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To Outwit or not to Outwit Censorship in Malawi: University Theatre and Banda's Policies in the 1970s

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Abstract

This paper is about ways in which drama created by members of the University of Malawi's Chancellor College Travelling Theatre, in conjunction with the Writers' Workshop, responded to the oppressive policies of Hastings Kamuzu Banda in the 1970s. James Gibbs, Patience Gibbs, Chris Kamlongera, David Kerr and Lupenga Mphande have written about the subject in their respective studies. What makes their articles different is that they wrote while Banda was alive and their commentary and analyses were limited for fear of reprisals both for the dramatists and themselves as critics. Written twelve years since Banda was ousted from power by multi-party stalwarts, and nine years after his death, the present article is able to make direct commentary through an exploration of Lance Ngulube's *Phuma! Uhambe!* Innocent Banda's *Mad like a Prophet* and Dede Kamkondo's *The Vacant Seat*; a sample that brings out new insights about the way the dramatists outwitted Banda's censors and staged their plays, or directly confronted Banda's policies and their drama never saw the light of the stage. *Phuma! Uhambe!* made it through the Censor's watchful eye while *The Vacant Seat* and *Mad Prophet* were spotted from a distance.

Introduction

Writing *Drama and Theatre in Malawi: A Study of their Development and Directions* for her MA degree, Patience Gibbs gave an account of girls' initiation ceremony amongst the Yao people of Southern Malawi in order to identify dramatic elements, as a base for understanding plays that were produced locally in the 1970s (Gibbs, 1980: 2). Furthermore, she gave a brief account of activities in Malawian theatre from 1900 to 1967: the time the university became active, before analysing ten published plays that

university dramatists produced between 1972 and 1978. Nine of the ten plays were published in a collection called *Nine Malawian plays*, but her analysis of the tenth play, *The Rainmaker* by Steve Chimombo, was particularly interesting. In the assessment of *The Rainmaker*, she suggested that Chimombo's inspiration came from the socio-political context he lived in:

> A personal dimension is successfully conveyed in "The Rainmaker's" deeply felt concern with the oppressive figure of Kamundi and the desire for change (Gibbs, 1980: 3).

Like Chimombo and the other members of the Writers' Workshop in the 1970s, Gibbs disguised her explicit interpretation of political criticism in the play, and yet remained very indicative of the oppressive situation by alluding to the voice of dissent carried in the 'personal'. She recognised the villain figure, Kamundi, and the 'people's' desire for change in the society. If she had replaced the suffix *ndi* with *zu* in the name *Kamundi,* she could have had the name Kamuzu, Dr. Banda's first name. One might suggest that, apart from the quest to maintain the play's poetic depth, she had avoided such political references for fear of reprisals from the government on the playwright, who at the time taught at the University of Malawi.

Writing under the same dispensation but in Leeds, Chris Kamlongera analysed four stage plays, selected from the second half of the 1970s, including *The Rainmaker*. Kamlongera observes Chimombo's usage of myth, and writes substantially on how *The Rainmaker* highlighted the character, Kamundi, as an oppressive figure who clung to power:

> The obvious and central theme in the play is the question of power and authority in society. Through the character of Kamundi, Chimombo shows how an individual trusted with authority by society can grow to be greedy and tyrannical against the very people he not only works for, but from whom he gets both spiritual and physical support. When the play opens, Kamundi has been the python priest for some time. He is called upon to fulfill his duty to the community. Should he fail, he must give way to another person…. The reason for refusing to give way is not that he can still perform his duties, but because he believes he is infallible (1984: 280 – 81).

Kamlongera adds more contextual suggestions to the meaning of the play in reference to trust given to political leaders, who turn out greedy and tyrannical. He alludes to the leadership's refusal of succession, even after failing the society in its expected role.

