

**Repression and Comedic Performances: Kamuzu Banda's Rule and
Kwathu's *Ku Chipatala* and Umodzi's *Akupasule***

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Abstract

In this article I focus on re-reading what in African theatre and drama is described as 'radical', 'relevant' or 'committed' productions versus the so-called 'escapist', and 'mere entertainment' commercially staged comedies. Without undermining their standing, I recast the politically justified debate about 'committed theatre', using philosophical positions by postcolonialists such as Achille Mbembe, Terence Ranger, Francois Bayart and James Scott, before re-reading the so called 'escapist' comedies to disclose their commitment. I arrive at the position by contextualising the productions in the states of repression from which they came, and argue for a semiotic reading of the comedies, to reveal even deeper reflections of oppression. I apply the reading on Malawian 'escapist' comedy produced at the birth of Malawian popular stage drama, and the height of Banda's dictatorship in the early 1980s. Utilizing Kwathu Drama Group's *Ku chipatala (At the Hospital)* and Umodzi Drama group's *Akupasule (Marriage Breaker)*, I conclude that the comedies were radical, viewing them from the perspective of what Bayart calls 'weapons of the weak' in a fight against oppression.

In my earlier articles (Magalasi M. 2007 and 2008b), I explored ways in which theatre practitioners evaded or confronted Banda's repressive policies in their plays, while not directly showing the manner in which Banda's presence and absence influenced the practice in Malawi. The focus, however, was on dramatists from the University. In this article, I intend to show how Malawian popular theatre, which was outside of the university theatre, responded to Banda's repression. I utilize one of

Kwathu Drama Group's earliest Chichewa plays, *Ku chipatala* (*At the hospital*) and Umodzi Drama Group's *Akupasule* (*Marriage breaker*).

The choice of the plays has been deliberate, owing to the fact that they were first staged between 1981 and 1984, the time popular stage drama in Malawi emerged came about (Magalasi M. 2008a). Furthermore, this same period marked the height of Banda's repressive rule in Malawi. Opposition figures, in exile or inside the country, met deadly reprisals. Muwalo Nqumayo, with his brother-in-law who was the Special Branch Chief, Focus Gwede, accused of plotting to kill Kamuzu Banda, tried by traditional chiefs, had been hanged in 1978 with the in-law getting a life imprisonment. Apart from that, in 1981 Orton Chirwa, who went into exile after the 1966 Cabinet Crisis was abducted, together with his wife, Vera, and son, Fumbani, and were tried for opposing Banda while in exile; this earned the parents a death penalty which was later commuted into a life sentence, while freeing the child. Additionally, Attati Mpakati, a Malawian rebel leader who took refuge in Mozambique was assassinated in the lobby of Sheraton Hotel in Harare in 1983 by Banda's henchmen. Furthermore, university student dramatists Edge Kanyongolo and Zangaphee Chizeze were picked up for 'communist language' (personal interview with Kanyongolo in 2003) and detained at the notorious Mikuyu Prison in 1983. As if not enough, three cabinet ministers Dick Matenje, Aron Gadama and Twaibu Sangala, and Member of Parliament David Chiwanga, alleged to have opposed Banda's heavyweight John Tembo in a Cabinet session, were brutally butchered by the Special Branch and their death blamed on a road accident. A combination of these factors makes Kwathu's *Kuchipatala* and Umodzi's *Akupasule* the most appropriate plays for this investigation on repression and comedic performances.

