

**'Your Experience is Your Only Truth': Elvania Namukwaya  
Zirimu 1939-1980**

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**Abstract**

While focussing on post independent theatre in Uganda, scholars have neglected the role of women, concentrating most of the time on performances generated by men. Women in Ugandan popular theatre are in an exceptional position because they have to struggle for the control of a space and the power of their voice in an art form whose processes and production in the adult world is dominated by men. Many Ugandan female writers, performers and directors, work in the popular performance genre while expanding its confines or resisting the limitation that they impose. In this regard, they divert from the norm by introducing ethnic and gender themes and remarkable ethnic characters. Some use performance as a means of rewriting female experiences, while others reinvent narratives and form, for example, musical, dramas to underline the issues. This paper will examine how the post-independent theatre aesthetics of Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu domesticate, critique and subvert the impact of military or political dictatorship and customary experience in the artistic and political lives of the people. The discussion addresses the contribution of female artists which have been distorted and erased from current criticism; it also explores questions of performance aesthetics and theory, gender, and reception in the context of Uganda theatre.<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

Zirimu redefined the meaning of theatre, *Katamba*, to underline the relationship between male and female performers; female performers and the audience; the director and the performer; and performer and the audi-

ence. This allowed her to engage with complex cultural issues, for instance, female sexuality, male promiscuity and rediscovering the female voice. Zirimu's monthly essays, published in the *Ngoma Newsletter*, the only English publication that devoted its space to performance reviews, creative writing and critical essays by indigenous Ugandans, underline her relationship with the theatre and performance. They cover a range of topics including the development of theatre, performance, and audiences; in addition, they developed theories of indigenous performance, creative investigations of performance, and the Ugandan performance and political landscape. She remains perhaps the most prominent Ugandan female artist to have worked both in English and indigenous language and performance mediums.

The discourses on the interrelationship between cultural values, folklore, indigenous popular performance, and women were significant in shaping Zirimu's performance aesthetics and philosophy. Perhaps the most prolific Ugandan female writer and theatre director who always referred to herself as a 'peasant woman', Zirimu was a remarkable woman and artist. Usually referred to as a rebel or *ky'akula sajja*, man-woman, particularly because in her provocative writing and theatre practice she adopted a male gaze; Zirimu's gender influenced her decision to practise oppositional writing and performance and her education status also positioned her within territories of conflict. Nicknamed the 'Dare Devil', she staged conscious-driven performances addressing issues of gender identity, ethnicity and nationalism. She used 'iconographic, kinaesthetic, linguistic, tactile and sartorial literacies' (Esiaba Irobi, 2006: 268-282) in theatre to resist, educate and engender a theatre culture for post-independent Uganda. A Muganda by birth, she went to King's College, Budo, and the most prestigious Anglican Secondary School in Uganda with a predominantly male population. She obtained a Diploma in Education from Makerere University in 1963 and following a brief period as a secondary school teacher in Ankole, Western Uganda, she studied English at Leeds University where her husband, Pio Zirimu, was doing postgraduate work in linguistics. On her return to Uganda, she spearheaded the formation of the Schools Broadcasting Service in Uganda, taught in secondary schools, later taking up the position of Junior Fellow in Creative Writing at Makerere University between 1970-72. She was Lecturer and Head of English Language at the National Teachers' College, Kyambogo, from 1973 until 1980 when she was appointed Uganda's High Commissioner to Ghana. During the same period, she became the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the National Cultural Centre.

