



By Sam Opondo



I

Listen

Our fishermen have always netted fish,
strange bodies,
and even stranger stories.
Stories of seductive mermaids and *Mami Wata*;
The terrifying Mokele-Mbembe,
and the Lochness Monster

With a Messiah
they caught all types of men,
and transformed the world to now say Amen
They also caught Nyamgondho's wife...
the not-so-beautiful woman,
who transformed a not-so-wise fisherman's life.
From the shores of the sea
they beheld the sign — *Ichthus*
and discovered the lyre of that great charmer;
That 'fisher of men' - Orpheus.

These are just some of their fishy stories;
stories of water monsters and water deities
stories of sea beauties, and human frailties
stories that we cannot help but listen to
stories that help us listen to the silence within
Or the silenced ones without...
The silence that is yet-to-come

II

Look

As he rows his old Ssesse canoe,
the fisherman tells a stranger water story
With quivering lips, and aching hips,
he tells of those who drowned on the land, and were buried in the water;
of those who tread the storied waters, and live in dread
of those who count the dead whose names remain unsaid

With hands trembling and hope crumbling,
he shows the baton that struck his daughter's skull,
The same batons and bullets that turn fishermen into strange fishers-of-men
Look he says...when the fisherman dies, his baby cries,
when the baby dies, the mother cries...

III

Tremble

With trembling hands and a bleeding heart
He cast his net and hauled in a strange catch
A heavy bag that carries the truth of the land
In whose recesses, lie the excesses of the land
A bag denied the man with a sacred hand
The man and the girl, who still haunt the land

As he hauls a catch too heavy for his net to bear,
he mourns for souls that are too heavy to care
for souls that stare and dare to cheer
at the fisherman's ire, and his perpetual fear

At the scared fishermen who remember how they cared,
for the floating dead of April 94, Rwanda
As they fished out men and *omena* from afar,
His scarred hands tremble and he mourns for the land
that cheers as it slowly turns into 1994

IV

Mourn...

With misery and memories of Kagera's deliveries,
He reflects with sorrow on today's mysteries

In these familiar waters, he has fished and wished
In these strange waters, he has seen Fish-Men and bad omens
with a heavy heart , he beholds these heavy waters
that refuse to dissolve, the unresolved truths of the land

Clear waters that reflect the dictates of the land
bloodied waters when the state mutates and hate becomes our mandate
bloodied streets when killers of men, and counters of men,
turn fishermen, into fishers - of - men

So he mourns and protests and even meditates,
how the heavy hand turns 'business men' into killers of men
and fishermen into fishers-of-men
How it turns widowed daughters into witnesses by the shore
Who wait to see what the net will bring forth
For they know and hear every fisherman's woes

He fishes and wishes ...
That his dear lover and worried wife,
for all the uncertainty and sorrow of this life
will not tomorrow receive him as a fished-man
All bagged and netted by these part-time fishers-of-men

V

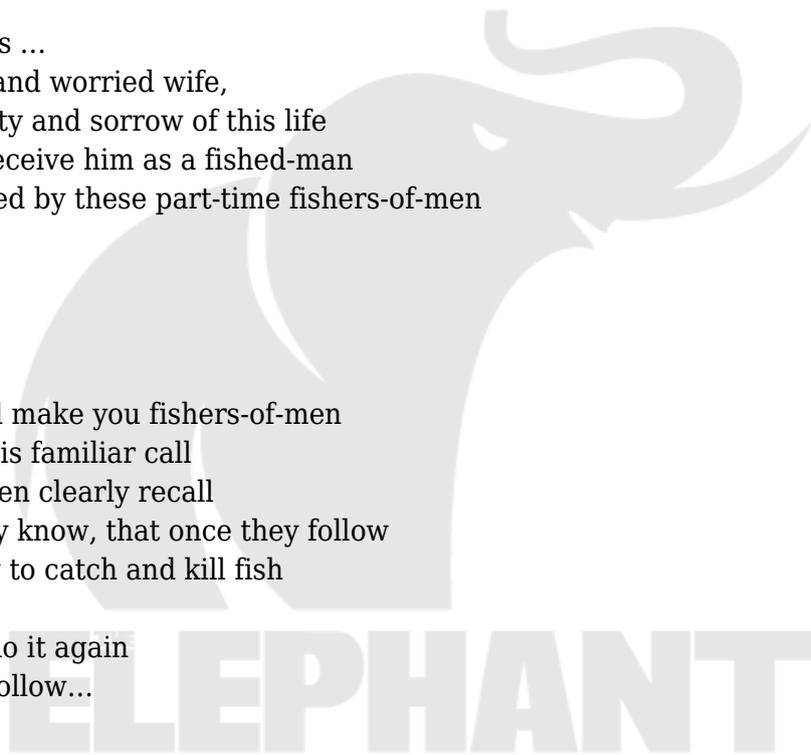
Follow

Follow Me and I will make you fishers-of-men
He is horrified by this familiar call
One that all fishermen clearly recall
And tremble for they know, that once they follow
once they learn how to catch and kill fish
once they like it...
it becomes easy to do it again
it becomes easy to follow...