The succession to Kamuzu Banda's presidency was a taboo topic from the start of his reign in Malawi. According to Philip Short, Banda manipulated the 'cowed' politicians who remained in his cabinet after Kanyama Chiume and the Cabinet crisis. Furthermore, after being

captured, Silombela, a leader of a military incursion, was beheaded and his head was put on a stake and publicly displayed for all to see. Such display of ruthlessness, identified in postcolonial dictators, helped in shaping the 'monarchial' power most of them wished for. In 1971, Banda changed the constitution and wrote in the clause for life-presidency without any opposition. The coincidence of these activities to Chimombo's *The Rainmaker*, which was written in the 1970s, is too close to be ignored. Given the repressive situation, however, Chimombo criticized the situation via myths and legends. Anthony Nazombe made further remarks on Chimombo's usage of myth in his doctoral thesis, additionally illuminating how the playwright succeeded in commenting on the repressive socio-political situation in Malawi (Nazombe, 1984).

James Gibbs further appreciated the dimension that emerged in *The Rainmaker*'s performance by equating it to other plays allowed by the Censorship Board to be performed, such as *Antigone* and *Julius Caesar.* In his book, *Singing in the Dark Rain: Essays on Censorship in Malawi,* Gibbs writes:

> For a moderately subversive observer, one of the highlights of a performance of *Antigone* in Malawi was the audience's reaction to the … exchange between Creon, an ageing ruler used to getting his own way, and Haemon, a youthful challenger…. At Zomba, Haemon's remarks drew gasps of delighted surprise and recognition that stirred the dark Malawian night. *Julius Caesar* also made its point…. Some of the scenes were presented in modern dress … (with) some members of the audience standing around the "corpse of Caesar"…. The experience engulfed the audience, the actors, and the crowd (1999: 7-8).

Gibbs' observes the allegorical commentaries on Kamuzu Banda's abuse of power in his reference to *Antigone* and *Julius Caesar*. In addition to that, he implicitly reveals similarities between the main characters in the two plays and *The Rainmaker*, all of which have a ruler who refuses to take advice from other people. *The Rainmaker* can be seen as one of the plays which outwitted the Censorship Board in its attempt to eliminate political criticism.

Other members of the Writers' Workshop and Travelling Theatre wrote plays similar to *The Rainmaker, s*ome of which were successfully staged, others rejected. This paper intends to reveal what the Censorship Board blocked from the public for those plays that were disapproved of, and from exploring performance and narrative aspects used in those that were approved, show how the latter outwitted the Board to successfully gain the required authorization. Lance Ngulube's *Phuma! Uhambe! (Get Out! and Go!),* Innocent Banda's *Mad like a Prophet* and Dede Kamkondo's *Vacant Seat* will serve as case texts for the study. We start with Ngulube's *Phuma!*

Uhambe!

PHUMA! UHAMBE!

Lance Ngulube came to Chancellor College in 1972. He attended meetings of the Writers' Workshop and took interest in the Travelling Theatre. He was part of a community which included such artists and critics as Jack Mapanje, Steve Chimombo, James Gibbs, Ken Lipenga, Patience Gibbs, Lupenga Mphande, Adrian Roscoe, Patrick O'Malley, Innocent Banda and Enoch Timpunza Mvula. In their different essays, writers such as Gibbs, Mphande, Mapanje, and O'Malley have remarked on how the authoritarian rule in the country inspired creative writing in different ways, including use of traditional material, as Ngulube does in *Phuma! Uhambe!*

Phuma! is set in a Ngoni/Tumbuka village in Northern Malawi. Masozi's new-born baby, Chakufwa, has fallen ill. The matter is referred to a medicine-man who reveals that Mufwenge, an elderly man from the village bewitched the child. The medicine-man also points out that Mufwenge intends to inherit Masozi, who has been recently widowed. Furthermore, Mufwenge is said to magically create lions that break into people's kraals to steal cattle. As is typical of such issues, the case is taken to Inkosi who concludes that Mufwenge should be banished from the village. At the announcement, the whole village joins in and shouts *Phuma uhambe! Phuma uhambe*! (Out you go! Out you go!). In response to this, Mufwenge casts more evil spells on the villagers to silence them, and does not leave.