Between 1965 and 1980, Zirimu wrote plays, poetry, short stories, critical essays and theatre reviews, directed her own plays and many

others by both local and international writers and devised theatre. Her published plays include *When the Hunchback Made Rain* (1975h), *Snoring Strangers* (1975c), *Keeping up with the Mukasas* (1965b), and *Family Spear* (1973a). Zirimu's *When the Hunchback Made Rain* was originally an experimental production with a cast that included professional indigenous musicians, and secondary school children – 'a truly communal act' which is how she regarded theatre performance (*Ngoma Newsletter* December 1974). Among other productions in her portfolio would be included Bisaso's *Watch Your Step* (1976), Sentongo's *The Invisible Bond* (1976a) and *The City Game* (1979c) as well as her own plays *Keeping Up with the Mukasas*, *The Family Spear*, *When the Hunchback Made Rain* and *Theatre Ngoma* (1976i). While she sought the liberation of popular culture and ideology from colonial domination as part of the post-colonial movement, it did not imply that she denigrated western performance forms. This is evidenced by her directing Nnyanzi's *Omulambuzi wa Gavumenti* in 1976, a Luganda translation of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (1947), the only performance of the play in an African indigenous language. Others include Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) in 1977 following the murder of Archbishop Luwum<sup>2</sup>; and an adaptation of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children: A Chronicle of Thirty Years* (1991) in 1978.

The killing of Archbishop Luwum and Byron Kawadwa signified that Amin's rule had literally ended. A silent participant in this political drama, Zirimu, in her selection of playwrights and the timing of the productions reveals her fortitude to use the stage as a soundboard for society's views on socio-political issues. At the time when the military had taken over all aspects of government, including civil administration, the staging of a play based on Tsarist Russia was a subtle comment on their behaviour and so was the 1977 production of *Murder in the Cathedral*. Collectively, these plays represented active public performance protestations against Milton Obote and Idi Amin that was uncommon during the 1960s and 1970s. The 'ideological interrogations' (Soyinka, 1988:148a) which an African director like Zirimu injects into her version of European/world dramas such as *Murder in the Cathedral*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Government Inspector*; or *Watch Your Step* based on Luke's *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, are a mark of a budding critical Ugandan theatre. Zirimu's aim in staged performances and writing was to sow seeds of vocalised resistance to oppression. That this resistance was organised by a female artist is pertinent; apart from the recognition of the need to acknowledge women's rights, it underlined the fact that people were prepared to stand up for their rights. Secondly, the protest brought into focus the ability of theatre as a medium of resistance.

## Zirimu and Ngoma Players

Writing in 1976, Zirimu underlines the essence of performance by noting that the beginning of Ngoma Players, founded with her husband in 1966, was inspired by the 'earth-shaking dance' performance of two teenage brothers as well as the inspirational performance by a group of children who danced 'to the point of lifting people out of their seats'. In the same essay, she acknowledges the link between performer, the performance event, and reception as the essence of theatre:

[T]hese children were not giving a performance for visitors. They were just enjoying themselves at the back of a crowd, responding spontaneously to the music. Very few of the guests were even aware of their existence, let alone of their dancing. And this was the first conscious event, call it the sperm or the egg from which Ngoma Players was conceived. I want to put emphasis here on the fact that these children were performing to themselves, for their own enjoyment, regardless of whether anyone was watching or not. This is what I call the first quality we need as artists. We must want to perform first to ourselves for our enjoyment. (Zirimu, 1976k: 1)

Ngoma performed in community centres and schools; and in addition recorded television and radio dramas that included Zirimu's *Baana Bazanye*, Jane Geterial's *Tutakula Nini Kesho* (What Shall We Eat Tomorrow), Sentongo's *People's Theatre* (1976b) and *The City Game*, (1976 – 82), and Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1963). Her commitment to 'a theatre that can be defined as typically African' merging music, dance and drama; and in addition, 'communication to a wide cross-section of audiences' (Zirimu, 1976k: 3) is evidenced in the group's performance portfolio. For example, Barrett's *Jump Koo-Koo Makka* (August 1967), Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (January 1968), and Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* (October 1968). In a review of the group's annual activities, Zirimu comments that the 1967 performance of *Jump Koo-Koo Makka*, an English language play blending music, dance and drama was 'so strange to the public that the play was received with mixed feelings.' However, she reassures the audience that the form and style of theatre is typically African and 'they [Ngoma Players] are proud to see that this concept of theatre is now in the vogue' (Zirimu, 1976j: 2). Following this apparently contentious performance, the group staged *The Invisible Bond*, a play that merges music and dance with the richness of the intellectual and emotional content, which, according to her 'gives a balanced picture of our existence'. On the other hand, because *The Bride* is set in a community

that practises rituals of circumcision it provided 'a natural situation for the merger of music, dance and drama.' (Zirimu, 1977l: 1-2)