He knows,
just like it became easy to catch fish
It will become easy to catch men
It becomes easy to kill fish ... Once you follow;

He knows that once you see life as hollow
With or without skill, you will learn
With even a mere stone, or an Ass's jawbone
to strip your catch to the bone

Once you follow;
You will catch the beautiful fish
You will stroke her rounded belly,
You will choke it by the gills;
scale it with a knife;
running all the way from its tail to its head



You will hang it on a hook;
weigh it, and then dry it

Once you follow;
You will smoke it;
salt it, and gut it;
First by sliding your knife into its anus
and then slowly through its abdomen, all the way to its head;

Once you follow;
With a sweating face, and a smile that lingers
you will part her abdomen with your bloody fingers;
You will pour out the roe...and call her a whore...
You will cut her family line,
as you pull out her filth-filled intestines

You...
yes you, with a smile
once you learn how to follow
you will rinse the empty cavity
and then...slit its sides;
and behold the rawness
and the freshness of its flesh
You will rub in the salt to keep its flesh fresh
And you will smile as it writhes in pain
For it is now almost 'your time to eat'

He knows that once you follow
once you trivialize the human cry;
once you disregard the call of the fishers-of-men
who know one day they themselves might be fished-men
Then, 'we' all become potential fished-men

VI

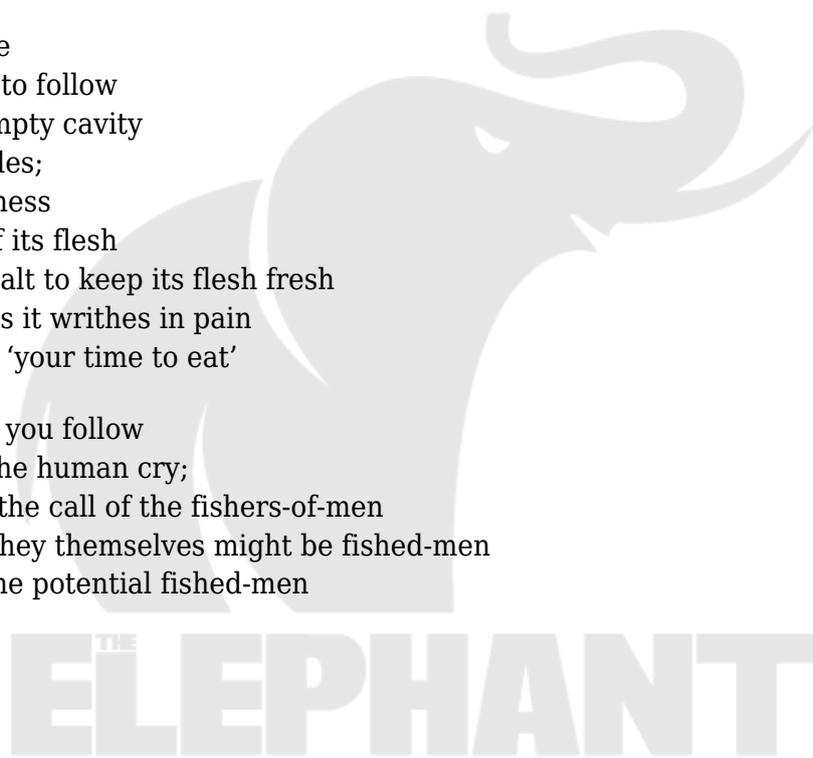
Question...

He is tempted to follow but he tarries...

He listens as you dissect his fishy stories
He wishes you would not rub salt
into the fisherman's bullet wounds

He hopes that you, once you apprehend his face,
you might want to pause and ask;
what kind of hunger, what kind of anger
makes one man turn his brother into a fisher-of-men?