It should be noted from the start that in the old Ngoni/Tumbuka society, social misfits such as wizards were banished from the village. Ngulube's reference to the matter is therefore well grounded in the Ngoni culture in which the play is set. However, in the larger Malawian society it was clearly evident that 'banishment' into 'exile' had become a Banda tool in Malawi during his reign. Two years after independence, all those ministers he disagreed with went into exile and he dismissed them in public as *zigawenga* - rebels. Frank Chipasula, who could not take it anymore, left the country for exile. Ngulube was aware of all these events, being part of the group of intellectuals who met, for example, at the Writers' Workshop. The theme of exile runs in a number of works that made their rounds in the 1970s, including Chimombo's *The Rainmaker*, Frank Chipasula's poetry contained in the collection *O Earth, Wait for Me* (1984), and Anthony Namalomba's poem 'Out you go' (1977) etc. Ngulube's inspiration therefore can be seen to come from such a socio-political and creative environment. But what does characterization in *Phuma Uhambe* reveal?

Right from the prologue, the relationship between the chief, the *Induna* and the villagers exposes layers of contradictions. At the *mphara* - chief's

open ground - the *Induna* warns the people of the Inkosi's approach to the ground in this way:

> … Silence everyone! Here comes the Inkos*i*! Prostrate!
> *And the villagers greet the chief in unison*:
>
> … *Bayete Inkosi*! Your decision is always final!
>
> *The chief opens his address to the villagers*:
>
> Witchcraft in my dominion is punishable by banishment…. My chieftainship remains mine forever. My sons remain to be obeyed and respected. [*Villagers murmur*] Did I hear any murmurs at the back?
>
> *The villagers' response goes this way*:
>
> *Bayete Inkosi*! Not even the ancestral spirits would be foolish enough to object.
>
> *Satisfied, Inkosi pronounces the verdict*:
>
> Good, we must maintain the spirit of oneness. By the power which lies in me as your chief, I have considered the case… I am convinced that I can only do one thing about it – [*A buzz of murmurs interrupts the speech*]
>
> *The chief Induna disciplines the villagers*:
>
> Silence! You make a wild noise as if you are all witches. Keep still and listen.
>
> *Inkosi continues in this way*:
>
> It does not please me to send a kinsman to his damnation. But in such circumstances, compassion must give room to justice. He that practices witchcraft separates himself from our community. I therefore pronounce that my verdict is [*Momentary pause. Sound of drums, then faintly*]
>
> PHUMA UHAMBE!
>
> [*Violent drumming. An uproar of abuses from villagers shouting* 'Phuma uhambe' *as they chase away* Mufwenge] (*Phuma*: 2).

The Inkosi receives exaggerated praise displaying undertones of sycophancy or 'performance' of fear on the part of the villagers. In their salutations to the chief, they express the idea that he is more powerful than even the ancestors. This is surprising since, normally, chiefs consult ancestors for wisdom to guide the living. In the present case, there is an inversion of power because even the ancestors are reported to be afraid of him. Furthermore, the villagers' greeting emphasizes the chief's divine

ability to make 'irreversible decisions'. While ascending to the throne by inheritance is true of kingships and chieftainships in traditional Ngoni/Tumbuka societies, the deliberate emphasis of 'chieftainship is mine forever' rings satirically in the mouth of Inkosi. What is more, the murmurs from the villagers suggest that there is resistance to the chief, yet when prompted, the villagers join in to loudly pronounce the judgment.

The contradictions in the villagers' demeanour allude to Achille Mbembe's articulation of repressed subjects in the postcolony. Mbembe (1992:) posits 'mutual zombification' as a state of affairs in which the postcolonial state is confronted with monstrous leadership, and ordinary people's performance of fear becomes a negotiating tool to share the postcolonial space. The leader knows that he survives because of the brutal tools at his disposal. On the other hand, the subjects, unable to match the brutal force, play along to survive, while registering their disapproval in subtle waysWhat, for example, became of those who stood against Banda in the 1960's such as Silombela, his guerrilla uprising, and the final public display of his lifeless head? Ngulube displays an intelligent use of traditional discourse on broader modern Malawian politics under Banda.