### **Commitment and Performance**

Zirimu's performance and writing interventions are informed by multiple cultural and political discourses; therefore, we must take into account the socio-political conditions within which she predicated performance, and her contradictory approach to gender issues. Her views on Ugandan cultures, politics and performance, and the commitment of the artist had no ambiguity. In her essay, 'Your Experience is Your Own Truth', she declares:

Our most important and unchanging commitment is that of performing to ourselves. I call it the most important because it is necessary for us to enrich our lives with art before we can present our art to an audience of outsiders. Yet I do not see it as possible to create art without a meaningful cohesive community in which the individual is free to express the self and develop what is within him or her, a community in which the individual feels important, accepted, wanted and valued. (Zirimu, 1976k: 1-4)

By relating 'commitment' to 'art' and 'audience', the 'individual' and the expression of one's 'self', she seems to underline the relationship between the individual and performance, freedom of expression, and humaneness. Referring to 'a meaningful cohesive community' as a prerequisite for artistic creation raises the question of postcolonial political discontinuities and ethnic strife. She insists that a 'cohesive community' enables the individual to feel 'important, accepted, wanted and valued'. 'What matters first', she states, 'is one's inner relationship with oneself and then with one's co-workers'. In 'May we Work Together Some More' (1974g: 2-3), Zirimu asserts that 'the harmoniousness and beauty of theatre is only possible because of ... [the] foundation of togetherness'). She is calling for unity and peaceful co-existence by all because a society, which is not at peace with itself, cannot effectively relate to the outside world. By asserting that performing groups, just like any other family unit, tribe or nation '...love, hate, sing, dance, quarrel, fight, build, destroy, eat, give birth to and bring up children', activities that make the 'ingredients from which we create the meaningful art of theatre'. Remarkably, her vision does not preclude conflict but envisages a nation where people live in harmony; hence, she seeks to distance theatre from the violence and ethnic conflict enveloping the country. Humanity not

ethnicity is the decisive influence in the existence of Ngoma Players; hence, the performance ethos Zirimu is constructing is inter-ethnic and multicultural.

### **Exhibitionism and the Performer**

The lack of alternative entertainment forced the football-going community, and other members of the public, which followed the harassment of oppositional football crowds by patrons of Idi Amin's military football teams, to resort to the theatre. At the same time, cinema houses, suffering from the backlash of Idi Amin's 'Economic War' (they could no longer import films), were transformed into playhouses. The invasion of the theatre by people forced to abandon football grounds, brought a new dimension to theatre, engendering a boom in theatrical activity, entertainment and political dissent. The attachment to individual actors, and response to live performances became similar to that of crowds cheering their favourite team or player (see Kasule, 1993a). This brought spontaneity and encouraged improvisation and exhibitionism in theatre, which are features of Kiganda theatre.<sup>3</sup> Spontaneity and exhibitionism usually displayed by popular indigenous performers are much admired qualities by most. It is within this context that Zirimu takes a critical stance against exhibitionism. In 'Tapping our Audience' she states:

...our audiences are free to make all sorts of complimentary and uncomplimentary comments. *Any actor or theatrical artist who thinks he or she will thrive or fall by his public reputation on stage is making a fatal mistake.* (My emphasis) (Zirimu, 1971f: 3-4)

Her observations highlight the negative dogma of individualism and greed alongside which professionalism and integrity cannot survive in theatre. Zirimu, reviewing Sentongo's *The Invisible Bond* five years into Amin's reign, criticises the perceived relationship between exhibitionism and the art of performance. Elsewhere she asserts:

We need more adventurers willing to try their hand at producing and stage management rather than assuming that appearing on stage is the only thing that matters in *Theatre*. The latter are exhibitionists not artists. (Zirimu, 1974g: 2-3)

In this context, her criticism of exhibitionism in theatre is an attempt to revise the indigenous notion of professionalism evidenced by *abadongo* and *abagoma*.