What is it that makes the index finger point and accuse the distant stranger
Saying he is a danger?
What makes it wrap itself around the trigger and pull?
What is it that makes the parental hand cuddle one child and strangle another
Or wrap itself around the baton that dutifully crushes the baby's skull



What sense of duty, what banal evil, what kind of upheaval,
makes it so easy for the long armed man to haul the body into a body-bag?
To cast the dead into the lake, to hide them...for 'our' sake
to try to dissolve them or to erase them

Question!

Then listen to the fisherman's cry, he would prefer not to be
a fisher-of-men, a fished-man

VII

Doubt

As you listen to the fisherman's story,
Will you put your fingers into their bullet wounds...all you who doubt?
Yes, he is a mere story-man, an everyman...
He probably does not know by name, those who they hauled in their nets
You doubt that these mere fishermen can tell one body apart from another
That these fish-men know the difference between the fish's body and the human body

As he listens to your stories, he asks that you listen
otherwise ...
All you who say that they are mere fishermen
Net-casters and stone throwers
You doubters who say;

*Hao ni wala samaki
Ni watu wa hamaki
Hawataki Uthamaki
Ni machizi,
wako na hasira ya mkizi
Hao ni watu wa mawe na domo domo...*

He asks that for one minute, you listen to yourselves!!
And then...imagine;
the horror of men and women who mourn when they haul in a human being
in nets meant for other beings
The horror of men and women who can tell apart the many species of fish;
*kamongo and mumi,
omena and fulu,
ngege and mbuta...*
and now have to haul in a strange catch; One that tells them that they as fishermen,
They as fishers-of-men, are a lesser species of men

VII

Imagine...

The sorrow of this man
Of Men and women who know that this water body
is full of dead bodies. Full of spirits of the dead... *Nyawawa*
Spirits who are repelled by noise
Spirits who have gone silent

For they have now been joined by their wailing kin

Once you imagine, listen to those who mourn silently
Listen to those who refuse to be silenced

VIII

Listen Otherwise!

As he tells his stories,
Of killers of fish , who know the secrets of the killers of men
of children of the land, who, like Jonah of old,
are on the run...
are to be found not on the land, But in the belly of the seafaring beast
In the belly of the foreign body bag
Wet, submerged...hidden for three days

Listen...
He says to those who know the contents of their catch
Those who have inspected and counted
Those who have retorted
Those who have sorted and reported
Those who were sorted
Then into the water deported
And are now being hauled in like fish
Weighed like fish

He mourns, for he knows their ethical weight,
he mourns for the assumed weightlessness
Of those who have waited and searched
Of those who have wailed and sailed
Of those who have marched and been besmirched
and will soon tire of waiting

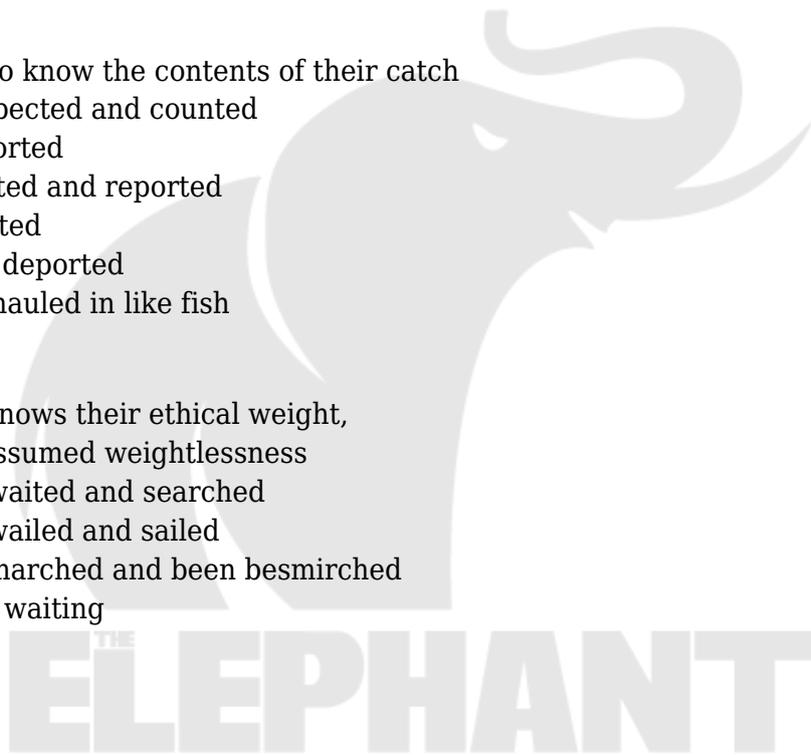
IX

Search

Listen and run, he says...