Generally looking at the play, the united chasing of the wizard out of their village was a possible reading of how Malawians subconsciously responded to Banda's dictatorship at the time. In public, people agreed with whatever his decision was but grumbled in private. Adrian Roscoe who reviewed the play after its first performance observed that:

> (He is) questioning … the values of the Ngoni/Tumbuka tradition of banishment and he is not merely exposing the tradition for the sake of entertainment (1976:).

Phuma! was approved and given a performance permit by the Censorship Board, according to James Gibbs, who organized a First Chancellor College Theatre Festival in 1974 which was staged at the Chirunga Open Air Theatre.

From the description above, and assuming he intended to make a political comment, it is clear that Ngulube used a number of devices to escape the censor's watchful eye. He used traditional material, complex characterization and irony to successfully camouflage criticism of Banda's leadership and policies. Ngulube's writing, however, was different from the way another playwright, Innocent Banda, wrote *Mad Like a Prophet*, whose assessment follows.

MAD LIKE A PROPHET

According to Patience Gibbs in her 1980 study, Innocent Banda's was born in Mutapa outside Bulawayo, Rhodesia in 1948 and came to Malawi when he was thirteen. His father came from Kasungu, and went to

Rhodesia after qualifying as a student-teacher with the Methodist Church. When the dramatist was young, he liked copying pictures: a reason Gibbs attributed to the pictorial nature of *Cracks*, one of Banda's plays (1980:92). Gibbs also mentioned Banda's travels as inducing in him a sensitivity towards other people. This sensitivity, in addition to a poetic urge to go beyond reality, will help in the reading of his play, *Mad Like a Prophet*.

In the play, the voice of an exiled madman renders poetic criticism of the madman's brother who has banished him from the land of their parents. Accompanying the mad prophet is the Voice which chants and complains about oppression. Besides talking about oppression in the land where the mad prophet comes from, the Voice appeals to God for help. Later, a realistic scenario brings out an argument. A father warns his son not to resist the colonialists because they made him chief. The son, however, does not heed this, and goes ahead to mobilize people to resist the colonialists. As a result, the country attains independent rule. In celebrating freedom, a big party for 'new *Bwanas*' (bosses) is organized at a big hotel in the city. Only those who have high education and big posts attend the party. The son's father, who has accompanied him to the party, notices the similarity between the 'new bwanas' and the colonialists. They eat good food and drink imported liquor. When the party ends, the Mad Prophet, accompanied by the Voice of the oppressed, admonishes the new bwanas that 'they dine while seated on "corpses" of the struggle for liberation'.

Mad Like a Prophet combines surrealism, realistic scenes, poetry, background sounds, and commentary. It has several 'voices' that render poetic pieces within realistic scenes, and the poetry connects two different scenes. The play opens in the following breathtaking way:

> …wild wind; introducing rural sounds and snoring; slowly all of them rising to a fearful climax … then a crash of thunder stops everything to a dead silence … Then the voice of the Mad Prophet: rough but strong; crude, rebukes, predicts and assesses the situation (*Mad Prophet*: 1).

The playwright uses the wind as a background in an evocative painting. Rural sounds and snoring become images that are 'painted', fore-grounded on the windy backdrop. They grow louder in volume, only to be abruptly stopped by an explosive sound of thunder: a prelude to the entry of Mad Prophet. The texture of the opening mood prepares the audience/reader for a presentation that mixes reality and fantasy.