Does a conspicuous Ugandan literary/performative text necessitate the appropriation of indigenous aesthetic and cultural sensibilities? Zirimu responds to this and other concerns in her critical writing, sometimes questioning how performers in Uganda can best stage foreign music and theatre. For instance, in a critical review of a performance of Christmas carols she states that the audience was:

Polite enough to sit through the first part of the programme, during which the choir sang carols sweetly but without any show of feeling, without even the children making any disturbance. Is this the way European music is really sang – Is the singer suffered just to produce the high and low notes, and the soft and loud sounds without any visible sign of life on the face or body? And polite enough to appreciate the racially mixed cast and accept Amahl's (the actor) lines "There are three Kings/and one of them is black!" without batting an eye lid?! (Zirimu, 1970e: 4)

In the above review, she appears to be asserting that popular performance forms are meant to motivate actors and the audiences, therefore, familiar performing spaces should not alienate but enable them to share their experiences. For, no matter the content, a meaningful performance should create a link between the performer and the audience's worldview.

In 1976, after the first performance of *When the Hunchback Made Rain* she writes:

...it is a pity we have the sort of stage we have in the national theatre. The whole play would have been different if it was acted on a different type of stage with entrances and exists through the audience and you would have the audience participation of the African theatre. (Zirimu, 1976j:1)

Not surprisingly, Zirimu continued to experiment with non-proscenium stage performances; for instance, staging Kawadwa's *Olu-yimba lwa Wankoko* in Kyambogo University Design Centre's courtyard. An important consequence of her directing of *Olu-yimba lwa Wankoko* was raising the political consciousness of audiences and performers; and in addition, highlighting the dialectic between western and indigenous performance forms. She discarded the proscenium stage framework and

transformed the play to fit in any performance space. Aesthetically, her goal was to experiment with 'the interplay of spoken dialogue and music', echoing Glissant's comments, 'for us music, gesture, dance, all forms of communication, are just as important as the gift of speech' (1989: 248). As she states in 'You made the Hunchback', artists must continue with the 'experiments we have made in the interplay of spoken dialogue and music; and ... the first experiment in the use of an amphitheatre' (1976j: 3-4). As well as adopting a radical approach to the uses of music and choreography of dance, Zirimu, for purposes of dramaturgical and political intervention, applied Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook's approaches to performance.

In *The Family Spear* she investigates the ritual of sex sacrifice which allows a father-in-law to sleep with Birungi, the bride, before his son. The strong minded women and sturdy characters in her writing symbolically displace the image of the sexual 'mettle' in women expected by men like Ssekisa. Both within this play, and in *Keeping Up With The Mukasas*, female characters are able to assert their rights, sexuality and humaneness through liberal dialogue hitherto unseen in Uganda. In *The Family Spear*, Birungi, the bride, forced to perform a marriage sexual ritual with her father-in-law, shares her dilemma with the audience. In this play, as elsewhere in her writing, Zirimu acknowledges Ugandan culture and aesthetics, rejects the restrictive taboos, and opts for positive aspects of change and development.

