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ROBERT SERUMAGA AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF UGANDA'S THEATRE: SOLIPSISM, ACTIVISM, INNOVATION (1968-1978)

SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
TO
TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

2008

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01160711

DECLARATION

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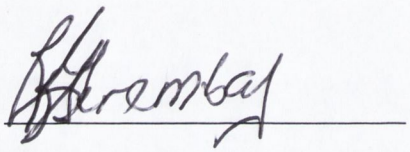

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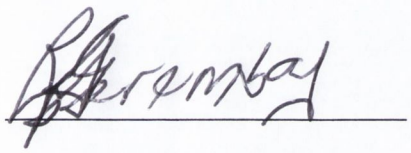

GEORGE BWANIKA SEREMBA

SUMMARY

The theoretical methodology employed in the research and writing of this thesis is primarily postcolonial. Though comparatively nuanced, poststructuralism is also employed. The emphasis in the latter is on the Foucaldian position with regard to history, and also on deconstruction. This is an examination of the work of Ugandan playwright Robert Serumaga, and what I have designated as the 'Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre' (1968-1978). The key issue is the question of individualism, or its extreme form — solipsism, on the one hand; and activism, or a social conscience, on the other. In addition, the thesis also examines the question of theatrical innovation in Serumaga's plays.

There is a comprehensive introduction to Serumaga the man, as well as the historical context against which his plays unfold. The first chapter focuses on the theatrical history, the precursors to Serumaga as well the Golden Age. Serumaga's work is examined in chronological order starting with his very first play *A Play* in Chapter 2; *The Elephants*, in Chapter 3; and *Majangwa* in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 is devoted to the regimen and methodology of Serumaga's company the Abafumi and concentrates on the first of Serumaga's largely semiological, and unscripted drama, *Renga Moi* (*Red Warrior*). *Amayirikiti* (*The Flame Tree*), the second of the two 'ritual dramas', though not the focal point is also discussed in the chapter.

I have read the texts in as literalist a manner as I could and sometimes, read them against the grain. I have then re-read the same (synchronic) texts in the context of the diachronic text of Uganda's polarised, turbulent history, in order to provide a proper context, which, in turn, enabled me to delve even more deeply into the world of Serumaga's dramas and his signification. I have also relied on numerous reviews, interviews, and articles in journals, as well as, newspapers.

If Uganda's history had to be read with a poststructuralist stance, and deconstructivist rigour, so, too, was nationstatism, a notion, crucial to the understanding of Serumaga's dualistic identity as a Muganda and also a Ugandan. A number of critiques, too, had to be put

under the deconstructive glare with that notion in mind, among other things.

The principal findings of this study are as follows: Serumaga was in many ways the most experimental and innovative of the playwrights of that lofty decade. This is evident in his psychological depth, and characterisation, and in the numerous ways he struggled to indigenise the theatrical sign; which he achieved with his company the Abafumi (Story- tellers) — the first professional company in East and Central Africa.

The alleged individualism and lack of a social conscience, is best understood as an ostensible one, due to the allegorical individualism in the work; dictated in part by the question of signification and survival. The evidence consistently shows Serumaga to be a committed activist and critic who eventually traded the pen and the art in, for a gun when he realised that art had ceased to be an interventionist enough sign. No study of this depth and scope has, to date, been done on Serumaga.

Finally, I had the privilege of knowing Mr. Serumaga and spent a considerable time in his company, in what turned out to be the final months of his life. Any knowledge and insights gained from that experience will I believe, help, rather than hinder this exercise by blunting my critical or scholarly distance.

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My grandmother, Sasira Naava Nabakungulu, my great Uncle, Bro. Stephen Bwanika, who both lie and rest with the rest of the ancestors and to whom this is dedicated.

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Introduction

In a Nairobi hospital, in September 1980, Robert Serumaga's life came to an abrupt, brutal and tragic ending. In April 1979, Serumaga had returned to Uganda as a member of both the Uganda National Liberation Army (U.N.L.A.) and the Uganda National Liberation Front (U.N.L.F.). He had fought in the war against the genocidal dictator, Idi Amin. Before that it was as a director and playwright that Serumaga had earned his reputation in Uganda and the rest of the world. Immediately after the liberation war, Serumaga served as a cabinet Minister in the first post-Amin, provisional government, only to find himself forced to return into exile (in Kenya) after the fall of Professor Yusufu Kironde Lule's short-lived, interim government. It is in Nairobi (Kenya) that Serumaga died, a little more than a year after his second, and what was to become his last, exile.

Serumaga was a very popular and much admired figure in and outside Uganda. His acting, directing and playwrighting had indeed earned him an indelible reputation, not only in Uganda, but in many other parts of the world, too. To those artistic achievements, add yet one more, equally memorable achievement: his role as a freedom fighter and field Commander who had abandoned both the pen and the theatre for an AK47 rifle, to fight alongside his fellow Ugandan exiles and the Tanzanian Army in the liberation war that eventually freed Uganda from the genocidal nightmare of Idi Amin's rule. It can be said without using any hyperbole that Serumaga's artistic and military credentials must have been a constant source of unease to many powerful individuals in Uganda, such as Cabinet Minister Paulo Muwanga and the army chief of staff, Brigadier David Oyite-Ojok, considered by many to have been Milton Obote's right-hand man.

By September 1980, Milton Obote, Uganda's former President, had finally returned to Uganda after eight years of exile in Tanzania; Idi Amin had been overthrown in the liberation war (1978-1979);

Obote was to win a gerrymandered and rigged election in December 1980. Serumaga had known this only too well and it was a major reason he opted to wage another liberation war. It was the gun that *they* would use to win a landslide at the ballot box and it was only the gun that would dislodge them out of office. It was the gun that would put an end to the hegemonic leadership that had afflicted Uganda virtually since its independence in October 1962. That hegemony had all begun with Obote and no doubt his return to Uganda in 1980 meant it would continue with him. Forced into exile once again, Serumaga was determined to stop that and this time his contribution was to be even more 'all-consuming' than in the earlier liberation war (1978-1979).

But in September 1980 the life of this articulate, immensely gifted, popular, international figure, formidable and implacable foe of Obote and his supporters, had finally come to an abrupt and tragic end. in the prime of his life. Whether or not Milton Obote, or his key stalwarts in the Ugandan government, had played a part in the events that led to Serumaga's brutal and premature death, we shall probably never know. The official cause of death was an aneurysm. Through the next few days, Serumaga's family, friends and a good number of Ugandan exiles, fellow artists, some of the officers and men under his command at the time, all gathered together at a house in the leafy Nairobi suburb of Kirichwa Gardens. In accordance with tradition, they had gathered to offer condolences, to mourn alongside the immediate family, to console them and to pay tribute to Serumaga and the cause he had lived and died for.

Back in the land of his birth, many more Ugandans — particularly, though not exclusively those from Serumaga's home region of Buganda — kept solitary vigil in the privacy of their homes no doubt hoping that those ideals for which he had lived and fought would sprout, flourish and indeed become an inalienable feature of the

political landscape of a free Uganda.[1] In accordance with the customs of the land, they would also have hoped and prayed that Serumaga's remains would one day be returned to the land of his forefathers. Only then could they properly and publicly mourn his tragic loss, salute the legendary artist and formidable freedom fighter and hope that his spirit would finally rest in peace. But the artistic community, particularly within Ugandan theatre, had also suffered an equally grievous loss: a loss that would certainly be felt for years to come.

Curiously and regrettably, Serumaga's story has not been told, to date. However, some attention has been paid to Serumaga's work. Scholars such as Margaret Macpherson, Rose Mbowa, Andrew Horn, Joanna Kamanyi and a number of others have written about him on more than one occasion. In Kamanyi's case it is primarily in her M.A. thesis: *A Comparative Study of Theatrical Productions in Uganda Today*.[2] A lot of what Rose Mbowa has written on Serumaga can be found in two recent books, one devoted entirely to Uganda and the other to Africa at large.[3] The publications are crucial, but are also 'long-overdue'. So, too, though is a comprehensive study of all of Serumaga's drama and none has been done, let alone published, so far.

Over the years, both before and after Serumaga's death, there has only been one published essay solely devoted to Serumaga. In the other cases, he is discussed as part of larger studies of East African/Ugandan theatre. Without in any way diminishing the contributions of other

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[1]Hopefully a Uganda, too, in which no single ethnic group, be it the Baganda or any other peoples, because they were born on the 'wrong' side of the infamous north-south divide that Obote had grossly exploited to promote and foster his hegemony from 1966 to 1971 when he first ruled Uganda.

[2] Kamanyi, Joanna, *A Comparative Study of Theatrical Productions in Uganda Today*, M.A. Thesis, Makerere University Kampala, 1978. This is Kamanyi's only contribution, to date, but an important one in relation to Serumaga' s unscripted plays, in particular, *Renga Moi* (*The Red Warrior*) and *Amayirikiti* (*Flame Trees*). Kamanyi also provides a lot of valuable material on the period in general.

[3] The two essays will be cited quite often, here though are all the relevant details: Mbowa, Rose, 'Luganda Theatre and its audience', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, 39, 1999, pp.227-246. The second one is: Mbowa, Rose, ' Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, 31, 1994, (revised and enlarged) 2003, pp.123-134.

Ugandan playwrights such as John Ruganda and Byron Kawadwa,[4] Uganda's place and contribution in the annals of the world's theatre would have been substantially less and probably have taken longer to be noticed were it not for Serumaga. Kawadwa, Serumaga, Ruganda and a number of others wrote a lot of their plays around more or less the same time. But, particularly in terms of the period we are dealing with here (1968-1978), it can be safely posited that it is Serumaga who almost single handedly put Uganda on the theatrical map of the world. In his essay, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Robert Serumaga', the Africanist scholar and critic Andrew Horn, makes more or less the same point. He starts by noting that among Serumaga's peers in the whole of East Africa, there is none more familiar to overseas audiences than Serumaga. 'This is a result not only of his dedication to the theatre but of his extraordinary entrepreneurial ability, a commercial and publicity sense at least comparable to his acting, directorial and writing talents.'[5] Horn singles Serumaga out, not just among Serumaga's fellow Ugandan playwrights, but also, from the entire region of East Africa. Indeed the praise seems to become more unequivocal as the essay progresses. The essay is by no means a paean to Serumaga.[6] Whether or not one agrees with Horn, his essay provides the most extensive attempt made so far in the analysis of Serumaga's work. There is no doubt that more academic interest could definitely spawn more productions of Serumaga's plays.

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[4] Much more will be said about Kawadwa, right from Chapter One. Ruganda started writing plays as an undergraduate at Makerere University's (at the time) Honours English School. He was also, one of the founding members of the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre, about which more will be said in the first chapter. He has, by now written more plays than any other Ugandan ever has in English. For more on him, see Imbuga, Davis. Francis, 'An Introduction to John Ruganda the Playwright', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, 39, 1999, pp. 273-284.

[5] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga, in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa (a reader)*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 97.

[6] There are, though, a number of issues about which one is bound to beg to differ with Horn. One may not necessarily agree with Horn's primary concern and hypothesis in relation to the key issue 'Individualism and Community' in Serumaga's work for example. There are a number of other areas that may spark disagreement and they are not necessarily caused by 'negative' views or critiques — certainly not in all the cases. Unfortunately, it may not be very helpful to provide examples at this stage and a number of these areas will definitely come up in context.

Of those plays, Serumaga's *Majangwa* (1971), subtitled, *A Promise of Rains* has continued to enjoy regular productions. Kenyan audiences for example, have been accustomed to seeing it with what scholar and critic Adrian Roscoe would call 'ritual regularity', despite a ten-year gap in its production history from 1994. In January 2004, the seasoned Kenyan director Tirus Gathwe directed a Gikuyu adaptation of *Majangwa*. Gathwe's production provides even more evidence of the popularity and enduring nature of a lot of Serumaga's work. But sad as it is to say this, Serumaga and his work could soon be reduced to a little more than a footnote. The two books that were alluded to earlier and Horn's contributions may all be available in these fairly recent publications, but the material itself has been reprinted. Horn's essay, for instance, first appeared in *African Literature Today* in 1982.[7] And again, in a number of these 'sources' Serumaga is mentioned almost in parenthesis, the man and his work are actually under-served, if not misrepresented.

The world theatre community also need to know Serumaga as an innovator who extended the possibilities and frontiers of performance; and one whose contribution and legacy encompasses theatre as an art, in general, and perhaps even more importantly, the theatre as a Postcolonial African aesthetic. (Uganda itself needs to re-acquaint itself with the man and his work, if for no other reason because of the dire state its theatre has been in since around 1978.)

The Early Years to School

Robert (Bellamino) Kalundi Serumaga was born on January 6th 1939 in what is generally known as Masaka or Buddu. Then as now, Masaka was part of the region of Buganda.[8] For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with this part of the world, *Buganda* is the region and *Luganda* is the language spoken. The people are the *Baganda*, and the

[7] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', *African Literature Today* 12, 1982, African Publishing, New York.

[8] Buganda is the south-central part of Uganda along the shores of Lake Victoria. To the people of Buganda, that Lake (second only to Superior in size), is called: Nalubaale or the mother- of- all- Gods.

singular form for that is *Muganda*. Robert Serumaga was a Muganda. His father Thomas Kyakwambala, Serumaga, was a Catholic. So, too, was his mother, Geraldine Namatovu. His father is described by Serumaga's eldest son (Kalundi), as having been 'an important County chief, [...] for nearly a decade.'[9] At the time of Serumaga's birth, his father was already in his sixties and anecdotal evidence from school friends of Robert Serumaga, suggests he had lost his sight by then. The parish priest of the area, who hailed from Italy, suggested that the newly born child be named after Roberto Bellarmine who was (anointed) into sainthood on 6th January 1939, the day of Serumaga's birth; hence the name Robert and Bellamino. Kalundi was a name traditionally chosen after one of Serumaga's ancestors.

Robert Kalundi Serumaga lost his father at the early age of four. It is said in a two-page biography of Serumaga that soon after that 'he and his mother were forced to leave the dead father's home.'[10] The newly widowed Geraldine together with her son (the younger Serumaga) left for her birthplace of Villa Maria in a different part of Masaka. In his relatively brief, self-authored, biography, Serumaga informs us that it is to his mother, his maternal grandparents and presumably his mother's five sisters (one of whom according to Kalundi was a Nun), to whom he 'attributes' a lot of his success. Serumaga's father was, no doubt, a wealthy individual but his own part of the vast estate would not be given to him until the age of 18. Geraldine was a schoolteacher by profession and Serumaga notes she resumed her work to earn the badly needed money that would pay the young Serumaga's way through his school years.

From the tender age of four, through virtually all his teenage years, 'he learned how to' live with next to nothing; what it meant to

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[9] See Serumaga, Kalundi R, 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and The Abafumi Theatre Company', (1998), p. 1. This resourceful paper is yet to be published unfortunately. The author is Robert Serumaga, (Junior). Until recently, he was for a number of years, the Artistic Director of the Uganda's National Theatre in Kampala. Kalundi R. Serumaga spent over 8 years in exile, mostly in the U.K. and finally returned to Uganda with an M.A. in Film Studies.
In order to avoid any confusion over the names, Kalundi R. Serumaga will be referred to simply as Kalundi.

[10] Robert Serumaga's Biography, (unpublished), p. 1.

be hungry, deprived; 'and to find truth and love in languages beyond the material trappings of life.'[11] One begins to have a sense that the tragedy, the wry humour, inhumanity, greed, loneliness and despair that would later emerge, as recurring themes in Serumaga's work; were not the result of an academic or passing knowledge, but rather experienced first hand by that fatherless child who was to 'father' the man and the playwright he would eventually become.

Serumaga's eldest son, Kalundi makes an interesting observation; given the fact that this was a patriarchal society, 'He was to have little real contact with his [paternal] side [of the family] until [...] well into his late teens.'[12] One presumes, too, that this would have been the same time that he received his share of his father's estate. The loss of the father, the absence of that part of the family in his most formative years after what presumably looks like an acrimonious parting of ways, would all no doubt have exacerbated a palpable loneliness. Loneliness would become a key theme in Serumaga's work.

After his primary school, Serumaga spent two years in a Seminary only to reach the conclusion that he was not really cut out to be a member of the clergy. He subsequently went to St. Henry's College Kitovu but never finished secondary school at Kitovu on account of what he describes as a serial kind of incompatibility with school principals. Kalundi sums it up as 'insubordination'. He did, though, finally complete his secondary school at St. Mary's College Kisubi, which, like St. Henry's, was run by the Brothers of Christian Instruction. There then followed what is now known as a gap-year which he spent ferrying commuters as a 'long distance' public-taxi driver. In the meantime, Serumaga had also won a scholarship to study at Ireland's Trinity College, the University of Dublin, in 1959.

Trinity College

[11] Ibid., p. 1.

[12] Serumaga, Kalundi R., 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company', p.11.

Serumaga and his wife Delphine arrived in Dublin in 1959. Delphine Zinunula was born and bred in Kalisizo (Masaka), very close to Serumaga's birthplace of Kabwoko. Her mother Sarah Ndagire was a much loved matriarch whose family was as well known as Serumaga's.[13] Serumaga was to read Economics and Political Science. Six years later, in 1965, he was awarded a degree in Economics from Trinity College, Dublin. It is in Dublin that Kalundi and 3 of their seven children were born. Mrs. Norah Owens, a neighbour on Fitzwilliam Street, remembers the couple and the children well. She remembers Serumaga for his intelligence in particular and his busy schedule. Serumaga combined his studies with a job at the BBC, which meant he spent most of his weekends at Bush House in London, where he worked on the radio programme, *Africa Abroad*. But Mrs. Owens also recalls Serumaga as a fine dancer.[14]

Kalundi has this to say about his father and the arts: 'Robert Serumaga began a consistent interest in art generally and [the] theatre in particular as a 21-year old student in Dublin.'[15] Serumaga himself mentions the Trinity College and Dublin years as the time he started to write and perform his own material in the form of 'satirical reviews' in which he appeared. This interest was not in a single genre, hence Kalundi's choice of the word 'generally'. In fact, Serumaga notes in his biography that 'he also organised the first African Art Exhibition in Dublin borrowing works of art from more than 15 African countries.'[16] This was an extensive operation in which a number of private collectors were approached, including Princess Margaret of Great Britain, who donated the sculpture *Compassion* by the Ugandan artist and lecturer Gregory Maloba. Even though Serumaga's passion

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[13] I should add as well that Delphine's family was also very Catholic, indeed her Uncle was a well known Priest. I have been unable to get the details of their marriage but I suspect it would have been sometime in 1958.

[14]The Interview with Ms. Owens was conducted in Dublin in February 1988.

[15] Serumaga, Kalundi. R,' Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 3.

[16]See Serumaga, Robert: Biography, in *Programme Magazine*: *Renga Moi*; 4th Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies; Theatre Limited: Kampala, January 1974, p. 1.

would eventually be the theatre, one gets a sense that from a fairly early stage Serumaga regarded the arts as interrelated (as opposed to compartmentalised). This is a view and an approach to which he would subscribe even more in his own work. If Serumaga's broad artistic immersion is a process that dominated his Dublin years, then his initiation into the specific mediums of writing and performance happened in London.

London: 1965-1967

The two London years seem to be characterised by bountiful energy and incessant activity which would in fact become a sort of trademark throughout the rest of Serumaga's short life. Among his activities was, of course, working for the BBC programme *Africa Abroad*, on which he had worked while an undergraduate in Trinity College. Serumaga also worked at the Transcription Centre and was co-editor of a literary magazine, *Cultural Events in Africa*. This was a man as clearly in love with his home, the African continent at large, and the arts, in much the same way he had been during the student years in Dublin.

Some of the interviews he conducted with his countryman Okot p'Bitek and the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo are, thankfully, available in book form. They show a man who seems to have researched meticulously the then burgeoning world of African literature, including writers such as Chinua Achebe, one of whose novels he knowingly refers to in the interview with Okot p'Bitek. Serumaga certainly sounds like a host who loved and respected his subjects and probably well on his way to being a practitioner himself as far as creative writing goes. In fact in the interview with Okot p'Bitek, conducted in February 1967, Serumaga talks about himself as 'an economist [who is also] involved in theatre in some way'.[17]

That interview is interesting in part because of the seemingly tiny but significant things that emerge in relation to the theatre. At that

[17] Serumaga, Robert, 'Interview with Okot p'Bitek', in Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden (eds.), *African Writers Talking*, London: Heinemann, 1972, p. 154.

time, Serumaga did have one work of art to his credit already: the novel *Return to the Shadows*, which he had written in 1966 but was not published until 1968.[18] Even at that time, Serumaga was well aware of the negative impact of transplanted Western theatre and the inimical role of Christianity and Western education in relation to African culture and the theatre. Serumaga mentions the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre back in Uganda, and one of its co-founders, David Cook, as well as a number of other things that reveal him to be a man who was acutely aware of what was happening on the theatrical front back in Uganda, and perhaps, on the verge of making his own contribution to it.

In terms of his individual journey, London exposed him to a good deal of theatre and afforded him the opportunity to perform his own sketches, that would leave their indelible imprints on his work in thematic, idiomatic and intertextual terms. Indeed, Andrew Horn has noted the range of plays that London offered and the opportunities to perform as a big part of Serumaga's 'training'. Serumaga was, after all, able to garner a lot of praise as an actor and this was not confined to his own material. But Horn goes on to say that, 'Perhaps of greater significance [...] to his development both as an actor and playwright was Serumaga's work in variety and revue as a stand-up comedian.'[19] That experience and influence, seems to be unnoticed by most of the other critics and scholars. Horn is 'puzzled' as to why other critics do not see the London years as a significant and crucial phase of Serumaga's 'development'. By its solitary nature, stand-up is a baptism of fire, for a performer, and has links to key traits in Serumaga's plays that have their roots in the revue and stand-up routines. It is more important, however, at this stage to reiterate the hands-on training, contacts, business, publicity and self-promotion that were gained in the London years. It is there, too, at venues including London's Royal

[18] According to Serumaga's good friend David Rubadiri, the entire second half of this novel was lost by the publisher, Heinemann, and it had to be rewritten by Serumaga.

[19] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa (a Reader)*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, p. 98.

Court Theatre, where creative individuals from Africa and other parts of the Commonwealth, such as Serumaga, found a home away from home. For Serumaga, a personal quest had consciously begun. He embarked on a journey in search of his voice, culture, tradition, and to unlearn what Christianity and western education had turned him into and he comments on these issues in the interview with Okot p'Bitek. 'When I was at school', says Serumaga, for instance, 'there was always a certain kind of furtive shame when one was placed face to face with one's culture.'[20] The London years can also be regarded as years of 'homework' in artistic and idiomatic terms, the quest for self-awareness and creative voice. But this creative voice was rocked by a key cataclysmic event in his home country.

'*Things fall apart*'

A year after his stay in London, then Prime Minister Milton Obote stormed the palace of the Kabaka of Buganda, Sir Edward Mutesa, and overthrew the Kabaka, who was not only the King of Buganda but also the president of the federal state of Uganda. Obote abrogated the constitution, banned the monarchy in Buganda and elsewhere (mostly in the south), usurped total power and declared Uganda a republic, with himself as President. This was a brutal and tragic change. As Serumaga's son, Kalundi states: 'The now familiar methods of state repression were brought to bear [...] To many, Serumaga included, these developments came as a profound shock.'[21] To Serumaga and his fellow artists who were grappling with the aesthetics and nature of whatever genre they had embraced, in particular the theatre, the role, function and concerns of the Ugandan writer were about to change. They were now to be defined by their response to Obote's 1966 coup and the devastating hegemony that

[20] Serumaga, Robert, 'Interview with Okot p'Bitek', in Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden (eds.), *African Writers Talking*, London: Heinemann, 1972, p.152.
[21] Serumaga, Kalundi R., 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 12.

came with it. It was their responsibility as artists to cry out against it. It should be noted, in parenthesis, at this stage, that there is a context to the calamities of 1966 and one has to delve into the history of Uganda and Buganda for that. But, activism and even innovation had now become a defining characteristic of the writing. The idiomatic modes and some of the varied, innovative, artistic tools, would — to a significant extent — be dictated by the need to evade the censor but cry out against the inhumanity that had now become the norm, particularly after 1966 (or arguably 1965). This was all because of one man, Milton Obote, who held the reigns of power in 1966. 1965 is encased in many people's minds in Buganda because of the Nakulabye massacre, the first pogrom with Obote's signature on it.

The Political History of Uganda

Buganda, the powerful Kingdom from which the country (Uganda) derived its name, had been an autonomous entity for over 500 years before the occupation by the British. So, too, were a number of other Kingdoms and various, different entities that together with Buganda were to eventually become what would be designated as Uganda by the colonial masters, in this case: Britain.[22]

By 1862, when Europeans first set foot on Buganda's soil, Buganda not only had its own monarchy, but it also had the *Katikiro* or Prime Minister and the Lukiiko, which was the equivalent of a parliament; in short, an entire sophisticated system of administration. There were monarchies in other areas in the predominantly *Bantu* south, such as Bunyoro and Ankole. The term Bantu is a linguistic grouping. [23] Among the different Bantu peoples the word for person will vary from *muntu*, to *mutu*, *mundu* and so on, hence the

[22] Historian M.S.M. Semakula, Kiwanuka discusses the early years at great lengths, the arrival of the missionaries, the chartered companies such as the Imperial British East Africa (I. B.E.A), see: *A History of Buganda (From the Foundation of the Kingdom to 1900);* London: Longman Group Ltd., 1971. So, too, have other historians such as Samwiri Rubaraza Karugire.

[23] If one drew a line diagonally that cut Uganda into two through the Congo to the west all the way up to the Atlantic Ocean and did the same to the east through Kenya up the Indian Ocean, with very few exceptions one would be mapping what may well be termed as Bantu territory. It is an area that would start there then go south of the Equator all the way down to the southern tip of South Africa.

designation: Bantu.[24] As for Buganda, it was not always in an 'enviable' position; a lot of the power it had amassed, in terms of territory for example, had been incremental and it came at the expense of the rival Kingdom of Bunyoro or Bunyoro Kitara. To ensure its place with the dawn of imperialism, and to counter bigger threats (as M.S.M. Semakula Kiwanuka tells us) from as far away as Egypt, Buganda would enter into an agreement with the British as early as 1894. By virtue of that agreement, Buganda would be a protectorate and not a colony, as was the case with neighbouring Kenya or Zimbabwe for example. To the Baganda, this was a pragmatic and strategic engagement. They also thought, albeit mistakenly, that they were signing as allies and equals. Although they would enjoy a unique position, it was one they would have to fight to maintain. This, they certainly did, for example alongside their much loved Kabaka, Sir Edward Mutesa, who was exiled (1953-1955) by the then Governor Andrew Cohen after saying no to an East African Federation.[25]

Uganda is, in fact, a comparatively recent construct. It did not exist, not even on paper, until 1885, the year of the Berlin Agreement. Only a few years earlier, Europe had been opposed to the acquisition of colonies, but with the Industrial Revolution, an unprecedented search for raw materials as well as wider markets, colonial acquisition become the order of the day. Colonies had finally begun to make sense and the colonial powers did not want to tramp on one another's feet or walk into each other's spheres of influence. It is in Berlin that the carving and partitioning of Africa by the West reached its first, high watermark.

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[24] Related as they are these are languages and not dialects. Their reduction by colonial masters and scholars to dialects is a reflection of the same mind-set that reduced those various autonomous African *nations* and their inhabitants to tribes. The Spanish language for example is not Italian let alone Portuguese for that matter. In relation to Uganda the Bantu south may share certain similarities but they are far from homogeneous and as far as the north goes the languages, the languages in the north and the south, are as different from each other as English is different from Russian for example.

[25] What that example illustrates is that (Sir) Edward Mutesa and the Lukiiko had those hundreds of years as a people, a kingdom and a nation whose relationship with the colonial masters was not always an amicable one.

Sir Edward Mutesa provides a vivid picture of the partition, the haste, the greed, the lack of care and understanding that would to this day, cut families into half with an uncle in Kenya and a cousin in Uganda, for example: 'It is easy to see the difference between the wavy, wriggling, natural boundaries of Buganda and the man-made straight lines of Uganda.' [26] The arbitrary nature of the boundaries had, in the case of Uganda, put the north and south together in a way that was bound to lead to problems. Many observers have noted, Phares Mutibwa included, that the people of the north had linguistically and culturally a lot more in common with Southern Sudan than with almost every Ugandan south of Lake Kyoga.

In addition, those various nations, peoples and entities were now concomitantly reduced to tribes, thanks to the colonial masters.[27] As Sir Edward Mutesa notes: 'I have never been able to pin down precisely the difference between a tribe and a nation and see why one is thought to be so despicable and the other is so admired.' [28] Mutesa knew the word tribe was simply a colonial way of stripping people of their worth and sophistication. Within a few years of his accession to the throne this 'tribesman' would encounter the brazen face of Governor Cohen. For the 'offence' of standing up for his people and democratic values, Mutesa would be exiled for two years. [29]

Colonial Administration

How did the British administer these recent acquisitions and how were the acquisitions effectively occupied? Phares Mutibwa, Samwiri Rubaraza Karugire and other scholars point to indirect rule, which gave the British a degree of invisibility and created the illusion that

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[26] Mutesa II, Kabaka of Buganda, *Desecration of My Kingdom*, London: Constable Press, 1967. p.57.
[27] The word tribe after all can be used with reference to a not fully evolved people, it can also be used as a reference to people as well as beasts, it can also among other things mean a people who are yet to be exposed to literacy even as a concept. Interestingly, at least according to the Collins dictionary, the Afrikaners are not categorised or described as a *tribe*, is it maybe because of their European origins?
[28] Mutesa II, Kabaka of Buganda, *Desecration of My Kingdom*, London: Constable Press, 1967. p.59.
[29] 'He drew from under his blotter the papers which withdrew recognition from me as *Native ruler*, flimsy typewritten sheets already signed, and handed them to me (Italics mine).' Ibid. , p.121.

nothing had changed. They were also extremely good at pitting one group against another. M.S.M. Semakula Kiwanuka gives a harrowing account of Captain Lugard and the Church Missionary Society, Captain Lugard's Maxim gun, together with a standing army of about 8, 000 Sudanese mercenaries that were put to good use in the early 1890s, in the decimation of the Catholic Baganda, and the way the Protestant minority eventually came to wield the reigns of power over the majority Catholic population. They also subcontracted their key subjects, the Baganda, to effectively subdue a number of the areas in the rest of Uganda that were not yet effectively occupied. They operated by dividing and ruling, and by exploiting vulnerabilities and accentuating differences. Buganda for instance was assisted with arms and ammunition to ward off its ancient rival Bunyoro. But even internal differences among the top Baganda elite were exploited in the name of effective occupation. Buganda certainly did not endear itself to a number of its neighbours due to its sub-contractual role in that process.

Not long after independence, that same role would be cynically exploited to rally a lot of the Ugandan 'supra-nation' against Buganda. And to justify the excesses that would be meted out to the Baganda, in the name of nationalism — a nationalism that was uncannily similar in method, to the classic, British divide and rule — but this time the enemy would be the Bantu south (Buganda, for the most part).

Independence: The Unholy Alliance

Buganda had a special place that was enshrined in law in the Constitution that was agreed in 1962. That Constitution was a patchwork quilt, with Buganda at the centre. It entered into the postcolonial times almost as a state within a state, with a choice to be or not to be a part of Uganda. The Baganda had fought for that position through their numbers as the single largest people, through their economic muscle. All through the mid to late 1940s and the entire 50s, through the Kabaka, the Lukiiko and the entire populace, the Baganda had fought long and hard, and the colonial master was getting weary,

hence the enshrinement in law of Buganda's unique and distinctive position. Enshrined in the Constitution, was their Federal status. Most of the West enjoyed a quasi-federal status; some parts of the North in particular were entirely under the central government. It is important to point out that the British did not impose this 'quilted' constitutional arrangement, and some Baganda even opposed it. Notably, one of the 'other' Ugandans who supported this arrangement was none other than Milton Obote.[30] Obote pledged to protect Buganda's distinctiveness and soon swore to uphold the Constitution. The Baganda rallied behind Obote in the name of a 'sacrosanct' political alliance between his Uganda Peoples Congress (U.P.C.) and Buganda's Kabaka Yekka (K.Y.) at the time of the elections that preceded independence. Subsequent elections saw Obote become Prime Minister of the country and Sir Edward Mutesa, the Kabaka of Buganda who Obote 'lured' into standing for the ceremonial head of state, the first, and for over 30 years, the only president who had ever been elected by the people.[31]

Nothing the Baganda had done, not even the 'sins' of their history and grievous political mistakes (such as the trusting of Obote), would prepare them, and more important, justify what would be unleashed on them in the 'powder-keg' that postcolonial Uganda would turn into under Dr. Apollo Milton Obote.

Buganda Under Occupation

As Phares Mutibwa observes, 'The irony of our recent history is that the agonies to which people have been subjected often did not start

[30] According to Phares Mutibwa, a man who maintains exemplary courteousness and a judicious distance, Obote's boyhood years were spent as a goatherd. Born in Northern Uganda in 1923 a Langi, (in other words as a Langi by tribe) Obote was among other things closer to the Acholi his tribal/ethnic neighbours. Both the Langi and the Acholi, are on the northern side of that linguistic and cultural divide that was discussed earlier). By all accounts Obote would go far beyond those humble origins. He would go on to study at the prestigious Busoga College Mwiri, and in fact Makerere College, though for some reason, he never finished. The doctoral designation, that would 'preface' his name for years, was in fact an honorary one.

[31] It should also be stated that the alliance between Obote's U.P.C. and the Baganda also came about due to a religious divide between Protestants and Catholics, differences between the Kabaka: Sir Edward Mutesa and another Muganda: Benedicto Kiwanuka — a Catholic — the head of the Democratic Party (D.P.) who when the 1962 elections were held found himself without a seat in the Parliament. But the loyalty to the King among the Baganda meant that even most of the Catholics, ended up voting for the U.P.C. and K.Y. alliance.

with the *arrival* of the colonial masters but with their *departure* in the 1960's.'[32] Mutibwa is not denying the colonial signature that is patently inscribed in the postcolonial tragedies and even genocide whose seeds were planted during the partition, colonial conquest and rule. He is talking about the appalling scales of these postcolonial atrocities that make a lot of the men and women in the city streets and village arenas, 'long' for the colonial times in various countries. This, of course, is a result of 'dogmatic' postcolonial nationalisms and principles to which the leaders themselves pay token attention to or mere 'lip-service', as they march forward to becoming life-Presidents, for example, without remembering the irony of the monarchies they emasculated or annihilated and the opposition leaders they detained, exiled, or murdered. Consequently, the people sometimes 'forget' the wrongs of the colonial masters, if, for no other reason, to avoid deflecting any of the blame that squarely lies on the shoulders and bloodstained hands of their postcolonial rulers.

Obote was one such ruler. He knew that on the verge of independence he was entering into an alliance fraudulently. His goal was to eliminate Buganda. He scuttled that alliance only two years after independence and hoped to unite the rest of Uganda against the Baganda. His alliance with the army, an army that would become increasingly ethnic and patently northern Ugandan, would be displayed in 1965. Obote's 'nationalism' was indeed an ethnic one. His goal was to demonise and isolate the Baganda and unite as much of the rest of the country as possible, against the Baganda of course.

A Place Called Nakulabye

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[32] Mutibwa, M. Phares, *Uganda Since Independence: A story of Unfulfilled Hopes*, London: Hurst and company, 1992, (Preface) p. ix.

That is a painful observation to come to terms with and its irony is inescapable. Particularly, coming as it is from a scholar who is anxious, like most of us, to avoid saying what could be misconstrued as an endorsement of the colonial era, let alone seem to swallow 'our' afro-nationalistic pride, particularly in a forum of that nature.

The first recorded pogrom was at Nakulabye, a suburb of Kampala. At the time Obote was Prime Minister the army (which he had deliberately courted from a very early time) fell under his jurisdiction and command. Rose Mbowa, whose writing is characterised by a meticulous care, judgement and scholarly distance has commented thus on the Nakulabye massacre: 'In 1965, his soldiers proceeded to murder innocent Baganda school children and civilians on the outskirts of Kampala'.[33]

The 'offence' was to have protested over a referendum that had not gone Buganda's way over certain counties that had 'changed hands' (towards the end of the 19th century) which in Ugandan parlance, are referred to as the 'lost counties'. By 1964 the alliance that brought Obote into power was over. 1964 was also the year of the Nakulabye massacre. Two years later, Nakulabye would become a 'dry run' compared to the massacres that began with the battle of Mengo in 1966. Obote would usurp total, absolute power in 1966 and turn Uganda into a Republic. Henceforth, the name Buganda disappeared from the map of Uganda. This is a period that would be characterised by a costly and never-ending reconstruction, force, and propaganda, to consolidate Obote's hegemony.

Obote's 'accession' to power in 1966 was the most tectonic, tragic event and experience since the attainment of independence. The Kabaka of Buganda, Sir Edward Mutesa, had put up a valiant fight with the few men and weapons that he had when Obote's troops stormed his palace at Mengo. He survived the onslaught, escaped, and sought asylum in England where he lived in abject poverty, in an East London flat. Sir Edward's life ended in, that, his second exile, in November 1969, only three years after he fled 'Obote's' Uganda.[34]

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[33] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth African studies, 31, 2003, p. 125. Mbowa curiously places the massacre in 1965, virtually all the other sources say 1964.

[34] In an interview conducted in London with a member of the embalming 'team' that worked on the remains of Sir. Edward Mutesa, it was revealed that close members of the family asked that the casket taken to Kensal Green cemetery for the funeral would not contain Mutesa's remains, for fear of vandalism or similar acts, ordered and sponsored by Obote. Their fears apparently turned out to be true,
continued on next page

The gross violations of the Baganda, the erosions of their humanity, the delegitimisation of their monarchy, their culture, naturally precipitated a gulf between Buganda and the rest of the country that Obote now headed. The same is true of most of the Bantu south. But it was in Buganda that a full-blown ethnic binary came into play. But again, that does not mean that the rest of the southern part (or the Bantu-south as opposed to the Nilotic north) where both Obote and Amin incidentally hailed from, was spared of being turned into a scapegoat — *à la* Buganda — and indeed demonised and othered by Obote and his henchmen. As we have seen, this is a period that would be characterised by a costly and never-ending reconstruction, force and propaganda to consolidate Obote's hegemony. The indignities are too many to bother going through, but they include pogroms, detention without trial, emergency laws and forced exile.

All it took to offend then was simply to be a Muganda, be mistaken for one, or sympathise with the Baganda. Obote's entrenchment project was an ethnic one to its very core. Every Ugandan had the freedom to be whatever they ethnically were except the Baganda who could not be both. Where the Baganda had seen difference as diversity, others saw inequality. Where they saw the law as sacrosanct, Obote saw it as something to transgress and only evoke when it came to Buganda, which was kept under the yoke of an emergency for virtually all Obote's first tenure in office.

In years to come, specifically 1980-1985 after a gerrymandered and rigged election,[35] Obote would return to power and *excel* himself in that and other aspects of that heinous entrenchment project. The massacres that had been unleashed on the Baganda in Nakulabye, Mengo and other areas would now look tame and civilised compared to what befell the Baganda especially those in the famous Luwero Triangle where a lot of the second liberation war (1981-1986) to

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and their measures proved a lot more than prudent because the grave was indeed raided but the remains were safely locked away in a morgue somewhere in London. Such was the depth and callousness of Obote's hatred for the King and the Baganda.

[35] See Mutibwa, M. Phares, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes*, London: Hurst and company, 1992, pp. 138-143.

remove Obote and his supporters out of office was staged. The pretext of the war gave Obote a golden opportunity to finish what he could not have finished in his first 'reign' (1966-1971): the annihilation and subjugation of the Baganda and any like-minded southerners, particularly the Banyankole. Mutibwa draws our attention to a piece of graffiti inscribed by an Obote soldier presumably after a massacre at a place in the Triangle or the killing- fields of Obote's return to power: 'Killing a Muganda or a Munyankole is as easy as riding a bicycle'.[36] Incidentally, the soldier in question made sure to attach his 'Acholi name' to a statement that needs no elaboration except that these were the fruits of the epistemic seeds planted in Obote's first tenure of office. Obote had not changed. Now, though, he had the cover of the 'fog of war' and a license to kill.

Mutibwa cites an estimated figure of 300,000 dead and half a million displaced. Those conservative figures, tell the grim tale and dramatic toll Obote's second tenure in office took among the Baganda. And Mutibwa's colleague at Makerere University, Samwiri Lwanga-Lunyiigo, sums it all up starting with a reminder of Obote's purpose: 'To bring down the proud Baganda to their hobbling knees and he [Obote] succeeded with a vengeance unprecedented in African history— possibly only equalled by [Cambodia's] Pol Pot.'[37] Both Obote and Amin managed — if nothing else — to make the equally untenable and catastrophic period of colonial rule look like the blessing that it actually never was.

To leap all the way to Obote's second tenure is something that could not merely be done in parenthesis or in a footnote or two. The point is that the Obote who returned into power on the 10th of December 1980 was very much the same Obote (1966-1971) except worse, and he had the excuse of an insurgency to enable him to fulfil a heinous project, one that he would have entertained and savoured in his first reign, which had thankfully ended with his overthrow, by Idi

[36] Ibid., p. 159.
[37] Ibid.,

Amin, in January 1971. Many of the men and women, who died fighting for his cause (during his second tenure of office) had been weaned, well bred, and conditioned on that epistemic 'staple-diet' of pernicious ethnicity and propaganda that eventually acquired a genocidal magnitude as we have seen in the graffiti and the *conservative* numbers of the displaced and the dead.

Obote's second tenure, though chronologically beyond the boundaries of this study, has to be examined if, for no other reason, because for far too long, there were many who justified and rationalised that hegemony that began in the mid 1960s and was terminated in 1971. So the decision to leapfrog over the 1970s, which are a very crucial part of this study, is to equip the reader with unequivocal proof of a geopolitical history that sometimes turns into a geological project; because for far too long Obote's othered and mythical bogey-men, the Baganda, though incontestably victimised and violated, were the ones who were blamed for what happened to them. One therefore must dig deeper than the myths turned into wisdom in order to get to the bottom of the question of the Baganda and Obote's post-Independence Uganda. There was a surreal kind of denial of the hegemony and rampant inhumanity in the years that marked Obote's first tenure of office, (officially May 1966 to January 1971). President Yoweri Museveni, in Obote's hometown of Lira would talk about Obote and Buganda from 1966 through to the coup of 1971, in terms of 'the wrath, hatred and curse of the Baganda which are still haunting him and following him' beyond his grave.[38]

Idi Amin Dada

There was a cruel irony to the end of Obote's first reign. The man who took the presidential oath after the coup was well known to Obote: Idi Amin, Dada. This was the same Amin who had led the attack on the Kabaka, Sir Edward Mutesa's palace at Mengo on the 24th of May 1966. At the time of independence in 1962, there had been army

[38] Ibid., p. 60-61.

officers, such as Major Katabarwa, who had far more education than Primary Two, which is all Amin had acquired by way of formal education, apart from the military knowledge he gained in the Kings African Rifles and, subsequently, the Uganda Army. Like Obote, Amin was from the north, not from the Bantu south, and his lack of formal education made him something of a 'toothless bull', to be perhaps coveted by any hegemonic leader who, for obvious reason, had to be aware of the risk of a military coup. But Obote had even boasted of his invulnerability to the then relatively new phenomenon of military coups. He who had ruled by the gun though, was about to fall by the same gun.