Innocent Banda's obsession with madness, first expressed in his other play, *Cracks* (1984), seems to indicate the writer's attempt to use a form that enables him to fully articulate the *status quo* in a stylized manner, which afforded the performance an opportunity to directly address the audience, through poetry and prose. The mad prophet tries to convince the reader/ audience to be on his side because he openly shouts: 'I am a prophet'. The

reason why the mad prophet should be listened to is stated by another character, the Voice, who pleads:

> Rise, O lord
> to the aid
> of your people.
> Our backs are doubly bent…
> … in slavery…
> Listen O Lord,
> to the echo
> of the oppressor's whip
> gnawing the backs
> of your people
> in the south
> as they polish gold… (*Mad Prophet*: p. 3)

The Voice pleads with the Lord for himself and others because of the enormity of the problem. There is no leadership which productively directs the people to liberation. And feeling abandoned the oppressed appeal to God. Furthermore, the Voice, heard besides the mad prophet's, is not a lone one. Using the pronoun 'our' to suggest a plurality of suffering voices, the victims cry with the oppressor's whip in South Africa 'as they polish gold'.

There is a connection between South Africa and the land from which the mad prophet is banished. Malawians went to work in South African and Rhodesian mines because of lack of such resources in their country. The dependency on agriculture by Malawians made the mines a better source of income. It is also evident that the mad prophet's 'preacher-brother' is connected to these oppressors. Despite criticism, Kamuzu Banda was the only leader in Southern Africa who kept diplomatic ties with the regimes described as racist and oppressive such as South Africa and Portuguese East Africa (PEA). Nationalists in South Africa and Mozambique saw this act as a betrayal of the struggle for freedom in Southern Africa (Short, 1974). Innocent Banda seemed to agree with the criticism that the nationalists made of Kamuzu Banda's policies.

Inheriting the colonialist's house, the son, who is now a District Commissioner, has a house servant, just like his white predecessor. He is invited to the Republic celebration dinners in big hotels, to which only "the bwanas" are invited. On one occasion at the hotel, the son meets his friend, Samson, who has grown a pot belly, a double-chin and drives a good car. Sam is already drunk by the time he comes to the celebrations, prompting the son to be very critical the behaviour of the other "bwanas". He reminds Sam that the freedom was fought for by the people, many of whom are not present. The extravagance of the party equally perplexes the father, who has accompanied the son. The play thus raises several issues. Right from the opening, it is evident that it captures the state of affairs in Malawi at the

time Innocent Banda wrote the play. The wild wind represents an unstoppable force that blew over a majority of the citizens, threatening them into conformity. The rural sounds and the snoring stand for the slumbering citizenry, who are woken up when the thunder cracks, and with all the sounds abruptly silenced, the voice of the mad prophet is heard.

On characterization, the mad prophet is a representative of people who opposed Dr. Banda, and were not welcome in independent Malawi. Many of them were thrown into jail, exiled, or killed. The Cabinet Crisis of 1964 had sent Masauko Chipembere, Kanyama Chiume, David Rubadiri, and Willie Chokani, among others, into exile (Short, 1974). Writers such as Innocent Banda, Felix Mnthali and Jack Mapanje were 'looking for a voice' to raise issues about the state of affairs in Malawi. In fact, the use of the term 'mad' is a cynical celebration of critics whom Kamuzu Banda saw as 'insane', and yet the term also expressed how most of the people in the country felt about him.

The most important debate that the play raises, however, is on rulers of the independent state. Both educated people and villagers fought the anti-colonial wars. On attaining independence, it was the educated people alone who benefited. The father notices similarities in the behaviour of his son, who is a new Bwana, to that of the colonialists. The following exchange between them illustrates this point:

> Father: … My son it's my time to speak to you.
> Son: (*To a servant*) Go and make tea for us. Don't make it strong…
> Father: Just like Bwana Thompson. I am sure you don't like your tea with too much sugar…
> Son: (*Laughs. He assumes a European accent*) One sugar please? (*Mad Prophet*: 9)

While this type of snobbish talk initially came from colonialists, it was later assumed by educated natives who attained high positions in the new dispensation. Frantz Fanon (1990) prophesied that after independence, the leadership, because of being denied 'good life' by the colonialists, would desire to live like their predecessors. Fanon argued that the leaderships' western education did not prepare them enough to be liberators because they themselves were not liberated. Instead of having visions for the benefit of all, they aimed for personal comfort, rising to the heights white people had always blocked them from.