In her struggle to articulate the participation of women in performance, Zirimu had to engage with the demands of a male-dominated performance genre; a male-dominated academic establishment and a patriarchal culture that sought to keep women down. A plurality of literary and performance approaches marked her strategy of inculcating new thinking about women artists. Zirimu aimed to educate the elite, both male and female, and popular theatre practitioners, that women can practise performance, act, dance, sing and drum, on equal footing with men. At the beginning she was ridiculed by these groups of people for her role in theatre, however, she responded by promoting the image of performing artists, particularly women, and performances that incorporated ethnic popular performance forms, dance, song and instrumental music. Her approach was to cast women in prominent roles, re-present indigenous popular theatre and display dance and folk music as sophisticated performance genres. Zirimu defined her position through the performance of relevant dramas and poetry at a time when performance politics were linked to the postcolonial spirit of freedom - this was committed to changing the socio-cultural conditions of indigenous communities, women, and the detribalisation of all sections of life.

*Keeping up with the Mukasas*, set in 1962 in the home of a middle-class Muganda family, was Zirimu's first published play. It projects contemporary social conflicts in Uganda brought about by differences in education and material wealth. She presents a society where a small proportion of the population is reaping the fruits of independence. While Mwebe's family lives in the village where they eke out a living by cultivating while his neighbour, Ssali, is well off. Mwebe's poverty contrasts with Ssali's affluence; for instance, the latter takes tea first thing in the morning instead of cultivating the garden, has a car, electric light, and a Primus lamp. While his family would like these possessions and an affluent life, Mwebe will not forsake his pride to become a sycophant to the wealthy. Zebia, his wife, expresses their discontent at the inequality in society by observing that Mwebe lost his job because he was not competent in spoken English. When at the end of the play Ssali informs Mwebe that he has to live on debts because of his greedy wife, Nora, Mwebe gains our admiration. Society's attitude to women, highlighted by a comparison of Zebia to Nora, reinforces our positive perception of the former. Zebia, as the traditional, submissive and understanding wife, who shields her frustrated and violent husband against the hatred of the children, is contrasted to Nora, the nagging woman.

Zirimu raises issues of traditional etiquette and custom against the backdrop of Western education and its accompanying aesthetics. The rural setting of *The Family Spear* makes the play relevant to the literary pre-occupations of the immediate post-independent period while the central themes of female sexuality presents a radical attack on patriarchy. In the play, Muweesi, who has just married Birungi in the customary way, cannot come to terms with his father Ssekisa over traditional rituals. Birungi is in a dilemma whether to appease her father-in-law or obey Muweesi's desire to resist custom. She opts to follow custom but Muweesi, encouraged by his mother, abandons the homestead and the family spear, a decision that culminates in violence between father and son. In the context of the play, the spear is both a phallic symbol and a significant possession in the homestead. At the root of the conflict is the ritual sex sacrifice expected from Birungi, which allows her father-in-law – the family spear! - to break her virginity before her husband. Muweesi's aunt insists on the old practice of ritual sex. Together with his mother, they object to these demands. Here various members of the audience would share Birungi's dilemma. Her strong personality helps her resolve the conflict by giving sacrifice or submitting to the ritual sexual desires of her father-in-law thus forcing Muweesi to re-assert his manhood. Muweesi's rejection of the family spear symbolizes the rejection of retrogressive traditional rituals. Here she addresses the question of gender, seeking to

propose a new position for women in post-colonial Uganda. She challenges the stereotypical concept of the woman, presenting her alternatives in Nakidde and Birungi. Just like the other works of Zirimu, this play demonstrates that the only hope for the reinstatement of moral sanity depends on a few brave individuals who will be able to lead the communal voice against retrogressive customs and tyranny.