Amin's genocidal rule is not 'contested' or questioned either by the people or the academy in general. A substantial part of it will emerge when the 'story' of Ugandan theatre is told and in the analyses and examinations of the dramas of those turbulent times. Suffice it to say, though, that at 3:45 pm on the 25th of January 1971, Obote's overthrow was followed by a euphoria that in Buganda could only have been paralleled by the return of Sir Edward Mutesa from colonial exile in 1955. The celebrations though, were not confined to Buganda. Prominent politicians such as Matyansi Ngobi, Grace Ibingira and Balam Kirya, who had spent years at Luzira Maximum Security Prison, came from other parts of the Bantu south where people celebrated as well.

The End of the Honeymoon

Idi Amin's eight-year rule was soon to be characterised by an unprecedented genocide. Amnesty International and other organisations estimate that anywhere between 300,000 to half a million Ugandans died under Amin's reign of terror. That genocide, would only be rivalled during Obote's second tenure, most of which was confined to Buganda, particularly in the 'famous' Luwero Triangle. Amin's genocide began well before the general population knew about it. It was initially confined to the north, as in Obote's home area of Lango, among the neighbouring Acholi and in the various military

barracks, but it did not take long for it to spill over and spread throughout the country, and the implications would be dire and tragic for the populace and the artists, particularly those in the theatre. The playwrights eventually realised that no amount of masking was enough to obscure their exposés of the spine-chilling nightmare of the killing fields of Idi Amin's Uganda.

The History of Uganda's Theatre

For the purposes of the period of this study it is important to remember that the focus of this thesis is on the earlier Obote period (1966-1971) and the Amin years. It is under the earlier Obote that the Class of '68 wrote a lot of their earliest work. The designation, Class of '68, is in part due to the 'arbitrariness', convenience, and inevitable need for labelling, but it also has to do with the theatrical responses of Serumaga and his peers, to the hegemony of a man (Obote) who seized absolute power in 1966. If their plays are a portrait of the human condition, it is an unquestionably sad, pathetic and tragic one. They diagnose, interrogate, and expose a 'life' not unlike one under an occupation. But their own society itself is not beyond reproach or even complicity in its tragic plight. It is also important to note that even in Obote's first tenure of office (1966-1971) it was not only the Baganda who cried out against Obote's inhumanity and hegemony, the political detainees mentioned earlier did so, as did a number of writers, such as Okot p'Bitek and playwright John Ruganda. And humanity, common decency, principles and freedom, were some of the major concerns at the centre of the creative axes of the class of '68 regardless of which part of the country they were from. It is also equally important to mention that from around 1968 all the way to 1978 Uganda was to witness an unprecedented quantity as well as quality of drama that has yet to be matched or surpassed. Thus Serumaga and his class of '68 constituted the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre.

Theatrical History and Evolution

But first, what is Ugandan theatre? Is it advisable to assume that whatever *Ugandan* theatre is should simply be taken as a given? That too, is a legitimate question to ask. It may even be necessary to make a distinction between theatre and drama in this respect, as in production and authorship, or with regard to theatre purely as a script. A production and performance of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, as was the case at Makerere in 1929 for example, is Ugandan as far as geography, casting and so on, but however Ugandan it may be theatrically, it is author-wise, not. An adaptation of the same play, subsequently produced in Uganda, will be classified as Ugandan, but it will still be an adaptation. The designation could very well be determined by originality.

Is, whatever passes for Ugandan theatre though, the same thing as *Uganda's* theatre? In the 'looser' sense that scholar and critic Andrew Horn for instance uses it, which is also the chosen one here, Uganda's theatre and Ugandan theatre are taken to be synonymous with one another. To be 'Ugandan' may have more to do not just with originality, even though that is a big part of it, but with the form, the idiom, the thematic concerns and content of a given work. Uganda's theatre could otherwise be read as a more encompassing designation; one that acknowledges the plurality of peoples and their differences. It is, after all, in many ways a regional affair with Buganda eventually becoming so dominant, production-wise that it is not unusual for people to wonder whether the National Theatre may in reality better be described as Buganda's as opposed to Ugandan. That, though, would be to exclude talent from other parts of Uganda, people such as John Ruganda, whose glowing contribution is an inalienable part of the Golden Age and the Ugandan canon. Even so, given the predominant duality of *that* theatre linguistically, as in Luganda and English, is it a regional theatre that is also concomitantly national? The answer to that is, yes, as long as national is not read as something to do with state sanctioned.

What about the nationality of the author? Is that all we actually need to know in order to decide? Take *The Black Hermit* (1962) by

Ngugi wa Thiong'o for example, a play that was in fact written to celebrate Uganda's Independence and is indeed usually cited as an example of the very first, full-length, indigenous drama in Uganda (that happens to have been written in English, of course). Sometimes the boundaries have to wither away, and in this particular case, the focus has to be on the play as an important landmark in Ugandan theatre as well as that of East Africa at large.

National designation of a play or a theatrical experience as Ugandan, regardless of the language, the criteria for designation, has to do with the citizenship (whether blood-based or acquired), the geographical and birthplace of the author, as well as thematic concerns or subject matter, idiom, etc., As far as productions go, anything that is produced in Uganda is a Ugandan production but that does not turn it into a Ugandan play or drama.

What about the production of Ugandan plays abroad? A quick answer is that their nationality does not change. What may be more interesting in this respect is the question of a Ugandan playwright in the diaspora.[39] It is probably better left to the artists to decide how they designate themselves in this respect. This could very well depend on how the artists in question view their work as well as themselves, in national or in fact post-national terms.

Whatever one does or says it is important to be cautious of 'all-encompassing' assumptions. The Ugandan theatrical scene, at perhaps its most crucial and formative stage, was not only multicultural but also a multiracial and multinational 'enterprise' (multinational here is not used in a corporate sense). To be terribly rigid is to risk the danger of ignoring the vital contributions made to the Golden Age of Ugandan Theatre by (people such as) the poet, actor, director and academic,

[39] But this is more of an issue now (far much more than in the period of this study) given Uganda's predominantly *unsavoury* history particularly from independence till 1986, or even beyond that for some Ugandans. What happens to a Ugandan who ends up in the diaspora, or one that is born and bred there, for example? How is one going to classify their work in this regard? It will probably become even more of an issue for those Ugandans and other Africans who may 'shy' away from issues of nationality in these increasingly post-national times.

David Rubadiri, or Josephine Baker and David Cook, founders of the celebrated Makerere Free Travelling Theatre, for example.

In an essay entitled: 'Ugandan Poetry: Trends and Features (1965-95)'[40], Ernesto Okello Ogwang begins by raising some 'converging' or shared concerns. He alerts us to the inherent danger of assuming a given 'tradition', which we would then have to designate. He also seems to point to the totalisation that would be implied by the equating of Uganda, in geographic terms, to a literary tradition and the foreclosure on exploration. He cites Adrian Roscoe's book *Uhuru's Fire*, specifically Roscoe's 'discussion of the song school of poetry under the rubric of, not the Ugandan [which it ostensibly should be], but the East African song school of poetry.' The point is, as Ogwang notes that the so-called song-school was predominantly Ugandan, as opposed to East African. And furthermore, 'East Africa [as a concept or an entity] is so taken for granted [by Roscoe] that it is not questioned.'[41] Ogwang's insightful concerns, though addressed to a different genre, are just as relevant to drama and the theatre.

Theatre and Uganda

Perhaps the first thing that one would note in this respect is the alien nature of the theatre as a cultural sign in the colonial days. When Western theatre first set its feet on Ugandan soil, it was alien in both form and content. Those early years began with a 1929 production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* at Makerere University that eventually led to a mushrooming and diversification of theatrical activity in most of the urban centres of the country. That activity though, at least for the most part, was largely confined to the expatriate community and, to an extent, the Ugandans of Asian origin. It appears that even after the opening of the National Theatre in Kampala in 1959, the few indigenous groups that existed could only access the venue 'on

[40] Ogwang, Okello Ernesto, 'Ugandan Poetry: Trends and Features (1965-95)', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 39, 1999, pp. 113-132.
[41] Ibid., footnote 1, p. 113.
It may have to be left to others to probe all these concerns and questions more deeply but they are important concerns, and at the very least, necessary to bear in mind.

Saturday afternoons when the white expatriate audience were still out on the shores of Lake Victoria [...] and only too often their performances were cut short to make room for the Asian and white theatrical groups.'[42] In spite of that observation, most commentators also note the positive contributions of both the expatriate and Asian communities in those early years, towards the theatre in Uganda. Those contributions and activities in the 1940s were mostly in the schools and colleges, as opposed to Makerere itself. Either way, apart from the plays by and for the Asian community, the theatre, at this time, was also an alien sign in linguistic terms since as Rose Mbowa has noted 'To speak the *vernacular*, play or dance to the traditional drum were punishable by manual labour [Italics mine]'.[43] So, to put it very briefly, both language and culture were under siege in the schools and churches (too) — the two places — where the dramatic form was first encountered by many a Ugandan.[44]

Linguistic Duality

From the very beginning, the use of indigenous language — particularly the use of Luganda — in the theatre, was at least partly, a protest. It can certainly be read as an attempt to radically interculturalise and indigenise the theatre as a cultural sign. But it was also a democratisation of a medium that would otherwise have been elitist, purely in terms of its audiences. Wycliffe Kiyingi, Byron Kawadwa, the other playwrights, actors and directors changed that by ensuring that a wider audience would from henceforth find a home in the various venues. Language, specifically the use of Luganda, was to become a characteristic trait of Ugandan theatre, alongside English; of

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[42] Breitinger, Eckhard, 'Popular Urban Theatre in Uganda: Between Self-Help and Enrichment', Cited in Kalundi R. Serumaga's unpublished essay: 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 3.

[43] Mbowa, Rose,' Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, No. 31, 1994, revised and enlarged, 2003, pp.124-125.

[44] It is tempting to extend this narrative, but the rest of the relevant history of the theatre will be addressed in Chapter One.

course, they would both become the two sides of the theatrical linguistic coin.

Wycliffe Kiyingi is an important figure in the history of Uganda's theatre. Kiyingi revealed in a recent interview that he started writing as early as 1947, during his secondary school years at King's College Buddo.[45] He cites King's College and its Inter-house Drama competition as a big part of his initiation into dramatic dialogue and storytelling. Interestingly, especially in this context (of inter-culturalisation and indigenisation of the theatre as an alien sign), he also extols his father's contribution and inspiration as a storyteller *par excellence*.

During the colonial days, a process had started on the road to an epistemic eviction, and construction of a colonial and religious subject. It did not take long for the people to agonise in suspended animation between two binarised worlds of their tradition on the one hand; and the 'West's' language, religion and culture at large, on the other. The literature and theatre that was to counter or mirror that postcolonial condition has led the scholars, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins to invoke Stephen Slemon's words and observation about the postcolonial creative sign as 'a form of cultural criticism and cultural critique: a mode of dissidentifying whole societies from the sovereign codes of cultural organisation, and an inherently dialectical intervention in the hegemonic production of cultural meaning.'[46] The tension, conflict, and hypocrisy, entailed in what, for many, became a harmonisation of the irreconcilable, and for the most part, mutually exclusive worlds (for those who chose to adapt); and in Uganda, it would be captured as Mbowa points out: in Wycliffe Kiyingi's first full- length play, *Pio Mberenge Kamulali* (1954).

Pio Mberenge Kamulali premiered in 1954, in the Kampala suburb of Mengo. (Incidentally Mengo was also the seat of the

[45] Interview conducted by myself in January 2004, at Kiyingi's home in Mutundwe, on the outskirts of Kampala.
[46] Cited in Gilbert, Helen and Joanne Tompkins, '*Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*', London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 3.

Government of Buganda as well as the palace of the Kabaka or King of Buganda). The author himself directed it, under the auspices of his Company: the African Artists Theatre Association.[47]

The eponymic protagonist, Mberenge, was an actual chief among the Baganda, who found himself profoundly torn between the monotheistic and monogamous demands of Christianity, on the one hand; and on the other: his 'pluralistic' marriage to his four wives; together with his allegiance to the Gods and customs of his people. Pio was his adopted/Christian name. *Kamulali* is also the Luganda word for pepper. So a combination of Mberenge — his indigenous self — and the newly acquired name, *Pio* is bound to result in a pepper-filled, burning mouth, a hot and lethal, uneasy, and chaotic result.

Mberenge is faced with an intricate dilemma. His embrace or conversion to Christianity brings with it a kind of censorship that turns his lifestyle into a schizophrenic duality and hypocrisy. In the public eye he is a Christian. In the safe confines and closed doors of his homestead, Mberenge then 'husbands' his four wives, tends to the ancestral spirits and to the pantheon of indigenous gods. This is a lifestyle that is replete with conflict and the newly converted chief is deeply mired in it. It is also a conflict and reality that is as relevant today as it was in 1954 when Kiyingi's play had its première.

Indigenisation of the Sign

Mberenge was one of the earliest plays written by a Ugandan and in an indigenous language. The theatrical genre or idiom itself, starting with the script, was a definitely new and alien aesthetic. But performance itself, and role- playing, could rightly be described as far from alien. Scholars, Rose Mbowa, Margaret Macpherson and a number of other commentators (Serumaga included) have all, in their individual ways,

[47] The actor, Dan Zirimenya, later popularly known as Mwami Kyesswa, who was to become a legend in his own lifetime, thanks — at least in part — due to a Kiyingi Television Series, *Nebuba Enkya Nebuba Egulo* (As- it- Was in the Morning so- it- is- in the Evening), was in the cast for the premiere of Kiyingi's first full-length play. So, too, was Kezia Nasejje; also later popularly known as: Elivania Agaati, who was to garner her fame in the same series as the ubiquitous actor and Pastor's son: Dan Zirimenya.

talked about this alien-ness in form and content, too, as well as the indigenous parallels.

Mbowa in particular, identifies some indigenous forms of performance that shared a kinship with the theatre. It is those forms of orature, such as, storytelling, legends, myths, ritual, music, song, poetry, and even more oral forms/genres, court performances for example — that included dance though not confined to it — in Buganda, to which Serumaga, Kawadwa, Kiyingi, and many others would turn. This was the source of their struggle to understand and indigenise — to interculturalise the theatrical sign — in a truly radical postcolonial spirit, with a youthful optimism and inexhaustible fervour.

Syncretism and Intertextualisation

Any discussion of the theatre's taking root on Uganda's soil, at least in the early stages, will almost inevitably involve syncretism and intertextualisation. Intertextualisation 'knows' neither time nor place and it does not always necessarily involve another culture. To understand, attempt to indigenise, to interculturalise the essentially Western sign that the theatre was in its very beginnings is to engage in a negotiation of sorts. Intertextualisation, and syncretism in particular, are an inevitable part of both result and process of indigenisation of the theatre as a cultural sign. To syncretize is, after all, to combine what — in this case — appears to be an alien or Western form with indigenous 'potentially' and inherently dramatic forms, from a culture where scripted drama was not even a concept in the pre-colonial times. That is a very conscious negotiation, one that was to yield spectacular results in a phenomenally short time. However radically one seeks to transform that sign, as the emerging playwrights try to discover their distinct, individual voices and master their craft, the question of influences becomes important. And it is definitely a salient feature of the plays of the early days and the Golden Age itself.

As time went on, of course, there was more and more originality as well as masterly of the craft in general. It is also no wonder that adaptations such as *The Trick* (1965) by Erisa Kironde, an adaptation

of J.M. Synge's *Shadow of the Glen*, and Julius Nyerere's Swahili translation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1965) are cited by many as examples of the various negotiations that took place through most of the 1960s. Byron Kawadwa's Luganda translation of Molière's *The Miser*, entitled *Sitakange* (1969), is yet another example of the syncretising process and negotiation entailed in the early years. There were, of course, many playwrights who began by plunging straight into their own myths and legends, and their names and work will be cited at a more appropriate time. The point to note in addition is that influences are not necessarily negative, they do not always inhibit originality, and they are inevitable. They are also always at play, consciously or unconsciously. Molière, Synge, Yeats, Beckett, Osborne, and Fugard, seem to be the playwrights whose work had a tangible and fruitful impact, in intertextual terms, among the class of '68. Though not cited by most, Athol Fugard, in particular his play *The Bloodknot* (1961), which was produced in Kampala in 1968, could well be the single playwright who influenced most of the Class of '68, especially those who wrote in English, in particular, Robert Serumaga and John Ruganda.

On the popular theatre front, the ubiquitous Katoto and Kapere characters; two sides of the same coin — a *commedia* character *à la* Molière, are yet another example of the fusion, the inter-culturalisation and indigenisation of the theatrical sign. The two farcical characters first appeared in the popular didactic skits produced by the Department of Social Welfare in the 1940s. But these 'negotiations' are not necessarily always a guarantee of success, not even among those who were close to or ultimately mastered their craft in this, the most difficult perhaps, of all literary mediums.

Censorship, Protest, Resistance

In 1966, the history of the nation was about to dictate the tone, content, and significantly the chosen idioms and their signification in Ugandan drama. It is important to note, even in parenthesis, that censorship was not a new thing. As Mbowa has pointed out, 'Political

repression relative the artist [and the entire society goes as far back as] 1893 [with the advent] of British rule in Uganda.'[48] Censorship was therefore not new. She goes on to note, for example, that 'Christian missionaries discouraged and suppressed indigenous performance art practises which they labelled uncivilised and pagan.'[49] Entire aspects of culture such as the Ndongo (Wedding) dance had been proscribed among the Baganda on the basis of what they perceived to be immorality. To Governor Harry Johnston, for example, the offensiveness of the contentious Ndongo dance was not only confined to the performance arena; it inspired and spawned, even more blatantly 'immoral' acts that were simulated in the performances. The churches subsequently 'threatened to suspend any member who performed it.'[50] The Anti-witchcraft law of 1912, as Mbowa goes on to note, followed the proscribing of the Ndongo dance. All through this process the Christian missionaries and the colonial government clearly worked hand in hand. What they characterised as witchcraft was, in fact, the indigenous religion, otherwise known as Lubaale, among the Baganda. And what they deemed to be primitive and egregious was, more often than not, the encoded mores, values and practices, with which society was bound together and lubricated with, which probably explains why they were not necessarily as successful as they would have wished to be in stamping out these practices.

It would be wrong, though, to underestimate the effects of this epistemic violence and the wounds and scars that followed it. This colonial zeal and missionary fervour to destroy a lot of what defined the Baganda as a people, was, perhaps even more evident in the schools. Kalundi has observed as follows: 'In the schools, new "traditional" costumes were designed [...] to replace the actual dress of

[48] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University African Studies Series, 31, 1994 (revised and enlarged) 2003, p. 123.
[49] Ibid.,.
[50] Ibid.,. p. 124.

the people, which was considered indecent.'[51] The repression was not confined to the sartorial arena, any 'traditional songs and dances were adjusted' for example, if they appeared to have 'sexual or heathen overtones'.[52] This humiliation, repression, alienation, and ideologisation in the name of Christianity and Western values did not go unnoticed by future artists, such as Wycliffe Kiyingi. Indeed Kiyingi's very first play *Pio Mberenge Kamulali* which was discussed earlier in this Introduction, was to turn its critical gaze on the hypocrisy, contradictions and dilemmas, experienced by some of the early converts. That Kiyingi chose to write in Luganda was, in and of itself, a laudable accomplishment; considering that language was one of the sites on which the ferocious process of epistemic eviction took place. The true national languages for a long time (even after Independence, unfortunately) had been relegated to vernacular, forbidden and outlawed in schools and colleges. For Serumaga and many others who were educated at the time, the difficult process of self-reclamation, in linguistic and cultural terms was to define a significant part of their early creative writing years.

Ironically though, Makerere was an exception to the linguistic hegemony of the colonial masters. From the very early days in 1946, Makerere had a Department of Sociology and a lot of research was being carried out with regard to aspects of indigenous Ugandan culture. Rather than discourage students from embracing their cultures and traditions, as Macpherson puts it, 'We required our graduates to be literate, numerate, and to know about the cultures of their continent.'[53]

Independence [as was pointed out at the very beginning of this section] would soon be followed by the unrelenting, panoptic glare of the state. The struggle to indigenise the theatre as a cultural sign was soon replaced by a more monumental one. Artists, who had embraced

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[51] Serumaga, Kalundi R, 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and The Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 10.
[52] Ibid.,.
[53] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunrise', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, No. 39, 1999, p. 24.

their creative pursuits with unfettered passion, as they strove to come to terms with their craft and idiom in the different genres of choice, soon found themselves forced to look at signification as a survival kit. Their art first, under Obote (1966-1971), and then Idi Amin (1971-1979), was now 'forced' out of an attempt to understand, to cry out against the evils of the day. Those were the conditions under which their art managed to surface. That art would also (rather ironically perhaps) reach its zenith in a dramatically short time, in the Uganda of Idi Amin. Artists had a responsibility to communicate as well as to survive the censor and indeed 'cling' to their lives. Amin's tyrannical 'reign' happens to constitute most of the period of this study. Indeed, exile or death became the norm for many, including the 'offensive' artists.

Serumaga Comes Home

Serumaga officially returned to Uganda in 1967. This was a very different Uganda from the one he had left in 1959, when he went to pursue his University education at Trinity College, Dublin. Gone was the monarchy, and with it, Sir Edward Mutesa, the Kabaka of Buganda. Obote's infamous, 'pigeon-hole' Constitution was now the law of the land.[54] In other words, illegality and hegemony, the irrationality of it all, had become sacrosanct, and were now enshrined in 'law'. Buganda, the region, together with its name, could no longer be found on the map of Obote's Uganda. The Baganda and their sympathisers were still nursing their wounds, mourning their dead, and branded with physical, psychological, and psychic scars. While virtually all the other Ugandans were free to be what they were in the dual, ethnic and national sense, this is a luxury that the Baganda could not enjoy. A full-blown ethnic binary, in which the Baganda were the enemy, was now the official policy. Obote was now well on his way to a physical and epistemic goal of subjugating the Baganda. A state of emergency

[54] Many commentators, including Phares Mutibwa have noted Obote's furious and vengeful, hegemonic anti-Buganda feelings, behind this document as well as the irony of Parliament's lack of a say in what was to become the law of the land.

was now the norm in the arbitrarily partitioned and, to a degree, administratively effaced region formerly known as Buganda. Serumaga's artistic concerns and the burdens he shouldered were a direct result of this strife and inhumanity. His artistic idiom and perhaps even the genre of choice (drama), to an extent at least, were both more than likely dictated by the cataclysmic change, emergency laws, and censorship, which all the artists sought to evade, without compromising their responses to the reprehensible hegemony.

On his return to Uganda Serumaga had a very productive time. 'Serumaga began working as a Sales Executive in the British owned Uganda Company, which he would stay with until the late 1970s, eventually rising to a senior managerial position.'[55] This is certainly no surprise, considering his Economics training at Trinity College. But Serumaga also became a Senior Fellow in creative writing at Makerere University, and it was there that two of his plays were written: *The Elephants* and *Majangwa*.

In December 1968, Serumaga played the role of Zach, in Athol Fugard's two-hander, *The Blood Knot*. He played the Professor in Soyinka's *The Road*, in February 1969, and George in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. All these productions took place at Uganda's National Theatre. Serumaga's love for, and skill in acting would serve him well in his own material and more than likely, complemented and enhanced his directorial abilities. Margaret Macpherson described him as 'a dominant figure on the stage with a splendid voice and a considerable sense of timing.'[56]

Theatre Limited produced those three productions, and at least two of Serumaga's own plays. Serumaga was not only a very instrumental, and a founding member of Theatre Limited; some attributed the entire idea of that almost professional company to him. In an article, co-written by Serumaga and Janet Johnson, Johnson

[55] Serumaga, Kalundi R., 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 3.

[56] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and Peoples: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda, Robert Serumaga', Workshop Paper No. 4, *The Writer and Society in Africa*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, University of Nairobi, 1974, p. 14.

writes: 'From the start, Mr. Serumaga has been the inspiration behind the venture: his knowledge and love of the theatre and his business instincts give the company a sound basis.'[57]

It is fair to see even in this very 'venture', some of Serumaga's theatrical legacy from the London days, whose impact, according to Horn, is not given the emphasis it deserves. In addition to playing the title role in his third, and the last of his scripted plays, *Majangwa*, Serumaga also directed it. But *Majangwa* was the last of Serumaga's plays to be produced under the auspices of Theatre Limited.

In 1972, convinced that Theatre Limited was not an adequate vehicle for his unprecedented plans, vision and strategy, he launched a theatre school as well as the Abafumi (Storytellers) Company. That story will be told in chapter five. With the launching of the Abafumi Company, Serumaga was to excel in artistic innovation and experiment, cementing his almost single-handed contribution to get Uganda and East Africa onto the theatrical map. Again, this is a journey that had its beginnings in Trinity College, in London, too, and finally back home in Serumaga's Uganda. But it all began with his novel, *Return to the Shadows* (1968). [58]

Return to the Shadows must be read as an exposé of a traumatic, contemporary, postcolonial history. It is also an important text in terms of Serumaga's artistic journey in search of a literary medium and an aesthetic as he responds to the atrocities visited upon his people; atrocities which would become the norm and not the exception, through both Obote's and later, Amin's reigns of terror.[59] And Serumaga's role and function as a writer, from his earliest work and

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[57] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda's Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, p. 54.

[58] Written in 1966 and published in London: Heinemann, 1968 (AWS 54) and Exeter NH: Heinemann Inc., 1969.

[59] Again, the period of study here is 1968-78, which covers both, Obote's hegemonic rule, and Amin's genocidal grip.

only novel has to be seen as synonymous with that of a witness and town crier.[60]

Set in a thinly veiled Uganda (Adnagu), *Return to the Shadows* unfolds right after a military coup, the protagonist (Musizi), escapes from the city and returns to his home village, only to find that the rampaging soldiers have raped his mother. As Kalundi rightly observes: ' Shocked, [Musizi] resolves to stop running away [to] return to the city [Kampala] and do something about the whole situation.'[61] That decision to act in response to the continuing tragedy under a hegemonic regime is not a casual one and it says a lot about what Edward Said would call the 'strategic location' of the author.[62] This is an allusion to the author's omniscient voice in my understanding and more difficult to decipher in drama as opposed to fiction. It is important to bear the authorial stance in mind in light of the scholarship on Serumaga's writing heretofore. As Horn observes: 'Serumaga has often been bitterly criticised for an apparent lack of social commitment and political concern'[63] in his work. This is an allegation that does not seem to be borne out by the evidence. And both — those that praise him as well as those that abhor him through that categorisation — seem to be, respectfully, off the mark.

There is certainly a lot more to say about *Return to the Shadows*, Musizi, the protagonist, Serumaga's strategic location, and the myth of what Horn calls 'a radical individualism tending distinctly towards solipsism'.[64] The importance of the novel in this context lies in the aesthetics, the signification, and in its content — as testimony of Serumaga's role and function as a writer — which, naturally spills into

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[60] In this he is no different from, for instance, his fellow playwright from South Africa: Athol Fugard in the face of apartheid. Nor is he any different from his fellow Ugandan playwrights such as Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda, and virtually all the other members of the Class of '68.

[61] Serumaga, Kalundi R., 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 12.

[62] Said, Edward. W, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Books, 1978, p. 20.

[63] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa (a Reader)*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, p. 97.

[64] Ibid., p. 97.

his plays. *Return to the Shadows* 'strikes themes and rehearses narrative forms which deeply inform'[65] the two plays that followed it.

Playwright

Serumaga is credited with a total of five plays written in the space of approximately seven years. His very first play, *A Play*, though written in 1967, was not published until 1971. *A Play* was first produced in 1968; *The Elephants* (1969); *Majangwa* in (1971); followed by *Renga Moi* (*The Red Warrior*), 1972, and *Amayirikiti* (*The Flame Tree*), 1974.

Simply put, these plays are a response to Obote's hegemony and Amin's megalomania and genocide. But they must also be seen in the context of a journey, a quest for an African aesthetic. There are aspects of intertextualisation and syncretism, particularly in the first two, which must be seen, at least in part, as the early stage of that journey. For Serumaga, the casting off of Christianity and Western culture was not a blind, wholesale, ideological process. He used whatever suited his needs and the influences were many and diverse and went way beyond the West. After a trip to Manila in 1971, for example, where *Majangwa* was performed in the Third World Theatre Festival, classical Japanese elements would be put to work in subsequent productions. As Margaret Macpherson states: 'on his return [...] he immediately incorporated some of the new ideas he had come across into a revised version of *Majangwa*.'[66] Incidentally, the 'revision', here, appears to be a reference to the production as opposed to the text. But Serumaga was clearly fond of experimentation and innovation, so it would not be surprising if both production and text were to him, far from sacrosanct, but in fact malleable and open candidates for his restless mind. Indeed, as Macpherson says in the same paragraph, 'He [Serumaga] is an articulate thinker on the theatre arts and his boundless enthusiasm embraces continually new experiences and new

[65] Ibid., p. 103.

[66] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and Peoples: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda, Robert Serumaga', Workshop Paper No. 4, *The Writer and Society in Africa*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, University of Nairobi, 1974, p. 14.

experiments.'[67] Nowhere, perhaps, would Serumaga's zeal, be more palpably evident than in the non-dialogic plays, *Renga Moi* and *Amayirikiti*, which followed *Majangwa*. But in examining those non-dialogic plays (particularly *Amayirikiti*) a virtually wordless play, Constantin Stanislavski, and perhaps, to an extent Jerzy Grotowski, cannot be overlooked as influences, even though these plays evidently show a Serumaga at his most original and African self. That said, the biggest 'influence' on Serumaga is clearly his own heritage. As Serumaga himself states; 'Ritual dances of birth, circumcision, marriage, war, victory, death and even resurrection, have been the fountain of Africa's aesthetic inspiration.'[68] Herein lies a clue as to how the best and most successful of Serumaga's plays, though literally 'mired' in the burning issues of his country, transcended those very issues, and provided something for anybody that cared about humanity and art.

And while obvious to some, in the context of Serumaga's work, social or political commitment is curiously non-existent, to a vocal number of critics.[69] Serumaga's focus on the individual can be read as a paradigmatic portrayal of Buganda. If insanity, for example, is epitomised in an individual, as is the case in Serumaga's *A Play* and *The Elephants,* can we not read that as a concern for society, instead of what Nazareth describes as 'a non-political approach [...] a lack of sensitivity to what is going on'?[70] Whatever 'is going on' for Serumaga seems to be very different to what Nazareth has in mind.[71]

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[67] Macpherson, Margaret, Ibid., p.14.

[68] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda's Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, p. 52.

[69] Peter Nazareth and Chris Wanjala, 'lambaste' Serumaga for his obsession with the individual, and in Wanjala's case, Serumaga's (obsession) with Buganda. It is not very useful to plunge into a deconstruction of their views at this time, but the evidence points more to an activism that probably goes against Nazareth's ideological grain, or simply escapes his critical attention.

[70] Nazareth, Peter,' East African Literary Supplement', *Joliso*, 11,1, Nairobi, 1974, p. 13. See Nazareth's remarks can also be found on the same page.

[71] In fact Peter Nazareth, rather disparagingly perhaps, dismisses Serumaga on the grounds that originality is not one of his virtues. Nazareth makes other allegations that should be taken seriously but may make themselves vulnerable to a Derridean deconstruction. But this is not necessarily tantamount to a dismissal of Nazareth's contribution to the arts and letters on the East African scene at large. His views on the role of a writer and the question of commitment in postcolonial Africa for instance, which

continued on next page

Horn, on the other hand, at least for a moment, seems to revel in what he perceives as Serumaga's 'radical individualism, tending distinctly towards a solipsism, which characterise all his central characters.'[72]

Theoretical Models, Critical Strategies

A thorough examination of Serumaga's work, together with a substantial survey of the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre in general (1968- 1978), can best be served by historicizing and, therefore, contextualising the work in question. And, when one opts to analyse and discuss any work primarily through a postcolonial as well as poststructuralist lens, *historicizing* is a necessity whose value cannot be overemphasised. This is arguably more relevant in postcolonial analyses than it is to the poststructuralist ones in general. A postcolonial position, reading or critique is, among other things, patently historicist. In an albeit conceptually different way (perhaps), the poststructuralists also share a significant relationship with history — one that is equally necessary and one that certainly complements the postcolonial critical framework of this study.

It is almost impossible in this process to avoid thinking, at times, about Adorno, and his views on poetry after the Holocaust.[73] The magnificent dramas of the period in question came out of a tragic irony; tremendous pain and tragedy under Obote's hegemony and Amin's genocide. But whether we are discussing the Holocaust, the killing fields of Uganda, or those savage and ghastly horrors of Rwanda, it becomes important to remember that the perpetrators are the only beneficiaries from our failure to speak of these *unspeakable* atrocities. Almost all the work of the Golden Age playwrights was

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he first spelt out in *Transition* Magazine are relevant even today and would certainly spark vigorous debate.

See: Nazareth, Peter, 'The African Writer and Commitment', *Transition*, Vol. 4, Number 19, pp. 6-7.

[72] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa (a Reader)*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, p. 97.

[73] See Adorno, Theodor, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Prisms*, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1981, p. 34.

written and produced in those years that we have to revisit in order to get to the bottom of their signification. But our obligations also have to be weighed against the role and function of a critic. It is therefore equally important, as much as one humanly can, not to let any empathy that one may have for the artists, diminish one's scholarly distance, or blunt one's critical faculties.

My own inclination to refer to the period of study and characterise it as the Golden Age for instance is something I arrived at long before I was exposed to anything that Andrew Horn has to say about Uganda's theatre for instance. I was heartened by the fact that Horn has designated the same era in much the same way. Horn must have come to that conclusion by way of a hypothesis, not empathy or sentiment, and, eventually, the plays and playwrights made their case. It is in much the same way that I too seek to make a forceful case for the plays of that unprecedented period in the theatrical history of Uganda, a period whose sheer volume and quality has not been replicated since. My emphasis is, of course, on Robert Serumaga, but this is not, where possible, to the exclusion of the others that contributed significantly and indelibly to the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre. I have also designated playwrights and others of the time as the Class of '68; this should not be read as a veiled salute to poststructuralism. It just so happens that Byron Kawadwa's play, *Serwajja Okwota* (*The Lean Dog Which Came to the Fire*), opened in Kampala that year. In many ways that marks the tangible beginning of what was to become a phenomenal period for Uganda's theatre.

The nature of the critical paradigm/s chosen may raise additional questions and, perhaps, even concern. I therefore feel compelled to share some reflections on the two primary methodologies chosen. But first some clarifications have to be made specifically with regard to critical methodologies and intellectual positions.

More often than not, the line between intellectual positions and analytical tools is far too blurred to warrant any distinctions between the two. But the different tools we deploy in critical analysis and cultural theory are products of conceptual frameworks distilled from

and formulated by a variety of intellectual positions. These multiple, intellectual positions are far from homogeneous. Theorists, scholars and critics, have been known to borrow, share or use critical tools associated with an intellectual position/s to which they do not subscribe.[74]So, to that extent, tools are therefore detachable and even interchangeable. A close reading of a work does not turn an avowed poststructuralist like Spivak into a formalist. Incidentally, among other things, Spivak comes across as someone who 'suffers' from— what may be designated as an *aversion* for or *intolerance* to the 'diagnostic', interrogative and 'symptomatic' *approach* of New Historicism— as 'professed' by Louis Montrose, Alan Sinfield, Richard Greenblatt and others.[75] But their critical practice intersects by way of that ubiquitously used term: deconstruction. It is therefore possible to talk about a New-Historicist deconstruction as well as a feminist-materialist one, for example. But to talk about a poststructuralist deconstruction would be described as tautological. I do not say this to advocate or defend the *purists* or those who may wish to draw an indelible line between intellectual tools and critical methodologies.

Deconstruction, particularly when alluded to in conjunction with the 'predicated' terms *différance* and *aporia,*[76] functions both as a critical tool and a form of analytical inquiry. It can be subsequently argued that more often than not, in criticism, to distinguish between intellectual positions and analytical tools is not unlike the separation of form and content in a work of art, a task which may not be altogether helpful in reading Beckett for example.

An intellectual position is a point of view that has as much to do with whatever is being discussed as well as a reflection of a way of thinking. Those views, positions or standpoints are tied to theoretical anchors. In terms of performance analysis or representation,

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[74] The preponderance of the semiotic terms, signifier and signified or signification for example, does not necessarily connote an allegiance to *saussurean* linguistics or structuralism.

[75] See Spivak, Chakravorty Gayatri, *The Post-colonial Critic*, Sarah Harasym (ed.), New York and London: Routledge, 1990. See Chapter: 'The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic', pp. 152-68.

[76] Will be explained at a more appropriate moment.

intellectual positions are not only a reflection/encapsulation of our concepts and philosophies, they also colour, shape — if not determine — our critiques, be they of performance or culture. They *taint* the critical tools or the devices we deploy, in other words. Even if we insist on polarising thought and device as a result of that kind of entrenchment with regard to the question of essentialisation in this context, a postcolonial reading of any work, for example, regardless of which methodological, critical or analytical tools it employs, will share an *a priori* kinship with other postcolonial analyses.

That kinship will be manifested in history, for example, in the aspects of it that the anti-colonial critical gaze must of necessity focus on for example. History here can be contextual as well as thematic. It can also be a distancing device through which artists can address the burning issues of their day. In that sense, the historical is in effect the ostensible concern of the artist, and the critic together with the audiences, are expected to be able to discern and read that history as an encoded or encrypted present day reality. Yet another example of the kinship that postcolonial analyses share in the form of history is from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon's emblematic 'man of culture' has an inalienable responsibility: 'to use the past with the intention of opening up the future as an invitation to action and a basis for hope.'[77]

Fanon's words can be read as plea or, in fact vision, of a palpable activism in relation to the role and function of a writer. They could be read by the postcolonial critic as a kind of primer for the writer's utilisation of 'the past' or history, for the ethics and aesthetics of resistance. Stretched to their logical conclusion, they imply a brutal commitment on the part of the artist who may inevitably trade the pen or keyboard for battle fatigues at some stage in the struggle. In Fanon's view, 'the past' is evoked or revisited not so much to take us on a *bucolic* trip down memory lane through an archive or a museum, but

[77]Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Preface by Jean Paul Sartre, Constance Farrington (trans.), London: 1963, p. 187.

for the express purpose of making us peer into the 'future'; and fuelling the anti-colonial struggle in the face of a dehumanising, untenable, despair. Even in those few words of Fanon's, we can begin to see a possibility of that kinship that all postcolonial analyses share. That kinship will also be manifested in the thematic concerns they prioritise — the mirroring of that untenable, catastrophic, inhuman condition under colonialism for example — in the aesthetics, as well as the activist role and function of the artist. However loose it may be, there is a kind of standard operating procedure in postcolonial thought and critical practice.

Let us not forget either that we are, after all, simply discussing ways of reading, analytical modes, interpretation — what Anthony Appiah would call 'an epistemology of reading'.[78] To muddy the waters over semantics in this respect may be intellectually justifiable but it could also be, respectfully, characterised as counter-productive.[79]

I now wish to turn to the second of the primary critical methodologies employed in this thesis: post-structuralism. I should also state that the primary methodology is postcolonial. How though, does it complement the postcolonial position in relation to Serumaga's plays in particular as well as the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre in general? It has been reiterated already that history enables us to contextualise, to read and decode the signification and the work. The poststructuralists also share a significant relationship with history — albeit in a conceptually different way— one, that is equally necessary, and certainly complements the postcolonial part of the critical framework of this study. Before we look at the relationship between

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[78] Appiah, Anthony, 'Topologies of Nativism', in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, Malden Massachusetts (USA) and Oxford (UK): Blackwell Press, 2001, p.955. A postcolonial position, analysis, technique as it applies to any given work implies certain things about how, why, and where the critical gaze will focus for example, where the emphasis will be laid thematically, aesthetically, narrative devices the artists will deploy.

[79] This is not to say either that postcolonial readings of the same work will be carbon copies of each other, related as they might be. That would be too simplistic. Ngugi wa Thiongo and Chinua Achebe will not look at a W.B. Yeats poem or play, or Yeats the man for instance, in exactly the same way either, even though they all operate from within the same postcolonial paradigm.

poststructuralism and history however, there maybe good reason for adumbration.

The world of poststructuralist thought and knowledge — much like the postcolonial one — is also one of polarities as opposed to binaries, necessarily. So it is possible to modify our initial position by saying that critical tools and methodologies are not always synonymous with each other, but it is also equally true that they are, depending on the context/ the degree or parameters we are using. Deconstruction is a tool in so far as our ability to detach it from the poststructuralist 'kit' and apply it even if we do subscribe to a different intellectual position such as New Historicism or Cultural Materialism for example. Essentially, though, it is a tool that cannot escape from the poststructuralist mould in which it was cast.

Deconstruction is simply a way of reading. The more literally one reads the better. Gayatri Spivak mentions this so much that there would not be much reason in citing a specific source for it. Spivak's use of a deconstructivist analytical approach is also important in this context because she is clearly postcolonial. It is, in much the same way, that this thesis combines the postcolonial and the poststructuralist as complimentary tools in the critique of Serumaga and the Golden age of Uganda's Theatre. Inherent, too, in deconstruction is the tension between the ostensible and real, and the assumption that a text always betrays itself. And if we read closely and focus on seemingly little things, we are able to eventually tease out and indeed see, among other things, what is left out, otherwise known as *Aporia* or absences. Those absences are not necessarily a bad thing; they could actually be a tribute to a text. There is also a cardinal deconstructivist view that no one, the author included, has a monopoly over meaning. That does not mean we should give up trying to stabilise the meaning for ourselves, of whatever it is we are pre-occupied with.

In addition, deconstruction is almost by definition prone to a deconstruction itself, rooted as it is in the language of the text and task at hand. Deconstruction and poststructuralism at large can be described as practices in which we accept our own vulnerabilities.

Deconstruction is, perhaps not always, but can indeed be an affirmative exercise.

The Derridean deconstructive critical methodology has already been at work here. We have already teased out and exposed the unnecessary and counterproductive binarisation of methodological or critical tools *vis à vis* intellectual positions that need not be repeated here. Given the deliberate obfuscation of factual information concerning Obote's hegemony in particular, the significance of the deconstructivist approach in this context cannot be overemphasised.

It is not terribly useful to provide an entire catalogue of what the deconstructive gaze will focus on; it is after all both an analytical tool and an intellectual position. Uganda's history and Obote's hegemony have to be deconstructed for what they really are. The contextualisation that happens in the process helps, in turn, to decode the signification of Serumaga and his peers, which feeds our understanding of the plays in question. Critics of Serumaga's work shall also be read deconstructively. We shall indeed be able to see what they say and what may have been left out of their texts and why. We shall combine both history and context to get to the bottom of the dramatic texts, their signification and meaning. Incidentally, by combining context and text we are not necessarily going out of the text and breaking Derrida's cardinal rule, '*I'll n' ya pas de hors texte*', which translates as: 'there is nothing outside the text'.

Let us now look at history, poststructuralism and deconstruction. It should also be emphasised that poststructuralism, like postmodernism, is characterised by an aversion to master, or foundationalist narratives. History is, therefore, essential but its very veracity is the first test it must pass. A poststructuralist gaze will approach or use history in general by acknowledging that it is a discipline which has been rightly championed, but at the same time subjected to circumspection and sometimes, outright vilification. This is not in any way to diminish the role and magnitude of history. To be ahistorical is, after all, one of the worst insults that the Academy can bestow.