Another instance of psychological weakness is detectable in the party scene when Sam, the son's colleague, comments on food that:

> …Hey look over there mounds of food. My God, this is freedom. White man's food. Food for Bwanas… I have never known freedom to be so appetizing…

> Samson: **(**to the Son) … Hey, what's the matter with you… you can't allow yourself a freedom drink. Freedom maketh my mouth water. What else can I say? For me freedom means a pot belly and a car (*Mad Prophet*: 12)

Provocative, the playwright satirizes the character to emphasize the point of self actualization in the psyche of the new Bwanas who, because of their education, had always wanted to be materially comfortable, but colonial policies would not let them. Having attained independence, it was their time to enjoy the benefits of their education and struggle against the colonialists, at the expense of uneducated people who also played a very important role in the anti-colonial wars. How many people, for example, were given loans to start estates and farms during Kamuzu Banda's era? According to David Kerr, Kamuzu Banda called himself *Nchikumbe Number 1* – Farmer Number 1 (Kerr 1998). Government ministers and party officials were given loans to open farms. At the same time, ordinary people were stifled through restricting space in secondary schools and university to avoid enlightenment en masse and also to create more labour for the now black owned estates. When Innocent Banda wrote *Mad Like a Prophet,* he was pointing at policies and practices that underdeveloped Malawians.

Unlike *Phuma Uhambe, Mad Like a Prophet* was never performed. Its direct references to the leadership's dominance in enjoyment of benefits of independence could have not only prevented it from obtaining a permit for performance, but could have also discouraged the writer from attempting to apply for the Censorship Board's approval. Nonetheless, direct reference was not the only criteria on which plays were rejected, as shown in Dede Kamkondo's *The Vacant Seat* which is discussed below.

THE VACANT SEAT

Dede Wisdom Kamkondo attended Chaminade Secodary School, which was a hub of ATEM dramatic activity in the early 1970s, before coming to Chancellor College in 1974. He participated in both the Writers' Workshop and the Travelling Theatre, interacting with such people as Felix Mnthali, Adrian Roscoe and Jack Mapanje. In 1979, Kamkondo edited *The Muse*, a magazine for critical writing and performance at Chancellor College. Filling his editorial pages with humorous comments, he encouraged both students and staff to contribute to *The Muse* (see *The Muse* 22–32, 1979). Kamkondo later joined the teaching staff at the University of Malawi as a Lecturer at Bunda College, and published numerous short stories and novels such as *Children of the Lake*. Kamkondo wrote the *The Vacant Seat* for a Travelling Theatre writing competition when he was in his first year at Chancellor College. It was voted the best play in a competition adjudicated by a panel that included James Gibbs and Patrick O'Malley (*The Muse* 6, 1976).

The Vacant Seat is about succession to chieftainship. The late Chief Shaki's second wife, Sokoni, wants her first born son, Sawa, to be chief, contrary to the traditional norm which stated that only a first-born son by the first wife succeeds his father. Sokoni instructs Sawa to ambush Mubanga, the rightful successor to the chieftaincy, who is expected to come back from South Africa, where he works in the mines. Shembe, Sokoni's brother, in an effort to please the sister, also arranges with three thugs to kill Mubanga on his return. Mubanga, anxious to arrive home looking smart, stops by a river to bathe and change into new clothes, leaving his old trousers and suitcase unattended. Sawa steals these and wears the trousers. With the appearance of a man in trousers, carrying a suitcase, the thugs, who had been lying in wait, mistake him for Mubanga. They kill him, cut his head off, and place it in the suitcase to present to Shembe. Without checking the contents, Shembe proudly takes the suitcase to Sokoni as a gift. When Sokoni opens the suitcase, she is understandably horrified. Kamkondo scripts a story of grisly murders performed to fertilise power of ruling families who stick to power.