Zirimu's work links politics to religion and gender in many different ways. *When the Hunchback made Rain*, first performed in 1970, was inspired by Baganda children's folktales. The plot is reminiscent of folk story narratives in which the *Mulubaale*, diviner, plays a central role in analysing and providing solutions to the problems of the community. The Hunchback favours Nsereko with rain, however, when Kabogozza arrives to make his request he becomes adamant in his refusal. Desperate and confronted with verbal abuse from the drunken Hunchback, he murders him and hides the body among the branches of the mango tree. He then tricks Nsereko into climbing the tree only for the latter to push an already dead Hunchback to the ground. Nsereko has to disentangle himself from the Hunchback's murder and the gimmick he uses is a trick reminiscent of Hare and Frog in Kiganda folktales. He concocts and intelligently narrates a story he claims to have heard from a benevolent soldier, that God is about to reward the Hunchback's murderer. At this point, Zirimu injects the story with a political sub-text, satirizing a soldier turned honest and considerate to the point of aiding Nsereko. Kabogozza, captivated by the story, wonders how a 'big man' (45) could apologize to a peasant. Nsereko's reply, 'He did, I tell you; which shows you there are some big men who are made with hearts...' (44) is double-edged because the audience understands the implied sarcasm about 'big men'. It is interesting to watch two people representing an economically desperate community each justifying his claim for being the true murderer of the Hunchback in order to get a reward. What makes us laugh at this point is the combination of watching a desperate Kabogozza, representing the community, misjudge God's moods and proudly suggesting to Him that the 'reward will be given in a more public place' (55). Conflicting but at the same time interesting statements are made in this concluding scene. God, furious at Kabogozza for having murdered his assistant, repeatedly recommends death as the penalty for taking life thus signifying a reprimand of tyrannical leaders similar to Amin: '...I'll show you that God's law is still law. I will not let the disorder of mankind overtake my realm.' (55) Kabogozza voices the feelings of the community on unjust justice in economic, judicial and moral issues as practised by the state:

When a poor man kills, let him be killed. When a big man kills, let him

be richly rewarded. And when God kills, that is the law....

(56)

Drought, physically afflicting man, animals and nature, may literally be taken as a metaphor for the political drought pervading the community. The play draws a vivid picture of starved peasants and emaciated children trudging up the highway to the place of sacrifice in quest of rain.

Once again, Zirimu shows an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the changing role of tradition in society. In this play, the theme of the conflict of tradition and modernity metaphorically expanded embraces criticism of aspects of old sacred and secular institutions and the associated evils, which include sacrifice, bribery, nepotism and corruption. In a drought-devastated village, Nsereko and Kabogozza, representing the peasants, are determined to get rain at all costs. The Hunchback is the mediator and aide apportioned power by God in the form of a "rain sheet" (27) which empowers him to give rain to peasants. He becomes vainglorious and his obnoxious character infuriates Kirabira who kills him hence inviting divine wrath and vengeance. Although sacrifice is an indispensable ingredient in traditional prayer, in her discourse, sacrifice and offerings become synonymous with bribe and institutionalized corruption. For, when Nabikolo informs God that she could not turn away supplicants because they were bringing juicy offerings, God cautions her: '(thundering) That's bribery! (contemptuously) Offer-offerings! So that's how they go around you, eh? With bribes!' (16) Nabikolo, sceptical of the role of sacrifice in improving community welfare, informs Kabogozza of the Hunchback's cynical treatment of sacrifices. God, distanced from the humans by his register and manner of speech, is further given credence by the rituals performed on him by Nabikolo.

God: Do you think it is an easy thing to be God? Do you think it is a laughing matter to listen to thousands of humans begging for millions of trifles which do not carry the slightest meaning to me, one way or the other? Males who want females, females who want males, wretches wanting children, misers and cut-throats who want more of that thing they call money? What does it all matter to me? What does your lot think I am?

Nabikolo: Why don't you tell them?

God: Hhm, tell them! As if I didn't know your kind! All they know is that I am God? I can't change the earth any more than I can make a fig tree bear mangoes!