In what may be described as an eloquent defence and passionate advocacy of New Historicism and perhaps, arguably, Cultural Materialism, Louis Montrose has posited that: 'The post-structuralist orientation to history now emerging in literary studies maybe characterised chiastically, as a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textualisation of history.'[80] The 'historicity' of a text takes us back to a certain time/ event or events in the past. The inscription of those events can be problematic. The historian and those who cite or use history must be accorded a circumspect reception. History itself raises questions of historiography and veracity. The Uganda of pre-1986, all the way back to the Uganda of a great deal of the Golden Age of Ugandan Theatre (1968-1978) is no exception to those concerns either. Through whose eyes and mind are we looking at that history for example? To what extent are they ideologically interpellated? If they clearly are or are likely to be, to what extent does that seep into the criticism of Serumaga's work for example? How can we tease all that out of their chronicles of Uganda's history? These questions shall be discussed at length in the subsequent chapters.

Now, what about those that may have some concerns or even misgivings about poststructuralism? It is indeed possible to argue, as some feminists and other scholars have done, that it is incumbent upon us to exercise some caution in our use of poststructuralist theory on the grounds that as Albert Memmi has posited: the colonial frame of mind stays in some form of psychological baggage and residue that consciously or not still resides in the psyche of even the most fervent anti-colonials from the West. 'Conscious rejection does not ensure the erasure of unconscious attitudes and assumptions which [...] reveal the *refuser* to share many of the fundamental attitudes of the class which has been rejected [Italics mine].'[81]

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[80] Montrose, Louis, 'Professing the Renaissance', in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), Literary Theory: An Anthology, Blackwell Press: Malden Massachusetts (USA) and Oxford (UK), 2001, p.781

[81] Cited in Cairns, David and Sean Richards: Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1989, p. 25.

That is a warning that should of course be heeded strongly. To say that is to urge us to exercise a healthy caution in our critical practice and approach but it is not an attempt to stop or demerit those of us that find poststructuralism useful. Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said, two of the leading postcolonial/anticolonial scholars for example, have also been quite open about their 'embrace' of poststructuralism. Furthermore, both Said and Spivak have expressed their reservations as well as disagreements with certain poststructuralists and their views, openly and unambiguously.[82] So indeed has Homi K. Bhabha, yet another eminent postcolonial scholar.[83]

But there are certainly those in Africa and some africanists too, who will actually go further and allege that the use of poststructuralist theory smacks of some kind of *recolonisation*, and an *affliction* that could well be described/diagnosed as, e*urophilia*? The West once again could be said to be holding us in intellectual bondage, through willingly seducing and enticing us discursively.

Incidentally, 1968 is usually cited as the year of the birth of poststructuralism. That year, or better still its choice, obviously is subject to a deconstruction itself if one factors in the problems that come with periodisation of any sort, given that some of the theorists had been at work for quite a while before that. What is important to point out here though is that by the early to late 1960s the European colonial empires had been virtually dismantled. Was poststructuralism, then, or even now, an act of recolonisation or neo-colonialism? There is no evidence to support that assumption. On the contrary, poststructuralism can be described as congenitally anti-orthodox, anti-establishment, and without dismissing Albert Memmi's vital observation and concern about colonial sedimentation even among the most anti-colonial Westerners, poststructuralism is as close to anti-colonial as the West can get.

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[82] See for example, Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *In Other Worlds*: *Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York and London: Routledge and Methuen, 1987, as well as, Said, Edward W, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Books, 1978.

[83] See Bhabha, K. Homi, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

In his book *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha draws our attention to what seems to amount to a hegemonic insistence to police cultural discourse. He cites one by the name of C. Taylor in an article entitled: 'Eurocentrics Vs New Thought at Edinburgh' [84] In it, we are given an interesting definition of 'larceny': 'the judicious distortion of African truths to fit western prejudices'.[85] Clearly, there are those who definitely have a lot more than just misgivings about poststructuralism and almost anything Western. But we also have to be careful of over-zealousness in this respect. We should also recall the differences mentioned in relation to Spivak, Said and Homi Bhabha. In spite of that caution and the differences cited by the above scholars, it should be pointed out as well, that disagreements in principle with the poststructuralist matrix could, in fact, be ideological. They could easily and have been known to come out of a 'rabid' literary nationalism that may have lived way past its sell-by date, its noble contribution to the liberation struggle and eternal vigilance in relation to our cultures and literatures. There is, behind some of those allegations, a kind of fundamentalist, epistemic, 'ethnic' cleansing. Homi Bhabha's response the allegation of larceny is incisive and concise, nothing short of axiomatic:

> Are the interests of 'Western' theory necessarily collusive with the hegemonic rule of the West as a power bloc? Is the language of theory merely another power play of the culturally privileged Western elite to produce a discourse of the Other that reinforces its own power-knowledge equation? [86]

Certainly, the 'hegemonic rule of the West as a power bloc' still rings true. But 'the language of theory' is not an Orientalist trope. Arguments that carry with them a whiff of racism should be identified for what they are because there is no need to re-inscribe the same dialectic we are still fighting against. Literary nationalism has no doubt been necessary and it has contributed very positively on the

[84] Taylor C., *Framework*, 34, 1987 p.148-footnote number 9.
[85]See (footnote 1 in Bhabha's Endnotes) in Bhabha, K. Homi, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 258.
[86]Ibid., pp. 20-21.

epistemological, pedagogic and cultural fronts, let us not discredit it by othering the West in much the same way it has othered us through the centuries. The unnecessary binarisation of knowledge is simply a re-textualisation or re-inscription of a repugnant dialectic.

It is important to remember that postcolonial thought and knowledge is interventionist. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha examines this at great length in the Chapter entitled "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern (The Question of Agency)". It is a search for agency, for an end to the metanarratives in which the other has been inscribed, perhaps as far back as the first 'syllable[s] of recorded time', 'enshrined', marginalized, misrepresented. It is also equally important to recall that 1968 was the time of the advent of poststructuralist thinking. Poststructuralism was never a result of yet another nefarious attempt to concretise Europe's, or France's grip on the empire. Poststructuralism was — much like the postcolonial — interventionist and, radically so. As we have already observed, poststructuralism can indeed be described as not necessarily 'post-' but certainly counter-colonial or better still, anticolonial.[87]Rather than binarising the two, we may indeed find that they complement and even augment each other perhaps, all the while acknowledging that there are no differences between the two as already indicated.[88]

Structure

The critical methodologies and critical tools, I believe, have been effectively foregrounded. This postcolonial and poststructuralist framework is the analytical prism through which Robert Serumaga in particular as well as the Golden Age of Ugandan Theatre shall be examined. The key question of solipsism, activism and innovation is

[87] It did after all turn a lot of things upside down all the way from the enlightenment and in fact beyond that to ancient Greece and of course closer to its own time, structuralism itself with regard to Saussure, Lévi- Strauss and other eminent structuralists. It could also be described as post-Marxist.

[88] Roland Barthes' secularist approach to mythology is almost diametrically opposed to — if not mutually exclusive from — Wole Soyinka's exegetic, cosmological and spiritual view of mythology for example and that is of particular relevance to us, specifically in Chapter 4.

one that will be posed with regard to each and every play of Serumaga's. Questions of syncretising, intertextualisation and synthesizing in the process of indigenising that essentially Western sign will also be addressed. So, too, will innovation; both in terms of breaking new theatrical ground and signification as a survival kit in addressing the evils of the Uganda of his day. Serumaga's work can be loosely characterised as being in three phases, the first one being the first two plays, *A Play* and *The Elephants*, the second one being *Majangwa*, and finally the two, non-dialogic or post-*Majangwa* plays, *Renga Moi* and *Amayirikiti*.

Chapter One will take a closer look at some of the key players, the individuals and Institutions whose roles in what led to the Golden Age, however different or similar they may be, are as vital as that of Serumaga's. But, in addition, looking more closely, and with a chronological historical depth, will also help to further contextualise Serumaga in the eventual evaluation of his role and contribution to the period.

Particular attention shall also be paid to the postcolonial, both as an ethic and aesthetic, in relation to the thematic concerns and theatrical 'execution' and realisation of the work as well as the syncretic road to originality and indigenisation of the theatrical sign. The question of commitment, in a Ugandan context will be discussed in relation to the critical and scholarly reception in Uganda and East Africa at large.

The plays will be examined in the same sequence in which they were written starting with the very first one *A Play* in Chapter Two. Further details will be provided in the individual chapters with regard to the production history of the plays, but *A Play* first opened at Uganda's National Theatre in October 1967. This was to be followed by *The Elephants* in 1968, which also first opened at the National Theatre in Kampala. *The Elephants* will be examined in Chapter Three. Majangwa, the most ubiquitously produced of Serumaga's scripted plays, also first opened at the same venue in 1971; *Majangwa*, will be examined in Chapter Four. Chapter Five will begin with the history

and philosophy of the Abafumi Company, their regimen and training methods, as well the Abafumi's ethos and Serumaga's search and vision. Serumaga's fourth play, *Renga Moi* shall be discussed at length in this, the final chapter, together with the sixth play, *Amayirikiti*. *Renga Moi* first opened at the National Theatre in 1972, followed by *Amayirikiti* in 1974. For both these plays, as well as the first three, more production details will be provided in the individual chapters.

Before I conclude, I wish very briefly to look at a quotation from Homi K. Bhabha which illustrates further the inherent danger of binarising the postcolonial and the poststructuralist, and it is, in fact, a reference to Frantz Fanon: 'The body of his work splits between a Hegelian-Marxist dialectic, a phenomenological affirmation of self and other and the psychoanalytic ambivalence of the unconscious.'[89] In short, we should not celebrate Fanon and discriminate among his sources, as in Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Lacan and others. We should also think long and hard before ascribing the eurocentric label to anyone that may wish to combine the postcolonial with the poststructuralist when it comes to performance analysis, as Fanon himself reminds us: 'The Negro is not. Anymore than the white man.'[90]

Serumaga's contribution to Uganda's theatre and its Golden Age is in many ways unrivalled, based on the volume of output and the time it was all accomplished. His skill, zeal, energy, and innovation may have been phenomenal, but it was not always like that.

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[89] See Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin White Masks*, Introduction by Homi K. Bhabha, Charles Lam Markmann (trans.), London: Pluto Press, 1968, p. ix.

[90] Fanon, Frantz, ibid., p. 231. Perhaps I should add that nothing that is said here should imply that Hegel, for example should not be problematised with regard to issues such as slavery. See for example Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Writers in Politics*, 1st published (1981), (revised and enlarged); Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers (EAEP) and Portsmouth (NH) Heinemann, 1997, p. 8.

CHAPTER ONE

PRECURSORS AND CONTEXT

> The saddest thing about theatrical development in Eastern Africa, has been the fact that the theatre of Europe came to Africa and established itself in complete ignorance of, and indifference, to African theatrical traditions. [91]

Robert Serumaga's assessment of the inchoate phase of theatrical experience in Uganda and the entire East African region points to a fundamental flaw, the cognisance of which, would, perhaps have precipitated an earlier and positive alternative to the Eurocentric playbills of the earliest companies. That flaw was the virtually patent exclusion of the indigenous population. There was, however, no flaw in the British context, since imperialism was based on binarism and cultural supremacy. The expatriate community's obliviousness to the possibilities of, at the very least, a hybridised theatre, that did not ignore, but instead exploited the wealth of the cultures and *mores* of Uganda, could well have delayed the birth and growth of a Ugandan theatre, a theatre borne out of what Serumaga very interestingly refers to as 'African theatrical traditions'— as opposed to a pre-colonial African theatre. While the theatre did exist, it was different from the dialogic Western sign form.

Serumaga's observation reflects Homi K. Bhabha's claim about the radical and interventionist nature of both the postcolonial and postmodern discourses.[92] The same of course can be said about the poststructuralist and postcolonial, in addition, they also share an

[91] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda's Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, p. 52.

[92] See Bhabha, K. Homi, 'The Postcolonial and the Postmodern (The Question of Agency)', in *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 171-197.

orientation to history.[93] Before it is elevated to the factual realms, though, history has to be subjected to a healthy kind of pessimism and meticulous scrutiny. Ingrained in some of that history, are jaundiced views that 'spill' over into the domain of criticism/ performance analysis. Those, too, call for a deconstructive reading in this, twin critical strategy.

Much of the focus will be on the literary and theatrical history and on how the wider historical context plays itself out in the literary and theatrical arena. Generally speaking, the literary and theatrical history will be divided into four phases, starting with the colonial era; prior to Independence (1962). The second phase (1962-1965) covers the early and relatively stable postcolonial period, one marked by increasingly burgeoning theatrical activity. Milton Obote's usurpation of absolute power, and its artistic implications fall under what can be designated as phase three (1966-1971) — the final one being the genocidal years of Idi Amin. The principal focus though is 1968-1978, the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre. Andrew Horn argues, that: 'The glow of Ugandan theatre's Golden Decade had begun to fade well before'[94] 1977. In fact, according to Horn, the fading process had begun as early as 1973. But the years 1977 to 1978 are, in my view, far more important as they mark the end of an illustrious period of theatre history that had embraced an alien sign, and by indigenising it, had invented something new.

On the theatrical front a number of institutions such as Makerere University, the Uganda National Theatre and Cultural Centre, Theatre Limited, Ngoma Players, and other companies would play a decisive role in the process that led to the Golden Age. This process was multicultural, multiracial and multi-national. As was noted in the

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[93] Some postmodernists, though, would characterise poststructuralism as yet another example of foundationalist, master narratives.

[94] Horn, Andrew, 'Uhuru to Amin: The Golden Decade of Theatre in Uganda' in H.H. Anniah Gowda (ed.), *Essays in African Literature*, Mysore, India: Centre for Commonwealth Literature and Research, 1978, p. 45.
Incidentally, Horn's decade is, technically, almost two decades, since it starts with Uganda's Independence (Uhuru), in 1962 and ends in 1978. This though is not held against him, but in this thesis, a decade is assumed to be a total of ten years.

Introduction, their patrons were enthusiastic, loyal and diverse audiences, that included Ugandans of Asian origin, indigenous Ugandans as well as expatriates and Africanists, much like the theatre companies themselves.

Those unfamiliar with Uganda may wonder about the Ugandans of Asian origin. As a community, they first set foot on East African soil towards the end of the 19th Century. The British brought them as indentured labour for the building of the Uganda railway. Phares Mutibwa has noted that with the completion of the job in 1901 the majority of them returned to their homeland (India) but close to 7,000 opted to stay and were soon joined by other fellow nationals. As Mutibwa observes: 'news of the immense [economic] opportunities [...] caused a further Asian influx'.[95] By 1972, when Idi Amin stripped them of everything they owned including citizenship, the community numbered 50,000. That also marked the end of Ugandan-Asian participation in the theatre, either as a community or in terms of individuals. Expatriate involvement would also peter out during Amin's genocidal rule. The Amin years were ones of deterioration, decay and chaos.

That woeful period is also, at least in part, the explanation for the appalling lack of archival material, not just on the early years but all through the 1960s and 1970s. Serumaga's eldest son, Kalundi was to experience that appalling absence of material in 1988, soon after his appointment to the artistic directorship of Uganda's National Theatre when he tried to find information on his father and his theatre company as well as Kawadwa and his company. In Kalundi's words: 'One of the first things I did on taking up office [...] was to seek out the File Index.' He goes on to note, 'I marked on the Index list the files that I wanted and asked the Secretary to retrieve them [...] from the registry.' Kalundi subsequently discovered that 'there were no files, in

[95] Mutibwa, M. Phares, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes*, London: Hurst and Company, 1992, p. 92.

fact, there was no registry to speak of.'[96] To tell the theatrical story of those times, the secondary sources that exist through the work of scholars such as Joanna Kamanyi, Margaret Macpherson and Rose Mbowa, as well as on the oral histories of the survivors of the period as primary sources. The absence of production dates, venues, cast lists, etc., casts an anecdotal spectre over much of the work done heretofore.

Beginnings

Formed by a number of expatriates before the Second World War, the Kampala Amateur Theatrical Society (K.A.T.S) is possibly the earliest theatre group to be founded in Uganda. Joanna Kamanyi cites *A Phoenix Too Frequent* by Christopher Fry, *The Mikado*, as well as pantomimes such as *Mother Goose* for instance, as predominant on their playbills. Every now and then, however, they had room for 'serious' dramas, such as Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana*. The K.A.T.S performed in an exclusive club but they were active contributors to the building of the National Theatre (1959) and their membership gradually became more diverse. Their activities continued till 1972, but they would cease, like almost everything else that the expatriate community was involved in, soon after Idi Amin usurped power.

It is clear from their choices that the expatriate companies such as K.A.T.S. did not really have the indigenous Ugandan in mind. It is easy to say that though, and forget that there were no indigenous plays at the time of their companies' inception, nor were there any indigenous playwrights.

The Ugandans of Asian origin were equally important in those pioneering days. Performing in *Hindi* as well as *Gujarati* was the Parimal Art Academy, which according to Kamanyi was a professional company. Kamanyi also lists the Goan Amateur Music and Dramatic Society who performed in English. A teacher, actor, producer and

[96] Kalundi R. Serumaga, 'The Arts; Slaughter House Or Graveyard', (pp. 1-2); for (online version) see: www.*Sablemagazine*.com)

playwright, Ganesh Bagchi (born in 1924), wrote most of their material.[97] The Kampala Kala Kendra, whose plays were mostly in Hindi, as well as the Goan Association, were two further prominent companies of the period. The large Asian community was their target audience, however, as Kamanyi points out, they were 'among the pioneer members of the Uganda Association of Amateur Theatrical Societies (U.A.A.T.S).'[98]

It was the representatives of the various leading theatrical groups that assisted the British Council in establishing the very first Theatre festival in 1955. In order to run the festival, the U.A. A.T.S. was subsequently formed in 1957. It would become the Uganda Theatre Guild in 1959, the same year that the National Theatre opened.[99] Also of equal importance is Kamanyi's observation, that these largely expatriate and Ugandan-Asian groups were not all from Kampala. Entebbe, Jinja, Fort Portal and Mbarara are some of the other urban centres mentioned.

Kamanyi, Macpherson, Rose Mbowa and others scholars, emphasize the role of the Department of Social Welfare in introducing and popularising of drama in Uganda. Under the Department's auspices in the 1940s, short, improvised, pedagogic, comedic skits in many of the various indigenous languages toured around the country. Those skits according to Macpherson focused on a wide range of issues from coffee-drying, to cotton-picking, encouraging literacy, discouraging binge drinking, and an end to wife-beating for example. These multilingual skits were taken to the rural population all over the country. The Department of Social Welfare, at least in part, may have contributed to the preponderance of satire and even farce in the future theatrical idiom of the nation, and without doubt, it must have instilled

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[97] Ganesh Bagchi's play *Of Malice and Men* (which is incidentally not an adaptation of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*), appears in David Cook and Miles Lee (eds.), *Short East African Plays in English*, London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1968, pp. 67-82.

[98] The Uganda Theatre Guild existed until 1972 when it became the Uganda Theatre Groups Association (U.T.G.A.). For more about the 'Guild' as well as the U.T.G.A., see Kamanyi, Joanna, *A Comparative Study of Theatrical Productions in Uganda Today, M.A. thesis*, Makerere University Kampala, 1978, pp. 11-36.

a love and a certain degree of taste for things theatrical. The Kapere [clown] character, 'identifiable by [his] bright check shirt and large pair of sunglasses,'[100] became part of the diction in Luganda. Macpherson also points out that the ubiquitous newspaper cartoon character and satiric social commentator, Ekanya, had his genesis in those improvised skits under the name of Kapere.

The arrival of the radio in Uganda in 1954 robbed the vast majority of people, of the potent and palpable entertainment that was theatre, as the dramas moved from the visual arena into an aural medium. It is fair to say, though, that some significant seeds had been planted: 'The taste for drama had been created [among] Women's groups in villages, students in schools and colleges and clubs'.[101]

Kapere was renamed for radio: 'He reappeared [...] as the roguish Munyarwanda [Rwandan] houseboy Katoto, in the 1970s.'[102] He also survived on the stage, however, under one pseudonym or other, and he would not always be favourably received. By 1972, Macpherson would note with regard to 'popular' Ugandan 'drama': 'one grows very tired of that Molière bastard — the Katoto.'[103] Be that as it may, that syncretic Molière and Ugandan 'bastard' marked, for a vast number of Ugandans, their earliest encounter with the theatrical genre and farce. It is also worth noting in parenthesis, that Kapere and those didactic skits, however entertaining, may also have led to the misconception, by a number of Uganda's playwrights, that theatre was, by definition, preachy.

By and large, though, perhaps because of the place accorded to indigenous languages, those initial skits — however theatrical they

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[100] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and people's: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga.' Workshop Paper No. 4, *The Writer and Society in Africa*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, University of Nairobi, 1974, p. 2.

[101] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunrise', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 39, p.29.

[102] Mbowa, Rose, 'Luganda Theatre and its Audience' in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 39, p. 235.

[103] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in: *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 4.

were — were not categorised as plays. In fact, the Luganda designation for that kind of popular entertainment is *Katemba*, which is certainly not a strict reference to a play or plays, but cheap, farcical, 'treats'. Pre-Independence Uganda though, was considered a cultural wasteland (in literary and theatrical terms).

Emergence of a Theatrical Tradition

At the first-ever African Writers Conference, held, at what was then known as Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda was referred to as 'literary desert.'[104] There must of course have been a touch of irony to the choice and setting of the historic conference given that Uganda (and indeed East Africa at large) virtually did not exist on the creative writing map at the time.

Nevertheless, this did not seem to bother legendary Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo, or the other writers who had converged at Makerere in August 1962. In response to a questionnaire from *Transition* Magazine, Okigbo commented thus: 'Makerere was a good choice for the Conference [...] Besides Kampala is a literary desert; and I should hope the Conference did to Kampala what irrigation does to the Sudan.'[105] Even though he described it as a 'literary desert' Okigbo seemed to sound even-tempered, light hearted, and hopeful about Uganda's literary future compared to Taban lo Liyong, who, three years after that historic conference, was still bemoaning the barren literary terrain, that the whole of East Africa supposedly was: 'East Africa, O East Africa I Lament thy Literary Barrenness'.[106] This wasteland that Taban so memorably lamented in 1965, was, at least, as a working hypothesis, true across the board of literary genres, from the novel to poetry and indeed drama as well. Taban's clarion call and

[104] Not long after Uganda attained Independence, Makerere became a full-fledged University. Makerere, according to Margaret Macpherson, was once a palace of the Kabaka of Buganda. It was he, the Kabaka (King) we are told, that missed the sun going up this majestic hill covered in 'the shadow'; it did not dawn on Kabaka Semakokiro that he was late, until he got to the top of the hill, only to realise that the sun had been up a lot earlier than he was led to believe, and consequently 'beaten' him to the top; hence the name Makerere.

[105] *Transition*, Volume 2, Number 5, 1962, p.5.

[106] *Transition*, Volume 4, Number 19, 1965, p.11.

provocation came on the heels of Okigbo's, perhaps, more hopeful and even-tempered observation, only three years before, in August 1962.

But, even so, in those few days in August 1962, Okigbo must have muttered a little prayer to his Nigerian Goddess, 'Mother Idoto' or better still — to the Ugandan Deities of art — because, ultimately, Taban's 'lament' for the East African literary Sahara, three years after the historic conference, can probably best be read as a clarion call for more literary output, and not an act of legitimate despair. The evidence seems to show that Okigbo's words and solemn wish in 1962 did not fall on deaf ears, and that things were not necessarily as bleak, at the time. In October 1962, just two months after the conference, Ngugi wa Thiongo's play, *The Black Hermit*, opened at the newly built, National Theatre as part of the celebrations that marked Uganda's Independence. In fact, as an undergraduate at Makerere, Ngugi had already written two novels: *The River Between* and *Weep Not Child*. In the next few years, the East African literary landscape would be dramatically transformed.

The evidence in fact seems to show that things were not necessarily as dire, by 1965 at least, the year of Taban's 'outcry'. The Ugandan poet, Okot p'Bitek's *Lak Tar* (*White Teeth*), a novel in the Acholi language had already been published in1954. Andrew Horn points out a few names, such as Timothy Bazarabusa and Michael Bazze Nsimbi who wrote in Rutoro and Luganda, respectively; as well as Akiki Nyabongo who was writing in English, as examples of creative output prior to the Conference (1962). Perhaps due to the peculiar logistical demands of the theatre as Horn tells us, they 'preferred the more solitary genres of fiction and poetry to drama'.[107] It could be argued, in addition, that prose fiction and poetry, were also comparatively easier to embrace since they shared more of a kinship and parallels to indigenous forms such as songs and folktales for example. This is a particularly compelling view if one assumes as

[107] Horn, Andrew, '*Uhuru* To Amin: The Golden Decade of Theatre', Gowda H. Anniah (ed.), *Essays in African Literature*, Mysore (India): Centre for Commonwealth Research, 1978, p. 22.

Margaret Macpherson has argued, that drama is a dialogic genre much more than it is a narrative one.[108]

Whether Taban lo Liyong knew of these literary endeavours in what Horn has characterised as, 'the more solitary genres', before his famous lament, is not terribly clear. In addition, there is something else that may have been unbeknownst to him at the time, as Ugandan scholar, Ernesto Okello Ogwang points out: 'Okot's *Song of Lawino* was emerging [...] following an initial rejection by the East African Literature Bureau.'[109] Like Okot's novel *Lak Tar*, *Lawino*, too, was originally written in Acholi before its subsequent translation into English. The seminal nature of *Song of Lawino* cannot be over emphasised. Single handedly, it precipitated a movement that, in his book, *Uhuru's Fire*, Adrian Roscoe has rightly described as 'the song school'.[110] '*Lawino*' was an inspiration to many and its influence went far beyond the genre of poetry. Ironically, it is Taban lo Liyong — who opted, for reasons apparently outside the text, and more to do with his own resentment of Okot's meteoric rise and success, to be hostile to this instant classic, *Song of Lawino*.[111]

Okot was to weigh in compellingly against Taban's lament, arguing there was only a desert if one discounted the wealth of orality in the coffers of the indigenous cultures. Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu was to designate that wealth and its genres of oral literatures in that famous neologism, which many now simply take for granted: *orature*. If there is a criticism to be levelled against the famous writers conference of 1962, it is that, though they may not have overlooked

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[108] With reference to story telling as 'a kind of one man show' and an example of the existence of 'theatre arts in' in pre-colonial Uganda, Macpherson argues that in spite of the vividness of the gestures and action entailed in that 'it still remains narrative rather than a dramatic form.' See: Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and people's: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga.' Workshop Paper No. 4, *The Writer and Society in Africa*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, University of Nairobi, 1974, (p. 1, of Professor Macpherson's original copy).

[109] Ogwang, Ernesto Okello, 'Ugandan Poetry: Trends and Features', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 39, p. 115.

[110] Andrew Horn devotes a substantial Chapter (Developments in Verse) to 'Okot p'Bitek and the Song School' as he rightly designates the movement that Okot's *Lawino* precipitated.

[111] See: Okumu, Charles, 'Towards an Appraisal of Criticism on Okot's Poetry', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 39, pp. 148-175.

orature, but they did not consider as literature the work that was written in native languages. Even so, East Africa, though not Uganda, could already boast of a youthful Ngugi wa Thiongo, with his two novels and a play that was to open that October at the Uganda National Theatre and mark the end of the colonial phase of Uganda's theatre history.

Makerere

At Makerere University, a number of writers and other artists were already anxious to do something. It really did not take long for them to take the leadership of this burgeoning movement from the secondary schools, colleges and clubs such as the K.A.T.S. Although Makerere's involvement dates back to a pioneering 1929 production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*,[112] a start had, nevertheless, been made. But the year 1946 was the decisive one. Macpherson was present at the time, and has gone to great lengths to provide as vivid an account of those early years at Makerere. In her accounts of those early days John Sibly stands out as 'an enthusiastic young lecturer', as well as, a 'writer and poet', who came to Makerere shortly after finishing 'active service' in World War Two. 'Urged' by fellow staff members from Science and Medicine[113], Sibly established what would eventually become the Honours School of English. It was Sibly's students, the first-year English majors', who had the 'onerous' task of performing, at the end of every second term each year, whatever Shakespeare text they were studying in class. *Julius Caesar* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are only two of the many annual

[112]According to Macpherson the production 'was regarded only as a qualified success.' See Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and people's: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga.' Workshop Paper No. 4, *The Writer and Society in Africa*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, University of Nairobi, 1974, p.1. The paper will be referred to later too, it is far more important for what it says about the 3 playwrights than that 1929 production.

[113] Two of the three primary disciplines Makerere taught at the time (the third one being Anthropology).

productions that Macpherson mentions. As Joanna Kamanyi notes, this annual production of the unrivalled bard went on from 1948 to 1963.[114]

In 1948, as well, competition at Makerere would go beyond the realms of athletics, to encompass the written as well as the spoken word, in four different categories. Again, thanks in large part to John Sibly, what was later known as the Makerere Inter-Hall English competition, was launched in 1948.[115] (Initially, students lived in hostels, as opposed to the large halls of residence that would later replace the hostels.) The climax of the Inter-Hall competition was the presentation of a 15-minute, original play, performed by each of the hostels/halls. Over the years, there ceased to be casting restrictions, gender-wise, so, the men's or women's hostels, were free to borrow male or female cast members, depending on what gender they may have lacked, to meet the plays' demands. In Macpherson's own words: 'The English competition went on for many years until the halls of residence, which succeeded the old hostels, became too large to organise and coordinate. But it had served its [purpose]. Creative writing by this time was a vigorous part of Makerere's life.'[116] Macpherson provides an amazing list of writers, predominantly playwrights, who were initiated by this competition: Erisa Kironde, David Rubadiri, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Peter Nazareth, Rose Mbowa, Elivania Zirimu, Rebecca Njau, Nuwa Sentongo, Jonathan Kariara and John Ruganda. As Macpherson says — these names 'are only a few among the many that enthralled their first Makerere audiences and many others since.'[117] A number of them such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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[114] See Kamanyi, Joanna, *A Comparative Study of Theatrical Productions in Uganda Today*, M.A. Thesis, Makerere University Kampala, 1978, p. 15.

[115] One thing that neither Cook nor Macpherson seem to mention is that, both Margaret Macpherson and David Cook are credited for masterminding this competition.

[116] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunrise', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 39, 1999, pp. 26- 27.

[117] Ibid., p. 26.

and Ruganda would indeed continue to enthral many more others indeed, in Africa and the world over.[118]

Other groups at Makerere included the Makerere Players that were set up in 1950. Their membership was primarily comprised of the expatriate as well as local staff. For the students, there was the Makerere College Dramatic Society. The latter continued even after the launch of the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre in1965. The College Dramatic Society continued to operate right up to 1971.

Back in the early days of theatrical activity, even the expatriate groups had begun to gather a wider audience. It is the presence of those groups, the Ugandan-Asian, and the expatriates from all over Uganda, and of course the groups that had mushroomed at Makerere that led to the first annual Uganda Drama Festival in 1955. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Makerere had three entries including one from the English Department, but the day belonged to the Makerere Players 'with a brilliant production of [Sean] O'Casey's *The End Beginning*.'[119]

The English Department insisted on an original work by a student as its annual entry into the festival. The work would have been showcased in the English competition then expanded from the initial 15-minute limit. The Department also offered dramaturgical help to the emerging playwrights. Erisa Kironde and Margaret Macpherson's *Kintu*, and Elivania Namukwaya Zirimu's *Keeping up with the Mukasa's* (1961), are two such examples. It is fair to say that, both the English Department and John Sibly's other 'brainchild' — the Inter-Hall, speech and drama competition forged a pivotal role for Makerere in Uganda's theatre. Many an actor, playwright, director and others in Uganda and East Africa as a whole, from 1946 to the mid-1960s, passed through 'the place of the early sunrise' and true to its motto, Makerere certainly did 'build for the future'.

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[118] A lot of the same names emerge again in connection to the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre, as well as some of the other groups, at Makerere and elsewhere.

[119] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunrise', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 39, 1999, p. 29.

But it is equally important to stress that, either as an institution or through the various individuals, behind what was to become a mammoth output and multi-faceted contribution, Makerere was not alone. The opening of the National Theatre — a 'purpose built venue'— would come, in 1959. It was a collective effort and an alliance that included everyone at the time, from the Ugandans of Asian origin, the expatriate community, as well as the colonial government. Many have lamented the appalling, provincial English structure, secluded behind a concrete shell or net that still makes it look as if it was built with winter in mind. Its tiny size, in terms of seats, has not helped the 'proscenium [slightly raked] stage, 54 feet by 36ft.'[120], space, either. Nor has its location, which Macpherson has noted, is not central enough, and makes it in fact a more isolated, elitist structure. All the same, as Macpherson points out: 'The fact remains that Uganda had a National Theatre long before anywhere else in Africa and before the UK by a very large number of years.'[121] The postcolonial gaze cannot but register, as noted in the Introduction, that it did take a while to fully open the doors of the Uganda National Theatre to the indigenous Ugandans. Both Joanna Kamanyi and Eckhard Breitinger have noted this.[122] So, too, has Macpherson: 'until Independence the stage was more used by the expatriate community than others.'[123] When the doors did open, however, and even before a Ugandan director was appointed, it was clear the Uganda National Theatre was far much more than a building and its location was not a stumbling block.

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[120] Kamanyi, Joanna, '*A Comparative Study of Theatrical Productions in Uganda Today*', M.A. Thesis, Makerere University Kampala, 1978, p. 11.

[121] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunrise', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 39, 1999, p. 30.

[122] Kamanyi, Joanna, '*A Comparative Study of Theatrical Productions in Uganda Today*', M.A. Thesis, Makerere University Kampala, 1978, p. 11. Also see Eckhard Breitinger, 'Popular Urban Theatre in Uganda: Between Self–Help and Self-Enrichment', in, *New Theatre Quarterly*, VIII, 31(1992), pp. 270-271.

[123] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunrise', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 39, 1999, p. 31.

The National Theatre too, like Makerere, is, only a part of a larger picture. Having looked at the expatriates, the Ugandan-Asians, Makerere, and the National Theatre, in terms of their contribution to Uganda's theatre, it is important to revisit the indigenous theatre scene and the other side of the linguistic coin. Linguistic dualism is, after all, one of the most characteristic features of Uganda's theatre. It is also equally important, though, to remember the role of the Department of Social Welfare through which a significant number of Ugandans first encountered the theatre in the early days of the 1940s.

Theatre in Luganda

According to Kamanyi, there were a number of companies on the Luganda theatre scene. These companies seem to have begun their lives as choirs or 'improvised play groups'. One such example is the *Kibuye Tusubira* Club (1949), as well as the *Kisamba* Singers (1963). Both eventually shifted and confined their focus to the theatre. Even more importantly perhaps, Byron Kawadwa and Christopher Mukibi would start their own companies in 1964 (Kampala City Players) and in 1965 (Kayayu Film Players), respectively. Wycliffe Kiyingi's African Artists' Association (A.A.A.), launched at Mengo in 1954 has already been discussed a good deal in the Introduction. By 1965 Kiyingi was busy writing his first series for radio, entitled, *Gwosussa Emwanyi*. The radio would be a major launching pad and vehicle for a number of actors with whom the audiences felt a degree of intimacy. The audiences came out in large numbers, to see those same 'heroes' play a variety of roles on stage at the National Theatre, in the schools, colleges and other spaces, where they performed, in Luganda, for the most part.

The very first indigenous play was, in fact, Mbabi Katana's *Nyakato*.[124] It would be followed four years later by another eponymic title: *Pio Mberenge Kamulali* (1954). The latter, of course, was by

[124] Exact production date seems unclear, neither is the space where it premiered, but it definitely appears to be 1950 or thereafter but definitely long before Kiyingi's earliest play.

Wycliffe Kiyingi and it was the first production of a Luganda play.[125] On that occasion in 1954, among the cast of future stars was a man called Byron Kawadwa. Kawadwa was Kiyingi's 'protégé', and soon, he too, would make his distinct contribution to Uganda's theatre. Byron Kawadwa deserves mention in his own right. Kawadwa and Kiyingi were the architects of another important festival, probably the most important one in the history of Uganda's theatre, launched in 1957 — the Uganda National Schools Drama Festival.[126] As Macpherson and others have observed, Kawadwa, 'was instrumental in starting the Schools' drama festival while he was still himself a school boy.'[127] Kawadwa's singular commitment and vision is important to emphasise here.

Rose Mbowa credits Kawadwa for the festival even more than Macpherson does. She singles Kiyingi out for helping to open the doors to the indigenous companies at the National Theatre, but as for the festival and its developmental potential, the vision and work is ascribed to that: 'close friend, disciple and a follower of Wycliffe Kiyingi. Byron Kawadwa [who] emphasised the aspect of developing talent by introducing the school drama competition in 1957'.[128] Writing in 1973, in a letter to Mr. Maurice Reeve, Uganda's Chief Inspector of Schools, Byron Kawadwa himself, would state: 'I am the founder of this Festival, and have been engaged in its organisation for the last sixteen years.'[129] When he finished school at 'Aggrey Memorial' Kawadwa spent a considerable period working for the sole

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[125] One is curious about the slight 'irony' of the names for the first indigenous companies — all, almost entirely, in English— at least in part. It should probably be read as a signifier of the process of negotiation, syncretising and synthesising.

[126] This was only two years after the launch of the 1955 festival for the adults, from predominantly expatriate and Ugandan-Asian groups, as well as Makerere and elsewhere.

[127] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and people's: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga.' Workshop Paper No. 4, *The Writer and Society in Africa*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, University of Nairobi, 1974, p. 3.

[128] Mbowa, Rose, 'Luganda Theatre and Its Audience' in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape,* University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 39, 1999, p. 239.

[129] Kawadwa, Byron, 'Report on the Youth Drama Festival', unpublished, covering letter dated 6th, November 1973, a copy of which was availed to me by playwright and lecturer, Nuwa Sentongo, a contemporary of Kawadwa's and founding member of the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre. Any lingering doubts about Kawadwa's role would probably be put to rest by looking at this letter and the intimacy and knowledge of the festival, displayed in the accompanying report.

state broadcaster: Radio Uganda. In 1964 Kawadwa launched his own company, Kampala City Players, for which he did most of the writing. According to Joanna Kamanyi, Kawadwa's company actually achieved even more success on the stage (the medium they opted to single-handedly work in) than his mentor — Wycliffe Kiyingi's company — the African Artists' Association (A.A.A.). But the festival alone, truly, was a major effort and laudatory achievement by Kawadwa.

By 1964, the Schools' Drama Festival had already become a phenomenal success; Kawadwa's vision of building for the budding and future talents, was becoming a reality. The Schools Drama Festival also featured plays in Luganda and other national languages.[130] In years to come, some of the young talents that first attracted attention because of their exemplary performances in the festival would make their mark on the wider national stage. As many commentators have noted, the festival also paid off, simply by instilling a voracious appetite for things cultural, as well as theatrical. There are times when the success of something also breeds its very demise, or, (in this instance) starts to display counterproductive symptoms.

The competition, particularly among the teachers, was far too fierce, but it also trickled down to the students who were more anxious about winning, than enjoying and learning from the 'rival' entries. These problems and needs had to be addressed and remedied. It is these concerns and needs, coupled with the desire to reach the grassroots that led David Cook and Betty Baker of Makerere University to launch the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre (M.F.T.T).

Makerere Free Travelling Theatre

In David Cook's words: 'The decision to launch the scheme was made in October 1964, [...] The first meetings were held in November 1964.

[130] More will be said about the question of language in the coming Chapters. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for instance, is rightly 'aggrieved' about the famous 1962 writer's conference, for excluding those writers who opted to create in their mother tongues. Incidentally, Kawadwa is listed as one of the participants (and no doubt this should be read as a tribute to his keen-ness). An even bigger tribute is the eventual incorporation of indigenous languages into the Schools Drama Festival.

The first performance was on the 29th April, 1965.'[131] This was a mammoth task, far bigger in scope and goals than the 'precedent' set by the Department of Social Welfare in the 1940s. Both Cook and Betty Baker believed that there was a vast and untapped audience way beyond the schools and colleges. That audience would be found on the streets of Kampala and in the small towns and villages all over the country. In fact, initially, they deliberately minimised schools and colleges on their itinerary. But reaching their cherished audiences, and in so doing, popularising drama — which was their key goal —was a logistical nightmare. They planned on audiences, not only outside Kampala, but also all over Uganda and, in fact, beyond, including venues in Kenya as well as Tanganyika (Tanzania).

The audiences would, of course, not pay. They would tour during the long vacation from April through to June of each year. It would be a repertoire of ten one-act plays in English — of the various indigenous languages — Luganda, Runyoro-Rutoro and Swahili. It is a measure of their phenomenal success that scholar and critic Adrian Roscoe for example, would say about their very first year: ' By 1965 this University group was already performing in four languages [including English] had 42 productions to its credit and had reached [...] no less than 17,000 people.'[132]

John Ruganda, Nuwa Sentongo and Elivania Namukwaya Zirimu, are some of the students cited in Cook's account, who took part. Those three names also appear, together with a number of others, on Macpherson's list of the early veterans that wrote for the Inter-Hall English competition at Makerere. Those three names too, would unquestionably become key names in Uganda's theatre in the years to

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[131] Cook, David, 'Theatre Goes to the People: A Report', *Transition* 25, No. 2, 1966, p. 23.

See also, Cook, David, 'The Makerere Free Travelling Theatre: An Experimental Model', in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 39, pp. 47-61.

[132] Roscoe, Adrian, *Uhuru's Fire, African Literature East to South*, London, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 260.

come. Of John Ruganda, for instance, Cook rightly notes: 'At least one playwright who became widely known later cut some of his theatrical teeth on the Travelling theatre.'[133]

Participation in the M. F.T.T., particularly with regard to writing and directing was not confined to group members alone. The emphasis, with regard to the material, was on the local: 'For the most part [we] seized on the few African plays that could be found [...] and drew very selectively on non-African writers'.[134] The goal, though larger, shared a similar ethos to that behind the plays the English Department entered in the festival, the emphasis, as already attested to by Macpherson, was on originality. And Makerere certainly offered dramaturgical help to these new and emerging talents. In at least one case, the dramatisation of the creation myth among the Baganda became an outright collaboration, resulting in *Kintu*, a play by Erisa Kironde and Margaret Macpherson. Though published in 1960, *Kintu* was written around the mid-1950s. A similarly interesting play was originally entitled *The White Bead*. Playwright, Tom Omara was still at school in King's College Buddo. As Macpherson notes: 'One writers' workshop [...] produced an excellent short play [...] by schoolboy Tom Omara', she goes on to say that Omara was responding to a 'tutor's suggestion that local legend could provide splendid material for a play.'[135] And it certainly did under the title: *The Exodus*. A close reading of the play no doubt reveals some 'teething' problems. Adrian Roscoe holds the view that the traditional, oral form of the material is a lot richer than Omara's encapsulated version. But even Roscoe notes the importance of this landmark, mythopoeic 'attempt' in a dramatic and dialogic form. Not long after the pioneering season (of which *The Exodus* was a big part), Cook singled out the play for its 'real epic and lyrical

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[133] Cook, David, 'The Makerere Free Travelling Theatre: An Experimental Model', in, *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 39, p. 51.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunrise', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 39, 1999. p. 26.

qualities'. He noted, furthermore: 'We are all convinced that this is the most outstanding piece of dramatic writing from East Africa we have seen.'[136] The actors who were not performing in it had also become avid fans of the play. With their parts done in the repertoire, they almost invariably joined the audiences to see *The Exodus*, time after time.

