



1979

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Recommended Citation

Calder, Angus, Under Zomba Plateau: The New Malawian Poetry, *Kunapipi*, 1(2), 1979.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol1/iss2/9>

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Abstract

Above the quiet town of Zomba, till a few years ago Malawi's capital, now superseded in that role by Lilongwe, but still the seat of the small Chancellor College campus, one can sit, having walked up painfully or driven with much trepidation along a winding road beside precipices, in the agreeable garden of an inn. Birds flash brilliantly past.

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Above the quiet town of Zomba, till a few years ago Malawi's capital, now superseded in that role by Lilongwe, but still the seat of the small Chancellor College campus, one can sit, having walked up painfully or driven with much trepidation along a winding road beside precipices, in the agreeable garden of an inn. Birds flash brilliantly past. To the west, the sun is beginning to drop over Mozambique (having risen at the rear over Mozambique in the morning; Malawi's base is wedged in that country as in a cleft stick). Sipping a Carlsberg 'Green' lager, one may contemplate a landscape which, vast and apparently fertile, rolls towards distant blue hills. One way of describing it, or evading the task, would be to say that it's like many other East African landscapes, with hummocky hills and scant signs of habitation etched amid woodlands – hard for the untrained European eye to make full sense of, but heartliftingly airy and 'unspoilt'. But Zomba is not quite 'any African' plateau, nor the view from it quite like any other, because a school of writers centred on Chancellor College

has begun to give it significances, visionary, symbolic, satirical, in English verse.

There is no need to 'introduce' this verse, as Adrian Roscoe, Professor of English at Chancellor College, has already devoted fifteen pages or so to it in his recent book, *Uhuru's Fire*.¹ But perhaps another viewpoint isn't superfluous.

Malawi had writers in the 'first wave' of post-independence African fiction and poetry. There were poems by David Rubadiri in the earliest anthologies.² But since the mid-sixties he has been an exile from his homeland. The credit for beginning a 'second wave' of Malawian verse in English clearly belongs to a group of 'six students and two staff members of the English Department' at Chancellor College which first met 'one cool Thursday evening in 1970'.³ This snowballed into the Writers Group which still meets weekly at the College, has seen as many as eighty present at one gathering and, when I was there for a month last November, regularly drew twenty to forty people to discuss poems and stories by members – it's not only the focus for a lively cyclostyled periodical, *The Muse*, which comments on the discussions and stirs up controversy generally, but it's also, clearly, a much-needed centre for intellectual argument on the campus. Its success reflects the absence of other facilities for debate.

An appealing anthology, *Mau*, appeared from a missionary press as early as 1971.⁴ At that stage, Malawian verse must have seemed amply ready for a 'take-off' to match that of Ugandan and Kenyan poetry a few years before. Sadly, this hasn't quite happened. Just one individual Malawian poet has published a solo volume,⁵ and a projected large-scale anthology has languished unprinted, in various stages, for years – so that Jack Mapanje, the editor, in desperation resorted to reviewing it prematurely in *Odi*, Malawi's one literary magazine.⁶ One very impressive long poem by Steve Chimombo appeared in a Canadian journal in 1975.⁷ I believe that the poems by Mapanje and by Felix Mnthali published in the first issue of *Kunapipi* were in fact the next to get into print outside Malawi – and *Odi* doesn't circulate widely, in or

outside Africa. So Soyinka can be forgiven (just) for ignoring the area in his *Poems of Black Africa*, which, with this amongst other imperfections, will unfortunately remain the standard anthology for some time yet.

Lack of aspiration doesn't explain the strange gap between 1971 promise and 1979 lack of evident fruits. The intellectual life of Chancellor College is remarkably energetic – the industry of staff and students puts those of certain other African campuses to shame. Nor is it an 'ivory tower'. Malawi is quite a small country, and besides the warm links which intellectuals maintain with their home villages (warmer by far, I would say, than in Kenya), the English Department remains in friendly touch with ex-students and other writers up and down the land. And the almost excessive perfectionism of Mapanje and Mnthali (I think these are the two best poets) is perhaps more symptom than cause of delay in publication – both constantly tinker with old poems as they might not feel able to do were the works in question already between stiff covers. Geographical isolation, enhanced since the guerilla campaign against Smith's Rhodesia stepped up, clearly accounts in some measure for delays. So does the fairly small size of the Malawian market for schoolbooks, which tends to stunt local publishing and to limit the interest of the multinationals – Heinemann, Longmans and OUP.