The story of repression and theatrical performance is not entirely new in Africa. The different regions have had their painful and funny experiences. When Mango Shabangu interviewed Gibson Kente for *Sket'sh* magazine about Kente's approach to theatre in 1973, the central problematic issue Shabangu raised was that most of Kente's work was escapist; just for mere entertainment, and that the plays unwittingly supported the white regime's policies of separate development in South Africa (Magalasi, 1999). The 1970s, having kicked off with such radical Black Consciousness theatre pieces as Mthuli Shezi's *Shanti*, activists including Saths Cooper, Strini Moodley and Mafika Gwala dismissed approaches such as Kente's as a pretence that all was well in black communities, thereby producing the celebratory township musicals,

modelled on the liberal Union Artists' *King Kong*. As a consequence of such criticism, Kente produced anti-apartheid black theatre plays including *How Long?*, *I Will Wait* and *Too Late*, going further to put them on film in 1975. Hardly had he finished filming when the apartheid government agents picked Kente up and detained him. After his release from prison, Kente went back to his safe township musicals, as the black activists Mthuli Shezis were being squashed by moving trains at Germiston, and the Maishe Maponyas, Strini Moodleys and Saths Coopers ran up and down the non-white townships, escaping the security police, and others were thrown into Robben Island (Steadman, 1985).

In West Africa, the chronicles about Wole Soyinka and the 'cat and mouse' existence he has had with different military regimes in Nigeria also come into the picture. When independence came in 1960, the celebrations day's dramatic rendition, *A Dance of Forests*, unravelled, and Soyinka's radical intentions were very clear, making him a suspicious dramatist in the eyes of the rulers (Gibbs, 1981). Besides him, Ken Sarowiwa, in his attempt to reprimand the government in the way it dealt with issues of land in Ogoniland ended up being hanged by the military regime (Abodunrin, 2001: 43). Apart from these two, Femi Osofisan, using a Marxist approach produced many notable plays that confronted problematic issues in the Nigerian society (Amuta, 1989: 167). But on the other hand, Moses Olaiya, Hubert Ogunde and the Oyin Adejobi staged everyday comic and funny stories, with their spiritualist and magical representations which included various social stereotypes (Barber *et. al*, 1997). A closer look at the two camps' relationships with the different regimes saw the Soyinka camp on the wrong side of the politicians, as the Ogundes thrived with popular support.

In East Africa, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, with his participation in the Kamiriithu experience (which produced *Ngaahika Ndeenda* – later translated as *I'll Marry When I Want*) and the penning of such plays as *Mzalendo Kimathi* (*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*), amongst others, equally saw him and colleagues on the run from the Kenyan rulers (wa Thiong'o, 1987). Ngugi wa Mirrii, who was part of the Kamiriithu experience alongside wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo, could not return to his country until the time of his accidental death in Zimbabwe in 2007. In Uganda, Idi Amin murdered Robert Serumaga and the whole of his cast after a show that was critical of Amin's policies (Breitinger, 1999: 241). On the other hand, the Swahili street comedian still collected his reward coins from

appreciative passer-bys and shoppers in the streets of Nairobi and Kampala (Odera-Outa, 2001)

It can be argued, therefore that the cited three regional experiences bring out a vivid picture, not only about the way theatre was practiced, but also on how comedy from popular theatre in Africa has been presented as neutral and acceptable in repressive societies, thereby labelling such practice as 'apolitical'. While commentators such as Barber (2000) have highlighted the commercial intentions in such practices as the Oyin Adejobi Company, they have been silent on how such practices highlight another angle of responding to repression.

The repressive society, for the intentions of this paper, shall be understood through articulations by Achille Mbembe (2001), Jean Francois Bayart (1993), Terence Ranger (1985) and James Scott (1985, 1990), in their exposés about ways in which power was and is shared in the postcolonial state, or how peasants used banal activities as resistance against the colonialists. Finding themselves powerless in an atmosphere dominated by the powerful and the-always-violent rulers, the ordinary people negotiate to share the (postcolonial) space by avoiding direct confrontation. For their purposes, therefore, the everyday banal activities of whatever nature contain their resistance to the repression, equal to the amount of power their societies afford them (Mbembe, 2001: 104 – 106). Their method does not include grand revolutions as articulated mostly by the middle class revolutionaries. In Mbembe's reading, a deliberate twisting of a word in a song contextually changes it into a swearword in a ruler's praise song (105); or according to Ranger, staying away from the colonial farm, being described by the supervisors as 'typical of lazy Africans', silently reducing farm productivity-input, added to the fight against colonial repression in Northern Rhodesia (1985:42). Given a rather uncelebratory term as 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985), such an understanding of power relations in the postcolony will help locate the so-called escapist comedy as equally radical to other obvious confrontational productions staged by the Soyinkas and Shezis.