Both Kironde's *Kintu* and Omara's *The Exodus*, on the one hand, Kironde's *The Trick* and other adaptations, on the other, offer a good glimpse into a process of negotiation that turned the alien Western sign into a more indigenous one, in a syncretic and synthesised form. The use of the English language in a way that conveys the form and poetry of the indigenous languages, as is the case in *The Exodus* for example, is yet another illustration of a dynamic, underpinned by a decision to negotiate, instead of a wholesale rejection, of a hitherto, alien and colonial form. A form that had, as Serumaga's words remind us 'established itself in complete ignorance of and indifference to African theatrical traditions.'[137]

It should also be noted that Makerere as a community was one described by Macpherson as 'notably a colourless society where your origins might be of interest when examining stories about the beginning of the world, or what your society thought about the birth of twins'.[138] Nationality, race and probably gender with regard to the cast, the directors or the scripts, seem not to have been sources of contention in the Travelling Theatre either, neither was the ethnic origin among the Ugandan members of the group. By 1965 the M.F.T.T., which had started as an experiment had already exceeded the expectations of Cook, Baker and the original group of ten.

By 1965 it was very clear that those reserves (early repertoire and orality) and other, parallel or theatrical elements such as music and

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[136] Cook, David, 'Theatre Goes to the People: A Report', *Transition* 25, No. 2, 1966, p. 32.
[137] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, p. 52.
[138] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunrise', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 39, 1999. p. 27.

dance, were becoming a defining characteristic of Uganda's postcolonial theatre. And playwrights such as Wycliffe Kiyingi, Byron Kawadwa, Christopher Mukibi and others were indigenising the sign, to the extent that linguistic duality — as in English and Luganda primarily (among the local languages) — was becoming a very salient feature in the changing cartography of Uganda's theatre. Kiyingi had blazed the trail back in 1954; by 1964 Kawadwa launched Kampala City Players. Mukibi's Kayayu Film Players, which (despite the name was in fact a theatre company) was launched in 1965. Kawadwa's brainchild, the National School's Drama Festival was still, very much alive and well.

Some of Kawadwa's early 'successes' included *Ono Ye Kampala* (*This is Kampala*), *Obufumbo Kye Ki*? (*What is Marriage*?), *Tezikya Bbiri* and *St. Lwanga*, Kawadwa's treatment of the story of the Uganda Martyrs and Kabaka Mwanga of Buganda (in 1886) which was written to celebrate the visit of the Pope to Uganda in 1969. There is at least one play that is not mentioned here and it is important in terms of when it was written, the subject matter, and the rapidly changing political climate in which they (the artists) would all work and live. The play is *Serwajja Okwota*, but it is best discussed in context, as a response to the inhumanity that was to become the order of the day in postcolonial Uganda.

Towards an Indigenised Sign

This is really a discussion of censorship, commitment, and resistance, in the face of the postcolonial hegemony that emerged in Uganda. It necessitates the cognisance or recollection of Uganda's history. As Rose Mbowa has rightly noted: 'The political background in response to which Ugandan drama developed is worth outlining'.[139] Without that outline there is no context and without that context an analyses of the plays will, at the very best, be anaemic. One major thread that both

[139] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 1994 p. 125.

periods share is in a word that Mbowa uses: 'response', which effectively characterised the theatrical scene as a counter hegemonic one.

To a good number of Ugandans, to Kiyingi, Kawadwa, and Serumaga of course, the tragic and traumatic path onto which postcolonial Uganda would be flung first became unambiguously clear in 1965. It is a story, though, that goes back to 1962. In October that year, Uganda obtained its Independence with Obote as the Prime Minister and the Kabaka of Buganda (Sir Edward Mutesa) as President. It was a federal arrangement in which Buganda's distinct place, including the right to withdraw from that configuration, was duly enshrined in the constitution. Obote fought for this and guaranteed to ensure it as Prime Minister. In return the Baganda, would use their majority, without which Obote had absolutely no chance of winning. As Sir Edward Mutesa put it: 'He (Obote) understood our fears for the position of Buganda; we shared his hopes for a united, prosperous and free Uganda.'[140] Those are important words, Buganda was not trying to ask for anything that it did not have; nor was it anti-Uganda or the federation.

Mutesa and the Baganda put their faith in the law and what the Baganda call, *obuntubulamu*: common decency/humaneness. Obote's *modus operandi* was guided by anything but that. For him it was his cunning, fraudulence, outright lies, and when the 'right ' moment arrived, force. While there was one 'text' among the Baganda that came to be designated and understood as an alliance or political marriage, the ostensible text for Obote was the one that really mattered, and that too was anything but what the Baganda thought and believed. Only two years after Independence, with Obote as Prime Minister, a dispute over the contentious, so-called, lost counties, to which both Buganda and Bunyoro had claims, was 'resolved' in Bunyoro's favour. The Baganda were disappointed and restless. Obote used their democratic protests as an opportunity to let the army lose on the

[140] Mutesa II, *Desecration of My Kingdom,* London: Constable Press, 1967. p. 160.

Baganda. The result was the Nakulabye massacre, which, as Mbowa observes, took the lives of 'innocent Baganda school children and civilians'.[141]

If marriage, betrayal, murder, are key themes in the dramas of the first half of the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre, which they definitely are, the years 1962 to 1965 have a lot to do with it, so, too, is the massacre at Nakulabye — Obote's first pogrom — which was also the first of its kind in postcolonial Uganda. Nakulabye, though, was, if anything, a dry run for what was to happen on the 15th of April 1966 when the infamous 'pigeon hole' constitution was introduced. It is important to delve into some minute details here to provide a vivid picture of what the playwrights were about to respond to, their principles as well as their animus. This is also part of the evidence that must be provided in assessing some of the critics that responded to that work and concerns with derision, ridicule, and unmitigated hostility. When the new 'constitution' was first proposed in parliament, members were assured they would find copies of it in their respective pigeonholes. In his book *Apollo Milton Obote and His Times*, A.G.G. Ginyera Pinychwa has noted that Obote 'was at once: the head of state and commander-in-chief of Uganda [...] repository of the executive authority of Uganda [...] he was also the head of government'.[142] It is those draconian powers that Obote used to send the five MPs from Buganda and the Bantu south into Luzira maximum-security prison. The atrocities inflicted on the men and women, on the symbols of the Kingdom of Buganda as well, are too many to enumerate here. A few examples will hopefully suffice. Buganda was sliced into smaller 'nondescript' entities, and the name Buganda was expunged from the cartography of the state and banished from political discourse. The only times Buganda raised its ugly head was in acts of derision, in Obote 'praise-song' (poetry), social engineering, epistemic

[141] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 1994 p. 125.

[142] Cited in, Phares M. Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence: A story of Unfulfilled Hopes*, London: Hurst and company, 1992, pp. 58-59.

construction and reconstruction tracts, written by people such as Akena Adoko. As Mutibwa has noted: 'To [yet again] rub salt into the wound, Obote turned the former Buganda parliament building (*Bulange*) into the headquarters of the Ministry of Defence; the Kabaka's palace at Mengo (*Twekobe*) was turned into Malire army barracks'.[143] Now that he clearly had the power, Obote was clearly keen on consolidating his hegemony, and there were precious few lengths to which he was not prepared to go. On the very day Obote seized absolute power, an episode was aired on the radio of Wycliffe Kiyingi's series: *Wokulira* (*By the Time You Grow Up*), which Obote found offensive. The cast, which included Byron Kawadwa, was immediately arrested. Obote would certainly brook no opposition and the arts were fertile ground. Censorship, which Obote himself would probably have regarded as an oppressive tool, which the missionaries and the colonial government had employed, was enjoying a ubiquitously unprecedented status in postcolonial Uganda. In 1967, Okot p'Bitek, Uganda's pre-eminent poet; director of the Uganda National Theatre and Cultural Centre and founder of the dance troupe Heartbeat of Africa, found himself unable to return home with the troupe, was forced into exile to avoid an imminent jail-term.

Only a year before he wrote *St. Lwanga* (a play that was mentioned earlier), Kawadwa had also earned for himself the wrath of Obote, on account of his play *Serwajja Okwota* (1968). This title spoke volumes to the native Luganda speakers, it is from a Luganda folktale which tells 'the story of a lean, hungry dog who came to warm himself by somebody's fire but drove off the owner and usurped the place all to himself.'[144] Again, the host was Buganda and needless to say the insatiably greedy, selfish, ingrate of a dog or guest was Obote. Two years after his seizure of absolute power, the country was now firmly under his hegemonic grip, and for all intents and purposes, Buganda

[143] Ibid. , p. 60.

[144] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 1994, p. 126.

was under a vicious occupation, without the monarchy, without a lot of what had evolved and survived 500 years in that 'laboratory of history', and a lot of who they were. The message of Kawadwa's play was not lost to the audiences or to Obote's state apparatus. Kawadwa had been jailed, of course, on account of his involvement with that 'offensive' episode of Kiyingi's radio Series *Wokulira*. That had been in May 1966. Only two years before that, in 1964 — the year of the Nakulabye massacre — Kawadwa had lost his own father who was tragically one of the earliest victims of Obote.

The theatre of the entire Golden Age period, including Serumaga's, must be seen as a response to this inhumanity. To many of the playwrights, that inhumanity was certainly far from abstract; it is something with which they each had much more than a passing acquaintance. That is what made Uganda's theatre evolve into a counter-hegemonic sign. Equally important though, is the fact that the good plays almost invariably transcended the very dynamic that pre-occupied them. They were still, in fact, first of all plays, as opposed to political pamphlets.

Criticism

One aspect that has not been explored as fully as it should in this context is the fundamental question of individualism, versus activism in the works of Robert Serumaga. To some, individualism is not necessarily a disavowal of activism; it could well be a masking or framing device, one that does not in any way undermine or eviscerate the activist role (or social conscience) and function of Serumaga, or other postcolonial artists. But the critic who opts to criticise under the aegis of standards and taste is actually promoting and fostering a particular ideology.

Furthermore, if even as a working hypothesis, it was agreed that Kenya and Tanzania were inclined to be almost 'natural', fertile ground, for a Fanonist-Marxist critical aesthetic, because of their history for example, does it follow that, the same aesthetic, designed in the forge of a different history, should be used to evaluate the work of

Ugandan artists, such as Robert Serumaga? How different is that from what Louis Montrose calls 'the ideological [...] discourses which reduce the work of discourse to the mere reflection of an ontologically prior'.[145] What this amounts to, in short, is to forfeit a close reading of the texts, in performance analysis, replacing it with an unbridled abandonment to the ideological 'text'.

It is absolutely important to assume, at least as a working hypothesis that it is quite possible for blind spots to emerge in certain critiques, in relation to Uganda's histories, and literatures, on account of ideological or nationalistic factors. The history of East Africa was never really that homogeneous, and so was the writing, regardless of the commonalities that exist. That is true of the Uganda of Milton Obote and that of Idi Amin, the two reigns that bracket and divide the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre as well as the plays that were written and produced.

Makerere 'Revisited'

This Chapter for the most part, has deliberately refrained from going beyond 1968. This is for the sole purpose of avoiding unnecessary confusion in terms of Serumaga and his peers as well as the institutions at Makerere and elsewhere. It should also be noted that Makerere, through the English department of course, also offered a Senior and Junior Creative Writing fellowship, and one of the writers to benefit from the Junior Fellowship, was Byron Kawadwa. The stipend aside, Macpherson notes that 'many of the men and women whose works are known in East Africa and beyond have held a Junior Fellowship.'[146]

Makerere's multi-faceted, seminal role does not end with the fellowships; the creation of the Department of Music Dance and Drama, in 1971 was one of the outstanding achievements of the

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[145] Montrose, Louis, 'Professing the Renaissance' (1968) in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Massachusetts (USA) and Oxford (UK): Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p. 778.

[146] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunrise', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 39, 1999. p. 28.

university. The overwhelming success could probably be foreseen purely in terms of the 300 individuals from all over East Africa who applied for the maiden Diploma course in the late 1960s. The school was to become an autonomous department in 1971.

Many of the very first graduates would play substantial roles in what was to culminate in the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre. One of the first graduates of the Department was James Mpagi, who became famous for his performance of the popular Kapere character.[147] A formidable member of what was designated as the Class of '68, of whom Andrew Horn has admirably stated — 'the only one whose theatre experience was primarily professional rather than academic'[148] Byron Kawadwa; was also among the very, first crop of Diplomates. So, too, was an individual who was returning to Makerere as a postgraduate, and who David Cook has described as 'an outstanding actress from an early Travelling Theatre group, who later became a most notable head of the Department of Music, Dance and Drama [...] namely Rose Mbowa.' Cook goes on to say, 'She has also become a leading producer, promoter and organiser of Ugandan performing arts, both at home and abroad.'[149] One of the first playwrights to exploit Mbowa's immense acting talents was Robert Serumaga; Mbowa played Rose in the world premiere of Serumaga's *A Play*. One cannot help but wonder whether the character was named as a tribute to Mbowa's talent.

Conclusion

According to Kalundi's account, Serumaga himself did not return to Uganda officially until 'late 1968'. He had, of course, moved back and

[147] Mbowa, Rose, 'Luganda Theatre and its Audience', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 39, 1999, p. 235.
[148] Horn, Andrew, 'Uhuru to Amin: The Golden Decade of Theatre in Uganda', in H.H. Anniah Gowda (ed.), *Essays in African Literature*, Mysore, India: Centre for Commonwealth Literature and Research, 1978, p. 44.
[149] Cook, David, 'The Makerere Free Travelling Theatre: An Experimental Model', in, in, *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 39, pp. 51-52. It should also be noted that it was, no doubt, with a heartfelt sorrow and regret that many in Uganda's theatre, Makerere and the world, received news of Rose Mbowa's untimely death in 1999.

forth before when he was still based in Ireland and the U.K. His first play was produced at Kampala's National Theatre in 1967, and his novel *Return to The Shadows* (written in 1966) was due to be published in 1969. Although, London was home for Serumaga in 1966, he actually happened to have been in Uganda that May, and he himself 'had undergone [personal] indignities at the hands of the military'.[150] On his return to Uganda, Serumaga would become the first theatre artist to address the nightmare that befell postcolonial Uganda in his 1967 play *A Play*. The play was produced by Theatre Limited, an intercultural and interracial company whose formation Serumaga was very actively engaged in. Makerere had 'lost' Serumaga to Trinity College Dublin — as a student — but Makerere wasted no time in letting him in as one of its own. Serumaga's next two plays were to be written as a Senior Fellow in creative writing at Makerere.[151] It should also be noted that there were other groups apart from Theatre Limited, which also produced plays in the English language, the Ngoma Players as well as the Makonde Group and people did not confine their loyalty exclusively to a single group. As Andrew Horn observes: 'these various organisations were by no means discreet. [David] Rubadiri and [Rose] Mbowa [for example] both worked with Ngoma and Makonde, members of which were also involved in Kawadwa's and Kiyingi's'[152] groups. And many of those luminaries who had started in the Inter-Hall competition as well as the Free Travelling Theatre continued to pursue their theatrical calling even after their student days at Makerere were over.

Obote's coup represents a major historical rupture as well as a turning point for Uganda's theatre, when the indigenised sign was forced to rapidly acquire an interventionist dimension, one that would become a defining characteristic all through the Golden Age of

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[150] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 104.
[151] The first Senior Fellow they had was novelist, V.S. Naipaul.
[152] Horn, Andrew, 'Uhuru to Amin: The Golden Decade of Theatre in Uganda', in H.H. Anniah Gowda (ed.), *Essays in African Literature*, Mysore, India: Centre for Commonwealth Literature and Research, 1978, p. 26.

Ugandan Theatre. Walter Benjamin's words perhaps come closest to summing up the journey on which Serumaga and his peers embarked: 'The state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a sense of history that is in keeping with that insight.'[153] Serumaga was the first one to stand up and be counted as they indigenised the theatrical sign as well as cried out against the hegemony of Obote's emergency and other draconian excesses.

[153] Benjamin, Walter, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illustrations*, New York: Schoken Books, 1968, p. 257.

CHAPTER TWO

'SERUMAGA'S IRISH PLAY'[154]
(SIGNIFICATION AS A SURVIVAL KIT)

Serumaga's signification could well be described as an intricate balance between the exposure of the abominable realities of those precarious times to which he was responding, and his inevitable attempts to evade the censor, as well as ensure his very survival in Uganda. This he does through an embrace of the so-called absurdist idiomatic choice. Critics and scholars such as Margaret Macpherson and Rose Mbowa have identified that choice in these two plays, (particularly in *A Play*). The term 'absurd' is used with caution in this context. The use by Macpherson and Rose is meant to reflect that tight rope walked by Serumaga and his fellow artists under the hegemony and pogroms of Obote and through the genocidal regime of Idi Amin.[155] Martin Esslin has cited Eugène Ionesco thus, in his search for a definition of the genre of the 'absurd' in theatre: 'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose [...] cut off from his religious metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become useless, senseless, absurd.'[156] Strong as those words may be, and they no doubt embody what is arguably the canonical definition of the genre of the 'absurd', they may still sound mild or even abstract to those who may not have encountered that form in a practical, corporeal reality or

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[154] More will be said about this later in the chapter, but the expression 'Irish play' should not be taken as a compliment. The actual quotation is 'European plays' but in the context and spirit of what was being said I have found 'Irish' a more appropriate phrase. It is a reference to Serumaga's two earliest plays: *A Play* and *The Elephants*. It may also be argued, even at this early stage, that although it may be appropriate to describe *A Play* in that unflattering tone, to do the same to *The Elephants* is to, perhaps, underestimate the concerns of that play, let alone, Serumaga's aesthetic accomplishments in it. For more on the genesis of the designation, see Rubadiri, David, 'Serumaga: Dramatist who has Descended to Grassroots Level', *Sunday Nation*, Nairobi, 29th January 1978, p. 20.

[155] For more on Serumaga and the 'absurd', see Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in: *The Writer and Society in Africa*: *The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972. Rose Mbowa also discusses the same issue in, for example: 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda, Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in East Africa*: University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 2003, pp. 123-134.

[156] Cited in Esslin, Martin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, (Third Edition), London: Methuen, 2001, p. 23.

dimension. But that uselessness, senselessness and absurdity was a direct response and encapsulation of the west and humanity at its lowest modern ebb, monstrous, desperate and unfathomably inhuman best or worst. The horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust precipitated the dramas of authors such as Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter. In much the same way an 'absurdist' idiom would emerge as a response to hegemonic and genocidal regimes that ruled in post-independence Uganda, specifically in the plays of Robert Serumaga. Serumaga's embrace of the 'absurd' is in part due to his six years as a student at Trinity College, Dublin, as well as his theatrical experiences as an actor and theatre goer in London, where he spent two years before his official return to Uganda in 1968. It is there that he is bound to have encountered a form that would be able to carry, the very core of how he felt, what he saw, and in a manner that brought him closer to an indigenised theatrical sign.

Serumaga's choice of the 'absurd' was not only an aesthetic one; it can also be described as a key component of his thematic universe and survival kit, enforced on him by the hegemonic order which characterised the regimes of Milton Obote (1966-1971) and Idi Amin (1971-1979). The 'absurdist' idiomatic choice is a valuable thematic key to Serumaga's diagnosis of what ails postcolonial/neo-colonial Uganda and Africa, in both plays. Again, the idiom of the 'absurd' is as much about aesthetics, as it is about an author's world-view or philosophy. An 'absurdist' idiom is dictated by aesthetics as well as by the artist's view of the world. Almost as a rule, in the dramas of the 'absurd', or those akin to them (such as Serumaga's *A Play*), form and content cannot be divorced from each other.

It is also important to note that there could well be an undue emphasis placed on the postmodern *vis à vis* Serumaga's embrace of the 'absurd' and in his theatre in general. What could easily be read as postmodern to some, the aspect of linearity for instance, or lack thereof, is simply a return to his indigenous roots. This quest is

incrementally evident in every one of his works as well as in his thoughts and writing on art and the theatre.[157] Serumaga's search for an indigenous form of signification ought to be re-emphasised, in particular to those who reiterate the European *avant-garde* in Serumaga but forget or are may be unaware of Serumaga as a relentless miner of his traditional heritage. Kalundi Serumaga reels off a list of names and newspapers[158] that, in his opinion, lay far too much emphasis on the European *avant- garde* and far less, if at all, on the far more formidable sources of influence and inspiration: Africa, in particular Buganda and Uganda. In Kalundi's own words: 'much has been made in criticism and otherwise of the period of his life in Europe [...] as the *animus* for what is perceived as the *avant-garde* or experimental nature of Serumaga's [...] theatre work'.[159] To Kalundi, this undue emphasis on the *avant-garde* and Serumaga's decade-long stay in Europe is at its worst, not only condescending and patronising, but also Orientalist, and neo-colonial. Perhaps, at its best, it is still circumspect, if not misleading, especially so with regard to the later and perhaps most successful of all his works, the non-dialogic plays: *Renga Moi* (*The Red Warrior*) and *Amayirikiti* (*The Flame Tree*). These plays are a product of a relentless search for Serumaga's 'own African voice.'[160] But the hybridised and syncretic nature of the theatrical sign in this context leads one to surmise, even as a working hypothesis, that Beckett/Europe were a little more than just catalytic for Serumaga, particularly in the early years. Beckett's presence can be felt even in Serumaga's third play *Majangwa*, but the difference there is that whatever the influences are, they are so well digested that they do not appear to blunt his originality in any way.

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[157] See for instance: Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda's Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, pp. 52-55.

[158] One exception is one by the name of Tom Sutcliffe – *Vogue* Magazine, 1st Feb. 1975, cited in Serumaga, Kalundi. R., 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and The Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 8. This resourceful paper is yet to be published unfortunately.

[159] Serumaga, Kalundi. R., 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and The Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 7.

[160] Ibid. , p.8.

That said, it is still valuable to engage in a discussion of Serumaga's adoption of the 'absurdist' idiom, which must also be seen perhaps even more as a syncretic issue. One salient aspect of Serumaga's work and that of the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre was the struggle to indigenise the theatre, which was an essentially Western cultural sign. This is not to negate the patently theatrical aspects of (in this case) Uganda before the colonial era. Playwrights such as Wycliffe Kiyingi, Kawadwa, Ruganda and Serumaga all indigenised the cultural sign in their own individualised ways of course. One by-product of that process was a hybridised kind of sign. In postcolonial societies, intertextualisation as well as the syncretic sign are inevitable in the march towards an indigenised form of theatrical figuration.

As we discuss signification, survival and the 'absurd' in Serumaga's work, it is also important to remember that the key issue of individualism/solipsism, on the one hand, and commitment/activism, on the other, has by no means been jettisoned. Implied, but not explicitly stated, is another primary concern: theatrical innovation. Serumaga's role in the formation of Theatre Limited in 1969, and his eventual formation of the Abafumi (Storytellers) are examples of his innovative and experimental approach. Writing about the Ugandan theatrical scene in 1972, Margaret Macpherson describes Serumaga thus: 'He is an articulate thinker on the theatre arts, and his boundless enthusiasm embraces continually new experiences and new experiments.'[161]

That desire and ability to experiment and innovate would reach unprecedented heights in the formation of the Abafumi Theatre Company and in the plays that followed (which will be discussed in Chapter Five). But it is important to reiterate that even in the earliest of his plays, to many a critic and scholar, Serumaga's flair for innovation was clearly seen as a major defining aspect of his practice.

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[161] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 14.

Broadly speaking, Serumaga's critics fall into two camps: the affirmative ones, and those who, he probably could never have appeased. Those with whom Kalundi seems to have taken umbrage probably deserve a category unto themselves. Among the unappeasable are critics and scholars such as Chris Wanjala and Peter Nazareth, both affiliates of what some in East Africa refer to as the Nairobi school of literary criticism. The scholar Charles Okumu divides these scholars and critics into two categories: the 'Marxist-Fanonist' and the 'literary-Marxist.' To the former, the polemic concerns are all encompassing, while the latter 'tends towards a balance between the social themes and the formal aspects of a literary work.'[162] Regardless of where exactly Wanjala or Nazareth fall under the sub-groupings, it does not take much of an effort to tease out where they stand *vis á vis* Uganda's turbulent history. It will be argued, at least as a working hypothesis, that there is such a thing as paradigmatic, allegorical or analogous individualism, whose goal is always the societal as opposed to the individual's concerns. And those who accuse Serumaga of 'a radical individualism, tending distinctly towards solipsism'[163] as well as those who might 'revel' in it are both off the mark. Writing in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, for instance, Chris Wanjala praises Serumaga for his theatrical abilities but goes on to say that 'eulogies of the defunct feudalist Buganda system are infuriating to any Ugandan national who would like to see a united Uganda.'[164] Wanjala is entitled to his opinions, but advocacy and proselytisation must also be seen for what they are. More recent history of Uganda now includes a restored monarchy in Serumaga's region of Buganda, for example. Where does that leave Wanjala's criticism? One can indeed be loyal to Buganda without abandoning Uganda. Positions such as Wanjala's too often start with the irony of consecrating or sanctifying borders and nations

[162] Okumu, Charles, 'Towards an Appraisal of Criticism on Okot's Poetry', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 1993, p. 154.
[163] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa (A Reader)*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 97.
[164] Wanjala, Chris, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature,* VIII, 2, December 1973, p. 14.

that were constructed and inherited from the British and other colonial masters. What about the Constitution that Obote abrogated soon after his assumption of total unbridled power in 1966, which was discussed at length in the Introduction? Wanjala's views must be set against the knowledge of the innocent lives that were lost during the Nakulabye incident in 1964, and even worse in the pogroms of 1966. To engage with Uganda or the Golden Age Theatre by ignoring or being selective in readings of the festering wound of its history and a vicious north-south divide that Obote exploited with a demagogic mastery and shamelessness, is to indulge in a kind of activist as opposed to judicial criticism. It is also to suffer from a self-inflicted *aporia* that is only too apparent as it clearly reduces 'the work of discourse to the mere reflection of an ontologically prior.'[165] It is a criticism that is defined by compromised misreadings as a result of ideological persuasion/s. That festering wound of Uganda's history and geopolitics is at the centre of Serumaga's creative axis. It is obvious even in his very first work, the novel *Return to the Shadows* (see: Introduction) and his earliest play, the subject of this very chapter.

A Play was first produced at Kampala's National Theatre in October 1967, under the auspices of Theatre Limited, a company that Serumaga helped to found (see Chapter One). In the spirit of the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre, the membership of the group was multicultural and multiracial. The one-act play was directed by Elizabeth Keeble, with Serumaga in the leading role of the middle-aged widower and erstwhile chief, Mutimukulu. Mutimukulu's wife, Rose, was played by Rose Mbowa and Mutimukulu's maid was played by Millie Aligawesa. The Malawian-Ugandan poet, scholar, actor and director David Rubadiri played the Godhead. Conrad Olive, doubled as the Old Man and eventually, the Doctor, John Sekajja; the Young Man, David Ponting; Peter and Amyn Sunderji, played John.[166]

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[165] Montrose, Louis, 'Professing the Renaissance' (1968) in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Massachusetts (USA) and Oxford (UK): Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p. 778.

[166] See *Cultural Events in Africa*, 41, 1968, p. 2.

The Play

The setting is a barely lit, eerily dark living room, which has certainly, according to the stage directions, 'seen better times.' The faded décor is deliberately paralleled with its owner Mutimukulu, who is dressed in 'a dark faded suit [...] carrying a briefcase, walking stick and bowler hat, [which are] weighing heavily on him.'[167] We know from the very beginning that more is troubling Mutimukulu than the electricity or telephone bill and the cooker that he seems to have purchased by instalments. Moments after we first encounter him, a nightmare begins to unfold. Mutimukulu is a troubled 'man who has passed his prime but he is still vaguely looking for it.' He is about to 'look' for a lot more than 'his prime', and if he is unwilling to do so, he will be forced by a divine hand from the pantheon of the God's of Buganda: Mukasa, the God of the lake (justice and restitution among other things). Mukasa is, arguably, the most popular, powerful and revered God in the vast cosmology of the Baganda. Buganda, of course, is also Serumaga's region of origin. The significance of that cannot be overemphasised in what is ultimately a re-enactment of a nightmare in the search for a crucial truth and answer.

Mutimukulu himself stars in the re-enactment of a drama set in his own mind. The drama is a tragic one and the dream is a nightmare that can only be described as uncannily closer to reality and to an awful, surrealistically rendered truth. It is a search for a gory truth of the murder of his wife Rose, a search made even worse by the fact that Mutimukulu himself seems to have been implicated in the murder. The appearance of the Godhead is followed by a storm that foregrounds a more violent storm in the mind of a man that may have attempted to

[167] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, first published in Kampala by the Uganda Publishing House in 1968, all parenthetic page references are from a republished edition; one with both *Majangwa* and *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p. 54. The next quotation in this paragraph is also from the same page of the play.

cauterise his memory of his own culpability in the murder, but is now haunted by the relentless pangs of guilt and the impeding consequences which the Godhead unambiguously spells out by way of justice/retribution.

HEAD

> There is an anthill where I am sitting and you and the truth have parted, and gone your different ways. When you meet on the other side of the raised ground the truth will have become a leopard with horns on its head. Will you let it eat you, or will you speak in its face?[168]

The Godhead's appearance and pronouncement is soon followed by the arrival of two guests: the Old Man and his companion, the Young Man. They are here not just to provide their host, the lonely Mutimukulu, with badly needed 'company' but also to help him revisit the past in order to clarify the present. The need for clarification and the revisiting of the past take on a different magnitude in light of that murder. This is no ordinary excursion into the past, as the Old Man himself puts it, early in the play: 'I expect a lot more to happen before the night is out. For tonight, five years ago, our host got married. And tonight, one year ago, his wife was murdered.'[169] The old Man obviously expects the unearthing of the truth. Why did she die, for instance? What was the manner of her death? What was the nature of her husband's complicity, or lack thereof, in what appears to be an orchestrated murder (or murders), on what has turned out to be a dual anniversary of a wedding as well as a murder?

John and Peter, the two other guests who eventually arrive with Rose to ostensibly celebrate the wedding anniversary, are also dead, and they met their deaths more or less at the same time as Rose. In the play within the play, the murder is re-enacted and the two, threatened by Mutimukulu (with a gun in hand), fire their guns at Rose. Mutimukulu instantly accuses them of the foul deed, exempting

[168] Ibid., p. 57.
[169] Ibid., p. 62.

himself from any liability as he sinks even deeper into mental instability.

Anguish and Justice

Andrew Horn states that 'The play seems to hover between an exposition of nihilism [...] and an assertion of a para-human fate which inexorably pursues every misdeed and its perpetrator.'[170] This is perhaps where the play surmounts or transcends the sum of its parts. The 'para-human fate' that awaits the guilty Mutimukulu has already been unequivocally spelt out by Mukasa, the most powerful of the Gods in the pantheon of the Gods in the cosmology of the Baganda. The God's appearance and his words further attest to the foul nature and gravity of the crime. Horn defines nihilism as 'pointless play between birth and death.'[171] That grim, purposeless and trivial view of life is woven through the entire fabric of the play. There is something radical about this even on a purely metaphysical plane. Nihilism is defined as 'a radical or extreme radical attitude which denies all traditional values, and not infrequently moral values as well.'[172] Serumaga does not deny his traditional values in religious, cultural and perhaps most of all, political terms. He upholds them to varying degrees, and sometimes in an orthodox and vehement manner. Serumaga's nihilism must be seen as a result of deep disillusionment and certainly despair. In the context of Serumaga's *A Play*, the disillusionment and despair are, by and large, metaphysical and religious. They are not a result, as Horn puts it, of 'a radical individualism, tending distinctly towards solipsism, which characterizes all [of Serumaga's] central characters.'[173] It is true that Serumaga's 'central characters' tend to be radically individualist. But

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[170] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 100.
[171] Ibid., p. 100.
[172] Cuddon, J. A. (ed.), revised by C.E. Preston: *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Fourth Edition), London: Penguin Books, 1999, p. 50.
[173] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 97.

they act more like his agents in a terrain characterised by metaphoric exploration of art and creativity, vision as well as insanity, enforced isolation and alienation. For all his lofty contributions with regard to Serumaga's work and Ugandan theatre in general, this is one of the moments where Horn falls short.[174] He, too, opens himself up to charges of selective readings of Uganda's postcolonial history and turmoil. But that history and turmoil are the fulcrum around which Serumaga's work revolves. At the very least, Horn does not belabour the facts behind the postcolonial condition mirrored in Serumaga's works. If one familiarises oneself with Serumaga's diachronic text and the incendiary geopolitics of Uganda's turbulent post-Independence history, one is more likely to say that if Serumaga's characters are radically individualist, the question should be, why are they so? The answer is likely to lie in the historical contexts that triggered Serumaga's texts, in the colossal inhumanity under both Obote and Idi Amin, in the tragic events but that triggered the anguish, the despair and the cry for justice; and they can all be located in the synchronic and diachronic texts.[175]

The Diachronic Play

MUTIMUKULU

> Blood! Blood with the concrete to lay the foundation.
> But the blood rots and stinks, and the house may not be inhabited.[176]

The play is set in the Uganda of its première (1967). That house echoes the ailing condition of postcolonial Uganda, a nation that reeks of blood, oozing from the very depths of its foundation. The house is a gigantic crypt in which the living are almost outnumbered by the dead. If Mutimukulu is emblematic of the living then the inhabitants' existence is one characterised by a palpable anguish and despair that

[174] Horn creates the impression of being no more than a messenger earlier on, but in the end, he does tip his hand later in his essay with regard to the question of Buganda and Uganda.
[175] Synchronic is simply a reference to the text in hand and diachronic is used to refer to context or times in the particular text or play is set.
[176] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p. 82.

provide precious little by way of affirmation life, even for those who might be tempted to choose between life and death. The solitary individuals that come and go into that house combine to provide a layered, intricate, pathetic and tragic tale of Uganda, Obote and Buganda, the state that Obote stripped of its nationhood after a political marriage of convenience.

MUTIMUKULU

> Vote? Vote! That is what' s wrong with this whole place. Every cretin, every putrefying mass of human refuse thinks they can settle all manner of issues by the simple act of their hands being counted. What makes you think that your two miserable votes can cancel out or even balance my vote.[177]

The logic here is simple; once you occupy or conquer a people and their nation, leaving them trapped and outnumbered deep in the hem of a colonial construct that is now sanctified by a dictatorship of the new-found majority from all the other parts of the state, then a vote is just an optical illusion in what amounts to a ritual consecration of a dictatorship. What Serumaga is saying is that, as it was on the national stage, so it truly is in this crypt of a house. As Mutimukulu bluntly puts it: 'Well, this is my house and nobody is going to vote in it.'[178]

Things get worse, as they did on the national stage. The nation that we see under Mutimukulu's roof is not what Fanon might call, 'a state that reassures the ordinary citizen, but rather one that rouses his anxiety.'[179] This is a tale of betrayal, murder and denial by Mutimukulu. The stage directions clearly spell out the message.

MUTIMUKULU

> She is dead. They've killed my wife.
> Why, why? Is there no conscience left in the world?
> How can you find harmony in the mouth of a gun?
> (*Looks at his fingers and notices blood*) [180]

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[177] Ibid., p.77.
[178] Ibid., p. 77
[179] Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth,* (trans.) Constance Farrington, London: Penguin, 1963, p. 133.
[180] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, pp. 81-82.

Obote seized absolute power in 1966, but he had blood on his hands even earlier. Mutimukulu's character calls for a contrapuntal reading, as he works both as a vessel and thematic agent of the author. Mutimukulu functions as the object and embodiment of all that revolts Serumaga. This could be a strength, as well as a weakness, not to mention part of the effort to elude the censor. Obote had become an elected Prime Minister in 1962. He would never have managed this without the support of the Baganda. Serumaga's thematic and social concerns are addressed in analogous ways. *A Play* is a solemn 'celebration' of a sad and tragic anniversary: it marks the marriage and the death of Mutimukulu's wife Rose. Obote initially came into office after a political marriage and a symbolic brotherhood with Buganda. He sealed this further by actually marrying someone from Buganda, Miria Kalule. Rose Mbowa has commented on this marriage to a Muganda wife as a further signifier of Obote's cunning and ambition. Mutimukulu, who is no doubt paralleled to Obote, addresses a portrait of Rose very early in the play. Incidentally, Rose is not only married to Mutimukulu, as many commentators have pointed out, she is also a symbol of Buganda. Mutimukulu's words ring rather hollow as the story unfolds, and it becomes clear that even the love he professes for his departed wife stems more from an expression of political rhetoric, than from a conscience or truth. 'Rose! I loved you. No, really I did. Maybe I was too busy pursuing my own ambitions to show you my love. But you were part of the whole plan, the whole picture.'[181] Did Mutimukulu actually love Rose or only insofar as she brought him closer to his ultimate goal: the whetting of his homicidal appetite and the consolidation of his unfettered power?

Mutimukulu is a man clearly in denial of a foul deed, personal responsibility and culpability, particularly so after the vivid re-enactment of the murder at the climax of the play. And it is no coincidence that the play revolves around a double anniversary of a marriage and a subsequent murder. To Mbowa, who played Rose in the

[181] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p. 55.

world premiere of the play, the eventual conquest, subjugation and attempted liquidation of Buganda by Obote began with a marriage on the political and personal arena.[182] With that context in mind, the house in which the personal and national nightmare unfolds should certainly be seen as a place far closer to a crypt than to a home. Virtually half of the characters the audience encounters are dead. On the list of the living are the Old Man and the Young Man, who are condemned to a precarious existence and a shorter lifespan as tramps. Mutimukulu himself is hanging on a precipice and he is already closer to a ghost than to the man he might have been once upon a time. A lot of the humanity he may have had seems to have been sacrificed on the altar of his ambition.

The play in general (and more so Mutimukulu's character) calls for a contrapuntal reading. Mutimukulu functions in a multi-layered way, both as a vessel, and thematic agent of the author. But at the same time, Mutimukulu functions as the object and embodiment of all that revolts Serumaga. Immediately after he orders John and Peter to murder his wife, he (Mutimukulu) mournfully asks: 'How can you find harmony in the mouth of a gun?'[183] In the next beat we see the blood on his hands. Earlier he makes a big speech that amounts to a deconstruction of the vote (by the author) given the geopolitics of the constructed country: 'What makes you think that your two miserable votes can cancel out or even balance my vote?'[184] But he quickly declares: 'Well, this is my house and nobody is going to vote in it.'[185] Mutimukulu is, overall, more of an object, an embodiment or veiled personification of a despot who will not escape the justice and restitution of fate and the Gods. But when Serumaga speaks through him, Serumaga's own voice and case is certainly undermined. The result is a murkiness in the signification, from which the author cannot

[182] Rose Mbowa also discusses the same issue in, for example: 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda, in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*: University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 2003, pp. 123-134.
[183] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p. 77.
[184] Ibid., p. 77.
[185] Ibid., p. 77.

be absolved, in spite of one's cognisance of the spectre of censorship and even the question of survival. Any effort to elude the censor also goes hand in hand with the responsibility or risk of turning the exercise of decoding into a prohibitive task. There is a tacit agreement, a kind of sacred trust, which the author and audience sign onto, and it cannot be violated by murkiness in the plot or even in the synchronic facts.

The original sin in this play, for instance, seems to be Mutimukulu's. By the end of the play, though, one feels that the truth of the murder/s and the grave consequences spelt out by the Godhead at the very beginning literarily dissipate into the enigmatic sound of the flute. There is a lot of dramatic potential lost here. What is certain is that Mutimukulu needs even more medication: his mental fragility is certainly worse after the staging/re-enactment of the murder. The feeling one gets is that more loneliness awaits him, and that the 'guilt' gnawing at him is even worse in its impact. Something as central as that cannot be left unresolved.

At the very end of the play, the Old Man reappears, deliberately doubling as Mutimukulu's doctor. Given what he knows or has witnessed as the Old Man, will Mutimukulu plead not guilty on account of a psychotic disorder? That seems unlikely, and that kind of speculation takes the discussion into what amounts to a different play. The more likely scenario is the re-appearance of the God of the lake, who, however benign he may be, will clearly deem it to be too late to intercede for a man who is clearly in denial of his culpability and the glaring truth of the foul murder/s.

The re-appearance of the Old Man as Mutimukulu's doctor certainly raises more questions and further problematises the play. It weakens the narrative by trivialising the horror we have witnessed and writing it off as a trite, untrue, extended episode of hallucination. It also lessens the gravity of what the play is pre-occupied with from the very beginning: the truth of the murder and the divinely sanctioned, inescapable consequences for the perpetrator. This is yet another example of missed opportunities on the part of one to whom theatrical vision, action, dialogue and humour otherwise come so easily.

The problems start long before the end. John and Peter for example, are not only accomplices in the murder in the pivotal scene when each of them pulls the trigger on Rose, they are also, according to the text, rumoured to have had an affair with Rose in the name of a political score they wanted to settle.

MUTIMUKULU

> Then afterwards I heard the rumours: that the bullet was meant for me and it killed you instead and that my rivals; in trying to destroy me had in fact made love to you in return for secret information about me, which you never gave and as a last resort, they shot at me but missed and got you instead.[186]

There are a number of other problems here. Rose is supposedly loyal when it comes to giving information about Mutimukulu, but she does not seem to hesitate in compromising her marital fidelity. To combine the affair with an assassination plot and the accidental bullet is confusion. There appears an authorial indecisiveness that has less to do, perhaps, with the attempt to elude the censor necessarily than with inconsistency and contradiction.

This inconsistency and contradiction is not confined to Rose's character or to Mutimukulu as agent and object; it is even more glaring in the construction of the plot. At no time, for example, is that affair/ betrayal a motive for the murder. In addition, there is an indisputably vivid re-enactment of the murder at the climax of the play. Peter, John, Rose and Mutimukulu all play themselves a year ago to the day. Mutimukulu threatens the 'Beckettian', music-hall pair of Peter and John at gunpoint, before they carry out his command. (One wonders why they do not aim their guns at him instead, given that there are two guns in their hands and Mutimukulu has only one.) He (Mutimukulu) then places the murder squarely on Peter and John's shoulders as he mourns for his 'beloved' wife. Peter and John then meet their deaths in different ways.

There is also an allusion to a certain Mr. Munene. Munene was scared that Mutimukulu would try to regain his political position

[186] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p. 93.

(Chief), having lost it to Munene's son. According to Mutimukulu that rivalry made Munene engineer an assassination; but the target is missed: the accidental bullet then takes Mutimukulu's beloved wife's life. Was Mutimukulu even at the scene of the accident or the shooting? In the re-enactment, which he is also the architect of, he, it is, that indisputably issues the order. In this instance, though, we are not told who the murderer is, though the evidence points to Mutimukulu more than anybody else.