But the main problem has clearly been 'political'. Writing early in 1972, David Kerr and Ian White, lecturers at Chancellor and both, as poets themselves, much involved in the Writers Group, commented:

The Malawi Government Censorship Board is not obtrusive or tactless. It has rarely questioned any publications from the University, and one could well argue that its effects are felt more by the cinema-going expatriates than by the local community. Yet there is no doubt that its very existence is inhibiting to local writers. Direct political comment is automatically ruled out. So too, more seriously, is that direct involvement with the village majority which would be the hallmark of a mature local literature.⁸

They were thinking of novelists, dramatists and film-makers more than poets here. But as commonly happens in Africa, poets have worked in other genres as well, and have felt to the full the discouragement which censorship - more active, I think, now, than in 1972 - has inflicted on literary culture in general. A few plays, a volume of short stories, have appeared in a series from a local publisher.⁹ But the representative anthology of poems has not seen the light, and the chances of publishing an individual 'slim volume' in Malawi seem non-existent. (Frank Chipasula's book, the one mentioned above, came out abroad, in Zambia.) The censorship seems to worry as much about 'sex' and 'bad grammar' as about 'politics', but this merely makes it all the more stultifying.

Happily, it now seems quite likely that a major multinational will produce either a volume by Mapanje, or an anthology, or even both. And meanwhile, the delays have not been all loss. While some promising writers (including, I suspect, Innocent Banda) may have failed to do themselves full justice for want of criticism from their peers abroad and from a public at home, Malawian verse has drawn certain strengths from its long submersion. Much of it has found a highly critical 'private' audience in the Writers Group, where intensity of interest has compensated for lack of numbers (and the numbers, as I've pointed out, haven't really been so very small). The poets themselves, and that immediate audience, are very conscious of allusions to each others' work, but this does not, in my experience, exclude the interested outsider who can't recognise the allusions. And if every line is charged with symbolism for those 'in the know', this doesn't mean that nothing gets across - indeed, I'd argue that it's in the very nature of certain valuable kinds of modern poetry that they 'suggest' rather than 'mean' and that what they 'suggest' depends on the individual reader.

Young Malawian poets in general seem to take more pains with 'expression' than their contemporaries in East Africa. The temptation to be strident and glib about obvious 'social' and 'political'

themes is one which they perforce must resist.

The combination of mythological with topical reference in Chimombo's 'Napolo' shows how a poem can gain in every way by indirection. The landscape of Zomba plateau, and the truly spectacular thunderstorms which assault the region in their season give a vivid natural context to the activities of a god who, man-like, brings both needed shocks and brutal destruction. The sequence does not suffer unduly from comparison with either Soyinka's 'Idanre' or Okigbo's 'Paths of Thunder'. Since it can be found in print without prohibitive difficulty, I won't quote it here, but will turn your attention to poets with less obtrusive but valuable virtues.

What I like best is the view of a valley village
Looking down on it from above an opposite ridge
Or coming up to it after a steep climb uphorizon,
I like to find people get out in the rainy season
Or women sing mortar and pestle songs at dusk
With the moon and stars lighting up their task.
I like the sound of cicadas in wet grass at dawn
And that of mosquitoes when the blinds are drawn
And the light is out and darkness is all around
And the cricket and the owl join forces aloud;
Sometimes after a tiresome day up the nearby hill,
I like the jumbled sounds of birds in an anthill
As on a doomed funeral day when the quietude
Of the procession burbles my heart to solitude.

Lupenga Mphande, the author of that poem,¹⁰ rarely sustains his lyrical observation so successfully. Perhaps even in this case, the word 'burbled' in the last line brings us close to bathos. But that word isn't an obvious or hackneyed one, it wasn't lightly chosen. Nor was the form of the poem, with its deceptively easy-looking and delightfully appropriate mixture of half-rhyme and near-rhyme with full rhyme. There is a great deal of pastoral poetry in English from Africa, and most of it is sentimental. By contrast, I find the combination here of warm affection for a familiar scene

with an intellectual's wistful detachment wholly convincing and directly touching. And this is very specifically a rural scene in hilly Malawi, not an imaginary African Eden.

Enoch Timpunza Mvula's 'Still Born'¹¹ is also very careful, very 'true' – and the sheer pain of the feeling which finds such adequate expression makes the poem, I think, a remarkable achievement:

She did not come just one night:
She did not come just one month.
But several nights and days and played
with her diabetic mother.
And like a feather blown
by the August whirlwind
disappeared each time
her mother wanted to embrace her.
'Where is my daughter
which the nurse showed me?
The daughter as beautiful
as gooseberry flowers
The daughter that brings
a mother's sleepless agony
... Why did you bury her
Without me seeing her?
Let's go to Zomba where
she wanders like a motherless
sheep on lion infested mountains'.

I cannot bear to think
of Gertrude's grief
for our still born daughter.
I am like a dumb man
deep at night seeing
his house on fire
until it vanishes.

The poem is 'made' above all by the honest separation of the speaker's emotions from those of his wife, and by the simple power of certain images. But it wouldn't work without its well-judged

free verse rhythms; my ear can't fault them.

Anthony Nazombe is more ambitious, less wholly successful, in 'Initiation',¹² where beer drinkers

... learn from the earth
that pestle must toil in the mortar
for grain to ripen
that clouds moan and crack
to shed potent rain-drops.

But here too, as in other poems by this promising writer, I'm conscious of a well-developed sense of verse rhythm, a grudging determination not to waste words and not to fall into platitudes.