It is now common knowledge that popular Malawian stage drama started in the early 1980s, after the Chancellor College Travelling Theatre produced a Chichewa play, *Mchira wa Buluzi (Lizard's Tail)*, staging and distributing it through popular venues and the radio. A number of commentators, including myself, have attributed the upsurge in the use of Chichewa language as a key factor that encouraged popular dramatists to enter the stage, after being dominated by university and secondary school theatre for two decades. However, one key factor that all

commentators have failed to allude to is the origins of the comedic in Malawian stage drama, and how it actually pre-dates the Travelling Theatre and Writer's Workshop, as it can be traced back to the late 1960s.

In his exploration of early university theatre, James Gibbs, Innocent Banda and John Listrum wrote about dramatic activities between 1967 and 1972. While alluding to contributions by such British Technical teachers as Jean Jarvis and her co-ordination of a "Wole Soyinka Plays and Poetry Performance Festival" at Mpemba College of Public Administration, Banda also writes about theatre and drama at Soche Hill Teachers' College in Blantyre during the period (1973: 7). Here, dramatists such as Enoch Timpunza Mvula, coincidentally, the author of the 1980s popular *Lizard's Tail*, whose Chichewa translation, *Mchira wa Buluzi*, kick-started popular stage drama, also wrote plays such as *Medicine for Promotion*. The comedic nature of Mvula's plays was astounding. In the 1960s, the idea of being civilized, modern and Christian was very prevalent amongst educated Malawians. Taking the Christian demonizing perspective on African traditions, medicine and spirituality, use of African medicine by the educated to, for example, blind the boss to promote one, was seen as backwardness. To therefore bring it into a play provided comedy, as other educated modern Africans laughed to show how they had advanced beyond the backward and heathen practices. In the Soche Hill's School Christian Organisation and Dramatic Society's *Tobias Phombe*, the word *phombe* referred to beer. The play therefore offered humour by exploring the escapades of a careless drunkard, whose character bore the name of his heathenness, as it preached the message of modernity through Christian practices.

What is more, plays from the 1970s, some of which James Gibbs collected in an anthology called *Nine Malawian Plays*, incorporated the comedic approach in question. Chris Kamlongera's *Love Potion* had utilised a similar theme to Mvula's *Lizard's Tail* (Gibbs, 1984). In Kamlongera's play, Agnes, a housewife to Mike, a man who worked as a clerk in the city, placed a love potion concocted from herbs and roots, which momentarily changed the husband from being rough into a loving one (Kamlongera 1984b). In Mvula's, the roots dissolved in the food but what was seen were the remains of a lizard's tail. In Kamlongera's play, the characterisation of an uneducated housewife, married to an educated man, visited by an uncle Nkeka who came from rural areas brought out stitches of laughter in the audiences, according to people who watched the plays in performance (Kamlongera, 1984b). Even some of the serious plays included in the anthology, such as Innocent Banda's *Cracks*, relied

on the comedic approach, not only in using a beggar as the main character, but also the dialogue employed. For example, while begging from a Mr. Chisale, who never turned to look in Cracks' direction, Cracks pleads with him because "... I have seen you put a K5 in the offerings plate at church" (Banda, 1984). K5 in the 1970s and 1980s, almost equivalent to US\$ 5, could have arguably bought commodities for a big family of eight for about half a month. It can therefore be seen that the comedic approach had been tried and tested from the 1960s to the 1970s, surviving the then ongoing political repression overseen by Dr. Banda.