Confusion is evident in the stage directions, such as on page 82 when 'young man returns [...] all eyes turn on him.'[187] When did he leave, one is tempted to ask? But that is probably making too much of something that could be ironed out in a production. It is not quite clear when we get to that scene how the two different guests, John and Peter, as well as the Old Man and the Young Man, become part of the same scene, unless it is meant to be a flashback, which it does not appear to be. It is no wonder then, as Macpherson has observed, that 'there are far too many loose ends. It is difficult studying [the play] in print to make a coherent interpretation.'[188]

Horn seems to encounter similar concerns when he notes: 'The play is also fractured by grave discontinuities of structure.'[189] Horn is talking about a disjointedness that is far from organic, and how the play digresses or veers off into what he rightly refers to as 'extended asides'.[190] The problem is that they cease to be asides when they threaten to swing the pendulum away from the main trajectory of the narrative. Horn cites an interesting example and one that will be discussed further. Those 'sideshows' take place soon after the re-enactment of the murder. They are, ironically, quite compelling. In some respects it is here that Serumaga's much lauded ability, his flair

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[187] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p. 82.
[188] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in: *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p.14.
[189] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa (A Reader)*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 101.
[190] Ibid.,

for comedy, the 'absurd' and so on, reach their zenith in this play. It is in those sideshows, more than half way through, after the key re-enactment of the murder, that John and Peter seem to take over the play. As Horn has observed: 'the focus shifts to the extended asides of Peter and John, a wholly different play begins to grow in the belly of the text as catalysts overshadow the reagents.'[191] John and Peter literally take the show over, becoming 'reagents' when their roles cannot be more than the catalytic one that Horn points out, in scenes that can only be read as segues. Horn speaks for a lot more than himself when he observes that the 'extended asides' are 'all the more distracting for being theatrically far more effective than the main body of the action.'[192]

Rose Mbowa places the play in the camp of the 'absurd' and attributes its problems to an obscurity in signification, which may well succeed in eluding the censor, but sadly, may also alienate and possibly lose the audience. Mbowa cites Macpherson to back up her views: 'In an attempt to reach stage performance without censorship, he [Serumaga] was more obscure than his audiences could follow.'[193] Macpherson herself takes us to what seems to be the root of the problem: 'The trouble seems to be that he has not quite decided whether he is writing a drama of the absurd which requires its own strange logic or whether he is writing a symbolic satire.'[194] That indecision and the wavering between two worlds that do not cohere betray an idiomatic/stylistic unease, which no doubt spills onto the page into the characters and weaves itself all through the narrative. Fortunately for Serumaga, some of the problems and concerns, as Macpherson points out were surmounted in production: 'The Director

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[191] Ibid.,
[192] Ibid.,
[193] Cited in Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 1994 p.128.
[194] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p.15

[...] Mrs. Elizabeth Keeble, was instrumental in clarifying [the play] to some extent for its first performance.'[195] This is certainly a tribute to the power of performance as opposed to the printed word. But productions, as Mbowa and Macpherson both know only too well, due to their multiple hands on experiences as actors and directors, cannot necessarily be a panacea when the writing falls short; in a script, the problems are sometimes more patently congenital. This also explains Macpherson's careful qualification of her observation by saying the clarification could only salvage the play, only 'to an extent' and no more. It is important to remember that both Mbowa and Macpherson observations come out of love and care; even though they do not mince their words, theirs are perfect examples of affirmative critiques. It is equally important to point out that there are moments in this play which more than make up for the many shortcomings. At the very beginning of the play, the clarity, even of the ambiguous, cannot be doubted, and the play resonates even on the page. An even better example can perhaps be seen soon after the pivotal scene in which Rose's murder is re-enacted. In the surrealistic sequences that follow, there is a crowd gathered outside the house, supposedly Rose's relations who want to take her remains:

PETER

Well then my opinion stands. Let them take the body.
(*There is some kind of agreement.*)

OLD MAN

They also say they want the man who killed her.

PETER

What?

OLD MAN

The man who shot her. They say they must see justice done.
And they intend to do it themselves. (*confounded pause*)

PETER

They can't do it. They mustn't do it [...] go tell them we live
in a civilised place here. There are such things as the
course of justice, the rule of law, and er [...]'[196]

Where was the civilisation, the 'justice' and 'the rule of law' when both Peter and John were pulling the trigger? That kind of irony could

[195] Ibid., p.14.
[196] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p. 83.

not have been lost to the audiences in Kampala's National Theatre in 1967. The vast majority of them would have had first-hand experiences with what Mbowa has described as: '— the emergence of [Obote's] fascist dictatorship,'[197] invoking everything that it had incontrovertibly violated. There might even have been a sense of *Schadenfreude* among many in the audience, a kind of 'poetic justice'. Consistency, however, remains a problem. Even if fragmentation and disconnectedness are an author's goal, there must be an organic coherence. To sit on the fence between the 'drama of the absurd [...] [and] symbolic satire' is, as Macpherson surmises, to fall 'between two stools.'[198] Say what you mean, even if what you mean is the ostensible as opposed to the real truth, for example. One must stick to whatever one's choice is, then work out one's signification with consistency; among other things, one will more than likely elude the censor as well as ensure one's survival. That indecisiveness and the play's occasional suspension between idioms that do not complement each other lead to a sketchy, disjointed, problematised plot, as well as obscurity that, for example, spills into the characterisation of Mutimukulu both as a kind of message/messenger or agent/object. Nonetheless, these shortcomings did not ultimately eclipse Serumaga's efforts, which will certainly be remembered for years to come.

Language, Intertextualisation, Originality

> ' His [Serumaga's] first play called *A Play*, was frankly frustrating both to me and the audience and school children that had to pass it for their exams [...] It used dramatic dialogue in a form that was heavily influenced by European drama. One had to remember lines to put action into meaning.'[199]

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[197] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 1994 p. 125.

[198] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p.15.

[199] Rubadiri, David, 'Serumaga: Dramatist who has Descended to Grassroots Level', *Sunday Nation*, Nairobi, 29th January, 1978, p. 20

David Rubadiri, Serumaga's friend who also played the Godhead in the original cast, made reference to Europe as a signifier of alienness in terms of cultural difference. The reference was mentioned earlier, in the very first footnote of the chapter. Rubadiri's unease appears to be triggered by a number of things, such as the inorganic/disjointed nature of some the dialogue. There are also echoes of Beckett through the comic pair of John and Peter. Those echoes may, in Rubadiri's view, have cast a shadow over the play's originality. Even more importantly perhaps, Rubadiri's unease would have been exacerbated by an alienness or 'European-ness' in some of the language that Serumaga's characters use. My choice of the designation 'Irish', in reference to *A Play*, is largely a result of some of the Hibernicised and Beckettian phrases and idioms that one encounters in reading the play. Beckett, is, of course, undoubtedly Irish, but I am also aware that certain critics and scholars consider his work to be far more European than Irish. Rubadiri's use of the designation 'European' is, in my opinion, a euphemism for the numerous concerns I have outlined above. It is therefore no compliment to Serumaga, neither should it be read as a slur on Europe or Ireland; it is simply a reference to an inherent cultural gulf, distance and alienness which Rubadiri feels in his reading of the play; and one in which he also happens to have performed. Well placed as he is in making those comments, I beg to differ with his affirmative criticism when the 'coded' designation, European, is extended to encompass *The Elephants*. *The Elephants* will not be discussed till the coming chapter, but suffice it to say, that at the very least, it happens to be a far more lofty accomplishment and there appears to be no justification for lumping the two plays together. I should add that in my view, the expression 'Irish play', at least in terms of some of the dialogue in *A Play*, seems to speak more closely to the specific source/s of some the contentious idioms as well as the degree of intertextualisation. Horn provides a number of very specific examples that speak to what Rubadiri intimates, including, not so much the alienness of some of the language, rather, its literariness. That is not to imply that Horn and Rubadiri would necessarily agree on

Serumaga or *A Play*. A few of their concerns do converge, but it is Horn who has written more extensively on the subject and his observations and concerns are therefore bound to attract more attention in this discussion. But to discuss those concerns is to also engage with the task of hybridisation of the Western theatrical sign, and the negotiation involved therein.

To Horn, for example, 'the distinctly Beckettian pair of John and Peter [*A Play*] who [are] strongly reminiscent of Vladimir and Estragon [...] spend most of their stage time'[200] playing games. Is this a question of literary kinship that takes the form of intertextualisation or is it a lack of originality/ derivativeness? Horn opts for the latter categorisation. Horn continues, 'Like Beckett's ravaged clowns; John and Peter are called jesters (p.65) and tramps (p.65, p.66, p. 67 and p. 69).' The evidence seems to show that they would have been called jesters, since that is a big part of their function. In fact they do it so well that as was already noted they literally steal the show in the satirical and hysterical 'extended asides.' Most criticism will take what those characters say as original, forceful and memorable; and the derivativeness, as probably far more apparent than real. Where these two characters echo Beckett's immortalised clowns are moments that the playwright could have obfuscated or erased but deliberately chose not to. The result works almost as a tribute in philosophic, thematic and artistic terms, to Beckett, to the Music Halls, and to the solo performances in which Serumaga was practically immersed and schooled. As Horn himself has noted Serumaga's legacy from 'stand-up' or solo performance is an aspect glaringly and curiously ignored by scholars and critics who have commented on Serumaga's work.[201]

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[200] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 98.

[201] ' Perhaps of greater significance to his [...] development both as an actor and playwright (and an influence neglected by other critics) was Serumaga's work in variety and revue as a stand-up comedian': from Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 98.

Horn goes on to note in a footnote about Serumaga's John and Peter, that 'their language [is] larded with theatrical phrases — 'a good line' (p. 65), 'his bit lightly overplayed' (p.66), 'this is a death cell not a theatre' (p.92).[202] He concludes that the characters 'often [relate to each other] in the form of music-hall turns.' Horn provides some vivid examples in this respect: John: 'We must pass the time somehow before we die [...] tomorrow' (p. 92), recalls Vladimir: 'That passed the time.' Estragon: 'It would have passed in any case' (*Godot*, p. 48); and Vladimir: 'That wasn't such a bad little canter.' Estragon: 'Yes, but we'll have to find something else' (*Godot*, p. 65).

It is quite possible to read this, not so much in terms of derivativeness or lack of originality, rather in terms of life as a meaningless or purposeless game: a major part of the thematic scaffolding of Serumaga's play, implied even by the very choice of the title *A Play*. Literary echoes/inter-textualisation/s and influences are hybridised signs. The hybridised sign is by definition also a syncretic one. In his remarks on *A Play*, Roscoe, for instance, points to 'echoes of Brecht, Beckett, Soyinka, and even Okigbo ghosting forth',[203] though he does not identify those 'echoes'. More importantly, in terms of hybridisation, is Serumaga's use of language. Roscoe points out that Serumaga is prone to 'occasional linguistic ineptness when a wrong register is used.'[204] Roscoe points his finger at the infamous 'undesirable cardiac contortions' (p. 64) that the Old Man mentions. This criticism is valuable and it is hard to disagree with it, but the key word is 'occasional,' and the 'ineptness' is not a defining characteristic in the way that Roscoe wants people to believe as he asserts elsewhere. It could also be argued though that Serumaga and others were products of two languages: their mother tongue, followed by that of the colonial master. On occasion, the search for a local linguistic feel within the

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[202] These citations and those in the rest of the paragraph are from, Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, (footnote 16) p. 113.
[203] Roscoe, Adrian, *Uhuru's Fire, African Literature East to South*, London, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 262.
[204] Ibid., .

confines/constraints of English, for example, can be elusive and it at times, leaves the writer dangling between the two languages, the end result being an uninhabitable linguistic liminality. The infamous phrase 'cardiac contortions' is an example. It could be nothing more than a desire for poetic speech. A native Luganda speaker would probably notice what Serumaga is aiming to say: palpitations, more than likely. The language, at times, is clearly a negotiation between English and Luganda, and it is successful in the language of the Godhead for example, but the manipulation of a hybridised linguistic sign is not necessarily a smooth exercise. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the key word about Roscoe's concern is 'occasional.'

Probably far more disconcerting than the 'occasional' slippages are the Irish and British idioms and expressions, which stick out in some of the dialogue in *A Play*: 'in there sweetie,' (p. 56), 'ruddy crocodile' (p. 58), 'I have no truck with people' (p. 60), Mutimukulu's reference to the maid as 'love' (p. 55). Both, Roscoe and Horn have complained about these phrases and they are no doubt part of the reasons for Rubadiri's lukewarm assessment of *A Play* in particular.

Horn also takes issue with something that stems from Serumaga's upbringing and formative years (which could also have been reinforced in Dublin), when he notes that 'distinctly Roman Catholic references abound,' for example, 'Jesus, Mary, Joseph I will kill you.'(p. 90). When you combine that line with 'Nice bit of rope you got here' (p. 94), the language seems to echo Dublin even more than it does London. Of course it also takes us back to Beckett and his 'ravaged clowns.'

Another aspect of language is the occasional literariness. When it appears, it robs the work of dynamism, spontaneity, and immediacy, relegating the words of the characters to a printed page rather than the speaking stage. One good example is:

> OLD MAN
> Escaping from the prison of your own folly. Life has a substance and a shadow. And more often than not, we chase the shadow and miss the substance. The fault

lies with us not nature.[205]

The risk of literariness could also be related to the trials and tribulations of translation and the negotiation that leads to a hybridised linguistic sign. It tends to be exacerbated at moments when we encounter what Macpherson has called the 'big speech,' which tends to ask 'for 3 stars beside it to indicate its thematic importance [...] [and] can be rather artificial.'[206] The telegraphing of the 'thematic importance' of a speech could easily make it sound far more imposed than organic, but it may also carry with it, the risk of didacticism.

A final aspect that ought to be mentioned here transcends language, but it is clearly rooted in Serumaga's upbringing and, perhaps to an extent, connected to Serumaga's Dublin years. Horn has noticed the predominance of Catholic iconography. He seems to wonder whether even the use of religious imagery from the cosmology of the Baganda, is not mediated and outweighed by 'Christian damnation.'[207] There is also an additional problem, of the most powerful and popular God, Mukasa. Mukasa being the God of the lake, among other things, could naturally be deemed responsible for storms or, in theory, at least, capable of visiting them on a people as a punishment. According to religious beliefs of the Baganda, Kiwanuka is the God of thunder and lightning.[208] It is therefore not clear why Serumaga chose to invest Mukasa with the additional office of the God of thunder and lightning.

Could it perhaps be that Serumaga had also just begun a journey to the roots of his traditional religion, in much the same way as he had embarked on a de-Europeanisation of the Western cultural sign that the

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[205] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p. 59.
[206] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 15.
[207] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa (A Reader)*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 100.
[208] See Kaggwa, Apollo, *Ekitabo Kye Empisa za Baganda*, Uganda Printing and Publishing: Kampala, 1918, Translated by Ernest B. Kalibala as *The Customs of the Baganda*, May Mandelbaum Edel (ed.), New York: Columbia, 1934.p. 122.

theatre was in the early days? *A Play* contains unmistakable signs of what Horn has described as 'Serumaga's superb sense of the theatrical.'[209] It is worth looking at some examples of this before the next play is discussed.

PETER
What a night we are having!
JOHN
We must pass the time somehow, before we die
(*pause*) tomorrow.
(*pause.*)[...]
PETER
Do you remember John do you remember that man shortly after Our independence? He was Belgian I think. He dressed his dog in our national flag; you remember? (*slight pause*) we hanged him and deported his dog.(*laughs wildly*)
JOHN
(*unamused*) I do not think that's funny. Anyway it is the other way around; we hanged his dog and deported him.
PETER
(*stopped*) Oh, was it now? (*pause*) And then what happened to the flag?
JOHN
We still hang that up every day.[210]

That final line, probably delivered deadpan, would undoubtedly elicit a rapturous reaction. But Serumaga's audience suddenly finds itself face to face with hanging as a ritual affirmation of national normalcy. Any keen observer of the Uganda or East African scene reading or watching this play is bound to count on some of these scenes echoing their way through the years and through the archives. Later, Serumaga's very own jesters, like their Beckettian kith indulge in a game. It is an improvisation of their arrival at a kind of heavenly Customs and Immigration:

JOHN
Saint Peter! I am home [...]
PETER
Aren't you going to take off your rope?
JOHN

[209] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 101.
[210] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p. 92.

(*unaware*) What?

PETER

You have just been hanged, remember? [...]

JOHN

I almost forgot. (*takes up his position again*)
Saint Peter, I am home.

PETER

Come on in, son. Let me take your rope. (*John hands over the rope*)
Nice bit of rope you got here son. (*looking at it*)

JOHN

(*bashful*) Oh, it's not really. Government surplus.[211]

The language here takes us closer to Ireland as opposed to Europe or anywhere else, including Uganda. It is on that account, perhaps, that Horn takes issue with the absence of 'unique locutions and rhythms of Ugandan English.'[212] And Horn is right. There is, however, a danger of conflating the written word with speech. Shakespeare or Sean O'Casey, for example, could sound Ugandan without altering a single word in their plays. And to speak of 'Ugandan English' is to risk a totalised and slightly misleading impression; Okot p'Bitek's rhythm would clearly be different from Ruganda's or Zirimu's by virtue of the regions they are from and even of the schools they attended. Horn is right, though, to exercise caution in interpreting language. And Serumaga himself is evidently not unaware of the alienness of the diction. As Kalundi, for example, points out: 'He had had, artistically speaking, a lot more European cultural baggage to get rid of than many of his contemporaries.'[213] Hence Serumaga's explicit and widely noted quest for self -reclamation and decolonisation, or de-Europeanisation, of his work. But again, even in this, his first play, it is impossible not to see the theatricality and abundant promise on all sorts of levels, including perhaps one of the most fundamental/patent aspects of the theatre — the 'visual.' As Serumaga himself said in 1972: 'Theatre is

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[211] Ibid., p. 94.
[212] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa (A Reader)*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 101.
[213] Serumaga, Kalundi R, 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and The Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 9.

first and foremost a visual and visible medium.'[214] Even a casual glance at the next and final excerpt, stage directions included, will illustrate this point. As John and Peter's game continues, those familiar with the Uganda of Idi Amin are bound to recall the firing squads at Kampala's Clock Tower and other parts of the country, which were to become a gory kind of spectator sport. In that sense, the play, much like John Ruganda's *The Burdens*, displays a vision that was uncannily even more true of Amin's as opposed to Obote's, Uganda.

> ([…] *Peter looks at John. Suddenly John bursts into action. He shouts, jeers, spits, turns his buttocks to the Audience, farts and runs back to Peter, breathing heavily.*)
>
> PETER
>
> (*amazed*) Who did you see?
>
> JOHN
>
> My bank manager. What does he think he is doing,
> Coming to my hanging with my overdraft in his hand?
>
> PETER
>
> Well, its his money.
>
> JOHN
>
> And its my hanging remember?
>
> PETER
>
> Our hanging…Do you see what I see?
>
> JOHN
>
> Yes, a priest.
>
> PETER
>
> Look at him. Look at him. He is sprinkling water…and smoke. He is making noises. I think he is singing. ([…] *shouts, spits, farts. They stop and collect themselves. Pause. Then they laugh wildly.*) [215]

It is important to remember that these excerpts are meant to be parenthesised, 'playlets' within a play. Still, they evidently make the derivativeness questionable in terms of their signification in a Ugandan context, illustrating Roscoe's point about Serumaga's natural affinity and gift for the theatrical, as well as the 'originality and force' that was noted earlier.

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[214] Serumaga, Robert, 'The Critical Silence', *Uganda Argus*, Kampala, 3rd August 1972, p. 4.
[215] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p. 95.

Conclusion

Given that Serumaga's signification is not only an issue of aesthetics but also of content, and is dictated by the spectre of censorship and by the need for personal survival, does one absolve Serumaga of any artistic shortcomings? The conflicting stylistic idioms that Macpherson duly notes (the absurd on the one hand and 'symbolic satire' on the other) ensure that obscurity, abstraction, and incoherence triumph over content and clarity. Much has already been noted about a palpable uneasiness and indecisiveness in the play, which undermine the author in aesthetic, semiological and thematic terms. Due to those congenital inconsistencies in form and style, Mutimukulu appears to be an agent through whom we can read the author's strategic location, his protest and dissidence. But Mutimukulu is clearly also the pillar and object of this psychobiographic exposé of the ailment of a tyrant facing an ultimate justice from which he cannot escape. The use of the word 'seemingly' stems from the inconclusive, weak and enigmatic ending, one that undermines and trivialises the play by turning the veracity of the nightmare and the tragic events at its core into a mere verisimilitude. This trivialisation is enhanced by the dual role of the Old Man; by becoming Mutimukulu's doctor at the very end, he reduces the nightmarish reality and truth into something that is patently untrue, and at the very best, no more than a momentary, aberrant condition that need not unsettle anyone. The plot suffers from an incoherence and occasional contradictions that undermine the play's dissidence, subversiveness and social-political critique. Then, there are the 'sidebars' those parenthetic play- within- the play scenes — which overwhelm the play. As Horn has observed 'a wholly different play begins to grow in the belly of the text'[216] as the catalytic characters John and Peter turn into 'reagents.'

From a linguistic point of view a catalogue of parallelisms has been provided and examined. Certain influences are deliberately

[216] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 101.

exposed on occasion as a kind of homage or inspiration; that is not unlike a liturgical note or silent space left at a jazz funeral. The desire to indigenise triggers a process of translation, which sometimes leaves the author dangling in what has been described as a liminal, uninhabited space, occasionally occupied by those spectacular, infamous slippages. It would be wrong to characterise Serumaga as one with a kind of congenital linguistic ineptitude. Far more glaring and disturbing than the occasional slippages are the instances where the diction of the characters is evidently transplanted straight out of Westbourne Grove (a neighbourhood that is referred to in *The Elephants*), or, in fact, Dublin. It is perhaps no wonder that in his quest for self-reclamation and de-Europeanisation, one aspect that was to undergo a radical overhaul in Serumaga's work was language. It is fair to say that the process of indigenisation was a long effort that brought with it a hybridised linguistic and dramaturgical sign characterised by an inter-textuality and syncretism which sometimes obscure the originality of a work that clearly falls short, even as it reveals the potential and talent of Serumaga.

It was Serumaga's first play, for instance, that Kenyan playwright Francis Imbuga chose to mount soon after Serumaga's tragic death in 1980, as a celebration of his lofty theatrical legacy. Was Imbuga's solemn celebration and mourning through the choice of this, of all the plays, an attempt to return to where it all began for Serumaga? Was it in some way an endorsement of the burning issues of the play, to its universal or human drama? Regardless of the precise reasons behind Imbuga's choice it is creates an opportune moment for saying something about the importance of this play, its legacy, Serumaga's commitment, passion, dissidence and insurgency. There is also his embrace of the absurd in his portrayal of a people deprived of the very oxygen of hope.

Serumaga was later to become much more prodigiously innovative and experimental. But even the very idea of a dream or a nightmare being the life-blood of an entire play was unprecedented in Uganda and East Africa at the time; so too was his psychological

approach and depth. In addition, the play-within-a-play, as well as the fantasy projections, were to become defining aspects, very much part and parcel of the theatrical and dramaturgic landscape in Uganda and, in fact, Kenya. However, attention must be paid to Kalundi's cautionary point as cited in the introduction to this chapter. Kalundi would much prefer for the critical emphasis and attention to be focussed on the African-ness of Serumaga's work, as opposed to the *avant-garde* and his many years in Europe. After all, if Serumaga's long-held aspirations were to be reduced to a single one, it would be his fervent quest to recover his African self, and in so doing to decolonise/indigenise even the theatre itself as a cultural sign. In fact, the evidence will show that Serumaga himself attests to this on more than one occasion. The later works also provide indisputable proof that Serumaga's aesthetic was increasingly characterised by an interdisciplinarity, non-linearity, improvisation and experiment. One can see, even without delving into the details here, why it would be tempting and easy to regard Serumaga's aesthetic as *avant-garde* or postmodern. Eurocentric criticism, in this respect can be misleading and at times simply false, revealing a congenital *aporia* that only allows critics and reviewers to see only as far as their *episteme* can allow them. Kalundi's cautionary point must be taken seriously, if for no other reason than in the name of postcolonial vigilance, because Eurocentricism and Orientalism still persist. If there is a slight unease sparked by Kalundi's view, the postmodern as well as the postcolonial are both interventionist and counter hegemonic. At least according to Homi Bhabha, they are both united by a search for agency and self-representation.[217] Rather than binarising the two we may indeed find that they complement and even augment each other. While it is our inalienable imperative to be constantly on the alert in the name of postcolonial/anti-colonial vigilance, there is necessarily no need to binarise the discourses.

[217] Bhabha, K. Homi, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, pp. 20-21.

As was pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, Serumaga has been accused by some of a rampant, perhaps even socially and politically debilitating individualism. The facts of the play simply do not bear out that assertion. Serumaga may signify best through individual characters who happen to embody the plight of his community, but far from being a romantic, nomadic kind of anarchist, he is, in fact, an activist by definition. Serumaga's commitment, passion, dissidence, and insurgency have all been borne out in this discussion of his first play. To accuse him of a debilitating individualism is to deafen or blind oneself to his metonymic or allegorical signification. Again, although Wanjala and others are entitled to their opinion/s, when does opinion transform itself into fact? Their readings of Uganda's tragic history, to which Serumaga was no doubt responding, seem to be selective and impervious to the misrule, misdeeds and callous inhumanity that Serumaga chose to counter analogously and with an exemplary psychological depth.

A Play may almost uniformly be regarded as far from Serumaga's best or most successful play, but it can be seen as a template for his diachronic and synchronic world-view, the deconstructed historical facts, and the themes of anguish, turmoil, betrayal, fascism, alienation, and isolation, are all first played out in *A Play*. The psychological depth and power that he was later hailed for in *The Elephants*, for example, certainly began here too. So, too, do the surrealistic leaps, the fantasy projections, and the plays-within-a-play. Some of these stylistic theatrical traits, in time, would come to define Serumaga as an indomitable craftsman, and inspire others among Uganda's Golden Age playwrights. Horn has noted that 'Serumaga's protagonist is always an actor; a player, a compulsive raconteur with a slick music-hall patter, whose extravagant rationalisations are woven out of ironic quips and baroque fictions.'[218] There are obviously variations to Horn's exegetic encapsulation of Serumaga's leading men.

[218] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 97.

Mutimukulu is not as sympathetic, so we arguably see a lot more of that apt typification of Serumaga's work and characters in the later work, nevertheless. For that reason alone, *A Play* is a worthwhile starting point. Serumaga's efforts to master the theatrical art would soon bear fruit.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ELEPHANTS: *A 'Postman's' Invocation*

> What Arnold said of Goethe, we may
> say of Robert Serumaga:
> He stuck his finger on the place,
> and said: thou ailest here and here.[219]
>
> — Bahadur Tejani (A Review) of Robert Serumaga's *The Elephants* [220]

On the 28th March 1968, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* opened at Uganda's National Theatre. Robert Serumaga and Elizabeth Keeble played George and Martha. Keeble was, of course, one the founding members of Theatre Limited, and she directed the world premiere of *A Play*. According to the Arts Magazine *Cultural Events in Africa*, in addition to Albee's play, 'Mr. Serumaga [had] acted in [Wole Soyinka's] *Trials of Brother Jero*, [J.P. Clark's] *The Raft* and the lead in the premier of his own *A Play*.'[221] Serumaga also appeared in two other plays that year; Wole Soyinka's *The Road*, which was produced in 1968, and more importantly perhaps, Athol Fugard's *The Blood Knot*. *The Blood Knot* was the first of Fugard's multiple hits. It was produced at Kampala's National Theatre in February 1969.[222] A critic in the Uganda Argus newspaper has cited Fugard's *The Blood Knot* as a significant influence on Serumaga's *The Elephants* (this assertion and observations will be discussed later in the chapter). Serumaga's multiple acting credits illustrate what can only be described as a hunger, joy, and a tremendous love of performance as well the inevitable discipline that the ancient art inevitably calls for.

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[219] Tejani, Bahadur, 'Robert Serumaga [*The Elephants*]', *African Arts*, III, 4, Summer 1970, p. 76.
[220] Serumaga, Robert, *The Elephants*, London: Oxford University Press, (New Drama from Africa Series), 1971. All parenthetical page references are from this edition.
[221] *Cultural Events in Africa*, 41, 1968, p. 2.
[222] See Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda's Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, 111, 3, Spring 1970, pp. 54-55.

Although the theatre as a cultural sign was still far from indigenised in those early days, the progress was irrefutable. Regardless of the nature of their specialties, a lot of hard-working men and women seem to have turned Makerere (and Kampala at large) into a beehive of activity. But that outpouring of theatrical activity in the early years was not complimented with capacity, or near-capacity crowds. Janet Johnson notes, for instance, that both *The Blood Knot* and *The Road* did not succeed at the box office, 'in spite of the elaborate and costly publicity.'[223] Wycliffe Kiyingi's 'tremendously popular [Luganda]' dramas were an exception to the box office woes. Kiyingi also ensured a quality and confidence with the medium that was still lacking, sadly. It is important to remember, though, that Theatre Limited had only been in existence since September 1968. Theatre Limited's support for Kiyingi's work augured well for Luganda theatre. In addition it spoke volumes about Serumaga and Theatre Limited; to actively support the theatre in indigenous languages was somewhat akin to Serumaga's rural to urban strategy that was referred to earlier in the thesis. The early box office woes meant a more commercially conscious mix in what they were to produce in the future, combining the serious with the popular. The choice of Molière's *School for Wives*, for example, was a product of that new policy. The results were instantaneously phenomenal: 'For the first time [...] a truly multi-racial audience was attracted and, thanks to the high [production] standards [of the Company], [they became] regular Theatre Limited supporters.'[224]

That mixed bag of trials, tribulations, triumph, was a kind of theatrical state of the art in the year that Serumaga's *The Elephants* premièred at Uganda's National Theatre on the 6th January 1968.[225] David Rubadiri directed, with Serumaga himself in the lead role of David. Davis Sebukima played Maurice Diop; and Rachel Weaving

[223] Johnson, Janet, in Robert Serumaga and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda's Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, 111, 3, Spring 1970, p. 55.
[224] Ibid., p.55.
[225] Incidentally this date coincided with Serumaga's birthday, 29 years to the opening night of his second play.

played Jenny. Ben Sabwe played the Old Man, and Byron Kawadwa played the Policeman. The play also toured to the Kenya Cultural Centre (Nairobi) in early 1970. In February 1971 it was performed at the Loop City Theatre in Chicago. It should be noted that no work by a Ugandan playwright had ever toured that much/far.

Three years after *The Elephants*' auspicious debut, Macpherson would describe it as, 'the most fully satisfactory play he [Serumaga] has so far achieved.'[226] And she was clearly not alone in that praise for Serumaga's skill as a storyteller, his restraint, suspense, subtlety, and stylistic consistency. In his review of the Nairobi production of the play, Robert Beaumont attributes its success to the fact that it 'is a play about *people* — and if this seems a gratuitous comment, think of all the other plays by East African writers you have seen, and you will find this is rare'[227]

The Elephants went through two working titles. One of them was 'People Who Eat Dead People'. One wonders whether that kind of title would have survived the scrutiny of the censors in Obote's Uganda. It is an interesting choice given the postcolonial malaise to which Serumaga is responding. But it could also be argued that Serumaga is — rather too subtly perhaps — turning his own critical gaze on the artist as a kind of cannibal. The turning of the spotlight onto art itself — to the creative fodder it feeds on — will also be discussed. So, too, will a number of other auxiliary themes such as racism.

In reference to *A Play* Andrew Horn has posited: 'It is best read as an *incunabulum*, pointing towards the playwright's more mature and ambitious work in the 1970s.'[228] That maturity and ambition that Horn alludes to in Serumaga's later work, I would argue,

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[226] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p.15.

[227] Beaumont, Robert, 'Superb Theatre', *The Sunday Nation*, Nairobi: 1971.

[228] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa (A Reader)*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 101.

starts, with a pre-1970s work: *The Elephants*. It is in *The Elephants*, that we once again come face to face with thematic preoccupations as well as dramaturgical choices that we first witness in *A Play*. Indeed, the more of Serumaga that one reads, the more apparent it becomes that it is in *A Play*, where most of the dramaturgy and thematic concerns first come to the surface. The 'slick, music- hall patter' and 'ironic quips ',[229] that we first encounter through the Beckettian pair of John and Peter in *A Play*, for example, are put to use once again in *The Elephants*. To Horn, the character of David's 'chatter of philosophical wise-cracks probably owes a great deal to Serumaga's "stand-up" comic routines of Serumaga's student days.'[230] The reader first encounters that legacy in *A Play*, of course. By the time we get to Serumaga's *Majangwa*, the 'wise-cracks' and solo-showman routines — the play within a play — clearly become signifiers of Serumaga's aesthetic/identity. In *The Elephants* they are just as fluid, clearly more refined, and much more organic as opposed to the infamous asides or parenthesised scenes in *A Play*.

Neither the social nor the political are jettisoned in this play. It would be wrong to assume as Horn has, for instance, that 'Bahadur Tejani misses the point when he over stresses the prominence'[231] of, in effect, the social and the political. Clearly, the deconstructive and postcolonial gaze, that is already at work here, will not confine itself to the play as an *incunabulum*, or to Serumaga's music-hall legacy, his concerns and the turbulent history that characterised the times. Some of Horn's criticism too, for example, especially in relation to *The Elephants*, calls for a deconstructive evaluation. The key issue in Serumaga's work, in relation to individualism and solipsism, as well as innovation, will also call for further discussion.

To many, an authoritative voice, *The Elephants* was remarkably different and accomplished compared to *A Play*. In *A Play*, Serumaga's

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[229] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa (A Reader)*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 97.
[230] Ibid., p. 103.
[231] See footnote 30 in Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in *The Performance Arts in Africa (A Reader)*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 113.

natural affinity to the medium had been grossly sabotaged by a series of squandered opportunities. Those who had stuck with Serumaga, however, now knew they had had good reason for their faith.

The Play

The Elephants is set in a sixth floor graduate student apartment in a university that is reminiscent of Uganda's Makerere. It is, however, slightly disguised by its lakeside location.[232] The apartment belongs to David, a character whose last name we never (curiously) get to know. David 'is a Research Fellow in African Literature and Musicology.'[233] He has also devoted a great deal of his time, in the last few years, to producing a prolific, quite peculiar, and rather strange kind of fiction. David also plays the flute. He shares his minimalist abode with a like-minded soul, Maurice Diop, a refugee from a postcolonial nation, which though not named, appears to be Rwanda. David also shares a deep bond and friendship with Maurice. There are a number of other characters; Jenny, a young American woman, Richard, who is also American, is a research Fellow at the University. There is also the character of the Old Man, and a Policeman who makes a fleeting appearance; there are, in fact, two policemen according to the cast list.

David has suffered from a major trauma and an ailment that he may not be able to conceal anymore. By concealing it, he may have cured the symptoms only to risk the ferocious return of the disorder. News of Maurice's impeding visit to his own country, and the hitherto withheld possibility of a marriage to their expatriate friend (Jenny), leads to more grave revelations, by way of secrets, occlusions as well as lies. Then comes the relapse in the form of a re-enactment, which is itself, a psychosomatic 'symbol' and symptom of a relentless postcolonial nightmare that could well have stripped David of any meaningful human agency.

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[232] And for those who are familiar with Makerere proper, the setting feels more like Makerere's Medical School campus at Mulago National Hospital in Kampala.

[233] Serumaga, Robert, *The Elephants*, Act I, p.1.

Beaumont's review of *The Elephants*, cited earlier, is a result of a number of authorial accomplishments, one distinct attribute being the exemplary psychological depth of the play. That is a quality that appears to have been unprecedented in East African theatre at the time. There are, though, three aspects to this particular discussion. To an extent these aspects are distinct and separate; but they are also inter-related. To speak of individuals is to also discuss their interactions and how that impacts on those individuals. To describe *The Elephants* as 'a play about people' as Beaumont has done, is to talk about their thoughts and fears, their interactions with each other, as well as the impact of what they say and do on each other. It is also to peer into their ailments.

It is important to emphasise that while *The Elephants* 'is [truly] a play about people', it is also just as much about secrets, omissions, and lies; their revelation/s; and the grim consequences. There is something else to bear in mind. Horn has observed, 'Serumaga's protagonist is always an actor; a player, a compulsive raconteur with a slick music-hall patter, whose extravagant rationalisations are woven out of ironic quips and baroque fictions.'[234] This observation may seem a lot more appropriate to Mutimukulu (*A Play*) as well Majangwa, in Serumaga's eponymically titled play *Majangwa*. But David, too, is not really that far removed from that characterisation; neither, therefore is *The Elephants*. David is the key player; it is therefore appropriate to start with him. David's 'baroque fictions' are not about himself. For David, it is, in some respects, more a question of omission rather than commission of those extravagant yarns. That he does love to talk goes without saying. As far as 'ironic quips' go, he certainly provides more than his fair share. David is definitely a performer, even purely in the way he relates to the other individuals. He also goes beyond that, performing in a more conventional way, plunging as he does, in the

[234] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 97.

Westbourne-grocery store episode (Act, pp.16-18). In a scene that climaxes on a scatological note, David actually brings two characters to life. A West Indian man goes to the Grocery store to purchase canned food for his cat. The proprietor harangues him for allegedly using it to feed his family, and implores the shopper not to return. He returns though, but with his cat in hand this time. The same thing happens again when the man comes back and orders a can of food for his dog, which he then brings along on the next occasion. Next time though, the same man fills a tin up with his excrement, puts a hole into the lid that is big enough for the proprietor's finger. He convinces him to dip his finger into the 'mysterious' tin and gets him to smell it; providing him with advance, incontrovertible proof of his genuine need for toilet paper. But David is perhaps even more compelling in his literary performance on the pages of his peculiar and disturbing fiction encased in the letters that eventually wreck his sanity and the friendship in Act 2. It could be argued that it is in those letters that David moulds his 'baroque fictions'. More importantly, though, there are grave implications and consequences to David's gilded narratives, in particular the 'master' narrative he has created by playing Doctor and Postman to ensure his friend and flatmate Maurice's sanity; by easing his anxieties about his family. David's very own sanity depends on the assumption and hope that their friendship does not unravel and the secret of his creative postman-ship and imagination remains hidden.

One of the very first things one notes about David is in a stage direction that describes him as 'the bright-and-early type with a complete disregard for morning sleep even in others.'[235] It was during the night (as the audience later gets to know towards the very end of Act 1), that David found himself instantly orphaned. So while the night is not 'the [cause of the] centre of the storm within' him, it probably exposes his fragile self more; rendering him more vulnerable to revisiting the dreaded psychotic 'storm', one that struck on a fateful

[235] Serumaga, Robert, *The Elephants*, Act 1, p. 2.

night during David's teens, in 'those years when the country was unsettled and night came fast upon the heels of twilight,' and when 'Daytime was fraught with danger and death stalked the streets at night.'[236] David was fifteen when those years began. And as the play itself unfolds it is hard not to note — metaphorically, at least — the rapid pace with which the tropical light is engulfed by the dark, eerie night. The day itself is no consolation since it is also 'fraught with danger'— just marginally less so. Combine that with the 'unsettled' nation-state that David alludes to, together with the tragic loss of his parents: 'Then one day I heard a voice calling out, 'Mother do you hear me? Father has gone out with the spear.' Think of the trauma that followed it. 'It was my *own* voice.' He continues to reveal: 'It was then I knew I had been talking to myself all this time.'[237] To surmise that David could very well find the nights unsettling — hence his 'disregard for morning sleep, even in others' — may not be as speculative as it may appear at first glance, in fact, it is an understatement.

David is clearly troubled by the memory of clasping his mother's corpse (unbeknownst to him). As he puts it to Jenny, 'My Father saw a bullet hole in the window and in the mosquito net. And when he called out she wouldn't answer.' When his poor father audaciously steps out, spear in-hand, to confront the killers, we are told: 'I heard a burst of gunfire and I *knew*. Now father was with mother. On the other side.'[238]

They had crossed the gulf and gone into the land of the dead. It was up to David, with the help of an Aunt, to pick up whatever pieces they could. The foul murders were followed by a psychotic ordeal that included a spell in a mental hospital. The hospital may have healed the symptoms, but it made the affliction worse. At the very best, the disorder seems to have gone into hibernation. But long before David reveals the heinous act and its aftermath to Jenny — towards the end of

[236] Ibid., Act 1, p. 24.
[237] Ibid., Act 1, p. 26.
[238] Ibid., Act 1, p. 25.

Act 1 — one cannot help but sense David's anxiety, vulnerability and volatility. The volatility is more apparent in his exchanges with Jenny and even the character of the Old Man.

The economy, restraint, and structure of Serumaga's narrative is worthy of note. Macpherson has lauded Serumaga for among other things, his 'coherence of complex communication.'[239] It is a complexity that may look deceptively simple. But it is embedded throughout, even in the visual elements. The Gecko (a tropical type of lizard), the Spider lily and the flowerpot, for instance, are good examples of this 'complexity' as well as the clarity that Macpherson applauds. So, too, are the characters' ruminations on them. They foreground or reveal a state of mind and the impending rupture, as well as David's return to the teeming cauldron of insanity. David's condition is apparent from the very beginning, though, it is not revealed until halfway through — and this is not a weakness of the narrative. Though it is fair to say that perhaps not 'every [single] word matters'[240] as Serumaga states in the introduction, the vast majority of them do. Serumaga's dialogue is certainly a big part of the psychological web.

It is important to reiterate that this is a play about individuals, their interactions with each other, and the impact of that, particularly regarding David. To discuss that is to return to the occlusions, lies, and their aftermath. A major omission in his relationship with Jenny is the tragic loss of his parents. David has known Jenny even longer than Maurice, who has lived under his roof for three years. But he has kept this gory act to himself all along, speaking about his parents in the present tense. He even speaks of making regular visits: 'Anyway, my parents need help. The grass grows at home and I must uproot it. It is not easy for them.'[241] That he does visit is true, and after the revelation

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[239] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 18.
[240] Serumaga, Robert, 'Introduction' to *The Elephants*.
[241] *The Elephants*, Act 1, p. 14.

of their tragic deaths he reveals even further; that the purpose of the visits is to weed the grass out of the mounds of stone over their graves. He also says in his defence: 'I didn't say they were alive. I said they were there.'[242] There is a hint of the proximity of the hereafter in the traditional sense of the Baganda, and how the dead never really go away. It is there too, in the exchange that follows the revelation.[243] There is, though, reason to wonder whether this is a kind of make believe, a form of escapism, which helps him cling to his sanity but renders him more vulnerable in some ways. When, in the same scene, he mentions that he is paying them a visit, pretty soon, and indeed talking to them, in between uprooting tufts of grass from their graves, more questions inevitably have to be posed. Is he simply abiding by his traditional beliefs, or is this a part of the countdown to what could well be an inevitable *rendezvous* with an affliction that he may have thought would never ensnare him again?

It is no wonder then that the revelation of the tragic loss is followed by another revelation: 'I passed out till weeks later I began to notice people looking at me. I was in hospital. They stared at me every time I walked past [...] It is then that I knew I had been talking to myself, all this time.'[244]

It is virtually impossible not to sympathise with David, when he says to Jenny, for instance, 'In a way, I am thankful I went mad.'[245] However ironic that kind of gratitude is, the only other alternative, it appears, would have been death. Much like the gecko, he did, at least, cling on. But David could also be arguing that, that neurotic bout ultimately blunted the edge of the nasty, long-term, knife of psychosis. Strange as that may sound, one does see the logic of it. He cannot

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[242] Ibid., Act 1, p. 26.