For those who have been told to wait might tire of waiting
Those who have been told to search
Might search elsewhere
They will not wait for the forensics
They might constitute another forum
and come up with a different form
A new *forensic*

Run...
For they no longer trust the truth-tellers
Or anyone who takes blood samples
Collects forms and brushes bullet cartridges
in order to tell them what they already know...



To tell them that they can't determine what everybody knows
To tell them that the bodies in the bags drowned themselves
Just like they were told in 1990
that one could shoot themselves in the head;
pour acid on their body; and then set themselves ablaze...
in that order

He listens as people start telling their own truths
New and old prayers
Blood oaths instead of blood samples
They still brush the dust off their bullets
and dried blood off their blades

As they ask...

"How long will we listen as these experts and their fishy half-truths?"

"Why should we listen to experts of blood and numbers who tell us that some lives do not count? Or that

we should all be counted?"

Who tell us that some deaths do not count...who attempt to fix what, how many, and who, we are?

What are we to do with these lay eugenicists? These 'techno-numerologists'? These demographic tyrants ...who tell us that some people do not count?

X

Believe

He no longer believes these expert truth-games
These experts who tell him that there is no need to know otherwise
That we cannot play other games. That we cannot live with others
...otherwise

XI

Play!!

He remembers his childhood.
A different time and a different rhythm
He remembers the child he has just lost...
The pain makes him tremble.
He remembers a childhood game...
One he didn't like much ...
The song haunts him...he plays with the idea

Apart...Together... Across-apart-together

XII

Wait

He has told you his story.
The fisherman's story. The story of fishers-of-men

So we wait

We interrogate
Not all truths
Just the fishermen's truth,
For our truth-games tell us that these fish-men are strange beings
That these strange fish-men have been weighed and found wanting
That these men who are not really men
do not count for much
That they are not worth listening to...

Are you afraid that if you listen otherwise you might learn something?
About yourself
About an other
About us
About...
Love
Just love

That when you listen to men turned into fishers-of-men
you might learn that we who are followers we are all potentially fish;
Bones, entrails, fresh and flesh.
We are all potentially gutted;
Hooked, salted,

We are all potentially predators and prey;
like *Mbuta*, that foreign big fish
we can create Darwin's nightmares in our families,
In our familiar waters
That we, small fish, are a diverse ecosystem
Are not only part of this system, but can be apart from it

XIII

Immersion

The streets are burning, bloodied, so he immerses himself in the water.
Holds his breath...
A new baptism, he has done it all his life
But today the water is heavy, tepid, 37 degrees...painful

He invites you too, immerse yourself ...
Not only in the water, but in the pain of the other,
Maybe the scales might fall off your eyes
So that we may see and listen to ourselves
That you may listen to these fishermen...
Amphibious men of land and water,
Men who know that we are all potentially fish;
healthy...delicious
beautiful...Rotten!!

Listen to these fish trappers
Men who have been trapped by other men
And are slowly being turned into man-trappers

Listen to men who know the difference between a hook and a net;
Not because they use it, but because it is wrapped around their neck
Men whose wounds warn us,
that when the net is cast far and wide
when the pond dries up, we will all be fish...
we will all be an accompaniment to bread
To ugali,
like *nyama choma*
But it will be someone else's 'turn to eat'

XIV

Swallow!

The lump in your throat. Feel what he feels.
Mourn for those who gloat
For those will not listen to the fisherman's wish
Because he does not act as they wish
Swallow your pride...
If you will not listen to the fisherman, at least listen to the fish
They tired of the body bags, bloodied waters choking their body of water

Listen to the fished-man's cry
For it is not our names that betray us
It our fishiness, our bodies
Our body bags
Our state
Our state of mind
That is what betrays us
That is what preys on us

XV

Attention

He is listening; looking; mourning; imagining; listening otherwise; swallowing his pride...he is trying to feel otherwise...trying to be otherwise.

But as he treads these bloody waters , it is made clear
that here,
some lives are no longer dear...
So he waits...

And hopes that...
As 'we' wait for the 'next day of judgment'
As new batons hit new skulls
As more bullets pierce more flesh
As fish-men, those fish eating men run on the streets...

Do not only listen to the gunshots and business reports,
Listen to the fishermen's lament,
Its specificity,
It can be your lament too

Maybe not today
Maybe not tomorrow...
Maybe it was yours yesterday
Maybe it will never be your cry
With empathy, listen nonetheless...

By Sam Opondo

Potential fished-man, potential fisherman, potential fisher-of-men

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).