When the Travelling Theatre staged the Chichewa comedic *Mchira wa buluzi*, it was perceived to be 'lowering' itself from the high pedestal of Shakespeare and 'the well made plays' of the English University tradition to talk the language of ordinary Malawians. The popular dramatists in response recognized the accessibility of the language and safety of the approach to use it for embarking on a dramatic journey Malawian popular stage drama so needed. How then was the approach used by Kwathu Drama Group?

Kwathu Drama group was started by Charles Severe (Chimombo S. 1992:7). Then a producer for educational programs at the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, Severe viewed radio drama productions with interest. Besides that, he was a keen follower of university dramatic activities. Firstly producing a radio comedy series in his Midweek Magazine radio program called *Bokhobokho*, he used popular university dramatists such as Viphya Harawa as part of his cast (Magalasi, 2005: 214). When the Travelling Theatre staged *Mchira wa buluzi* at Kudya Entertainment Centre and French Cultural Centre in Blantyre in 1981, followed by an equally popular Chichewa drama, Steve Chimombo's *Wachiona ndani?*, Severe assembled a group of young people whom he had seen perform Biblical drama at Ndirande and St. Pius Parishes in Blantyre (214). A combination of these factors created a ground to produce popular plays for ordinary people, in a language they understood very well.

Ku Chipatala is arguably one of the first plays Kwathu Drama Group performed. The play ran for about forty-five minutes. Based on activities in the outpatients' department at Gulupu (Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital), the play starts with a set of line of chairs on which patients come to wait before entering the consultation room. Each of the patients-characters has something to do, to show, or to say before the doctor comes. Patient One is a man, dressed in an old dirty jacket, with a dirty white shirt, a necktie, and a woman's "hippie" 1970s sunglasses and is

barefooted. His entrance provokes roaring amusement in the audience. He hesitates and finds a seat next to the entrance, away from the doctor's door. Then comes Patient Two, another man, and he is dressed in a watchman's or a labourer's overall and an old pair of army boots without shoelaces. He hesitates on where to seat, seeing that the other man occupied the very first seat after the entrance. He then goes on to sit three seats in front of Patient One. Then an argument on who should be in front ensues, including mockery of each other in terms of jobs, dressing, mannerism of speech and education levels.

As the argument is on, Patient Three, another man, dressed in something that appears like a maternity dress, enters, appearing very sick. This quietens the arguing men. As they resume their seats, the two exchange glances, wondering about the gender identity of Patient Three. The first patient makes a passing comment, when the two realise that it was a man, and that some manner of dressing could make men to proposition other men. This dialogue of comments continues until Patient Three turns to look at each of them in turn with a serious yet sickly look, silencing them. The silence is then broken by the entrance of a male doctor, dressed in a white overcoat, white shirt and white trousers, and well polished black shoes, holding a stethoscope in his hands. When he enters, he looks at each one of the patients and then goes into the consultation room, shaking his head. He is then joined by a female nurse.

The first patient quickly passes by the other two to go into the consultation room when the doctor decides to momentarily go out, leaving the nurse and the patient. Asked to sit by the nurse, the patient hesitates and wants to go back to the queue, but the nurse stops him. Asking for his personal details, his names are all Malawian, and have about five syllables for the first name and five syllables for the surname, causing a lot of laughter amongst the audience members. The normal 'modern' naming amongst Malawians is to have an English first name and a Malawian surname, after what the Missionaries introduced by re-naming children to have a Biblical or English first name. After the patient gives his names to the nurse, come questions about the disease from which he suffers and the patient hesitates. Forced and threatened by the nurse not to waste time for other patients, the patient tries to whisper that he has gonorrhoea, and the nurse urges him to speak up. The patient hesitates and the nurse loudly mentions the disease, and the audience roars with laughter. When it is time for inspection, the patient hesitates and slowly pulls his trousers' zip down and turns to face the direction of the nurse. This time some of the audience members actually stand to

shout, holler and scream in excitement. After the inspection, the nurse writes on the patient's ticket the drugs he should collect from the dispensary. As he walks out, the male doctor comes back and resumes his seat. No sooner does he sit than a young beautiful female patient enters to join the queue, and the doctor spots her and calls her to come into the consultation room right away. The others are disgruntled but with just one stern look from the male doctor, they all fall silent.