[243] It should also be pointed out that David, in a rather choleric but also condescending mood refers to the-25-year old Jenny as a 'girl'. [Act 1, p. 26] Is this patronising tone simply a product of his unpredictability? One inevitably wonders whether this is part and parcel of David's worldview. Where is the author's strategic location in this respect? The other expatriate character in the play (Richard), who also does not appear to be that much younger than David, is referred to as a boy too. There is something, at least seemingly problematic in both cases and it shall be discussed in due course.

[244] *The Elephants*, Act 1, p. 26.

[245] Ibid., Act 2, p. 39.

cauterise his memory, so the next best thing is 'not to look or find out.' There is, though, a congenital flaw in David's philosophy; what, for instance, is the effect of the periodic visits to his parents' graves? What about his speeches to them? Could it not all drive him to the very brink of what he may have survived? Still, he is far from a Mutimukulu (*A Play*). David is clearly a victim who is also on the verge of a relapse, and there is no evidence to suggest that he will once again cling to his sanity. The tragedy and the trauma that followed it, together with the impeding relapse, his generosity, humour, wit and academic accomplishments; all make him infectiously sympathetic. He has literally been robbed of his childhood and more; but also made something of himself in spite of it all; those things alone, in my view make it virtually impossible not to sympathise with David. This is not to say that one should turn a blind eye to his unseemly moments (of which there are a few; to his mystifying and revolting deed/s, which will certainly emerge as the discussion continues. As far as his chosen strategy goes, he may be damned if he remembers, but who is to say that he is not damned if he does not remember? In the end his choices may not have a decisive impact one way or another. His neurosis is state-induced, and there is neither rhyme nor reason, necessarily, to who copes, or recovers fully, and those that never do. There is a way in which the audience looks at him and says: 'there, but for the grace of God, go I.'

David does not take long to endear himself to the audience, who are probably bound to love him for his humour and wit alone. But they are bound to like him even more the moment he reveals the tragedy and the personal price he paid. That he is determined to keep up the good fight to cling to his sanity and his life earns him even more sympathy and understanding. He is not unlike the gecko that we first encounter at the beginning of the play, precariously hanging 'on to the walls' and ceilings 'with those gummy feet.'[246] Note his take on them, and how it parallels — if not manifests — his own condition: ' I don't

[246] *The Elephants*, Act 1, p. 3.

think they ever sleep though. I mean, if they have to hang on to the walls like that, they would fall off if they ever had as much as a nap.'[247] Whether consciously or not, David's concern for the vulnerability of that gecko, precariously hanging onto the ceiling, in the first few pages of the play, hints at his own vulnerability as well his struggle to survive. He is talking about himself, and not to himself. Towards the very end of the first Act, he makes it palpably clear: 'I must hang on. Like man; like beast; like all the creatures of this earth hang on to its bosom; lest they fall off into the void; like you geckos on the walls.'[248] But it is with some shock, regret and trepidation — though probably not surprise — that in that same scene, David then goes for the gecko as if he is meting out to it a taste of the awful deck that the state, and to an extent nature, have dealt him. As the stage direction states on the same page: 'He leaps and pulls the Gecko down.'[249] One is bound to fear that violence is about to erupt; and mind and body are about to part company — in David. Then comes the 'laughter and a tinge of murderous mischief.'[250] That laughter signals a change of gears and a slowing down, but the destination does not change. Much as one may commend and even empathise with David, is it enough, or, has his journey already been mapped out for him, not to mention the destination? And it is a journey characterised by fragility, anxiety and tension.

The audience certainly does not know as much due to the gulf between the plot and the story, as already acknowledged. And, as has also been emphasised, this gulf is not a problematic one. The more the play unfolds the more the display of restraint and other skills emerge. For Macpherson 'the gradual revelation of the experiences out of which the personalities in *The Elephants* have developed, has a rightness, a "probability" (to use Aristotle's phrase) which was lacking

[247] Ibid.,
[248] Ibid., Act 1, p. 27.
[249] Ibid.,
[250] Ibid.,

in the earlier work.'[251] This 'gradual' but certain 'revelation' of David's character and his revelations — like the play — unfolds with an Aristotelian 'probability' and inevitability, one might add. It is as if David's mind and body are linked together by an umbilical cord, and the more the play unfolds the more likely the possibility of its severance. As Tejani has noted: 'Thrust away into the far corner of the [his] subconscious, [is] the neurosis'; and it eventually 'explodes at the most unpredictable moment.'[252]

There are shades of that 'neurosis' in David's interactions/social 'transactions' with virtually all the other characters, particularly when he becomes a bully, in no more than a blink of an eye. But the problem starts at the very beginning. In those interactions/transactions, perhaps more importantly, it is, in a sense, the transactions with himself that threaten to, and do eventually tip the balance. This necessitates a look, however briefly, at the beginning of the play. But it is also important to note that in spite of what has been intimated as the role of the state in his plight, the question also arises: who is the author of David's trials and tribulations, is it his character, the choices he has made, or was his destiny all but sealed on that day when the-15-year old David witnessed that gory act? Whether it is character or destiny that propels him to his return to that bleak psychotic future is really an issue that can best be discussed through further examination of evidence, by way of a number of key scenes and events. Incidentally, the question of destiny should not be regarded as an Apollonian kind of divination, or dictum. Apollo is replaced by the state in this context; and it is definitely the state that triggers it, inscribing David into a psychotic meta-narrative. But his choices are ill informed, at times problematic, and, maybe, even somewhat delusional. In short, he is not entirely blame-free himself. More importantly though, his condition is there

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[251] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p.15.

[252] Tejani, Bahadur, 'Robert Serumaga [*The Elephants*]', *African Arts*, III, 4, Summer, 1970, p. 77.

from the very beginning; it is manifested in his anxiety, irritability, and volatility.

DAVID

[...] Did you check the post last evening?

MAURICE

Yes.

DAVID

Any mail?

MAURICE

No.

DAVID

Oh.

MAURICE

What?

DAVID

Nothing. You said there was no mail yesterday evening, so I said 'Oh'.[253]

There is a heightened anxiety from the very beginning, which David masks underneath his seemingly casual and detached tone. There is a lot more at stake encrypted in that seemingly innocuous curiosity about the mail. What 'meets the eye' is the mail/post, but there is a lot more to it than that. Ultimately, this is a play that revolves around the post.

David has known Maurice for a total of three years now. He took to him because of something they shared: essentially tragedy. That is what made them bond; it is as if — in Maurice — David, an only child, finds himself the brother and sibling he never had. Three years after fleeing from his thinly disguised country (Rwanda), they finally meet. David has helped him with a roof over his head, as well as a bit of money through being his Research Assistant. In addition, Maurice has also 'taken to painting.'[254] It has earned him some recognition in the national press. In fact his second exhibition is coming up shortly. Maurice, we learn through David, has also become something of a celebrity having been recently 'invited' to be the Master of ceremonies at a 'Shaggy Dog Show.'[255] Things can only get better. Maurice,

[253] *The Elephants*, Act 1, p. 3.
[254] Ibid., Act 1, p. 2.
[255] Ibid., Act 1, p. 14.

though, has a pressing problem; he is threatening, not so much to return, but to certainly visit the very country he fled. David has tried to talk Maurice out of it, but to no avail.

JENNY
Maurice's parents might need help too.
DAVID
They've never said so in their letters. And they write to him often enough.
JENNY
Alright, alright [...]
DAVID
This is his home; his world. If he does stay, hang on to it, he will make it one day. Fame, fortune and a death worthy of him.[256]

News of the visit and the anticipated reunion with his parents and siblings threatens Maurice's social and psychological bubble. All is certainly not well for David, who allegedly cannot comprehend Maurice's decision to turn his back on a home, a life, and a future. Then comes another revelation, this time by Jenny:

JENNY
[...] Shall I tell you a secret?
DAVID
A Secret! [...]
JENNY
Shall I?
DAVID
Well, if you must.
JENNY
I am going to marry Maurice.
(*David laughs. Pause.*)[257]

At first David turns this into a laughing matter; since he has not been told by his good friend it just can't be true. The seriousness of it soon dawns on him and he is clearly shattered.

JENNY
(*Sadly*) I am sorry I told you.
DAVID
I have been a mother, father and a friend to him.
JENNY
I wish I hadn't.
DAVID
I cannot let him destroy what we have tried so hard to build.
JENNY

[256] Ibid., Act 1, p. 14.
[257] Ibid., Act 2, p. 44.

He is only getting married, that's all, [...] what's wrong with telling his parents.

DAVID

It's all wrong! You don't know what evils you unleash.[258]

Not only is it 'all wrong', according to David, but he also starts to blame it on her. The more the parents are mentioned, the closer the audience gets to yet another revelation from David. He also cautions Jenny about what she does not know yet, and she is bound to ignite by telling Maurice. David it emerges soon after, has analysed Maurice and is unequivocal about the 'evils' that are bound to erupt in Maurice in accordance with David's 'pre-emptive' diagnosis. The parents' blessing and reunion that Maurice seeks will not happen. Instead, it is David's plight that awaits Maurice. The same plight that David wanted to avert all along by playing the Postman, the scribe and the artist. For some reason, David opened a letter that brought the grim news of Maurice's loss of both of his parents, as well as all his siblings. He then kept the awful information to himself and brought them all to life, using the biographical knowledge he had gathered from Maurice.

DAVID

[...] eventually, even hope brought sadness with it. So I had to make up my mind. [...] I became Maurice's father [...] he had told me so much about his father and family that later I could confidently write letters to Maurice, purporting to come from his father. A transport driver posts them for me border.[259]

This sets the stage for the grim revelation to Maurice himself, and it is an undoubtedly bleak aftermath. Maurice's already delicate balance is bound to tip catastrophically as well. When Maurice finally returns, elated with his acquisition of the Travel papers, David's slow-burning fuse, the 'neurosis' that is, as Tejani observes, 'thrust away into the far corner of the [his] subconscious,' has clearly surfaced and finally 'explodes at the most unpredictable [and catastrophic] moment.'[260] The

[258] Ibid., Act 2, p. 46.
[259] Ibid., Act 2, p. 49.
[260] Tejani, Bahadur, 'Robert Serumaga [*The Elephants*]', *African Arts*, III, 4, Summer, 1970, p. 77.

explosion is made even more dramatic and agonising because of the nail-biting suspense during the unbearably tense moments before the grim revelation known to virtually all the characters but Maurice. It instantly leads to a brief physical confrontation. Then comes David's explosion, the neurosis — the delirium. One is reminded of Jenny's apt and prophetic words earlier on (Act.1, p.13) in reference to the spider-lily: 'Why don't you pull out this flower? It's dying and it's taking the rest of them with it.'

The Post and the Neo-Colonial

Behind the psychological web that *The Elephants* is are some equally important political and social concerns. The political and the social may appear, to some, as if they are studiously being avoided by Serumaga. However, it is only because the psychological also functions as a veil, an allegorical path for the purpose of eluding the censor. The lengthy discussion of the play that revolved around the intricate psychological tapestry, David's secrets and lies concomitantly provides significant evidence of Serumaga's social, political and a number of other concerns. One could argue, in fact, that it is impossible to examine the psychological terrain of *The Elephants* without discussing the social and the political concerns, particularly. These concerns range from the irony of the tiered, elitist medical system to the academy, expatriates and racism. Perhaps above all, this play deals with the question of refugees and the post-Independence pogroms, which characterise even those countries that may not have spewed their nationals out of their borders, but share equally bloodstained hands. In addition, they also share a metaphysical and other forms of isolation and alienation that seem to be a congenital concern of Serumaga's. The isolation and alienation, though, seem to take one back to the realm of psychology. Macpherson, Tejani and a number of other commentators have identified the play's social and political concerns as very much part and parcel of Serumaga's tale. That is curiously not the case with Horn. Horn may be in the minority, but it is crucial to examine his views with as much deconstructive

rigour and post-colonial vigilance as possible, and it is with Horn's rather mystifying and problematic conclusions that this part of the discussion will begin.

Tejani reads *The Elephants* as, among other things, a critique 'of the attitudes' of academics — their 'greed', together 'with the narrow vision of Westerners who come to East Africa for research [...] the romantic vision of Africanists [as well as exposing] the dynamic existence of racial tensions.'[261] In footnote 30 of, perhaps, the most cited essay in this thesis, Horn dismisses Tejani's observations by accusing him of reading too much into the play. In Horn's own words, he (Tejani) 'misses the point when he over stresses the prominence in the play'; [262] of the concerns that are reproduced earlier in the paragraph.

In my view, a blanket dismissal of Tejani's observations, without attempting to engage with them, raises more questions than it answers. There is considerable evidence to back up Tejani's assertions. Horn's haste in dismissing them could well be based on a rush to bolster his problematic hypothesis of Serumaga the solipsist (as opposed to Serumaga the activist). If there is a problem with Tejani's observation it can only be that perhaps he does not lay enough emphasis on Serumaga's critique of the academy in general. Note, for example, this stage direction from the very beginning of Act 1: '*Sky-scraping constructions rise in a series of little boxes incubating a variety of students, researchers, lecturers and other layabouts from* [all over] *the world.*' [263] The author's strategic location is clearly visible in the eyesore of the 'sky-scraping constructions.' What are the denizens of this ivory tower incubated from? Serumaga almost overemphasised the point of it being the real world. It is also a critique that does not seem to distinguish on grounds such as race, gender or nationality, united as the characters all are by the designation 'layabouts'. The

[261] Tejani, Bahadur, 'Robert Serumaga', African Arts, III, 4, Summer 1970, p.78.
[262] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 113.
[263] *The Elephants*, Act 1, p.1.

obscurity, irrelevance even, of the research and the lack of any practical application, let alone, tangible, remedial benefits from it, to a world in need of drastic intervention seems to be at the core of the author's derision and rage. Note for instance, what is clearly the author's disillusionment behind David's words to Jenny in Act 2: 'sometimes I wonder if there is any basis, function or direction to this overfed nest of academic layabouts.'[264] Incidentally, this is not a question; it is clearly a statement. When David claims, with a touch of irony, that his research is hampered by his lack of 'a foundation scholarship', Jenny herself says to David, light-heartedly but certainly seriously: 'Money makes people soft and flabby.'[265] This may sound like light-hearted banter, but there is nothing trite about the seriousness of the feeling. And, although Serumaga was one of the first writers to address it, he was neither alone nor was he the last to do so. What is being asked of the academic community is a kind of activism in an interventionist manner. And contrary to Horn's contentious hypothesis of Serumaga as the epitome of solipsism, Serumaga's art is doing exactly the opposite, under the spectre of a censorship whose repercussions would become even more prohibitive in a dramatically few short years after *The Elephants* (1969) debuted in Kampala.

Of all the characters in *The Elephants*, Richard probably bears the brunt of Serumaga's assault on the academy and its impotence. His £4,000 Foundation grant is the butt of the author's rage as well as derision.

> DAVID
>
> The University is full of them, a constipating bunch in search of pure knowledge. So he was carrying on about this research, phoney as hell, and all of a sudden I lost my temper. I just blew, you see [...] I was short of money and here I was watching this four thousand pounds of sterling flesh [...] anyway I told him: why didn't he go back to America and do something useful. Like bomb his own troops in Vietnam, or even the Vietcong, or scalp a few blacks in Chicago for old time's sake.[266]

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[264]Ibid., Act 2, p.31.
[265]Ibid., Act 1, p.15.
[266]Ibid., Act 2, p.31

Richard, being American, enables the playwright to make contemporary references to racism as well as to the Vietnam War. There is clearly, a consciousness and an awareness here that goes beyond the confines of Serumaga's Uganda and the academy. It is a commendable consciousness, but a troubling one, too, in relation to Horn's hypothesis of disengagement. Faced with this kind of evidence, Horn's "text" starts to groan under the weight of its contradictions. One of the positive attributes that Macpherson points out, which also bolsters Tejani's remarks and renders Horn's dismissal and disengagement with Tejani's remarks on *The Elephants* even more troubling, is that to Macpherson 'It also allows for perfectly legitimate criticism of the intellectual in the present day East Africa.'[267]

The Elephants was the first of two plays that Serumaga wrote while holding the Senior creative writing Fellowship at Makerere. Makerere clearly offered him an opportune vantage point from which to diagnose the academy and the role of the intellectual. Macpherson would have stood up for the academy if she felt that Serumaga's criticism was unwarranted.

The monastic pursuit of knowledge with no practical ethos or relevance embedded in the very architecture of the syllabus is a major aspect of Serumaga's criticism of the Academy. And David, who does not exclude himself from some of the criticism, is the character who, more than anybody else, articulates this concern of Serumaga's. Look, for instance, at David's remarks to Jenny in Act 2: 'I am rehabilitated. Here, in this University, learning and *teaching*, but what? Within the rigidities of sense and syllabus [...] what can you give, what can you teach?'[268] The italics are Serumaga's. David is no doubt talking about the life-long societal and institutionalised stigmatisation of victims of mental health however rehabilitated they may be; a taboo subject that illustrates how rigid and narrow the boundaries become even at

[267] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga': *The Writer and Society in Africa*: *The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 15.
[268] *The Elephants*, Act 2, p. 39.

university. Any attempt to share his traumatic experiences, he points out in the same speech, would probably land him back in the mental hospital (one that the author has placed next door to David's building). In fact, he is damned when he speaks and damned if he does not. It is important not to lose track of the fact that David's neurosis is also a symptom of another affliction, a political and social one inflicted by the hegemonic nation-state: Obote's Uganda. With regard to the academy, the stifling epistemic constraints and the narrow curriculum, it is important to remember David's assessment of his 'playing field' as one defined by limits: 'rigidities of ' not only the 'syllabus', but perhaps even worse, a key thing that is easy to overlook: 'sense.'

So much for the 'native' intellectual and the academy; what about the expatriate one and the Westerners in general? What are Serumaga's concerns in that regard and who embodies or exemplifies them? It may be a good idea to go over Tejani's remarks again, which were cited close to the very beginning of this section. Tejani reads *The Elephants* as, among other things, a critique 'of the attitudes' of academics — their 'greed', together 'with the narrow vision of Westerners who come to East Africa for research [...] the romantic vision of Africanists [as well as exposing] the dynamic existence of racial tensions.' A point was made earlier that Richard seems to bear the brunt of Serumaga's critique in this context. 'You know he has this four thousand pounds a year grant'[269], David mentions to Jenny; which clearly earns him a spot in the 'overfed nest of academic layabouts (Act 2, p. 49).' When Serumaga launches his assault here, it may sound hilarious and witty, but he is certainly incensed and it borders on the opprobrious. Richard is armed 'with a Sunday school knowledge of Swahili', to begin with. As if that is not bad enough, the author seems to say, Richard appears to lack even a paltry knowledge of the language of the people whose poetry he is researching. His topic we are told is 'the onomatopoeic function in the heroic poetry of the Bahima.' The Bahima are from Ankole (they, in fact, belong to the ruling class of what used to be the

[269] This and all the quotations in the rest of the paragraph are from *The Elephants*. Act 2, p. 31.

kingdom of Ankole) in South-western Uganda. They may speak a Bantu language, which Swahili also is, but they are not known, either then or now, for their use of Swahili. So Richard is rather unqualified in his very speciality. The irony does not stop there, Richard, no doubt due to his sizable grant even in today's terms, has acquired for himself, a state of the art, 'Akai tape-recorder.' Armed with the huge sum of money (in Ugandan terms), the gadget, his paltry Swahili and ignorance of the Bahima's language, the thesis is good as written, which sums up Serumaga's mockery. The topic itself is terribly obscure, rather trite in nature and distinguished by its inconsequentiality in terms of benefit to the Bahima, Ankole itself in general, and the society at large. It is impossible to overlook Richard's glaring ignorance and there is, certainly, a rather 'narrow vision' at work here.

That ignorance and 'narrow vision' which Tejani identifies and Richard exemplifies, is not confined to the academic arena; it seems to permeate other aspects of life and unites a great number of the expatriates. How much do they know, if at all, about the inhabitants of these far-flung areas which at best, serve merely as backdrops against which the dramas of their personal dilemmas and crises are played out?

> DAVID
> What do you know about the man. About being a refugee, a deprived person! What do you know? Have you ever seen the pieces fall and caught them and tried to put them together? Have you? "Peace Corps Volunteer, Rich family background. In search of experience. Any African country considered. Or India, South America, Thailand".[270]

Although Jenny's intellectual acumen is obvious from the first time we encounter her, one cannot help but notice that this is a job that does not seem to require experience and one may even wonder whether there is much, by way of qualifications needed, prior to being assigned overseas. The destination itself does not seem to matter. The quest is simply the experience or thrill behind what, on the surface, may appear to be close to a selfless, almost monastic calling. Interestingly, Jenny

[270] Ibid., Act 1, p. 29.

does not deny this characterisation of herself. Her 'parents are, even in American terms, very rich.'[271] She is here because she is engaged in a 'search.' She is determined to 'discover the centre of the storm within'[272] herself. There are certain 'wants' and 'desires'; a gaping void that could never have been filled with 'material things'; it is those urgent, overwhelming needs that culminated in this quest for a panacea, a desire 'which at times was almost purely spiritual.'[273]

Jenny literally flees to heal herself of depression and dejection. Nothing in particular drew her to this part of the world and her motivation was admittedly not as selfless as she purportedly states to David: 'I was twenty-two, alive and searching. It had to be the farthest place if I was going to go away, I had to go to a distant place and sort myself out.'[274] And so she comes to 'sort' herself 'out' in the name of an ostensible call to 'pure selfless service.'[275] The saving grace for Jenny is that, at least she is eventually honest about it. Do you solve those kinds of problems simply by going as far away as you can? The quick answer is, no. Does that not smack of a 'narrow' and 'romantic vision', which Tejani identifies and Horn finds far too nuanced to be overemphasised?

Jenny's ailments do not stop there; the void that threatens her equilibrium turns into a search that, in her words, is 'almost spiritual.' The search then eventually finds the answer in the form of men. This is an assertion that may problematise the author's position in terms of gender, as Jenny's fulfilment or completion seems to be contingent on men. To what extent, then, was this, a spiritual search? In Jenny's and the author's defence, to an extent, at least, Jenny's understanding of spirituality is categorically 'not in the religious sense [rather] [...] in what one feels eventually and totally to be a sensuous search for the soul in oneself.'[276] This is Jenny in her own words, sounding a lot

[271] Ibid., Act 2, p. 41.
[272] Ibid.,
[273] Ibid., Act 2, p.31.
[274] Ibid., Act 2, p. 42.
[275] Ibid., Act 2, p. 43.
[276] Ibid., Act 2, p. 41.

clearer about what she does not mean. For whatever reason, her quest then takes an interesting form which she reveals by way of a question to Maurice: 'Do you know that a spiritual search can in the end project itself into physical solutions?'[277] Those 'physical solutions' come by way of men and sex; 'But there must be attachment,' she adds emphatically. Those men include David himself as well as Richard, the research student. There was also one before those two. Richard was ill-fated as he appeared at a time when, even though Jenny's search for potential fulfilment continued; she now could only 'work it out with someone [who she] did not stand the danger of being attached to.'[278]

One cannot help but ask, why does Jenny never question the idea of a 'physical' solution to begin with? Could it be that a 'physical solution' was her goal all along? A spiritual quest that culminates in a physical 'solution', akin to a redemptiveness through men and sex, is a search for nothing more than that; it could also be read as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Either way, it is troubling and again, it could make the author vulnerable to certain critiques. On the whole, this is a spiritual search that could use a more appropriate designation; it is also a quest that betrays a naivety, if not 'narrow' and 'romantic vision' of the expatriate and 'Africanist' community (which Tejani deems significant but Horn dismisses out of hand).

It is important to note that Jenny manifests a significant part, though not all of Serumaga's critique. She could also be the most sympathetic of them all. However questionable her search is, Jenny never ceases to stand up to the bullying, to David's volatility, to his taunts and dismissals. It could be slightly misleading to regard her only as a catalytic character, even though, given the context of the play and the amount of stage-time she enjoys (second only to David) together with her role as a kind of 'mother confessor' to David, her importance cannot be overemphasised. Beaumont would certainly have had her in mind too, when, having seen the Nairobi performance of the play, he

[277] Ibid., Act 2, p. 42.
[278] Ibid., Act 2, p. 43.

noted among other things that *The Elephants* was not only 'a play about people' but also, about 'people who [despite their] fairly light-hearted appearance [...] are stabbed and torn by doubts, past memories and inner insecurity.'[279] Jenny certainly fits that description. It is hard to think that she earns herself nothing but sympathy and admiration in her seething, deserved, rage at David at the climax of the play. She is the one who breaks the grim news to Maurice and indeed pulls out the pile of fictitious letters that David has been penning. In the end, it is not only the friendship between the two men that is over; Maurice's own sanity hangs in the balance. This all leaves Jenny almost back to where she was before; in a world characterised by the dejection and depression that made her resolve to travel and 'sort' herself 'out.' In spite of any sympathy and admiration we may have for Jenny, it is equally important to remember her ailments, her naivety, the ostensible and real reason for her volunteering; the 'narrow' and 'romantic vision' that Tejani identifies which, as was earlier noted, afflicts the Westerners and Africanists in the play.

But Jenny is certainly not alone; as Richard, almost single-handedly, provides the other side of the coin. Richard clearly belongs to 'that overfed nest of academic layabouts' but, through David, the author exonerates him to a degree: 'I do not think he is a charlatan. I think perhaps he is lost'[280] So Richard is really no different from a kind of paid tourist. And though she is not paid for being there, Jenny, too, teeters ever so closely to earning herself the same label. As David puts it in a slightly different context: 'at heart even you are a tourist',[281] just like Richard. Incidentally, Richard's greed may be slightly toned down, but it still is an integral a part of the author's concerns. Then there is the irrelevance of his research, as well as his ignorance of the language that his tape recorder will neither speak nor teach him. He, like the others in the expatriate/Africanist circles, is also on the run, at least so surmises David. He is on the run from the neuroses which they

[279] Beaumont, Robert, 'Superb Theatre', *The Sunday Nation*, Nairobi: 1971.
[280] Ibid., Act 2, p. 32.
[281] Ibid., Act 2, p. 32.

all seem to be escaping (or postponing) in the mistaken belief of finding a cure in distant locales. 'Something was eating him,' says David, 'some object unknown to himself was tugging at his insides and breaking off little edible pieces. [...] that's why he was running away to Africa, to academic seclusion, to some obscure and unimportant aspect of a type of poetry.'[282] The road to Africa seems to be one traversed by individuals who, in a strangely interesting way, are not unlike Serumaga's solitary figures; characters with whom they share qualities such as loneliness, doubts and insecurities. These attributes, to an extent at least, humanise them. But that does not exonerate them from their peculiar shortcomings and follies, which Serumaga critiques severely.

Tejani's observations provide a kind of postcolonial checklist, including the 'greed and narrow vision' of the expatriates and Africanists, as well as the romanticisation of those destinations they end up in, which have both been extensively discussed. Another key observation that Tejani makes which also merits some discussion is the 'dynamic existence of racial tensions.'[283]

Macpherson has observed that, 'Serumaga had seen David in his own likeness but as something beyond himself,' which helped to account for the 'powerful impact' Serumaga's 'performance' had on Macpherson and others.[284] That likeness is also the undercurrent of a scene in Act 1 that was referred to earlier in the chapter when the West Indian shopper has the 'last laugh' after a series of racially laced encounters with a grocery shop owner. The setting is London's Westbourne Grove and it is in this play-within-the-play episode that we first encounter that unseemly aspect; racism. The scene is a powerful and organically woven one as it is meant to illustrate the humourlessness of the campus denizens. The response of the History

[282] Ibid., Act 2, p. 31.
[283] Tejani, Bahadur, 'Robert Serumaga [*The Elephants*]', *African Arts*, III, 4, Summer, 1970, p. 77.
[284] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga': *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 15.

Professor who David told that story to, responded by saying 'very interesting; it has deep social implications', as for 'the joke!'; as David further states: 'He didn't show as much as one yellow tooth.'[285] One could argue that the scene also serves as an ironic illustration of the academy's insensitivity to those issues, which are far more pressing and relevant compared to their pursuits.

Whether or not there is an element of racial contempt behind the 'white mercenaries' that spewed Maurice out of his native Rwanda, the play does not seem to indicate. Neither does it go into the Bible and even shoddy science that validated the initial, manufactured myth, which turned the minority Tutsis into honorary whites; more importantly, the recent genocide in Rwanda (1994) goes as far back as 1926. That is the year the Belgians introduced 'a system of Identity cards differentiating Hutus from Tutsis.'[286] To discuss the tragic consequences of that apartheid-like differentiation would require going way beyond the constrictions that this context imposes.[287] The first massacre of the Tutsis took place in 1959, under the active blessing and supervision of the Belgians, and there will always be a colonial/neo-colonial hand to the first of the pogroms as well as those that would follow in 1962 and 1967 for example. Maurice would have been one of those who luckily survived and sought sanctuary in Uganda and other neighbouring countries. The horrors that Maurice flees from, and David's plight as an internal refugee, undoubtedly

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[285] *The Elephants*, Act1, p. 16.

[286] Keane, Fergal, *Season of Blood* (*A Rwandan Journey*), London: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 193.

[287] Suffice it to say, that the minority Tutsis who were also the ruling class, were, through a colonial sleight-of-hand cast into the mould of a superior aquiline-nosed people whose origins lay in the Occident and the book of Genesis. All did go well for a while, but when the Tutsis started agitating for Independence, the church (as in Flemish, catholic priests), the Belgian colonial state, as well as the majority Hutus used the class and constructed ethnicity of the Tutsis against them. Hence the first pogroms in 1959.

The Belgian mercenaries that Serumaga hints on in the play actually fought more in the Congo — which also had the same colonial masters. He therefore takes artistic liberties here, but does not undermine his cause since the colonial state was very much an accomplice in the massacres. Then, 'the postcolonial "mimic men", ' who took over after independence, would exterminate the Tutsis by the tens-of-thousands starting from 1962 and 1967. Many of the survivors took refuge in Uganda.

The phrase mimic men, is attributed to V.S. Naipaul but it is cited by Phillip Gourevitch in his harrowing account of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda: *We Wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families* (*Stories from Rwanda*), London: Picador, 2000, p. 61.

deserve to make the postcolonial checklist as well, and they are certainly noted by Tejani. This paragraph, though, started with the question of contempt and racism. No discussion of 'the dynamic existence of racial tensions' in *The Elephants* can be complete without a further examination of Richard. The same contempt, which turns the West Indian customer into the abject other in the eyes and episteme of the grocery store owner in Westbourne Grove, raises its ugly head in the person of Richard.

When he walks into David's apartment at an untimely moment, he is greeted by a silence from Jenny and David which he responds to with the following address to Jenny: 'Do you want to talk to me? Do you? Listen to me, perhaps? Talk! [...] Of course you don't. Not you! Little Peace Corps Soldier flaunting her peace to King Kong here. With his long flute.'[288] Richard's entry comes on the heels of a key revelation made by David: the brutal murder of his mother and his father. The emotionally drained Jenny is worried by the volatile David who appears to be in pursuit of the Gecko, in a manner that signifies the explicit return of his mental affliction. The first thing that Richard does is ask David, 'What the hell is going on?' Note his choice of words to begin with; perhaps even more important, he is not only interrogative but appears to have concluded that David has done something (probably unseemly) to her. To a woman that he still loves. Jenny dispels that fear and Richard, as if in a tutorial, asks her to 'expand on that'[289] explanation. But he clearly has deeper fears and anxieties; there is the fear and probably disbelief and belief (paradoxically) at the same time of a romantic liaison between the two. Note the fury, the sexism and chauvinism behind the words, 'Little Peace Corps soldier'. She is 'flaunting her peace', a euphemism for some kind of unbridled urge to display her wares, ready to jump into bed with any eager male. To add insult to injury, David happens to be a black, African man as well as beast — to use Richard's designation

[288] *The Elephants*, Act 1, pp. 28-29.
[289] Ibid., Act 1, p. 28.

once more: 'King Kong.' The only thing that can be said in mitigation here is his anger, jealousy and the unrequited love. There is still no excuse for Richard to daub himself in that kind of verbiage. David puts it best when he says to Jenny soon after: 'A man comes in here [...] as soon as you offend him, he comes out with the remark foremost in his subconscious.'[290]

Whether it is conscious or subconscious, it really does not matter; that it comes up at all, is the issue and Serumaga deserves credit for highlighting and exposing it. Homi Bhabha has theorised that, 'the stereotype is a form of knowledge and identification which vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.'[291] The repetition is proof of the untruth at the heart of the signifier without a referent. It is an attempt to bridge the gap between the fictional construction and the proof it lacks congenitally. This observation is made in a chapter on the 'Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism.' What Richard illustrates is that the neo-colonial discourse clearly has not changed much from the colonial one — if at all. His anxiety, the bitterness of rejection for a reason he does not know, does take its toll. Richard may be miles away from his home, but it is as if he has never really left the place where those ideas were inscribed in him. He has a longer way to go before ridding himself of the myth that Homi Bhabha describes as the alleged 'bestial sexual license of the African.'[292]

To designate Serumaga's thematic concerns as post/neo-colonial, is not to binarise them from concerns that do not necessarily fall under that loose categorisation; it amounts to the same thing as making a distinction between the Ugandan story and the human drama. But it is also not to deny that inter-related as these things may be there are issues that could be predominantly/peculiarly post/neo-colonial; it is also to acknowledge the inevitably porous divide between mental affliction for example, and the traumatic context that happens to be

[290] Ibid., Act 2, p. 37.
[291] Bhabha, K. Homi, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 66.
[292] Ibid.,

postcolonial in nature. As for Horn, he seems to have very deliberately opted to de-emphasise, if not dismiss the evidently pertinent postcolonial and neo-colonial concerns. At least, as an act of good faith and deconstructive rigour it is important to address Horn's concerns as exhaustively as possible, instead of opting for the broad strokes that he draws in a number of crucial moments. In spite of Horn's hypothesis, *The Elephants* is really best read as 'a play of close human relationships' and 'the interaction of each personality upon all the others round about.'[293] It is through those 'close relationships' and 'interactions' that Serumaga points to and diagnoses the ailments that afflict one and all. Serumaga's largely uncontested and clearly articulated concerns come out of keen and detailed observations and Tejani's citation at the very beginning of the chapter sums it all up succinctly: 'He stuck his finger on the place and said: thou ailest here and here.'

More Ailments; Artistic Intervention

A good number of the ailments, especially in relation to the expatriate community and the academy have now been discussed at length. The postcolonial malaise certainly goes much deeper than that. Even if there may not have been any mercenaries behind the chaos that engulfed Rwanda in 1959, there certainly was a significant Belgian, colonial hand. The turbulent history that was set in motion earlier on in Rwanda's history when the Tutsis and the Hutus were irreversibly 'tribalised'/ 'racialised' by the Belgian colonial masters is important to recall. It is important to emphasise that the original sin and the binarisation of what became the two peoples will forever only be fully explained by including the Belgians who sowed the seeds of the eventual horror. The massacres of 1959 and immediately after Rwanda's independence in 1962 are the most important ones in this

[293] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 15.

context; Maurice Diop is a 'product' of those ghastly massacres, which also took the lives of his parents and siblings. As David puts it: 'They were dead, shot: father, mother, brother, and his not so little sisters. The bodies were recovered from downstream where the river was sluggish and choked.'[294] The massacres and the clogged river make Serumaga's play look as though it was written after the genocide of the early 1990's instead of the 1950's and 1960's Rwanda. That is a massive political and human/inhuman 'ailment' to put it mildly, and Serumaga, to my knowledge, was the first Ugandan artist to address that pressing tragedy.

One thing that is important to remember as one reads Serumaga is, as Mbowa has noted, that 'It is important to emphasize the fact that the whole of Serumaga's career fell within repressive eras and thus his ceaseless search [...] for safe forms of communication in the Absurd, and to some extent, psychological drama.'[295] This is a key observation by Mbowa, and the importance of it in this context cannot be overemphasised. The psychological in Serumaga, is far from an end in itself; it is rather a means to one. The end is an artistic interventionist response; to the rampant inhumanity that plagued a nation beyond the borders of his own.

Further, there is also the inhumanity of his constructed nation. That, quite simply, is David's story, the cause of his horrible condition, one that started with witnessing the tragic murder of both his parents. In a sense what Serumaga is doing amounts to an intervention through providing the testimony of Maurice and David. Tejani is very aware of that intervention when he notes, thus, in his review of *The Elephants*: 'The play uses the 1966 revolution in Buganda as a backdrop.'[296] Needless to say, Serumaga was from Buganda and therefore a Muganda. One may question the use of the word 'revolution', given that if it really had been one, then people would have thronged the

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[294] *The Elephants*, Act 2, p. 48.

[295] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 1994 p. 129.

[296] Tejani, Bahadur, 'Robert Serumaga [*The Elephants*]', *African Arts*, III, 4, Summer, 1970, p. 77.

streets and village arenas and crossroads dancing with euphoria. Tejani himself is only too aware of what that 'revolution' meant. 'The Baganda [...] experienced the occupation of the Kabaka's Kingdom by Uganda's military forces, which resulted in King Freddie's flight to London. Serumaga sees this event from' [a traumatised character's] viewpoint.' [297] Tejani's words need no explication, but one could say in addition that it is not just a background or 'backdrop', because of the presence of the recent past as it pervades the synchronic time of Serumaga's play. The traumatised character is, of course, David. As for 'revolution' simply read 'murders' — massacres in fact, which may not have surmounted those in Maurice's country, but certainly no less revolting. No amount of blood the Baganda shed in the name of Obote's hegemonic entrenchment is justifiable. And critics of Serumaga's work must ask themselves questions before they subscribe to positions that might imply the expendability of blood and innocent lives. Neither are the liberties of other Ugandans who were detained without trial at the time and all through Obote's first tenure. This strife and the excesses, be they within an African nation (intraterritorial) or interteritorrial remind one of an observation/word of caution by Wole Soyinka that is certainly worth citing in this context: 'Africa has an opportunity to radicalise her existence by embarking on a policy of resolving its internal boundary disputes through the humanistic test; ascertaining the wishes of the people who actually inhabit [...] such disputed areas.'[298] The disputes that Soyinka has in mind also include the taboo of Independence being followed by postcolonial occupation and a resounding deafness to the wishes of a people in certain regions within the given polity. In the context of the play, it is worth reiterating that the psychological *modus operandi* was and has never been an end, itself, in the sense that it can only be read as an unfinished story; it is a means to one, and the goal is an interventionist response to the

[297] Ibid.,

[298] Soyinka, Wole, 'King Baabu and the Renaissance Vision', in John Conteh Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan, (eds.), *African Drama and Performance*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 12.

ailments that befell the Baganda and even the other Ugandans who saw 1966 for what it was, and that inhumanity predated 1966. The pogroms in Obote's Uganda first come to surface in an earlier Serumaga play *A Play*. David's character in *The Elephants* is Serumaga's key vessel through whom the social and the political — what Tejani simply refers to as the '1966 revolution' — is truly exposed.

What happens to David's parents is unquestionably tragic, but it also has to be seen as a microcosm of a larger, even more revolting picture. When one sees, in the final scene, the delirious David going back to his fifteen-year-old self, cradling his dead mother's body after a bullet rips through the mosquito net, and also holding onto his fathers pants to stop him from confronting the gunmen with his spear. This is a social as well as political statement — and perhaps over and above all that, a human statement.

Not so for Horn, who is out to prove that '*The Elephants* is not intended as a social or political statement. It is, rather, an exploration of individual psyches in the process of dissolution and "the self-destructive pretence[s]" (p.48) upon which human egos rely.' That 'dissolution' must be seen as a symptom of a catastrophic psycho-affective malady. A malady that is a result of postcolonial states and rogue regimes that have turned on their own, regarding them not as recipients of protection, rather like herds that must be culled. The reason for this is the self-perpetuation of those who now embody, or are synonymous with the state. The allusion to the 'social' and the 'political' as anything but key concerns of Serumaga's must be very carefully examined, because it is in reality another way of saying that based purely on his work, Serumaga is devoid of a social conscience.

Behind that assertion is a conviction that *The Elephants* and Serumaga's work in general can only be read by "amplifying" the psychological, as opposed to the social and the political. Why can it not be read as both? Is there a need to binarise the key concerns?

Much has already been discussed with regard to Serumaga's key concerns: the Academy, its rigid syllabus, the constraints entailed within that, the blind eye it turns to issues such as mental health, the

ignorance, the greed and the not-so -selfless motives behind the Volunteers and expatriates. Much has also been discussed with regard to Maurice and David as well, who, among other things, detects the signs of a similar affliction to his in Maurice, which he tries to avert through the occlusions, the lies and the fiction. When he eventually makes the revelation, the upcoming marriage is presumably aborted and their friendship becomes a thing of the past. Maurice and David do provide the audience with the two sides of the coin of horror that is largely post-independent, but also neo-colonial (due to the role of the Belgian mercenaries and colonial masters). The centrality and crucial nature of these concerns was verified through a close reading of the text and the provision of numerous examples. Most of these concerns and issues were examined under what was loosely referred to as Tejani's post/neo-colonial checklist, the bulk of which Horn categorised as a kind of over-reaction on Tejani's part; hence they ended up in footnote 30 of his essay.

But Horn's contentious and troubling allegations clearly go beyond that footnote and into, as we have seen, the body of the same essay, and attempts have been made not to dismiss them out of hand, but rather, to air them, to accord them a hearing and then weigh them against the evidence. In so positing, Horn deflates the prominence of crucial priorities that Serumaga unambiguously has; the vast majority of those concerns have already been itemised and discussed under the loose categorisation of the postcolonial and the neo-colonial. To Horn, a lot of those thematic pre-occupations are too peripheral to Serumaga's drama; the added implication is that Serumaga's work is devoid of a social conscience. At least as a working hypothesis, it was argued that there is an investment behind Horn's own hypothesis.

There is a moment, less than five minutes into the play, when David,[299] as he gleans through the morning paper and something finally grabs his attention. It is an article about President Nixon pulling

[299] There is a typographical era in the published version, which attributes the speech in question to Maurice, but it is clearly David's. I also happen to have a copy of an earlier version of the script, courtesy of the family archive, and a quick look at the relevant section confirms this observation.

all the stops out to welcome his predecessor (Lyndon Johnson) to the White House. 'It was on the occasion of [Johnson's] birthday'; the 'festivities', though, do not end at the White House. They all board the presidential jet on their way to 'a forest'; the reason being the naming of 'this expanse of woodland after Ladybird Johnson.'[300] If one froze the scene right there, even though the better part is just about to come, it would not be hard to notice even at that very early stage, that Serumaga is introducing a key postcolonial theme. Presidency, in the postcolonial context, almost across the entire board in Africa, was a kind of space that — even in the 60s — was reserved for a single tenant. Nixon was to disgrace himself later, of course, but to return to the more relevant context, a lot of the incumbents had already turned themselves into messianic icons appointed by the Gods to rule with an iron fist for the rest of their lives. The political rivals or those with presidential ambitions were in jail or exile or, in fact, dead. It tended to be the military that ended the careers of these select few, and then the incumbents would flee or die. The point here is simply this: the allusion to a former and current President, is a kind of frame or scaffolding; foregrounding — is probably a more appropriate term. It is probably best that before any other observations are made, the frame be unfrozen to see a little more of the scene, and it is best to pick it up right after the naming of the forest. Having looked at how other human beings conduct their political business and arguably, by implication, even the constitution in which the fixed terms are enshrined, the author turns his and the audience's attention to Africa. David's speech continues thus: 'Now that's civilised politics for you Maurice. You don't have politics like that where you come from, do you? You don't. That's why you are a refugee. I would say that was the reason.'[301] There is no need to discuss this much further, in part because it speaks for itself quite clearly, except to say that this scene/dialogue also introduces Maurice. Incidentally, David is not blaming Maurice or

[300] These quotations and the next exchange are all from the same scene and will be acknowledged in the same footnote.
[301] *The Elephants*, Act 1, p. 4.

laughing at him; if there is any laughter, it is certainly at the expense of the powers that be, in the postcolonial Africa of the day. In reality there is not one but rather two refugees, since David is also one, albeit an internal one as we later get to know. The foregrounding gets worse and better at the same time, as the brief exchange continues, with David returning to the naming of the forest.