Felix Mnthali, Nazombe's colleague at Chancellor has such a strong grasp of syntax and rhythm that his poems can make an effect even when, as happens quite often, the choice of words is not particularly vivid and original. I think that 'Write', published in *Kunapipi*, is the best poem of his which I've seen. It illustrates a serious preoccupation which he has also expressed in prose:

That Africa has a great past is no longer a matter for debate – any more than that this past includes much that we would rather forget. What seems at issue is the role which that past is to play in the present and the future.¹³

'Write' embodies a dialectic between pre-literate past and literate future. I quote here from a revised version, though I'm not sure that the longer line here works as well as the shorter one in the earlier version:

And a voice said to me, 'Write!
write on the sands on which we cavorted
clad in the sands themselves and the breath of the lake;
write and then erase all this in the waters of the lake
because they were here before; they were here
these waters ...'

The imperative 'Write!' is in ironic tension with the advice to obliterate everything written with the waters of Lake Malawi

which represent a past authenticity which historians (and poets) can never recapture. The synthesis of the dialectic seems to be presented in the last line, where the voice yet again says 'Write' - write anyway, write without sentimental illusion, write because the present and future demand it. But the poem will not let us forget the unalienated past in which man was 'clad in the sands', at one with the universe. At its best, as here, Mnthali's poetry combines rhetorical power with intellectual depth, dignity with an adequate dexterity.

Finally, a too-brief mention of the inimitable Jack Mapanje, yet another Chancellor College lecturer. 'Kabula Curio-Shop', also seen in *Kunapipi*, seems to me a little masterpiece, in which rhythm in the first stanza brilliantly enacts the process of making a 'curio' as the craftsman experiences it - then the second stanza, looking to the eye just like the first, gives the ear a wholly different rhythm to express the speaker's disgust at the waste of something achieved by such hard work. Though no other Mapanje poem represents his rhythmic gift so succinctly, they all share it in greater or less degree. It enables him to convey a complexly human sense of the world around him (and his poems are always very much about the world around him - he doesn't deal in dreams and abstractions). Wry and sharp, yet charitable and serious, companionable yet authoritative, Mapanje's voice seems to me wholly individual. Let's end with him sitting on Zomba plateau - 'For the Soldiers Quietly Back: April 1978'.¹⁴ The poem's meaning is both private and public, and it needs must explain itself, but it does no harm to note here that *chambo* is an exceptionally delicious fish, found in the country's lakes, and staple fare for those who can afford it:

For goodness sake Sweetie, let's stop fretting
About turbid top cockroaches that have no brains
To penetrate even their own images. Let us
For once when the prisoners are quietly home
Enjoy the fruits of the evergreen landscape
Of Zomba plateau. Let us walk up this *Colossus*
When the winding avenues are littered with

The purple of jacarandas and the tongues of
 Flames-of-the-forests. By the saw-mill let us
 Pause to greet plateau boys buying their fresh
 Vermilion strawberries and gorgeous grenadillas
 And up Mulunguzi fountain we'll select a rock
 To sit down on. And as the sparrows hop about
 The tree-branches twittering, let us chew our
Chambo sandwiches to the welling crests splattering
 Nervously down the river. Or let us fondle our
 Released hope hurtling down the turf in a strange
 Joy today when the soldiers are quietly back.

NOTES

1. Adrian Roscoe; *Uhuru's Fire: African Literature East to South* (Cambridge UP, 1977), pp. 134-49.
2. See John Reed and Clive Wake, eds., *A Book of African Verse* (Heinemann EB, 1964), pp. 68-71; Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier, eds., *Modern Poetry from Africa* (revised edition, Penguin, 1966), pp. 221-2; and the larger selection of Rubadiri's work in Howard Sergeant, ed., *Poetry from Africa* (Pergamon, 1968), pp. 78-98.
3. Jack Mapanje, 'New Verse in Malawi', *Odi* 2:1 (April 1977), p. 28.
4. *Mau: 39 Poems from Malawi* (Hetherwick Press, Blantyre).
5. Frank Chipasula, *Visions and Reflections* (Neczam, Zambia, 1973).
6. Mapanje, loc. cit., pp. 24-28.
7. Steve Chimombo, 'Napolo', *Malahat Review* 36 (October 1975), pp. 15-24.
8. David Kerr and Lan White, 'New Writing from Malawi' (unpublished Chancellor College paper, 17.2.1972)
9. See James Gibbs, ed., *9 Malawian Plays* (1976); Paul Zeleza, *Night of Darkness and other Stories* (1976); Steve Chimombo, *The Rainmaker* (play, 1978) – all published by Popular Publications (Limbe, Malawi).
10. Hitherto unpublished.
11. *Odi* 2:1 (April 1977), p. 30.
12. *Odi* 3:1 (June 1978), p. 44.
13. Felix Mnthali, 'Nostalgia, Identity and Culture in Africa', *Outlooklookout* (Dept. of English, Chancellor College, February 1975), p. 27.
14. Hitherto unpublished.