In the consultation room, the male doctor asks for personal details of the female patient, including directions on how to get to her house, to which she responds with relish. After the consultation, the doctor volunteers to escort the female patient to the dispensary to collect medicine, and she agrees. When the two pass by the patients still on the queue, the patients grumble by contorting their faces, while facing the other side. Spotted by the doctor, they put on a big smile. When the doctor exits, the patients loudly complain to each other about the doctor's behaviour. The doctor's sudden entrance while the grumbling is on silences the patients, as he passes by to collect something from his table drawer. Coming out of the consultation room, he announces that he is going to lunch. The patients express wonder which turns into a smile when sternly looked at by the doctor, before he exits. The remaining patients still on the queue grumble, talking about the unfair treatment between male patients and young beautiful girls. Seeing that it is amounting to nothing, they leave the hospital to exit the stage, marking the end of the play.

There are a number of noteworthy things in the play. Firstly, the form of the play is like a situation comedy, which from my collection from those who acted in it, allowed them to easily develop it through improvisation. Let it also be noted that no script exists today. The description I have done above is based on what I saw on the three occasions I watched the play at the French Cultural Centre in the early 1980s, Kamuzu Institute for Youth in Lilongwe in 1989, and recently at the French Cultural Centre in 2003. The first part of the play had the characters dressed as they were, and it developed as they related to each other while in the queue at the hospital. The actors had the skeleton of the play in mind but the dialogue was made up as the structure unfolded.

Secondly, the clothes they wore started to bring up some of the social realities amongst ordinary people. Patient One put on a combination of clothes that not only reflected his social standing (dirty clothes - poor) and a woman's 'hippie' sunglasses, which showed aspiration for a sophisticated class. Take note that the hippie revolution of the 1970s had

just passed, during which reasonably affluent Malawians dressed in bell bottom trousers and big glasses, with pictures of Malawian models dressed in these clothes printed in *Star Magazine* (before bell bottoms were banned), and more from *Parade*, a Zimbabwean magazine. Patient Two was dressed in a labourer's overall, representing a class to which many ordinary Malawians belonged to.

Thirdly, the power relations between the medical staff and the patients was very telling about ways in which ordinary people viewed those who had some education and occupied some positions of power. In a country where literacy levels were very low, a break of ethics would not have mattered; and after all, where would the low class Malawians gather courage to complain about such maltreatment. Even now, this kind of relationship is still there in hospitals, making headlines when relatives of unknown ministers get the rude treatment. Furthermore, the ordinary people were able to go into argument with each other, or could grumble amongst themselves, only to be silenced with a stern look by a person in authority such as the doctor or the nurse.

Fourthly is the relationship between the performance, performers and the audience. While some members of the audience laughed out of embarrassment, it can be generally observed that their response to the play was loudly displayed as they enjoyed an afternoon out at a popular venue. Interestingly, people in reasonably good jobs rarely patronised popular performances in Chichewa language because it was seen as low class. In the kind of audience that patronised the comedies, vulgar comments, describing the act of sex to a couple would be made at times. For example, the suspicious leaving of the male doctor and the young female patient would prompt such raw and condemnably un-Christian comments such as *ukamuchinde* – go and have sex with her - as other members of the audience roar with excitement over what is on stage and the comment. But if this is how *Ku Chipatala* was presented, what about Umodzi drama group's *Akupasule*?