DAVID
It would be different if you could name a few forests.
MAURICE
[...] At the rate we change governments in my country, we would run out of forests in no time.

DAVID
Well, then, you could diversify and go on to rivers, hills and even individual trees, I would say have enough of those; quite a lot in fact.[302]

A lot more could be said about style or register, but the point here is that key issues/concerns tend to be foregrounded, as is the case in that brief but poignant early scene. *The Elephants* is clearly an interventionist response to the social and political ills that plagued Serumaga's Africa in general and Uganda in particular. Both the social and the political are neither accidental nor peripheral, and they rank just as high on the totemic pole of Serumaga's priorities. There is neither a need nor compelling evidence to justify a position that regards the social and the political, as somewhat, diametrically opposed to the psychological. One thing that cannot be overemphasised, not only in relation to that scene but to the play and, in fact, all of Serumaga's work, is the key observation that Mbowa makes which was cited earlier in this very section: all through his 'career' the rhythm of life was one of repression. He inevitably had to address that reality without compromising his safety. One therefore has to acknowledge and remind oneself of Serumaga's work as a response, and an interventionist one at that, but also of the question of signification and survival.

[302] Ibid., Act 1, pp. 4-5.

In her comments on *A Play* Macpherson notes: 'any direct protest at this point would have been met with censorship.'[303] These are telling words; if one agrees with Macpherson then the problem is not so much Serumaga's, if at all, but those critics and scholars who forget that the negotiation involved in surmounting the censor and staying on message creates an illusion that the 'social and the political' have not been 'closely examined' when, in fact, they truly are. While *A Play*, for example, takes us into the fractured mind of a guilty individual as a result of a gruesome murder of his spouse, it is also a very conscious and unambiguous response to the travesty that was 1966.

Macpherson's telling words certainly apply to *The Elephants* and indeed the entire gamut of Serumaga's work. If *A Play* is a portrait of the perpetrator then *The Elephants* is akin to a victim impact statement, primarily through both David and Maurice by way of their legacies from their respective postcolonial states. What makes this victim impact statement even worse is that there is neither a judge nor a jury; and the perpetrator/s of the colossal inhumanity still reign supreme. Like Mutimukulu, the perpetrators will be punished, in much the same way as the mighty tetrarch of the jungle and the title who, in the end falls prey to the cunning pygmy; who despite his miniscule size, uses his brains, courage and cunning to devour the elephant slowly but surely, from the inside.

The social is never necessarily abdicated and not all of it is submerged or sub-textual. David, for example, is a victim. He is not unlike Fanon's patients on whom colonialism took a colossal mental toll. As a practitioner as well as theorist Fanon seems to excel even his rigorous, insightful self, when it comes to what Homi Bhabha calls the 'psycho affective realm', as well as 'the troubled traffic between the psychic body and the body politic'.[304] In the final chapter of *The*

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[303] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 14.

[304] The phrases are used by, Homi K. Bhabha, in an essay entitled 'Framing Fanon'. I received this essay in an unpublished form, but it was clearly meant to be a new Preface to *The Wretched of the*

continued on next page

Wretched of the Earth, Fanon provides a series of case studies, a catalogue of distinct forms of afflictions emerge in these diognoses that are all united by one thing: the violence; epistemic and physical, of French colonial rule over Algeria. Unfortunately, Fanon did not live long enough to theorise the postcolonial era as thoroughly as he evidently would have, judging from the chapter 'On National Consciousness', for example. And few if any contributions so far, have attempted to cover a similar spectrum, let alone matched Fanon's rare insights in many a postcolonial setting, insights that ironically still hold true except that things such as race, are replaced by regional and ethnic, and sometimes even religious signifiers. To 'agree' on that disturbing, revolting and uncanny diacriticality, or to acknowledge it, is to also accept as Tejani and others do, that David's neurosis is state-induced. There are no two ways about this crucial aspect. What comes first in the tale is not the disease, but rather what seems to have indisputably caused it: the foul murder of his parents. However much one dwells on the psychological or the neurotic, however predominant they are, the disease is the aftermath. Once you ignore or deflate the role of the postcolonial state as instigator and cause of David's condition, it becomes easy to claim that the play 'is not intended as a social or political statement', but that is also to deliberately forget why *The Elephants* was written in the first place; as an artistic response in an interventionist manner bearing in mind the negotiation entailed with regard to signification and survival.

These plays are literally awash with the social and political. To turn a blind eye to that fact or to attribute the predominance of the social and the political to a kind of hyper-critical zeal on the part of scholars such as Tejani, is to also forget that ensuring one's survival, given the context in which Serumaga and his contemporaries were writing, imposed restrictions on how much one could say directly. If

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Earth. I have so far, not been able to get that version of the book so I am uncertain about giving the respective page numbers. All the parenthetic references to Fanon's book are drawn from the edition prefaced by Jean Paul Sartre. Bhabha's preface could indeed change from the one I was privileged to access, but I suspect those phrases will stay.

Serumaga had been more explicit, it would have meant jail or exile? There is also the inherent risk of didactism in what Horn may be urging. As Kalundi has noted Horn's 'prescription' tends to 'result' in 'political diatribes, thinly disguised as plays or novels with comparatively little artistic merit.'[305] The syllogism here is that we would not be discussing *The Elephants* today, if the social and the political had been 'prioritised' over the equally vital formal/narratological aspects.

Again, once you eviscerate the social and the political then you can supposedly prove that Serumaga suffered from a kind of obsession with individualism that clearly bordered on the solipsistic. Incidentally, not every social/political critique was hidden in the crevices of the plays or, somewhere along the way, turned into little more than a backdrop. A case in point is the Old Man who appears in two different episodes of *The Elephants*. Unlike his counterpart in the earlier *A Play*, he is not a provider of company, but rather, one in dire need of it. He certainly does provide the audience with a lot of food for laughter. Tejani has remarked as follows: 'The intensity of this grey world of shadows is mitigated by a lunatic old man, who' mistakes David's abode, 'for the mental hospital.'[306] He is clearly in need of medical help. He is also pretty close to a catalytic character; his very first appearance (Act 1, pp. 19-23) soon leads to David's first key revelation about his tragic loss of his parents and his subsequent neurosis. Tejani has noted his comic relief, nowhere more present than in those most riveting of moments in all of Serumaga's written plays, arguably; shortly before the climax, before the truth of David's fiction is revealed, the Old Man provides his, by now, usual relief but also enhances the tension and the suspense (Act 2, pp. 51-55) which are exacerbated to an almost unbearable degree by Richard's arrival on the scene.

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[305] Serumaga, Kalundi R., 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 14.
[306] Tejani, Bahadur, 'Robert Serumaga [*The Elephants*]', *African Arts*, III, 4, Summer, 1970, p.78.

The Old man's comedy and wit, also enhance the satirical dimension of the play. It is through him that the author takes undisguised aim at the tiered nature of the medical system, which the Old Man hilariously breaches by finding a simple solution to the discriminatory system: 'when the question is put', regarding the elitist and absurdist entitlement, he has worked out a 'password'; 'Yes.'[307] The implication is that the bureaucrats, who keep the system in place, are not necessarily endowed with much by way of intelligence. On a more serious note on the plight of the mentally ill, all the Old Man gets is Aspirin. But it is clearly no magic bullet; it is, rather, an illustration of the senselessness and lack of empathy/compassion even among those in the business of healthcare. The obscene stigmatisation of mental health victims and (their problems) is also a trenchant critique that is never submerged or disguised, and neither is it abandoned on the wayside as the play progresses.

And when the lights go out at the very end of the play, right after David's neurosis returns with what appears to be a psychotic magnitude, those lights do not fadeout on Serumaga's social and political concerns. There is an even deeper malaise, indelibly stamped on the mind of any careful audience/reader: David and Maurice's respective nation states and the inhumanity on offer on the menus of a significant number of their denizens. They face an even bleaker future, except, perhaps, if the Gods themselves intervene, through that proverbial hand of intractable fate. So when the lights go out on two solitary individuals, on the abortive marriage, they also go out on a significant part of postcolonial Africa.

Some Advice to the Players

In spite of all his glowing remarks on the play, Tejani noted: 'the playwright has refused to trust his own vision'; to Tejani this was 'a major flaw.'[308] In his view it would have been, even better to have

[307] *The Elephants*, Act 1, p. 21.
[308] Tejani, Bahadur, 'Robert Serumaga [*The Elephants*]', *African Arts*, III, 4, Summer 1970, p. 78.

someone, other than the author, in the part. Serumaga knew the play far too well according to Tejani and the result was, a loss of intensity, to a degree, which took a bit of the sting out of certain moments that may have deserved a sharper focus. To Beaumont, though, what appears to be understated acting on Serumaga's part is a choice, actually shared by the entire company: 'a perfect example of art concealing art' [...] and Robert Serumaga, in the pivotal role of David, is the prime exponent of this deftly camouflaged technique.'[309] Macpherson, for her part, commends Serumaga for the naturalistic delivery 'that made a powerful impact.'[310] The point here is, not who one disagrees or agrees with, but more what prospective performers might want to consider in relation to staging, specifically to the role of David. It is a complex role, which seems to demand that the actor playing David must of necessity start his emotional journey in the middle and at the very end of the play, during the rehearsal process. So that before he reveals the tragic loss of his parents, and the aftermath of it, prior to his return to that awful psychotic state, the audience, shocked as they are bound to be, should not altogether be surprised. David's emotional state must be signalled almost as soon as the lights come up in the first Act. They have to sense it in someway, bubbling underneath intricate interactions that culminate in the relapse at the very end of the play. Every now and then, though, Serumaga does send a few danger signals, however subtly. But on the whole, it is probably safer to start by emphasising the gulf between the structural chronology that is not necessarily in harmony with the chronology of the story. There is no implication here that anyone must go over the top, but the delicate mental condition and impeding relapse have to be signalled in a carefully calibrated manner, and there are moments where the dialogue or actions (stage directions) may not be enough. Again, the audience must sense what they do not see, but should suspect, perhaps even be made acutely aware of; and

[309] Beaumont, Robert, 'Superb Theatre', *The Sunday Nation*, (Nairobi): 1971.
[310] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 15.

that is something about his plight, his anguish, his emotional and psychic scars, his volatility and heightened anxiety.

The players also have to be aware that one can keep the tension and concomitantly avoid ranting and raving. David may well be a belligerent and extremely condescending character. It is as if he has taken it upon himself to initiate Jenny and Richard into adulthood through his constant berating and admonition of them. The director ought to be aware of those things and inflect them so they can all be delivered without alienating the audience that the playwright might be critiquing. There is a potent trap, that could result in a screeching, preaching, culturally holier-than-thou-David. It is also important for the entire cast to remember that they are an ensemble linked by certain ailments, such as loneliness and isolation that know, neither nationality, nor race.

Conclusion

Adrian Roscoe has posited that '*The Elephants* is a play with a measure of psychological power, but which, stylistically is rather vapid.'[311] The 'psychological', was not as commonplace as Roscoe may imply. To fashion the kind of drama such as *The Elephants*, was, at the time, an unprecedented accomplishment, of a trend-setting magnitude. Beaumont's widely quoted review and Macpherson's paper, for example, both attest to that. Serumaga should be commended far more than Roscoe does. Serumaga's psychological craftsmanship was to become an invaluable part of the dramaturgical kit for many a formidable playwright in Uganda and in East Africa at large. The psychological also connotes both style and substance. One must be very cautious about style, because of the potential of turning it into something detachable, which could result in an unnecessary binary; style on the one hand, and subject matter on the other. To turn style into an adornment, something that a work can by implication do

[311] Roscoe, Adrian, *Uhuru's Fire, African Literature East, to south*, London, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 263-264.

without, and not sacrifice its subject matter, is not as easy as it sounds. For that reason alone, Roscoe's opinion on this matter becomes rather circumspect due to his failure to cite concrete examples to back up his hypothesis. It is probably counterproductive to draw too much of a demarcation between style and substance in this context. It is also to underestimate what it takes to attain, 'the coherence of complex communication'[312], that Macpherson and others have noted and applauded deservedly. Almost as a rule, the intricate matter of style must be discussed, but it is also important bear in mind, as Soyinka has posited, that, 'the ontology of an idiom is subservient to the burden of its concerns.'[313]

Roscoe has also argued thus: 'Except in isolated cases, and despite Serumaga's claim in the introduction that 'every word matters', there is neither rhythmic energy nor pungency of statement.'[314] The truth seems to be closer to the following statement: although it is true that not 'every [single] word matters'; the vast majority of them certainly do. It is important to be as open-minded as one can in examining Roscoe's opinions on Serumaga, but if one prefers to approach him with a healthy caution, it is because he seems to have convinced himself, that Serumaga will never do enough to appease him. What for instance does Roscoe mean by 'rhythmic energy', on paper — in a play that was never written in verse? Roscoe's brief commentary on Serumaga may not suffer from the ideological contamination that has been identified in some of Horn's analysis, but it makes one wonder, whether or not it is akin to those words that Gayatri Spivak would refer to as 'catachretical'; the reason being that

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[312] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 18.

[313] Soyinka, Wole, *Myth , Literature, and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 64.

[314] Roscoe, Adrian, *Uhuru's Fire, African Literature East, to south*, London, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 264.

what they allegedly denote, is not what they really mean, since they 'do not have an adequate literal referent.'[315]

Macpherson has a concern as well, in relation to language, but she is not, in any way, questioning Serumaga's linguistic credentials. Nevertheless, to Macpherson, Serumaga still suffers from something that first surfaced in *A Play*. That 'old mannerism is newly underlined in the dialogue — the 'big speech' [that is] obviously asking for 3 stars beside it to indicate its thematic importance.'[316] I respectfully remain unconvinced by that, as he seems to have left that 'mannerism', with the previous play. Even if Macpherson's observation was accepted on face value, there is a far more pressing concern, bubbling underneath some of the staging precautions that were suggested in relation to David's tone and delivery. Certain audiences could feel admonished, patronised and bullied, if the tone behind some of David's pronouncements is not calibrated to suit the moments. To refer to Richard as a ' little boy' (Act 2,p.57) and to say to the-25-year old Jenny: 'do you little girl?' (Act1, p. 26) or 'Now listen girl' (Act 2, p. 47), however furious he happens to be, especially to Jenny, could be read as gratuitous, in terms of Serumaga's strategic location. This might interpreted as unnecessarily picky, but there are also a few literalistic/ 'academicist' speeches. While, for example, it is perfectly fine for (the academic) Richard to ask: 'can you expand on that?'(Act1, p. 28), Jenny's, 'You know, I have great admiration for your interest in and knowledge of African literature and music' (Act1, p. 11), is an impossible sell. David's use of the word 'post' might also be questionable as far as Ugandan diction goes. So too, is Richard's use (as an American) of the expression, 'call back', as in return. Jenny's 'This is not play-acting and there is no script to life' (Act1, p. 18) could also make some cringe (the performer included). It is always

[315] Spivak, Chakravorty Gayatri, in Sarah Harasym (ed.), *The Post Colonial Critic, Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, New York and London: Routledge, 1990. p. 154.
[316] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga', in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 15.

tempting, but also quite tricky for the medium to attract attention to itself. Martin Banham, though not addressing the tempting allusion to the medium, however, makes an interesting observation that is relevant to this context. Banham notes that 'the overall impact of [Serumaga's] play is very successful'. But Banham also observes that 'some of Serumaga's prose is forced.'[317] That is certainly a fair comment to make based on the above examples.

On the list of concerns, however petty, is a misleading appropriation of some of David's lines to Maurice in a speech in Act 1, page 4 of this edition. But it is probably to do with the printer/editor than the author. Perhaps that, too, explains the discrepancy between the chronological setting we are given at the top of the play, as in June 1969 (Act 1, p. 2) and then Jenny who also states the same year, but provides the month of November (Act 2, p. 44). Neither the author nor the editor seems to have noticed that.

There is something to the language and Serumaga's craftsmanship that can only be given passing attention in this chapter, but will certainly be examined in the coming one, and that is what Macpherson has described as Serumaga's 'involvement in the symbolic and poetic potential of the local setting that has been present in all the plays.'[318] David's description of his home village is a good case in point (Act 2, p. 38). *Majangwa*, though, is, by far the best example of what Macpherson means by the poetics of setting and environment. The gecko, the spider lily and the flowerpot itself, speak more to that poetry and symbolic depth, but also serve as dramatic and thematic tropes.

Comparisons have been made to Athol Fugard's 1961 play *The Blood Knot*. In a review that was reprinted in its entirety in *Cultural Events in Africa* we are told that, '*The Elephants* emerges as

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[317] Banham, Martin, '*African Theatre Today*', London: Pitmann, 1976, p. 88.

[318] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 18.

an interesting theatrical venture.'[319] But the reviewer also draws our attention to the tautness of the script and lauds the production for quite a number of other accomplishments 'despite the echoes of *The Blood knot* in the links between David and [Maurice] the refugee artist.'[320] Fugard's play is about two brothers that genetic fate lands on the opposite sides of the colour bar in the land of apartheid. One can pass for white and has indeed exploited that for a while and that is why he comes back laden with guilt to live with his abandoned, illiterate brother. Fugard's plot is advanced, primarily through a series of letters to and from a white pen pal that soon threatens to visit, with all the implications that has in the land of apartheid. The letters in *The Elephants* are for a totally different purpose. They are written by Maurice and surreptitiously replied to by David, a kind of vulture, con artist and self proclaimed (adopted) brother-cum-healer. While it is true that the question of brotherhood reminds one of Fugard's 1961 play, the link between the two plays is far more apparent in the psychological exploration and depth of the characters. Even though it is possible to see how *The Blood Knot* would have inspired *The Elephants*, they are, in my view, very different plays. Serumaga did play Zach in a Theatre Limited production (February 1968). That probably enhanced the parallels. Similar parallels can be drawn between Serumaga's *Majangwa* and Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, which Serumaga saw in London,[321] shortly before the Kampala production of *Majangwa*. Fugard, though, could well have had more influence on Serumaga in the execution and fashioning of *The Elephants*, than any other playwright. The best influences sometimes efface any traces. But it would be a speculative conclusion to make, unless one did a comprehensive study of the two plays. Still, it is not as tenuous a link as it may appear at first glance. While Beckett's influence is easy to discern, since it is literally signposted in *A Play*, for

[319] *Uganda Argus*, 19th, October 1969. Cited in *Cultural Events in Africa*, 61, 1969, p. 3.
[320] Ibid.,
[321] See footnote 49 in Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 115.

example, and can also be felt in the, even more startlingly original *Majangwa*, that does not appear to be the case with Fugard, Serumaga and *The Elephants*. It is also possible to discuss influence as inspiration, and influences are also, not always negative attributes. A future study would probably help to clarify those things, in relation to *The Blood Knot* and *The Elephants*, as well as *Boesman and Lena* and *Majangwa*. The 'links between David and [Maurice]' and Fugard's two brothers Zach and Morris, are a good starting point in a comparative analysis. But more fertile ground would probably be found in the psychological approach and depth of the characters and the two different tales. The allegorical nature of the two works, the minimalism in terms of character and cast, the love for story-telling and how it manifests itself in the works of these two African playwrights, the differences with regard to the question of signification and survival and devices such as the play-within-a-play, as well as the role of the landscape in their settings, in their dramaturgy, are all areas one might like to investigate.

'People who Eat Dead People' [322] was, we are told, a possible choice for a title, it probably would not have survived the censor. Could it be that in some way, that was a choice that spoke to David's cannibalistic plunder of Maurice's family's details? Regardless of any mitigating factor/s that David provides, one still wonders whether that act, is also an analogous condemnation, by the author — that cuts across the genres — of the beautiful art we see, but we would probably feel different about, if it was deconstructed; and revealed the fodder that sustains it. If the play has to be read as art turning the critical spotlight onto itself then Maurice's '*Fishnet*', which was also a presumed title; speaks to the postcolonial condition a lot more eloquently than the indictment of the artist as cannibal whose thematic potential is not exploited enough.

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[322] This title and another one in the same paragraph can be found in an interview with Serumaga, 'Elephants it's Called but There's None in the Cast', *Uganda Argus*, September 19th, 1969. It is also reprinted (in excerpts) in *Cultural Events in Africa*, 61, 1969, p. 3.

There is also the portrayal of Maurice who is described in the stage directions as a one-time 'first-year', 'philosophy major (Act 1, p. 1).' Anything that a playwright highlights, to that extent, raises expectations. We might have been better off, without being privy to that information, since it whets people's appetites, but does not appear to have any dramatic relevance. The thematic centrality of the intractable hand of fate was referred to earlier, and the problem is not its clarity or anything related to dramaturgy. It is, rather, that divine retribution/justice may, in the end be too little and to late, if at all — for David, Maurice and all those who need much sooner intervention. The intractable hand can also become counterproductive, as it may connote a fatalistic strategic location.

The Elephants is an important landmark in the body of Serumaga's work. A worthwhile development from his earlier work, but like, in *A Play*, and probably the rest of his other work, it is increasingly clear that far from being an individualist, Serumaga was in reality an activist. At no time in that intervention, were the aesthetic concerns jettisoned in the name of content. Hence the manner in which in *The Elephants*, for example, contemporary issues are addressed through a complex negotiation dictated by the realities of signification and survival. As Tejani euphorically declared shortly after the play opened in Kampala, 'the phase of drama [had entered a] new phase of contemporaneity.' He went on to say that 'The ethos of Uganda and of East Africa in the 1960's and 1970's entered [Uganda's] National Theatre', and *The Elephants* was indeed 'a major breakthrough' for the author and other artists.[323]

Despite all that Horn has alleged *The Elephants* certainly deserves the accolades that it was welcomed with by Tejani and Beaumont, for example. This was an unprecedented event at the time, and it is important to remember the play's role in the transformation of the theatrical landscape of the time.

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[323] Tejani, Bahadur, 'Robert Serumaga [*The Elephants*]', *African Arts*, III, 4, Summer 1970, p. 76.

Finally, the play must be applauded for what Macpherson (as noted earlier) has rightly described as the 'coherence of complex communication', as well as the 'symbolic and poetic potential of the local setting' that Serumaga displays further, in *Majangwa. The Elephants* deserves even more applause for its economy, dramatic restraint, and the humour, which mitigates the grim subject matter. And despite the parallels to so-called absurdist dramas, it is actually closer to the classic Aristotelian model which led (again, as noted earlier) Macpherson to single *The Elephants* out as, 'The most fully satisfactory play that he [Serumaga had] has so far achieved.' Macpherson's list of Serumaga plays included, at the time, not only the unwritten/unscripted plays that will be discussed in chapter 5, but also *Majangwa. Majangwa*, is, to this day, the most popular of Serumaga's plays and to many, would be even more deserving of the praise that Macpherson confers on *The Elephants*.

CHAPTER 4

MAJANGWA: A PROMISE OF RAINS

PATHOLOGY OF A POSTCOLONIAL STATE

> Very often the questioning of the national space and the threat of, or agitations toward, a rearrangement of those spaces often takes its roots from a feeling of rejection or exclusion, stemming from the marginalisation of a part by the entirety or the internal domination of a part by another part. [324]
>
> — Wole Soyinka

> NAKIRIJJA
> 'We were the pus of a very diseased society.
> MAJANGWA
> On the contrary we were the wound; the opening through which society got rid of its excess pus.'[325]

When Serumaga's *Majangwa* first appeared on the Ugandan stage, a reviewer from a national newspaper responded thus: 'There is a time in the theatrical world when something extra-special comes onto the scene [...] Robert Serumaga has done it again and excelled himself as a brilliant playwright.'[326] This, the third of Serumaga's written plays, was to achieve that rare recognition and distinction with, as the evidence will show, overwhelming critical éclat.

Like the earlier plays, Majangwa will also be assessed according to a number of postcolonial 'prerogatives', as well as a poststructuralist, deconstructive gaze. Uganda's turbulent history too

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[324] Soyinka, Wole, 'King Baabu and the Renaissance Vision' in John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan, (eds.), *African Drama and Performance*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University. Press, 2004, pp. 11-23.

[325] Serumaga, Robert, *Majangwa: A Promise of Rains*, Act 1, p. 15.
(*Majangwa: A Promise of Rains* and *A Play* (Nairobi): East African Publishing House (E.A.P.H.), 1974). All parenthetical page references are to this edition.

[326] This *Uganda Argus* review is reprinted in excerpts in *Cultural Events in Africa*, 77, London, 1971, p. 2.

will be revisited, to contextualise some of the ailments that plagued the Uganda of the day. The postcolonial prerogatives do not only refer to content, but also the formal/aesthetic aspects of Serumaga's play. The indigenisation of the theatrical sign is one such aspect and it will be discussed with reference to idiomatic and dramaturgical choices that characterise the work. Myth and mythopoeia, together with Serumaga's animation of the landscape and setting will also be examined. Devices such as storytelling, the play within the play, for example, multiple characterisation as well as mime and dance will all be examined. The postcolonial state as a construct and hegemonic entity will also be revisited and theorised.

Majangwa, like *The Elephants,* was written during Serumaga's tenure as a Senior creative writing Fellow at Uganda's Makerere University, Kampala. It was to be the last of his scripted plays and also the final work to be conceived and born under the auspices of that prestigious fellowship. *Majangwa* was first produced at Kampala's Uganda National Theatre on 13 November 1971. Serumaga played the eponymic character; Majangwa's wife, Nakirijja, was played by the then teenage schoolgirl Gladys Nakazibwe. Among the supporting cast were; Byron Kawadwa, in the role of Walumbe (Death), and Jack Sekajugo as Kayikuuzi. Robert Serumaga directed and produced, under the auspices of Theatre Limited. Sam Kagimu-Mukasa and Kawadwa both served as Serumaga's assistant directors.[327] Soon after its

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[327] See *Majangwa* Theatre Limited *Programme Magazine* for Kampala production of the play.

There is also a name that is mentioned in virtually all the revues and it should be mentioned here too, at the very least as a reminder that there is almost invariably more to a production than the cast and the director; there are other individuals who are just as crucial. In *Majangwa's* case, that individual is Mohindra Poppat; his set and lighting design, was also a laudable contribution to the original production. In his review of the production in Nairobi, Robert Beaumont made the following observation, in the *Sunday Post* (Nairobi):

'One of the most striking things about the transfer of *Majangwa* from the much bigger Uganda National Theatre to Nairobi's minimal Cultural Centre Hall has been the adaptability of Mohindra Poppat ... frankly, I think he deserves a thundering round of applause.' Beaumont commends Poppat for his incredible pace, the long hours, incredible pace and stamina, for his dazzling technical ability, for his imagination. He goes on to say that Poppat's adoption of, 'the *Majangwa* set to the Cultural Centre stage and making that 'pocket-handkerchief' look like a real stage, must be his greatest [accomplishment] yet.' Beaumont's review is reproduced in the Magazine *Cultural Events in Africa*, 77, London, 1971, p. 3.

premiere in Kampala, *Majangwa* also played Nairobi's Kenya Cultural Centre. The Third World Theatre Festival in Manila followed that December, as well as Chicago's Loop City Theatre.[328]

Individual Story/Human Drama

Majangwa is best described in the words of the eponymous hero as: 'an empty road, a space below a cliff, a man and a woman and nothing happens.'[329] That 'space below a cliff', with the road in front of them and a forest behind their backs, is, to Majangwa, an ideal space, ideal for something that has not happened for what seems to be a considerably long time. He may distance it by alluding simply to 'a man and a woman', but what Majangwa is intimating and lamenting is that there is a lack of sexual intimacy between them.

The reason for this is Majangwa himself; his virility has gone missing, more than likely for good. As he himself admits: 'I have drunk from the earthen bowl many times, taken to the root and examined the cock's entrails but nothing seems to add any edge to my approach.'[330] He needs a lot more than adding an extra 'edge' to his 'approach'. The string of traditional remedies does not seem to have worked. Hence the decision to take to the road, seemingly with the hope — however faint — that this radical change of locale away from the city may re-ignite his libido; which also explains the play's subtitle: *A Promise of Rains*.

Commenting on Majangwa the man as well as Kironde's (*The Trick)* and Serumaga's play, Macpherson has observed that: 'Both plays' do capture something of the man, she too thought he was; 'He was frightening. He was challenging. He was pathetic.'[331] He is

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[328] The 'Loop' is no longer in existence, I was therefore unable to get the production dates but the production was probably in 1972.

[329] *Majangwa: A Promise of Rains*, Act 2, p. 37.

[330] Ibid., Act 1, p. 19.

[331] Macpherson, Margaret, 'What Happened To Majangwa?', *Mawazo*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1976, p. 68.

The earlier play that Macpherson refers to is mentioned in the Introduction. It is Erisa Kironde's *The Trick*, an adaptation of Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen*. Synge's Tramp was turned into an itinerant performer in Kironde's adaptation; a real-life drummer by the name of Majangwa, After they fell on hard times, Majangwa appears to have convinced his wife that the two would eke a living off the

continued on next page

certainly all that and more in Serumaga's portrayal of him, as the evidence will clearly show. Majangwa is also a showman. He is virtually never seen without his traditional Ngalabi drum. But his is a showmanship that also supersedes his legendary masterly of the Ngalabi drum. Majangwa is never short of words, a consummate, perhaps even infectious storyteller, who will do all it takes to win an argument or have the last word.

Now though, the consummate showman must give his biggest performance ever. The stakes have never been higher as he takes on the road to perform to his most loyal of audiences, his wife Nakirijja, who might also join the throngs that deserted him back in Kampala. So he throws body and soul into what could very well be his final performance. He chastises, cajoles, bullies and, on occasion, threatens her with physical violence. He wraps himself up in the colours of the traditional and mysterious; evokes his past glories and triumphs, mocks her, jokes with her, sharing his wit and what can only be described as his philosophical 'takes' on the city, progress, the environment, the society and materialism. At times even his tender and loving side is thrown into the mix; the question is: will it be enough? Will it do the trick? Sadly, even Majangwa's best may no longer be enough to revitalise him or to make Nakirijja stay by his side. Look at this exchange for instance, very early in the play:

> NAKIRIJJA
> We will never get anywhere — travelling like this, without aim or purpose.
>
> MAJANGWA
> Speak for yourself woman. I have a purpose, a destination: there, beyond the reaches of small minds.
>
> NAKIRIJJA
> If I don't share the purpose why should I share the journey?[332]

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travails of live pornographic shows. Incidentally, Kironde's play does not deal with that phase of their lives. travails of live pornographic shows. Incidentally, Kironde's play does not deal with that phase of their lives.

[332] *Majangwa*: *A Promise of Rains*, Act 1, pp. 9-10.

Nakirijja does not share or subscribe to that abundant optimism behind the 'purpose' and 'destination'. To Majangwa, the world of his fantasies and that of reality are one and the same. The fictitious, autobiographical and real have, over the years, become indistinguishable. The play is, almost entirely, a roadside duologue, if not an outright duel, between Majangwa and his Nakirijja. It is a series of exchanges between the two that are never far from the question behind their 'destination' and purpose of 'the journey'. For Majangwa, it is all about making the equivalent of a radical epistemic leap 'beyond the reaches of small minds.' But again the stakes get higher by the minute. To Nakirijja, the world of dreamers is not one to resort to for the kind of healing Majangwa is seeking, it probably does not even give the illusion of curing the symptoms, while attenuating the disease; it is simply escapist. They have been walking for 14 days (Act 1, p. 10). Nakirijja is no longer the conforming wife; she is a blunt, hardened, increasingly defiant and irrepressible woman. Consider the brief exchange precipitated by her complaint and pain due to the numerous stones, in a kind of rubber and leather net that her shoes have become:

NAKIRIJJA
Some women have shoes. I guess it's because they have husbands.

MAJANGWA
Do you want to start your quarrels again?

NAKIRIJJA
If you don't tell the truth to the hunchback in your bed, you have to do without your share of the blanket. [333]

If Majangwa thought for a moment that he had a monopoly over aphorisms and proverbs he is certainly mistaken. The allusion to the truth and the hunchback is a Luganda proverb that justifies the telling of 'hard', risky truths sometimes. Characteristically, he does not address the question at hand; instead he resorts to his usual selective, cherry-picking style by clutching on a word or two as if he had not heard, or by changing the trajectory of the discussion. And Nakirijja is

[333] Ibid., Act 1, p. 17.

not starting a quarrel — if anybody has or wants to — it's Majangwa himself. He does this from the very beginning of the play, before Nakirijja catches up with him; when he chastises the road itself for allowing her to step and walk on it, given her pathetic pace (Act 1, pp. 6-7). In this instance he resorts to verbal and physical intimidation as soon as he realises that the joke about the shoes is on him and he will not win the argument.

> MAJANGWA
> Your tongue is a snake; you shouldn't open your mouth too often.
> NAKIRIJJA
> Talking as one snake to the other ...
> MAJANGWA
> (*Approaching her with menace*) ...
> NAKIRIJJA
> Don't touch me. (*He approaches.*) Touch me and you will see what happens to you. (*He still threatens her, then stops.*) [334]

When he threatens violence (or perhaps feigns it) she stands her ground and warns him of the repercussions. Majangwa knows that he cannot live without her and Nakirijja knows that too; but if he so much as touches her, she will abandon him. Nakirijja, the meek and humble ally, has disappeared, replaced by an implacable foe who can no longer hesitate to 'tell the truth to the hunchback in [her] bed.' The play is awash with examples that clearly show she will no longer be bullied, ensnared by Majangwa's 'home-spun' philosophy, his dreams, the abundant optimism and the mysteries. As for Majangwa, the sternness, whether feigned or real, sometimes gives way to a very different Majangwa. He is certainly not averse to displaying the tender Majangwa. With Nakirijja falling asleep and plunging him into an unwelcome, solitary moment, a tender Majangwa instantly surfaces. 'How are your feet?'; he asks, of the same feet he mocks earlier on. 'I didn't have to ask you know', Majangwa continues. He then sums it all up thus: 'But I thought: as she has a big blister I might as well ask. You never know. But I won't ask if I bore you. (Act 2, p. 45).' The

[334] Ibid., p. 17.

concern for her welfare is clearly not the only reason for the concern. Majangwa, like David in *The Elephants*, is scared of silence and there is too much to cope with given the night and the forest as well as the treacherous road. There is, nevertheless, a degree of genuine concern. That concern, though, and most of Majangwa's sensitive and admirable qualities are ultimately outweighed by his obstinacy and inability to listen to, or accept that there are any other ways of looking at things, other than his own (Act 1, pp. 39-40). That kind of 'philosophy' may have worked in the occasional spat, but it now appears to have passed its 'sell-by-date'. This is a lot more than a domestic 'spat' or ordinary crisis; their marriage appears to be near the end of its road, in this roadside duel between the dreamer (Majangwa) and the realist (Nakirijja). It is a duel in which the hitherto timid/manageable Nakirijja, who probably wishes she had trusted her instinct a lot more, increasingly asserts and individuates herself.

The present crisis and the friction are clearly precipitated by the past. A lot of their time on the solitary roadside is spent in taking stock of that past. As they wait for a change in Majangwa's fortunes, or '*A Promise of Rains*', they 'look back on their debauched life and try to extract some meaning, and some hope from it.'[335]

To Nakirijja, those regular incursions — the excavation of that predominantly unseemly past — are an opportunity to express the revulsion she really felt. A lot of what those memories do is to expose the cleavage between them. What then was that past, and how does it widen the gulf between them? How much hope, if any, can they garner by examining that past?

This degree of strife and conflict appears to be relatively recent, as there was a time when their world, and that around them, were both relatively blissful. Serumaga's Majangwa was single, and so, too, was his sanguine, future wife Nakirijja. They met at a wedding, one of the vast number that he played, during his earlier life on the road — and

[335] See notes on the back cover of *Majangwa* and *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House (E.A.P.H.) 1974, it is also the sole version in use throughout the thesis.

simultaneously, as a resident drummer at the Court of a chief. Long before their first encounter, Majangwa, the royal drummer, was already a household name. Majangwa: 'You were there at the wedding as I played. Majangwa the great! (Act 1, p. 27.)' That very night, the incredibly agile dancer (Act 1, p. 26), and nubile young woman; Nakirijja was swept off her feet by the enchanting drummer. As Majangwa puts it: 'Later, when the last drumbeat had been lost to the winds, you came to me, in my room. It was a night to remember.'[336]

The early days on the streets of Kampala also appear to have been free of any damaging potential or aspects of the performance that Nakirijja found questionable or contentious; which would lead to future blame or recrimination. 'It was a good plan: a song, a dance and then some play with words and fake actions.'[337] Nakirijja does not entirely agree with the 'fake actions', which seems to suggest that it did not take that long before they engaged in a simulated form of pornography. She accords him the benefit of doubt, in the beginning at least. Then, according to her, Majangwa's greed kicked in as the audiences raised the fee:

NAKIRIJJA

> Five shillings Majangwa, five shillings." Five lousy shillings in your pocket and your trousers would go down. [...] and I in my silly spell would prepare to receive you. Then down on the pavement, right down on the concrete, before those gaping eyes, to give pleasure to the crowd.[338]

A number of things stand out here; his greed, and her shame. She in fact pleads a kind of temporary insanity (Act 1, p. 12.). It is as if he had cast some kind of spell or aphrodisiac, in the form of that drum and his immense skill, which blinded her and ensnared (Act 2. p 38) the young nubile dancer he had met on the road during his glory days. She does not try to extricate herself, since she was, at the very least, an accomplice. She does, though, attempt time and again to hold Majangwa accountable, but to no avail. She also accords a significant

[336] *Majangwa*: *A Promise of Rains*, Act 1, p. 26.
[337] Ibid., Act 2, p. 31.
[338] Ibid., Act 1, p. 13.

portion of the blame to the society, in the form of their audience. Nakirijja: 'We were the pus of a very diseased society.' His response is: 'On the contrary we were the wound; the opening, through which society got rid of its excess pus.'[339] He seems determined to shift the entire blame onto society. This is not to say that he does not make a compelling case. But the point is that even in the moments that he makes neither sense nor a compelling case, Majangwa is endearing; a rogue he may well be, but there is a well of sympathy for him. This is because of who he is; his present circumstances, how he started off, and the key compromise that moved them from simulation to realistic pornography. As Majangwa himself puts it: 'Five shillings is a lot of money when all you ever possessed is a heap of ashes and no drum.' By the time they got a new drum, 'it was too late, we had to continue.'[340] And so, pornography became what really defined their act. Nakirijja had warned him about the crowds and the danger of pandering to 'their whims' long before that (Act1, p. 30.), but Majangwa did not heed her advice, let alone listen.

They agree on precious little as they continue to go over that past. And Majangwa keeps on sniffing for opportunities to shift the blame. Even the comparatively small matter of the shoes is eventually blamed on her refusal to do what he interestingly refers to as 'work.' Majangwa: 'You burn your tail and then complain that it hurts to sit down. Who refused to work? You! Who wants shoes? You! (Ac t 1, p. 17)' That 'work' as it turns out was the only chance of intimacy or display of her love due, more than likely, to the physical toll it took on Majangwa. Interestingly, Majangwa characteristically pretends not to have heard her when she intimates that, to her, there was a lot more to the performances than 'work'. When he does hear, he claims not to 'understand' what she is saying.

NAKIRIJJA

It was work to you. To me, the only hope of your embrace. Didn't it ever occur to you? What happened whenever we got home after Katwe, Bwayise, Nakulabye, all in a day's

[339] Ibid., Act 1, p. 13.
[340] Ibid., Act 1, pp. 31-32.

work, what happened? The silence of frogskins, a
drum without a message, my touch would only give birth to a
stifled whisper.[341]

The point, though, is crystal clear: at night, under the privacy of their own roof, Majangwa, despite his bravado and machismo, would literally go to sleep like a log. Does he acknowledge that or accept any responsibility/blame? The answer typically, is no. When he is not shifting the blame from himself, he is implicating her even more than she acknowledges or deserves — by way of her role in that unsavoury past. In fact, for him, their act was never a problem; it is those audiences (overwhelmingly male) who were fathered by men that hid behind a cordon of 'closed doors, drawn curtains and five blankets just to sleep with their wives (Act 1, p. 15).' Nakirijja herself appears to be 'a product' of that kind of union. In fact, Majangwa is 'surprised' she 'didn't become a thief.'[342]

As noted earlier and increasingly substantiated, Nakirijja is no longer the conforming wife. If she holds out any hope it is a realistic one, as opposed to Majangwa's abundant and seemingly inexhaustible optimism. It is hard not to sympathise with Nakirijja, given all she has had to endure and even the decision to stick by Majangwa's side through the 14 days of walking and searching for that 'mysterious' magic bullet that will revitalise Majangwa. Majangwa's dilemma brings additional anxieties; although her 'womb doesn't stir any more' Nakirijja does long for an offspring.

NAKIRIJJA
I wanted a child so much.
MAJANGWA
Yes.
NAKIRIJJA
Do you think we still …
MAJANGWA
Yes.
NAKIRIJJA
When?
MAJANGWA

[341] Ibid., Act 1, pp. 17-18.
[342] Ibid., Act 1, pp. 15-16.

Acutely aware of this, the quintessential showman and master of the art of improvisation finally arrives at a solution, however temporary. The 'dry season [will] pass'; not because of the string of homeopathic remedies that he had tried before, which did not help; instead, due to something he ought to have known all along. Although the bottom fell out of their business due to the priests and police who evidently hounded their audiences away to 'a new form of perversion (Act 1, p. 22)' by way of movies, to Majangwa, the act has been providing a shamanistic kind of healing through the performances. They had provided an opportunity to 'cure' those audiences; doomed by the manner in which they, like Nakirijja, had been conceived. Majangwa: 'I see it all now. We were the God's go-betweens putting bones back into broken limbs. [...] they watched us and hoped that a whiff of passion would rub off on them and arouse them (Act 1, p. 21).' All that stands in between Majangwa and his long awaited 'orgasmic', tropical, downpour is a performance. The roles have now been reversed and the long awaited cure will be psychotherapeutic in form. It will come in only a matter of hours. They (the audiences) will still go the cinema, but afterwards, when they find a conducive, solitary spot to jump into the backseat of their car — he, Majangwa will sneak up and play the voyeur. Then he will be revitalised; his impotence will become a thing of the past, hopefully celebrated in an unprecedented burst of rain.

That is Majangwa's plan and fervent hope. But, not long after Nakirijja goes to sleep, Majangwa makes a grim discovery. The locale they have chosen to wait at, far from being the salubrious spot he may have had in mind, is a well-trodden and eerie path in the village of Tanda. This story is about the origin of the Baganda and how death ended up in their midst, and it is best told in a more appropriate context. What is important at this juncture is the grim discovery of their locale; a place that few, if any, would like to find themselves.