As regards characterization, Sokoni drives the story. When she enters in the opening scene, she is told about the council's decision to uphold Mubanga's right to the chieftaincy and becomes very upset:

> Ridiculous! Absurd! That's not their decision … it can't be … (*pulls at her hair*)
>
> Shembe interjects:
>
> I was there, sister. Am I not a member of the council? They completely outvoted us … oh, the embarrassment … (hides his eyes) (*The Vacant Seat*: 1).

In her anger, Sokoni accuses Shembe of being drunk at the meeting and asserts that Mubanga was chosen because Shembe, who was supposed to oppose the choice, was weak. Through such an exchange, Sokoni displays how powerful and central she is in this kingdom. This aesthetic of a powerful woman is further shown in scene three when Sokoni has the following exchange with Sawa:

> Sokoni (*angrily*): Sawa! … You were not listening… Did you stay out late last night?
> Sawa: No, mama…
> Sokoni: You are like that boneless brother of mine when he was young…
> Sawa: But, mama (*The Vacant Seat*: 3)

Throughout the scene, Sokoni tells Sawa what to do and what not to do. His responses 'yes mama. No mama…' show how powerless he is in

front of his mother. In addition, Sawa's insistence on 'no mama… yes mama', which he does six times in a space of three minutes could make one toy with the idea that the constant use of 'mama' was in reference to the Government Hostess, Cecilia Kadzamira, whom Kamuzu Banda had started to call 'Mama', apparently after Kenyan President, Jomo Kenyatta, visited Malawi with his wife, Mama Ngina in the early 1970s.

Shembe is another major character. He is a member of the royal family by virtue of being a brother to Sokoni. Although a drunkard, he is intelligent and makes his own plans, as shown in this exchange with the thugs:

> Shembe: … You can go now. Remember the instructions. The stranger will be carrying a suitcase and he will be dressed in town clothes. Your job is simple… cut his head off … and bring it to me. No head, no return…
> 1st Thug: Are you sure the young man will be alone?
> Shembe (*annoyed*): Was I born yesterday, you piglet? (*The Vacant Seat*: 2)

The authority he carries is clear, and the thugs are cowed. It might be said that his perpetual drunkenness was a sign of wealth, not a weakness. His cold-bloodedness also comes out clearly in, firstly, the planning of the murder, and secondly, in the threat of harsh consequences for the thugs on failure to accomplish the assignment. The thugs carry out the assignment though in the end it turns out that they killed the very person who was supposed to be protected. Central to the plot of *The Vacant Seat* is a known Malawian proverb, '*choipa chitsata mwini*' – an evil plan always turns back on the plotter. There is an evil plan at the center of this story instigated by a very powerful woman. Unfortunately, the ancestors prove more potent than the underhand plotters.

There are striking similarities between the theme of *The Vacant Seat* and the power hierarchy prevalent in Malawi from the 1970s to early 1990s. Firstly, the mention of a 'vacant seat' was very evocative in political terms. Kamuzu Banda never opened up the issue of his succession for debate with anybody, including members of his own party. Whoever raised it was seen as an opponent and was silenced. However, centralized in *The Vacant Seat* are the two main characters, Sokoni and her brother, Shembe. A combination of the two and what they intended to do to Mubanga was an ongoing theme in Malawian politics under Kamuzu Banda. While Banda was blamed for the many atrocities that befell his opponents, there were two people beside him who influenced his decisions: John Tembo and the Official Government Hostess, Cecilia Kadzamira, who was Tembo's niece (Van Donge, 1998). Their ambitions created a lot of tension with members of Malawi Congress Party's national committee. Any person other than Tembo, rightfully in line for 'the seat' was mysteriously eliminated. Muwalo Nqumayo was removed from power for allegedly plotting to