The advent of Umodzi Drama Group was equally dramatic. After the popular performances by the Travelling Theatre in 1981, a disparate group of people came together to form the company. In it was a popular traditional musician, Snowden Ibu. He provided music on his acoustic guitar as the cast members danced and sang to choreographed movements. Besides him was Isaac Chirwa, who had been part of the Travelling Theatre with James Gibbs at Chancellor College in the 1970s and had written plays such as *The Spear*. Outside the two were a number

of young people with an unknown theatre past but who exhibited a lot of natural talent for performance.

The play, *Akapasule*, was about a woman who was cheated on by the husband. After knocking off from his factory job, on a month end, he passes by a girlfriend's place to spend the night. Tired of being cheated on, the wife goes to a medicine-man who gives her herbs to turn her husband from a cheater to one who loved her, and her alone. When she comes back home in the evening, she mixes the medicine as instructed. She places the herbs in a *phale* - small broken pot - which has burning charcoal. And when the medicine starts to burn, issuing smoke, she calls out:

Akapasule, kumene muliko, ngati mumamva kukoma ndiwo zothira nchere, mumve kukoma mau anga awa, ndipo munyamuke mudzibwera (Mr. Marriage breaker, wherever you are; if you are able to feel the good taste of salt in relish, you should also feel the same way with the words I utter now, and you should come home right away).

When she goes back into the house, the words have an effect on the husband, who is still at the girlfriend's place. He then suddenly runs out of the house, putting on his trousers, zipping his fly, clasp his shirt in his hand. The girlfriend, startled by the sudden movement of the man, follows him, pleading with him not to go, and also that he had not yet given her the money for the monthly expenses. The husband does not listen and takes off, running to his wife. When he arrives home, he is such a loving man and the wife reinforces the situation by giving him nicely prepared food, which has a love potion in it. Soon, the husband listens to everything that the wife says, cleaning the house, plates and pots in her stead. He also goes to the garden to pluck pumpkin leaves and other traditional vegetables to prepare lunch. Apart from that, he gives all the money to the wife. Then suddenly, the husband's relatives visit them and are puzzled by the behaviour of their brother. When they query, the husband actually is the one who throws them out of the house, and confesses his love for the wife. After a number of days, the medicine's potency wanes and *Akapasule* comes back to his senses. The wife is just surprised by a sudden change from a loving husband to a rough one. When she tries to send him to collect water for her to drink from the kitchen, the husband shouts at her. When she asks the husband to serve her food, he throws the food at her, hitting her on the face. Horrified, she screams and runs out, with the husband in pursuit, to end the play.

Critically looking at Akapasule, it has scenes that take place in different places: the husband's family home and the girlfriend's house. The movement of the play alternates the action in the two spaces. Apart from that, Akapasule is built on a popular theme, evidenced in Malawian drama from the 1960s. It is a domestic drama with marital problems between the wife and husband. On top of that, African traditional medicine plays a big role in it. What is more, the woman is an unemployed housewife who wants the husband to love her but most importantly to give her money for home expenses. To achieve that, she resorts to the use of medicine. Additionally, the structure of the play is spaced with music and choreography, adding flavour to the already exciting plot. The job of the ordinary man also has not yet changed. He either works in a factory at Lever Brothers, making soap, or at David Whitehead and Sons, a textile manufacturing firm. And the reference to a rural family is still there, standing not only as a guide but as conscience for the couple.

Akapasule is a story of ordinary people, taking place in the townships. It reflects their desires, fears, challenges, and solutions. It is funny in nature and the audience relate to it because they see this in their everyday lives. It becomes funny because up until then, the language of drama was English, and not Chichewa, exemplified in the university and secondary school practices. In addition, such subject-matter about ordinary situations makes the story easy to relate to, attracting a big following amongst ordinary people. In the 1981 performance of Akapasule, staged in the 200-seater Mpingwe Church Community Centre Hall in a Blantyre township of Bangwe, people could not fit in the venue and more stood outside it. At the price of 10 tambala (10 cents), the hall roared with excitement and laughter. But the question that begs to be answered is: what was radical about comedies like Akapasule and Ku chipatala?

