of taking the violent way. Most of the time, the violent way doesn't resolve anything, you may only reach a consensus that is not a solution at all, it is only temporary. But with kindness, understanding and love, you will reach a solution acceptable to all conflict parties. We need to demilitarize minds especially in our region but globally as well. Love through creative expression can do that. We have the tool to heal our society to solve anything either inside or outside of ourselves.

**SM | You said to me in another conversation that 'to be in exile is to be in love'. I didn't quite understand it at the time, but now I believe that I do. By this statement, you mean that you write about love and that is how you have chosen to live your life, and because exile is this robot-like society, the only way for you to live is through writing about love?**

**RNB |** Yes, but also experiencing love in exile has now become a little bit nostalgic, and the way people express love is quite different from the way a poet expresses love. I mean, I am sure there are many places around the world that are longing for love. In the Democratic Republic of Congo despite the harsh conditions these last decades, but they do still sing *Bolingqo* all the time. It is only a damaged mind that can be scared of love. It is good therapy too, writing love poems to grow your love inside and outside.

**About**

**Rais Neza Boneza** (b.1979) is an artist, fiction writer, poet and peace activist originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Currently, he lives in Trondheim, Norway. He is a member of the TRANSCEND Network for Peace, Development and Environment and received an honorary doctorate degree (Honoris Causae) from the Institute of Management (ISGM) and the University of CEPROMEC in Burundi. Inspired by the reality of exile, Rais' work presents a successful mixture of the universal and the particular in a search for freedom and wholeness. His writing has been published in different magazines worldwide.

[raisnezaboneza.no](http://raisnezaboneza.no)

His book *Nomads of Exile*, is available on [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com).

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*Written by Serubiri Moses.*

Bujumbura | Doing our part to combat immappancy

Image courtesy Library of Congress and the G. Eric Matson, American Colony Photo Dept.  
*Red Bill (Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis) at the Khartoum Zoo, Khartoum, Sudan (1936).*