assassinate Dr. Banda. Tried by traditional chiefs, he was sentenced to death. While it is difficult to make a claim for Muwalo's innocence because of the way the case was dealt with (Richard Carver, 1982), the fact remained that he was the Secretary General of the party, and that gave him power of succession in an event of Banda's removal from the post. Kamkondo's traditional analogy to this socio-political issue accurately commented on the succession issue and how prospective candidates were discredited or killed by those who wanted the presidency. Having said this however, there was no event in Malawian politics in which members of the ruling lineage were killed, as is the case in Kamkondo's play. The playwright's intention to imaginatively punish the oppressors might have inspired him to end with the death of the Queen's son. This is not strange in Malawian drama. Steve Chimombo ended *The Rainmaker* with, firstly, Kamundi losing his head, haunted by M'bona's spirit, before Kamundi himself eventually dies. Zangaphee Chizeze, using a torturous and winding end in *Tears of Blood*, kills the villainous 'society oppressing' characters by forcing them to take poison, and follows very closely the destruction that the stuff causes in their bodies, until they are finally dead.

The Censorship Board rejected *The Vacant Seat* for a public performance. The Chairman of the Board rationalized the rejection thus:

> I am afraid scenes in the play concerning cold-blooded murder, conspiracy and loose morals are repugnant to our Malawi concept of decency. Rejected 25.11.76 (Gibbs, 1998: 6).

James Gibbs, surprised by such responses, pointed out that plays such as *Julius Caesar*, whose central issue was conspiracy to murder, were allowed to be performed in the country. He bemoaned the bias for European classics and suggested that prejudice was rooted in the sense that the Chairman of the Board, Dr. Tobias Banda, saw classical plays as posing no immediate threat to Malawi. He felt they were distant from the Malawi situation. However, writers such as Dede Kamkondo had made a mention of the social illness in plays like *The Vacant Seat*, which was unfortunately refused permission to be performed.

Conclusion: University Theatre and Censorship in the 1970's

The plays studied for this paper use different techniques to put across their messages, which I have argued as being political. The writers used traditional subject matter, complex characterization, irony, stylized writing, mixture of poetry and realistic scenes, and metonym as metaphor to shape their dramas. In *Phuma! Uhambe!*, a traditional subject matter is used as a metaphor to comment on Banda's policies. Using embedded feelings of hate in the relationships between the villagers and the chief, the play manages to reveal the chief's autocracy, and how the chief and the

villagers 'mutually zombified' each other. A subtle register of resistance in the 'murmurs', and private criticism comes out in the villagers' ironic support for 'banishment' directed at the wizard, as they wish it on the chief himself. *Mad Like a Prophet* shows how the new dispensation that succeeded colonial administration offered comfortable lives to educated Malawians, leaving out the less educated. In a stylized form, through Biblical and original metaphors, the play threatened death by the sword to those who abused the benefits of independence. *The Vacant Seat*, on the other hand, focuses on succession to chieftaincy in a traditional story, raising a politically contentious issue of the time it was written. Mysterious deaths, planned by people related to those in power, had become the way to maintain continuity and purity in the ruling lineage that worked so hard to ascend to power when Banda leaves. A queen and her brother's plans to kill the rightful successor are foiled and consequently the queen's own son is killed.

The writers exhibited a high level of expertise in a repressed society. *Phuma! Uhambe!* uses transliteration to give a cultural flavour of the traditional Tumbuka/ Ngoni, while *Mad Like a Prophet* showed sophistication in its stylized form, fusing poetry and prose, enjoying the freedom to speak directly to the audience and interspacing such statements with realistic scenes. *The Vacant Seat* presented a strong politically critical narrative in simple language. The three plays exemplify the creative work Malawian dramatists produced in the context of strict censorship rules, with encouragement from their English teachers and producers at the Chancellor College Travelling Theatre in the 1970s raising the point that there is still a high percentage of buried dramatic resistance to Banda than what the few daring scholars covered in their studies.

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