In a country such as Malawi which was experiencing a dictatorship, it was very difficult to speak about contentious issues like the ones cited above, more so by ordinary people. The society, according to analysts, was under the stranglehold of a system that did not tolerate criticism. It was in the responses by the leadership, sometimes, that one noticed signs of political unease and tension. For example, in his New Year's address to the nation in 1980, Kamuzu Banda included a warning to rebels that: "... All the rumours that the dissidents were spreading were in vain, came to nothing. Food was plentiful, definitely, enough for everybody". (*Daily Times*, January 2, 1980: 1) While not mentioning what the rumours were,

he was assuring the nation about the lying rebels and through it showed that he was still in control and running the country effectively. Another example came a year later, when a serious statement presented in a mild manner was printed on the front page of the Daily Times in a small box. Entitled 'Detainees to be released', the message read: "It has been announced from the Office of the Life President and Cabinet in Lilongwe that His Excellency the Life President Ngwazi Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda has been pleased to exercise his powers of reprieve in respect of many prisoners including Fern Najere Sadyalunda and Walter Dyson Chona" (July 4, 1981: 1, emphasis mine). The two mentioned here were not just common law prisoners but political detainees who had been detained years earlier in a sweep that saw, Albert Muwalo, detained, tried and hanged for treason in 1978. The writer of the newspaper article was very careful and deliberately removed prominence from the two by including them in a group of common prisoners who were to be released, though his heading said detainees. There was a difference, even then between detention and imprisonment. The two terms referred to political imprisonment, usually without trial, and common law incarceration, respectively. For fear of giving them prominence, which would sound as if he/she supported the freed rebels, the writer used language ambiguously. Also notice the repetition of 'Life President' in the name of the Office of President and Cabinet, and later as an honour attached to the president's name. A quick scan through the newspapers during this period reveals the dominance of Dr. Banda as subject for news: all for his praise, whether it was the un-debated budget of 1980 which had the biggest national deficit and was supported by, amongst other financial backers, the South African apartheid government ('Editorial', Daily Times, January 2, 1980), or a young minister like Tadius Phaiya praising the Ngwazi for making sure that the problems in the budget were quickly resolved (Daily Times, January 2, 1980), not to mention praise editorials that newspaper editors perfected to incorporate the best eulogizes of the Ngwazi. It is in a context like the one described that Malawi popular stage drama was born and tried to find a voice.

Akapasule and Ku Chipatala become radical because the everyday socio-economic and development issues that are embodied in the characters presents a semiotic reading of a society in economic, education, not to mention power relations, turmoil. The aspiration for a better life by Patient One's dressing is very telling. Being ordinary, with less literate and obviously with a low job, if any, Patient One could only dream of being well to do, exhibited by the type of clothes he wore,

mocked by the dirt and raggedness of his poverty. The old threadbare jacket, the woman's hippie sunglasses, and a tie are a metaphor for the wishes of the people from whose class Patient One comes. An example of the desired dressing can be seen in adverts for flights to London. Placed in the *Daily Times*, the advert showed a well dressed model, Miss White, in the type of sunglasses the man wore, as she sat next to an equally well dressed gentleman in a white suit, in a plane's passenger cabin. In addition to him, Patient Two, dressed in an overall extends the story of Patient One, as regards low paying jobs, therefore not well to do.

As regards power relations, education in the Malawian society meant power. The doctor in Ku Chipatala is able to dominate, rather immorally, even when people are dying of ailments, whose cure he holds in his hands. He can decide to go for leisure at any time he chose, and could pick on any woman he fancied, after all he had the education and the job which gave him a relatively good salary to afford him an overpowering social standing amongst the ordinary people. In addition to this, the nurse's attitude towards ethically professional secrecy on patients' illnesses took the issue of power relations further. Patient One could do nothing to stop the nurse from embarrassing him other than follow instructions of this socially powerful woman. In these encounters between the medical staff and the patients was embedded a semiotics of the stratification of power for this society, determined, partly by western education.