(14)

At a metaphorical level, Kirabira, the sanctuary keeper who acts with impunity towards supplicants, may symbolise soldiers, security guards and personal secretaries who have become demigods in society. Like them, he possesses a variety of vices: corruption, nepotism and opportunism. He is a scavenger who, like Amin's *mafutamingi*'s (those greased with wealth) or the new rich, is greased with fat from the sacrifices offered to God. Notwithstanding, he regards society with disdain and has earned honorific titles, 'The Terrible one' and 'His Subordinate, Kirabira, the Hunchback' (6), a deliberate ridicule of contemporary political leaders fond of adding prefixes and suffixes to their names to authenticate and legitimize their authority. God's act of delegating power to Kirabira indicts society for entrusting their destiny to people known to have scanty wits. Bede Sensalo comments, 'The relationship between God and the peasants in *When the Hunchback Made Rain* is perhaps indicative of a growing disillusionment among the populace concerning religion and/or the Amin regime' (Sensalo, 1986: 226).

The 'rain sheet' (27) is similar to the gun as a cynical symbol of political and economic power, alluding to Amin's reference to the gun as the father and mother of soldiers. While in possession of it, Kirabira terrorizes supplicants and threatens: 'I'll brain anyone who dares to offend me. I'll brain your bungling brats' (27). The Luganda equivalent of the word is '*kubetenta*', associated with beating a snake's head to pulp or smitherens. Kirabira's attitude to the peasants is transformed by power, as he demands that God must now give him a guard to 'keep all vermin at the Gate.' (32) His reference to supplicants as 'peasants' (p 32) is cynical, connoting *bakopi*, base, in Luganda. In a monumental declaration exhibiting feelings of a socially insecure person, he harangues them for being oblivious of his power: '...I have the power to give you what you want, or power to refuse, (grabs *his arm*) Hey, you, Do you think I can't give you rain?' (26) He is a vivid example of upstart military rulers of the 1970s and 1980s, and *mafutamingis*.

In her search for a true Ugandan theatre, Zirimu modifies the language of writing and criticism by appropriating idioms and metaphors from indigenous languages. The most interesting feature of *Keeping Up with the Mukasas* and *The Family Spear* is the creative and imaginative use of language. Luganda words are built into English constructions; vernacular idioms and proverbs are literally translated to blend with Standard English. Soyinka, commending the 'sparse economic dialogue' (1973a:109) of *The Family Spear*, noted the stylistic use of language in this context as a variation on the conflict of the new and old values. Perhaps Soyinka is referring to the literal translation of vernacular idioms that occurs in the text. While this shows a strong awareness of her audience, it

raises complex issues about the nature of Ugandan postcolonial writing. The use of Swahili by Kirabira, especially when he pompously insists on speaking English to Nsereko, the peasant who is illiterate in the English language, underlines his role as a caricature of soldiers and the *mafutamingis*.

Zirimu searched for ways in which to revolutionize the content and form of Ugandan theatre to voice the silenced tales of the people. To achieve this she worked on experimental productions, for example, the 1977 adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*, for stage and radio, as well as children's theatre workshops in schools. It is her relationship with Kawadwa, Wassanyi Sserukenya and indigenous professional musicians and dancers such as Edward Ssempeke and Moses Serwadda, and popular music theatre groups, that evidences her vision and influence on popular performance.

Zirimu constantly questioned society and humanity in a powerful way. Her focus on humanity and integrity meant that she wanted people to 'engage in self-examination'. To paraphrase Cornell West (2007), an African American intellectual, 'Her standards of greatness so radically call into questions who I am.'

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## Notes

- 1 This chapter is linked in a way to my earlier papers: 'Resistant Voices in African Popular Performance' (2007) and 'Possession, trance, ritual and popular performance: The transformation of theatre in post Idi Amin Uganda' (2006).
- 2 When Idi Amin staged the firing squad at which several alleged anti-government personalities were publicly shot dead Zirimu made a decision to take her family to the village for the period, away from the scenes of bloodshed.
- 3 Spectators formed pressure group, *Ekibiina ky' Abalabi*, 'The Audience Association', similar to Football Club Supporters' groups. Among other things, the association aimed at influencing the staging of 'ethnically based' popular shows in defiance of political leadership.