As for Akapasule, it raised very important issues about relationships of men and women during this time, which interestingly came to the centre of socio-political debates in the mid 1980s as feminism. While the literacy level for the nation was low, judged from the factory job that the husband did, most women were mostly housewives. Their economic well-being depended on how best to control the men they either were married to, or those who just wanted sexual favours and could be enticed into casual relationships. For this group of people, Christian morality and spirituality became relative. At most, their existence came first, as they used whatever means to survive the onslaught thrown at them by life's challenges, not to mention urbanisation. The means used by the wife dealt a blow straight in the face of 'claimed' modernity as she went to a traditional herbalist to change her life's situation. Even though things turned back after the potency of the potion had waned, a very clear statement about Malawian survival had been made, outside the city's proposed modernity approach. As for the girlfriend, the Christian moral principle against adultery never counted. What she saw as important was

her survival in a city in which a money economy prevailed, without which, one returns back to the village where the rural economy sweated peasants with harder manual work. While the Ngwazi claimed, as in his speech of January 2 1980, that all was well with the nation, unlike claims by the dissidents to the contrary, ordinary people still struggled and had to find a way of survival. All means available, modern or traditional, socially tolerable or not, had to be used. It can be seen then that while the school and university drama was busy trying to stage/wage grand revolutions in their plays, evading censorship and criticising the political leadership, the popular comedic stage drama came on to the stage with laughter and banality, embodying the issues which semiotically talked about repression and the battered well being of ordinary people in a postcolonial dictatorship such as Malawi, under the rule of Life President Ngwazi Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda.

What has this paper explored? Starting off with an exploration of ways in which the popular comedic drama in Africa has not been acknowledged in terms of its contribution to radical theatre that raised pertinent issues about repressed societies, the paper briefly surveyed the different regions of Africa. In South Africa, the experience Gibson Kente had in the face of radical Black Consciousness theatre, on one hand, and apartheid's repression on the other, we explored how Kente was forced to abandon his township musical style to produce 'radical plays', which momentarily saw him go to detention. In West Africa, Soyinka and such people as Femi Osofisan and Ken Sarowiva produced radical theatre, and yet the practice of Hubert Ogunde, Moses Olaiya and Oyin Adejobi was not acknowledged as regards radicalism towards pertinent societal issues. They were rather acknowledged for their commercial success. The story of *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o* and *Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ* at *Kamĩrĩĩthu* or the murder of Robert Serumaga brought in the East African experience, which downplayed the role of the Swahili street comedian as inconsequential as regards response to bigger political issues. Recasting radicalism and revolution in light of articulations by African postcolonialists such as Mbembe and Ranger, Malawian popular stage drama especially that produced at the height of Banda's repression in the early 1980s, was described and analysed. The focus in the analysis was not only of the funny content of the plays for its sake, but to exhibit how what was described as low class escapist comedy contained radical ideas about society. Viewing them through characterisation, costume and language for example, it became clear that the plays were an embodiment of society, that they used semiotics to comment on issues that affected

ordinary Malawians under the rule of Dr. Banda. The main point that the article makes, therefore, is that a proper reading of Malawian popular 'unradical' comedies, despite the low class dramatists that produce them, and the 'escapist' comedic approach used, incorporate a lot of contentious issues, reflecting the socio-political, cultural and economic systems that they emanate from. So while the Steve Chimombos, Lance Ngulubes, David Kerrs and James Gibbises are acknowledged for producing radical theatre that protested against Banda's harsh rule over Malawi (Magalasi 2007), the small, ordinary-looking dramatists equally contributed to the reflection, if the reading of popular culture and resistance through 'banal' activities by Achille Mbembe, James Scott, Francois Bayart and Terence Ranger is anything to go by.

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