[343] Ibid., Act 1, pp. 18-19.

According to the mythology or oral scriptures of the Baganda, it is at Tanda that death (Walumbe) went underground, pursued by Kayikuuzi. To Majangwa this certainly does not augur well, and the locale is far from ideal. As if that is not bad enough for the increasingly desperate Majangwa, a dead body is disposed of not long after his grim discovery: ruining the possibility of a performance, which the 'cast' appear to be on the verge of giving. Majangwa, who seems to be losing his grip, in a ferocious burst of anger holds the corpse responsible. To Nakirijja, more than likely, that is the last straw that will break the back of the relationship. She flees as Majangwa vows to destroy the evidence, lest they stand accused of the murder.

Postcolonial Prerogatives

Perhaps the best way to return to the actual postcolonial prerogatives of the play is by returning to the very end: to that haunting *mise en scène*. Having attacked and insulted the dead body that was dumped into their midst a few moments prior to the very end of the play, Majangwa notices the fleeing Nakirijja and appeals to her: 'Come back. I will burn the body. I will destroy the evidence. No one will ever know the truth. Come back.'[344] Majangwa pursues her, but there is no evidence that they reunite. The pledge to 'destroy the evidence' by setting the remains on fire — thus ensuring that 'no one will ever know the truth'— is disturbing. Not only because of the degree of empathy that one is bound to have for Majangwa, an individual who — however pathetic he may have become — is now caught up in a deed he had nothing to do with; he is also, more than likely, on the verge of a mental breakdown, if not death, in the face of what appears to be Nakirijja's desertion. Nakirijja could well live without Majangwa, but that does not seem to be true, the other way round. That is the individual drama, but there is a lot more to that road, forest, ditch, Majangwa and the dead body; in terms of how they highlight Serumaga's strategic location and his reflection on contemporary events.

[344]Ibid., Act 2, p. 51.

Idi Amin had seized power from Obote on 25th January of the year *Majangwa* opened, signalling the beginning of tragedy and gory spectacle. It was a spectacle that may have seemed rare (around Kampala perhaps) in 1971, but increasingly turned into the norm through the eight years of Amin's reign of terror. To the extent that it became increasingly 'abnormal' for a day to pass without hearing or encountering something akin to those gory spectacles and multiple tragedies — reminiscent of the horror and tragedy Serumaga encodes and captures in that *mise en scène*. In a 1993 play entitled *Come Good Rain*, this very writer was to capture some of that grisly reality that characterised the genocidal rule of Amin. It maybe worth looking at a brief excerpt in which the spine chilling terror is told:

GEORGE

In the early days the sight of a dead body n your way to school was something you talked about for a long time to come. Time passed. Things changed. We found ourselves haunted by images of people shot and abandoned for the vultures. Men, with their genitals stuffed into their mouths like Cuban cigars. Others burnt with acid. Pregnant women; bellies ripped apart with bayonets. Alleged foes, naked and chained, paraded on national television before facing a firing squad.[345]

While *Come Good Rain* enjoys the luxury of speaking as directly as possible about the evils of the day, Serumaga and his contemporaries certainly could not have. But it was incumbent upon them to address and expose that inhumanity. Indeed, Walter Benjamin's words which as earlier stated (see Chapter 1) though sparked by a different time and events are equally appropriate in this context of tragedy, burning issues and artistic priorities: 'The state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a sense of history that is in keeping with that insight.'[346]

What makes it even more tragic in this context is that Serumaga, like the vast majority of the Baganda and quite a number of other

[345] Seremba, George, *Come Good Rain*, first published in Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing Inc., 1993, Act 1, p. 28.
[346] Benjamin, Walter, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illustrations*, New York: Schoken Books, 1968, p. 257.

Ugandans as well, had, in the very initial phase, seen Amin as a beacon of hope. But their 'dreams', like Majangwa's fervent plan and hope, would soon be shattered; replaced by a long unending, postcolonial nightmare. The play concludes with a snapshot of a more sinister and dire phase of Uganda's contemporary history. Majangwa's disillusionment and despair, his impotence and his inability to do something about it, is one that would have resonated deeply among the audiences that flocked to the theatre on the opening of the play. Majangwa clearly becomes vituperative and violent towards those 'hapless' remains in a manner that vividly portrays himself and, by implication, his hitherto, sick, postcolonial society — getting worse. He is sanctioning himself to complete the work of a state whose hands are drenched in the innocent blood of its victims. David' s psychosis in *The Elephants* was referred to as state induced. Majangwa's could also, to an extent at least, be characterised in the same way. If we were once again to argue that Fanon's diagnoses are uncannily diacritical in the colonial and postcolonial settings, then Majangwa as well as David, in different ways, suffer from what 'psychiatry classifies as "reactionary psychoses".' And as Fanon, further notes 'prominence is given to the event which has given rise to the disorder'.[347] It is a frightening process that Majangwa is engaged in as he attempts to 'normalise' the grossly abnormal and foul deeds as well as blaming and victimising one-self. In this too, Majangwa and the author are analogously diagnosing and exposing an acute postcolonial pathology that many a Ugandan knew, but very few dared to speak of or name as the sick society got even worse: walked and waited for what appeared, ever so briefly, as a form of postcolonial deliverance only to find themselves even more worse off.

[347] Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (trans.) Constance Farrington, London: Penguin, 1963, p.201.

Amin's advent, as Rose Mbowa has observed, was regarded as a bountiful opportunity for 'the much hoped for rejuvenation.'[348] Note the use of the word 'hope', the degree to which the Baganda certainly and, a significant amount of the rest of the body politic, arguably, all yearned and waited for that downpour that would revive that unfortunate, dry, infecund, postcolonial entity of Uganda. But the people, like Majangwa, were soon to find themselves confronted by that perpetual, festering, intra-racial and intra-national inhumanity that became synonymous with Amin's Uganda. One of the first highly publicised, conspicuous, examples of that inhumanity came in the form the judge-turned-wealthy-businessman Michael Kawalya-Kaggwa. This is an example that has a bearing on Majangwa and the much discussed *mise en scène*. 'I should indicate', states Mbowa, 'that the rehearsals for *Majangwa* started before Serumaga found the ending for the play.'[349] Mbowa, who knew Serumaga well and was also intimately familiar with the theatre scene at the time, goes on to note: 'This was provided only three weeks before the scheduled premiere in Amin's murder of Michael Kawalya-Kaggwa, Buganda's leading tycoon. His charred body was found in his sports Mercedes Benz [...] with a bullet hole in his heart.'[350] That was in 1971, Amin had been in power for less than a year. So it was, really, only the beginning, but it was enough for Serumaga and some of his fellow Golden Age playwrights to know what the future held. Sights of that nature were to become ritually regular in Kampala, Namanve forest and many other places during Amin's reign of terror. In *Majangwa*, the moment that corpse is flung into their midst marks the end of the road for Majangwa. Majangwa must see something of himself mirrored in that corpse, a death knell to any dregs of hope he may have had to rejuvenate himself; hence his subsequent rage. But the act of insulting and beating the dead body is, to Mbowa, also Serumaga's deliberate way of

[348] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger, (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 1994, p. 128.
[349] Ibid.,
[350] Ibid.,

unambiguously 'registering the inhumanity of man to man.'[351] Mbowa goes on to say that Serumaga is also 'registering', 'above all,' the political and 'social reality' through [Majangwa's] plea 'to the fleeing Nakirijja'[352]: 'The Police won't come. They never do. [...] I will burn the body. I will destroy the evidence.'[353] Those who saw Kawalya-Kaggwa's remains in Kampala talked, among other things, about an apparent attempt to corrode both body and car with acid. You can imagine the tension with which Majangwa's final words in his appeal to Nakirijja were received in Kampala's National Theatre that November. As Rose Mbowa points out: 'The audience [...] was tense with fear'.[354] Here was a playwright who, however oblique and masqueraded his signification, had knowingly put his personal survival at tremendous risk, every single night of the play's run. As Mbowa sums it all up: 'Serumaga had trodden dangerous grounds, [by] alluding to one of the most recent and most scandalous political murders.'[355]

On that occasion the message seems to have been missed by the censors and Amin himself, who, alongside the cast and crew, is billed on the Program's cover for that (original production) as the opening night's Guest of Honour. If Amin — or more likely, those around him, who were endowed with the ability to decode these things — thought in November 1971, that *Majangwa* was a political intervention, critique, or exposé of Milton Obote instead of Amin, they actually were not far from the truth.

Most of the play is undoubtedly about the Uganda of Obote. The bulk of it was definitely written as a response to his much-discussed hegemony, in much the same way as the earlier *A Play* and *The Elephants*. Serumaga's response to the calamity, which befell his

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[351] Ibid.,
[352] Ibid.,
[353] *Majangwa*: *A Promise of Rains*, Act 2, p. 51.
[354] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger, (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 1994, p. 129.
[355] Ibid.,

people, by way of Obote's usurpation of power in 1966, can be seen right from his very first work, the novel *Return to the Shadows*. Then came *A Play*, which Macpherson, as was noted in Chapter 2, has described as 'an attempt at symbolic drama arising out of his [Serumaga's] perturbation at the 1966 crisis.'[356] It was also posited in the same chapter that if *A Play* is a portrait of the perpetrator (through the principle role of Mutimukulu), *The Elephants* is akin to a victim impact statement, primarily through David and Maurice's 'legacies' from their respective postcolonial States. Another thing that was noted earlier which is important to bear in mind is the need to read the work in a contrapuntal manner. It becomes a lot easier, with reference to the key symbols and images for example, to recognise that they may mean more than just one thing at the same time. The interminable waiting, the agony, the barrenness that is hinted on when Nakirijja talks about the lengthy silence her womb has endured (Act 1, p. 19); or her womb's failure to 'stir' anymore (Act 1,p.18); Majangwa's disillusionment, abject despair, the impotence — a number of these things apply to Nakirijja in varying degree perhaps — but also, figuratively, and in some instances literally, to the body politic that Serumaga has in mind. He also does not exclusively speak for Buganda alone, Buganda and Uganda overlap in *Majangwa* certainly. With the advent of Amin for example, he is speaking for one and all, all over the country.[357] But, as noted earlier, a great deal of *Majangwa*, like the earlier works is a response to Obote's hegemony. In a sense, it is no wonder that *Majangwa* is set on the side of a road; it is an appropriate image, usually applied to the struggle for independence. This is the postcolonial political path or route, one trodden by the populace under the panoptic hegemony of Obote. And that road is probably the key to

[356] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 14.

[357] Sometimes if one's grip slips, or they instantly feel uncertain as to whether it is Buganda or Uganda, it is best to remember that either way he is talking about inhumanity. With the exception of *Majangwa*, all the other work falls under Obote, otherwise it is either post-*Majangwa* or post-Obote: as in, under or during Amin's reign.

the world of Serumaga's symbolic terrain, and indeed, the postcolonial prerogatives, including, of course, the pathology/pathologies that he diagnoses and exposes.

'It's a good road. It can't stay empty for too long. (Act 1, p. 24) ' So says Majangwa, in an attempt to reassure Nakirijja (perhaps even himself), that the agents of his therapeutic remedy will definitely turn up and perform; and in so doing, heal him. He then reminisces, one of the things he excels at: 'I was on it. Travelling. A young man and his drum playing weddings across the Country.'[358] This is a remarkable memory in which Majangwa plunges into a mesmerising account of their first encounter; the marvels of art and creativity and illustrates, some, if not the very best of Serumaga's writing. But that road stands for a lot of things, and not many of them are wistful (as at the very beginning of the play, for example). Neither does it always trigger memories of the glory days for Majangwa and, by implication, the country, (in its pre-Obote days), presumably. At the very top of the play, Majangwa decks praise on the road and its magnificence; it is anthropomorphisized, as Majangwa muses to himself, but it is also chastised for allowing the lazy Nakirijja to continue treading on it (Act 1, pp. 6-7). That road speaks most vividly — and reveals the author's strategic location (narrative voice) and standpoint — when it becomes an agent for change or an embodiment of the nature and grave consequences of that radical change; politically, socially and environmentally. This change is ostensibly in the name of progress. In that process, the road earns itself a name or notoriety that leaves Majangwa with no way of describing it, other than: 'An act of murder. That's what this road is. An act of murder.'[359]

Majangwa may be uneducated, in the formal (Western) sense of the word, but this is no mere 'escapist bubble', or rant, that he blurts out every time he feels defensive or vulnerable. It is a thesis he expounds upon throughout the play as he explicates and fleshes it out

[358] *Majangwa*: *A Promise of Rains*, Act 1, p. 24.
[359] Ibid., Act 1, p. 27.

drawing from concrete examples and time-tested truths. The road provides incontrovertible evidence of the murder; hypothesised, proved and defended in his profound, philosophical treatise. To begin with, that road happens to go 'across the necks of two rivers.'[360] According to Majangwa, who draws his reference from living, archival, traditional lore, they are, in fact twin rivers. Obviously named, the same way twins have always been named in Buganda, Wasswa (the elder) and Kato (the younger) if they turn out to be male, which these two happen to be. As Majangwa himself puts it: 'They are children: Mayanja Kato and Mayanja Wasswa. Born of a woman as she sat on the raised ground up above.'[361] Those then, were the first murders, committed in the name of the road. In the name of 'progress', and the 'birth' or construction/imposition of a new society and a new order — as in the Republic of Uganda.

There are, therefore, two births: that of the twins and, one preceded by a double murder of the aforementioned twin rivers. There is nothing natural or evolutionary about the latter birth/murder, nor is it welcomed by any jubilation or euphoria. It is what it really is: a murder complete with technological apparatus and neo-colonial hands: 'The Italians with their yellow machines.'[362] A little later in the Act, the man behind the wheel even has the nerve to shout at the onlookers, in a manner reminiscent of apartheid South Africa: 'Get out of my way you people! Get out! Bloody Africans.'[363] It is important to note as well, that although Majangwa starts by singling out the Anglo-Italian construction giant Stirling Astaldi, a number of other multinational companies in the same business also make an appearance, including Mowlem and Solel Boneh. It is no accident or mere coincidence that they are mentioned. Serumaga may not have been a socialist, but it does not mean he was averse to criticising the banks or multi-national

[360] Ibid., Act 1, p. 28.
[361] Ibid.
[362] Ibid.
[363] Ibid., Act 1, p. 33.

conglomerates. In this case he is indicting the road-builders for colossal environmental destruction in postcolonial Uganda.

MAJANGWA

> So what they did was they drove their machines into the bodies of the rivers, crushing papyrus plants and leaving water-lilies desolate in the clearing. They moved mountains of stones and dust and stuffed them into the rivers, killing eels and mackerel.[364]

Those beautiful words aim to enrage any conscientious audience as they come face to face with the desecration and destruction of humanity's endowment from nature. And one ought to applaud Serumaga's vision in championing the environment, much like Soyinka does, through Bale Baroka, the village chief in his *The Lion and the Jewel*.[365]

But what happens to the twin rivers also befalls others as the reckless road makes its way 'across the necks of other rivers'. The landscape and other gifts from nature are also eroded; Kampala itself, the capital city and symbol of 'progress' had once been, 'a forest', 'Like the one behind [them] (Act 2, p. 41.)'. After that phase, the other ailments presumably began to afflict Kampala. The ultimate destination of the roads themselves is an interesting one, but more for its absurdity/senselessness. It goes 'all the way [...] right up to a small house in the middle of the road where a man tells you one country ends and another one starts (Act 1, p. 29).' So much for construction, many would certainly say, concurring with Majangwa.

The other side of the road is obviously far more sinister and ravaging. Majangwa is not convinced of the death of the twin-rivers at least: 'From time to time, the asphalt peels where the body has moved deeper; and the people from the Ministry of Works come [and patch it up] (Act, 1,p. 29).' Is this an ironic warning to those behind the massive destruction of the resilience of nature and its remarkable indefatigability? Perhaps so, but it is still cold comfort considering the magnitude of the painful damage that Serumaga so vividly depicts.

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[364] Ibid., Act 1, p. 29.
[365] Soyinka, Wole, *The Lion and The Jewel*, London and Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1963.

That havoc and destruction is not only confined to the environment but also to the people as well as their culture. Majangwa attributes the loss of their house to the same mean-spiritedness, cruelty, envy and malice behind those who wreak havoc on the environment under the guise of progress (Act 1, p. 31). The flames that devoured their home also took everything they had ever owned — the Ngalabi drum, included. They were now beggars and their song and dance-act days of the recent past, followed by 'some play with words and faked actions' (Act 1, p. 31.), were over, replaced by the non-simulated pornography that the audiences yearned for.

That is what happened to them as individuals but the societal and cultural destruction plays itself out in a vivid enactment, by Majangwa and eventually, Nakirijja too:

> MAJANGWA
>
> And when he got to the village of Tanda he came face to face with an anthill.
>
> NAKIRIJJA
>
> Who?
>
> MAJANGWA
>
> Stirling Astaldi [...] In the middle of the projected road stood an anthill. There it was, a termite mountain, painfully raised out of the red earth, nurturing in its maze of cavities, white ants, big driver ants, small driver ants and the queen ant [...] a world concealed beneath a piece of rising ground. But the road had to go on, another act of murder.[366]

This excerpt and the scene from which it is taken, is one whose importance cannot be overemphasised. This is due to its thematic centrality, the ailments that afflict the Buganda and Uganda of his day. But it is also a scene whose subject goes beyond the confines of the parameters of this section. Through a distancing device Serumaga conjures up the battle of Mengo, replayed as a so-called 'adventure of metal against earth.'[367] The two sides in the 1966 'crisis' do not appear as equal combatants; it is the might of Uganda's federal army (under Obote's supreme command) poised against Sir Edward Mutesa and Buganda. One side is literally armed to the teeth. The other seems to be hardly prepared for that kind of encounter. In reality, Mutesa, a trained

[366]*Majangwa: A Promise of Rains*, Act 1, p. 32.
[367]Ibid., Act.1, p. 32.

and spirited soldier, did resist formidably, particularly so, given the extremely limited number of troops as well as arms and ammunition at his disposal, on that fateful 24th of May 1966. For Obote, who had already suspended the Constitution and was being legitimately challenged in the courts: 'the road had to go on' as Majangwa says and 'naturally', that called for 'another act of murder.'

That, Mutesa, the Kabaka (is figuratively speaking) the Queen ant in this context, really goes without saying; that anthill 'in the middle of the projected road' is the palace of Mengo (the village of Tanda in the play), and the entire intricate institution and cultural tapestry, that is, Buganda. All, some see of it, or will ever get to understand, if at all, is the surface of it. But there is 'a [whole] world concealed beneath a piece of rising ground' (Act 1. p. 32.). What is being destroyed is a labyrinth-like complexity of the monarchy, the Baganda, their clans, culture and tradition. Behind those 'yellow machines' and dictums is Obote, a man who had decided that it was easy and necessary to stamp out all that the anthill signifies — all that had deservedly become the norm among the Baganda. To some commentators, such as the Ugandan scholar Samwiri, Lwanga-Lunyigo:

> No one, however brilliant or well informed, can come to such fullness of understanding [...] to judge and dismiss the customs and institutions [of a people]; for these [customs and institutions] are the wisdom of generations after centuries of experiment through the laboratory of history.[368]

That though is exactly what Obote did on 24 May 1966 when his troops stormed the palace of the King (Kabaka) of Buganda. The battle of Mengo was no walkover, even though Obote's troops did finally triumph, 'boasting' a figure of no less than 2, 000 deaths among the civilians who had vowed to perish fighting for their King. As Phares Mutibwa has noted: 'scores of these civilians were loaded on to army

[368] Cited in Mutibwa M. Phares, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes*, London: Hurst and Company, 1962, p. 60.

trucks and disposed of ' [in the River Nile,] 'or by being buried alive in common graves.'[369]

In the long run, Obote's victory was hollow. Its toll on Buganda, though, cannot be underestimated. In *Majangwa*, it is clearly evident through the road and its devastating impact on the environment, as well as the people and their cherished institution; encapsulated in that anthill — and of course, in what that 'termite mountain' stands for. Serumaga unequivocally states through Majangwa's dispossession that, in Obote's 'wisdom', even the symbols had to go up in flames. 'They burnt our drum too. [...] Why did they burn our drum?'(Act 1, p 31.) Those few words serve as a reminder of Mutesa himself who died in exile and abject poverty in East London in 1969. One would not be going beyond the realms of plausibility by reading into the dispossession and abject poverty — an attempt, to a certain degree — to parallel the plight of his character with that of the Kabaka of Buganda. If one looks at the diachronic text, at the historical events that bubble underneath Serumaga's tale, the callous and malevolent destruction, one cannot help but recall as Majangwa bemoans that drum, the loss of what amounted to a sacrosanct set of drums in the Kabaka's palace at Mengo in 1966. As Mutesa himself has noted:

> Among the sad news of who is dead, who is in prison and what is destroyed, comes confirmation that the Royal Drums are burnt. These drums, of which there are more than fifty are the heart of Buganda, some of them hundreds of years old, as old as the Kabakaship.[370]

Some of those drums would have been close to, if not older than 500 years old. The phrase 'children of the drum' is used in reference to the Kings of Buganda, which speaks to the reverential aura and high esteem in which those drums are held. Their wanton destruction provides a telling example of the malice and folly of those who did all they could to put asunder a lot of what defined the Baganda and their institutional and cultural essence, which Obote sought to erode

[369] Ibid., p. 39.
[370] Mutesa the II, *Desecration of My Kingdom*, London: Constable Press, 1967, p.193.

overnight. Those drums definitely fall under what Lwanga-Lunyigo refers to, earlier in this section, as 'the wisdom of generations after centuries of experiment through the laboratory of history.' The only consolation seems to lie in the analogous indestructibility of the twin rivers, for example, as Majangwa himself says of them: 'I doubt whether the rivers are really dead.'[371] Every now and then, he continues, 'the asphalt peels where the body has moved deeper; and the people from the Ministry of Works come and dig it up and renew the headstone.'[372]

Undeniable as the hope implied in that analogy may be, it is a faint and extremely testing one. No wonder, therefore, that a lot of the Majangwa we see is one whose solace is more easily drawn from the past; a past that becomes increasingly escapist. It is also that very past that has driven him to the solitary spot along the highway to wait for some sort of redemption, rejuvenation and cure. The Kampala they have left behind is quite unwell, having been ravaged environmentally, but it is also plagued by a number of societal ailments. The Kampala — of their pre-pornographic performances days, was already sick; but contemporary Kampala is much worse. Materialism and greed are its key afflictions and Majangwa keeps returning to them. The play literally reeks with them. The woman in the Kampala suburb of Ntinda, who makes her four different boyfriends purchase the same bunch of bananas for her, is one such example (Act 2, pp. 42-44); so, too, is 'That [telling] look on the face of the bank man', his pockets, though full to the brim with money, he has absolutely no qualms about ignoring 'the outstretched hand of a crippled beggar (Act 2, p. 36).' As if that is not enough, there is the question of murders. On more than one occasion, it is Kampala that Majangwa has in mind when he says, 'The City is a nest of little murders (Act 2, p. 41).'

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[371] *Majangwa: A Promise of Rains*, Act 1, p. 29.
[372] Ibid.,

Many an inhabitant of Kampala would have readily agreed with Majangwa. To many, there seemed to be a hand of the state in these sinister robberies and murders, popularly known as *Kondoism*. The word *Kondo* connotes professionalism and the use of weaponry during the acts of robbery. The hand of the state moves the robberies beyond the realm of greed into the world of state-sanctioned terror. Mutibwa does not appear to subscribe to the 'state-sanctioned' dimension. He does, however, note the 'prevalence' of Kondoism and that the State's 'apparent inability [...] to stamp it out caused general frustration and a sense of grievance against Obote's government.'[373] This 'frustration' and 'grievance' would explain some of the ways in which the audiences in Kampala would also have shared Majangwa's anxiety and despair during the long, interminable wait along the highway. For the audiences, the author and a vast majority of the populace, Amin's advent, for a little while at least as Rose Mbowa has observed, would have therefore been regarded as a bountiful opportunity for 'the much hoped for rejuvenation.'[374]

Their hopes, like Majangwa's, would have been shattered when that redemption arrived in the form of a dead body that turns the stage and the street into two, hitherto different entities or individuals that become insolubly linked and now sing from one and the same page. As for Majangwa, shattered as he may be, he is also akin to a prophet by predicting that those systematic killings will reach even the solitary place the bedraggled couple now occupy. In Majangwa's own words: 'One day, one fated day, they [the murders] will reach out even to this very spot (Act 2, p. 41.).' That they clearly do in a matter of hours. And so, for Majangwa and the nation, in spite of the expectations, the reality is that things have gone from bad to worse. The deliverance the people had hoped for did come, or so they thought, but it arrived in the person of Amin; and the condition was, therefore, even worse than

[373] Mutibwa M. Phares, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes*, London: Hurst and Company, 1962, p. 69.
[374] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger, (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 1994, p. 128.

what they had endured under the grip of Obote. Majangwa himself thinks, much like Serumaga and many of those who thronged the streets to celebrate Amin's overthrow of Obote (ever so briefly), did believe the rains had literally arrived. Instead it was the beginning of a scorching, unprecedented drought. An unprecedented and unimaginable postcolonial pathology began to instantly take root. That ailment is allegorically embedded in the dead body that is flung onto the stage to, forever shatter Majangwa's hopes and dreams of rejuvenation.

It is not as often that African artists have placed 'themselves' at the centre of their creative tales. Whatever attributes he may share with the real/original anti-hero, Serumaga's Majangwa is certainly of his own coinage, and is an immensely original character. Majangwa's plight, his abject despair, impotence and his 'white rage' at the very end of the play, must also be seen as speaking to the helplessness of the artist and the inadequacy of his trade and medium as an interventionist tool in the acute social and political crises.

Serumaga's *Majangwa* is also an unambiguous, cautionary note to those artists who opt to trade their integrity in, by succumbing to society's ever changing, 'shopping list' of ideas and desires for monetary gain.

> NAKIRIJJA
> And I told you: don't give in to the crowds. Don't pander to their whims. Stick to the drum, I said and I to the dance. But no you had to start. Plays you called them, funny words and actions. In between the songs you talked and played with me. It was alright in the beginning, but the crowds taunted us and asked for one more inch. [...] After that it was only a matter of time before I had my back to the pavement.[375]

And the pornographic spectacle the couple became is unfortunately what they will always be remembered for; not for Majangwa's expertise and their initial acts. The society's role in how they ended up in that situation is also bound to be forgotten; highlighting even more, their own role in the compromise. And one need not look any further

[375] *Majangwa*: *A Promise of Rains*, Act 1, p. 30.

than Majangwa's impotence to see the astronomic price of that compromise, with an audience that is perhaps even more fickle than the Roman crowds one encounters in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

Horn has intimated that 'Above all, the play's argument has been criticised by some [in the academy] in East Africa as fundamentally reactionary and suggestive of an unwelcome elitism.'[376] That is an allegation that, frankly, would have held more sway in the days of a bipolar world. A world in which, if your ideological umbilical cord was attached to Moscow, China, East Germany and so forth, your views tended to be unproblematised and deemed to be as good as indigenous. One need not go further than the Hollywood studios, for example, to realise the validity and uncannily contemporary nature of Serumaga's cautionary 'sermon' to the artist about money, integrity and the perils of compromise. How different is that audience from a Hollywood producer? Many a screenwriter/director would say that this is a question whose answer is much too obvious to merit the affirmative response it solicits. The perils of lethal compromise play themselves out by way of Majangwa's plight. If there is such a thing as a secularised parable, *Majangwa* is one. And if Horn is right, then it is probably the first elitist one. In condemning Majangwa for his deal with the 'devil', the play does not veer away from Serumaga's strategic location, sub-textual and overt concern for his society and his, as well as society's aversion, to the 'proverbial', seemingly endless inhumanity.

It is also important to point out that Horn is really never as distant from those he refers to as 'some in East Africa'.[377] Almost invariably he is referring to two individual scholars that loosely fall under the label of the Nairobi School of Literary Criticism. And bubbling under the alleged 'reactionary' and elitist views is the question of individualism/solipsism. More often than not, these critics and scholars fail to declare their own interests, ideological convictions

[376] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding, (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 108.
[377] Ibid.

and inherent conflict. Serumaga's work was far more complex than these gentlemen like to admit or seem to understand. So too, was his life. His humanism may have gone against their dogmatic socialist 'grain'; but it was, nonetheless, a redoubtable humanism, one that was rooted in the values of his people, and in many ways, far from ragged individualism. You may recall the following exchange from *A Play*; it sheds some light on Serumaga's strategic location and is probably closer to his much more complex view of these things than 'some in East Africa give him credit for.

> (...*Peter looks at John. Suddenly John bursts into action. He shouts, jeers spits, turns his buttocks to the audience, farts and runs back to Peter, breathing heavily.*)
>
> PETER
>
> (*amazed*) Who did you see?
>
> JOHN
>
> My bank manager. What does he think he is doing,
> Coming to my hanging with my overdraft in his hand?
>
> PETER
>
> Well, its his money.
>
> JOHN
>
> And its my hanging remember? [378]

That brief excerpt alone is enough to cast a shadow over those unsubstantiated allegations about Serumaga as a kind of unadulterated capitalist. Think too about Stirling Astaldi, Solel Boneh and Mowlem, the multinational conglomerate road-builders in *Majangwa* (Act 1, pp. 31-33). In yet another instance, Majangwa reminds us of the ugly face of materialism: 'The common human bond made out of along string of green Bank of Uganda notes that binds us all to one another' (Act 2, p. 41). One thing that is unequivocally clear through these multiple instances is, that neither he (Majangwa) nor Serumaga is delivering a panegyric to the Banks, money, or even the individualism or elitism, alleged as Horn states, by 'some in East Africa'. Among the ranks of those that Horn refers to, as 'some in East Africa' is Andrew Horn himself, evidently.

Thankfully the limits of this binaristic criticism do not take too long to emerge. Sooner or later, what starts as earnest analysis and

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[378] Serumaga, Robert, *A Play*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p. 95.

critique, in Horn at least, eventually strays outside Serumaga's texts, into his life in order to castigate Serumaga for what the texts allegedly 'espouse'. If the texts exalt anything akin to individualism, it is in an allegorical manner. Furthermore, to say that society bears a significant brunt of the blame for the couple's 'fall from grace' is not to exclude Majangwa's role as part and parcel of the architectural team of his demise. Both Nakirijja and the author, it seems, critique Majangwa for what a critic in Nairobi's *Sunday Post* described as losing artistic, practical and realistic 'direction' and living 'in his imagination'.[379] The play is no castigation or disavowal of society, certainly not in the way the allegation is made, neither is it an espousal of individualism or elitism. In addition, before deploying words such as *reactionary*, one could also argue that it is important to exercise caution and vigilance, since, even to this very day, they could well be regarded as pejoratives. *Majangwa's* complex, dualistic narratology does allow Serumaga to extol the virtues of art on the one hand and to unambiguously spell out the 'wages' of compromise, the vulgarisation of Majangwa's art and act, in the name of commerce. The dangers and risks to which Majangwa falls prey are even more rampant now than they may have been at the time the play was written.

Dramaturgy and Idiom

Mbowa has noted, 'that the rehearsals for *Majangwa* started before Serumaga found the ending to the play. This was provided only three weeks before the scheduled premiere'[380] It was provided, as already observed, through the brutal and tragic murder of Michael Kawalya-Kaggwa. The problem here is not a thematic one; it is, rather, a dramaturgical one. The ending feels too rushed, rather sudden, and imposed. It may have been clear to the audiences, who feared for Serumaga's own life but even so, it strikes an inorganic, discordant

[379] See *Cultural Events in Africa*, 77, 1971, pp. 2-3.
[380] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, 31, 1994, (revised and enlarged) 2003, p. 128.

note. Some damage control, perhaps even a solution, could be found in performance. This would be, and I am indebted to Kalundi for this suggestion: through prolonging Majangwa's verbal and physical ire — his 'duel' with the corpse.[381] Production can provide a panacea, to an extent at least, because to portray Majangwa as one, who, like David (in *The Elephants*), is getting mentally deranged, or to let the play descend into melodrama, as it appears to, in those brief, final 'beats'; would undermine, whatever degree of empathy, the audience may still have for Majangwa and his valid concerns throughout the play; as well as undermine, in however small a way, Serumaga's own strategic location.

Referring to some of the audiences who attended the earliest (Kampala) run of *Majangwa*, Macpherson has noted as follows: 'Others found the circular nature of the dialogue puzzling and felt that the two principal characters were unable to be so articulate in the particular sophisticated way that Serumaga has made them speak.'[382] Macpherson does not clearly spell out where she stands, but this is more than mere *reportage* after an event, it is an attempt to politely express her reservations about a play many now consider to be the very best of Serumaga's scripted dramas. That honour did not simply come with the passage of time: there were many critics in the Kampala and Nairobi of 1971 who were elated by *Majangwa*, and who definitely would have differed with the eminent Macpherson. And the euphoria of *Majangwa's* reception seems to have washed over a wide array of people including those from outside East Africa. 'I heard some "foreigners" say', notes one reviewer in Nairobi's *Sunday Post*: 'that

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[381] This suggestion came out of an e-mail I received from Kalundi on December 27th (2006); it was part of a response to my feelings towards the play's very end. My concerns about the ending date as far back as the fall of 1986 in Winnipeg, where I happened to have played Majangwa in a production at the Manitoba Theatre Centre; (Warehouse Theatre). Larry Desrocher directed it; Suzanne Coy played Nakirijja.

[382] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 16.

this was the best play they have seen in Africa.'[383] And there are many more commentators who would not subscribe to Macpherson's views in this respect. What does she mean by the circularity of the dialogue, for instance? That Majangwa and Nakirijja keep going 'back to the future', which in this context is their past, and for the most part, nothing really happens. But why should anything happen? In an Aristotelian, plot-laden drama, that may be a pre-requisite, but as Soyinka has posited in a different context: 'the ontology of an idiom is subservient to the burden of its concerns.' [384] The point is that this is a play about two characters as well as a society that waited in agony, groaning under the hegemonic load of Obote's initial 'reign'; for a few fleeting moments that accompanied the 1971 coup, the people were euphoric, but that redemption had arrived in the person of Amin. A choice between the two, as the populace soon realised, really amounted to no choice: they had moved from a pogromatic hegemony to a genocidal one.

As for Macpherson's assertion (cited in the previous paragraph) that 'the two principal characters were unable to be so articulate in the particular sophisticated way that Serumaga has made them speak', it is, sadly, the kind of thing that one is bound to hear about Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon as well. The problem with this is that it tends to be an observation that says more about those who make allegations of that nature. Majangwa and Nakirijja may have had no formal education but that does not render them incapable of articulating their feelings and beliefs with their unique sophistication. Incidentally, Nakirijja seems to be mathematically proficient, Majangwa turns to her when he attempts and fails to calculate the sum total of money made by the 'serial monogamist' lady, who supplements her income by making each of the four different boyfriends pay for the same bunch of bananas she happens to have purchased already (Act 2, p. 43). The point is that both Majangwa and Nakirijja have little or no formal

[383] See *Cultural Events in Africa*, 77, 1971, p. 3.
[384] Soyinka, Wole, *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 64.

education at all, and they certainly do not speak English. With that in mind, one could argue that Majangwa and Nakirijja's lack of formal education makes it easier for Serumaga himself to delve more deeply into his linguistic heritage. One of the most indelible accomplishments of the play is its ubiquitous use of language, which will be discussed in a moment.

Macpherson has gone further by taking issue with Serumaga's dramaturgy: 'Majangwa is not a play if you look for action and excitement and a development from point A to climax point B and catastrophe or resolution point C but it is a fascinating theatrical experience.'[385] Here too, one cannot help but beg to differ. This is where she actually tips her hand. If we recall Macpherson's euphoric praise of *The Elephants*, we remember how she commends Serumaga for 'the gradual revelation of the experiences out of which the personalities in *The Elephants* have developed.'[386] She then says of that 'gradual revelation' that it 'has a rightness, a 'probability' to use Aristotle's phrase.'[387] That allusion to Aristotle and his *Poetics* is an invocation of a classical structure and a plot. But *Majangwa* unequivocally breaks away from it. Macpherson knew Serumaga enough to have known that he would never settle with rigid ways of fashioning his dramas. It is Macpherson, after all, who once described Serumaga as a 'restless intellect' who, almost by definition — is always 'experimenting in a new way.'[388] The point is that on this occasion Macpherson's orthodox adherence to Aristotle is inappropriate for the non-Aristotelian dramaturgy of *Majangwa*. Serumaga opts for a more character-driven narrative, and even then one that is held together by their reminiscences and re-examination of

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[385] Macpherson, Margaret, 'What Happened to Majangwa?', *Mawazo* Vol. 4, No. 4, 1976, p. 69.
[386] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 16.
[387] Ibid.,
[388] Ibid., p. 17.

that 'festering' past; which seems to confound Macpherson, hence the allegation of narrative/dialogic circularity.

Thankfully, Macpherson notes a number of dramaturgic and idiomatic accomplishments that can best be designated as milestones in Serumaga's quest to indigenise the theatrical sign. In her own words: 'Many were excited by [Serumaga's] increased awareness of [his cultural heritage], evidenced, both in characterisation, character, dialogue, [...] proverbs and such features as the dancing and drumming.'[389] There are a number of other attributes, which must be acknowledged: the movement sequences, for example, the 'plays' within the play, and the multiple role-playing of Majangwa (predominantly).

Serumaga's indefatigable quest to indigenise the sign, though obvious in *The Elephants*, is no doubt even more fruitful in *Majangwa*. It is as though he is armed with a wider palette, using a lot of the 'colours' drawn out of his own heritage. This is manifested through Serumaga's use of the devices that Macpherson lists above and others too, such as storytelling. Satire is yet another example of those attributes of the play which Serumaga drew out of the well of his heritage into the tapestry of *Majangwa*. As Serumaga himself put it, presumably before *Majangwa* was written:

> True, one does not find a theatre in East Africa with the same level of formalisation as in Europe. On the other hand, the practice of people getting together to watch the story-teller act out his story, or to hear a musician like the famous Sekinoomu of Uganda relate a tale of trenchant social criticism, dramatised in voice, movement and the music of his Ndigindi (a one-stringed Lyre) has been with us for centuries. And this is the true theatre of East Africa.[390]

The allusion to 'trenchant social criticism' should be read as, among other things, a commitment, critique and disclosure of the ailments of the day — be they social or political. One may read this in the same statement, but in idiomatic terms, satire, images and symbols were ubiquitously utilised tools; ones that Sekinoomu and other artists

[389] Ibid., p. 16.
[390] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda's Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, p. 54.

employed even more, given the severe reality of signification and survival. Incidentally, Sekinoomu, like Serumaga, is from Buganda. The glowing reference to his legendary status is no accident. The esteem with which Serumaga regarded artists of Sekinoomu's ilk is evident in the fact that Sekinoomu is, indeed, one of three artists — Temutewo Mukasa and Namale (the Songstress, perhaps) being the other two — to whom the playwright glowingly refers in the play. This is done through Majangwa, in the memorable scene in which he tells of his first encounter with Nakirijja, in the early, unsullied days of glory (Act 1, p. 25). It is fair to surmise that those artists, too, would have deemed Serumaga worthy of salutary attention for being a tireless miner of his linguistic heritage.

Majangwa is a play whose dialogue is endowed with proverbs and aphorisms translated from Serumaga's mother tongue (Luganda). The result is a language infused with a lyricism and a remarkably transparent poetry. It is a poetry that one feels and notes, whilst remaining ever cogniscent of the subject matter. Even a casual glance at the tragic, satirical and very theatrically charged demolition (Stirling Astaldi) scene, for example (Act 1, p. 32-33), testifies to that deceptively simple, poetic, assured delivery of one who, having lived overseas for a long while, has perhaps re-learned his language and heritage at the feet of his largely rural and oral society.

Yet another of the most memorable examples of Serumaga's facility with language concomitantly illustrates a 'virtue'/ ability which, Macpherson herself, identified: 'that has been present in all his plays', as far back as *A Play*; Serumaga's 'involvement in the symbolic and poetic potential of the local setting'.[391] In *Majangwa* this setting is vividly and memorably rendered in microscopic, economic and poetic detail. Majangwa's description of the Chief's court, his earlier days on the road (long before things fell apart), which also happens to be the

[391] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 18.

very first time he and Nakirijja met, is probably the most noteworthy for its poetic simplicity (Act 1, pp. 24-27). Horn though, has alleged thus, in relation to the proverbs and language: 'The dialogue, thickly aphoristic and metaphorical, sometimes demands the leisure of the book reader rather than the fixed time of a theatre listener.'[392] Based on the comments by Macpherson in relation to the 'setting', 'the symbolic and poetic potential' as well as my own observations, I respectfully disagree with Horn. And that allegation of literalism and an apparent 'aversion' to aphorisms and metaphors makes Horn seem to gravitate, more and more, into the ranks of scholars such as Adrian Roscoe, for whom Serumaga will never be good enough.

The dialogic/monologic wealth of the 'Chief's court scene' has already been singled out for its linguistic attributes. It is, though, in some ways rivalled by the descriptions of the road, as well as, the twin rivers. Both the road and the twin rivers do really come to life straight from the very first scene of the play. They are at least two examples of that vivid, economic and memorable animation, as well as poetic rendition and exploitation of 'the local setting.' 'What a waste!,' Majangwa says of the road, for example, which he goes on describe as 'firm of muscle, flat- bellied, long, outstretched, waiting for the ravishing approach of the travellers feet (Act 1, p. 7).' That is an illustration of a quality; and one, as noted a little earlier, which Macpherson lauds and identifies as an attribute that goes right back to Serumaga's *A Play*. And it is an ability that is evident both in the specifics of *Majangwa's* setting and in a lot of the key moments and places alluded to, or invoked by the couple; as they journey through their past and peer into a remote future.

There is certainly much more to the road than the edifying, anthropomorphisized entity that Majangwa chastises at the very beginning. The road is an image of a ferocious political entity, a construct erected in the name of another constructed entity: the state.

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[392] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding, (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 108.

To read/see *Majangwa* is, in some way, an experience that inevitably conjures up some of Fanon's disenchanting and painful observations: 'This is not a state that reassures the ordinary citizen, but rather one that rouses his anxiety.'[393] The state that Fanon diagnoses seems to be afflicted with even less ailments than the postcolonial Uganda of Serumaga's *Majangwa* and, indeed, the Uganda of those times. A lot of the 'anxiety' and suffering is a result of the physical and psychological horror that comes home to the audience, courtesy of that road. That road is, in both its physical and symbolic manifestation, a far cry from the anti- or post-colonial fervour and things, such as progress, for which it ostensibly stands.

Majangwa has already been substantially discussed in terms of both its synchronic and diachronic texts. Serumaga's allegorical exposé takes a number of forms and symbolism is undoubtedly a key aspect of it. Majangwa's drum, for example, is a key symbol; its destruction denotes the callous disregard for the Baganda and their monarchy that amounts to a pathological hatred. While the drum signifies the monarchy, the anthill is a more palpable and complex, symbolic embodiment of the monarchy, as well, the society at large; a people and a culture. That is all literally wiped out by the uneven technological might of the road builders. It is not so much a confrontation between two adversaries, as it is a walk over. Serumaga, then, provides a symbolic landscape that is decaying and dying of the most unnatural of deaths in what amounts to a postcolonial wasteland. Restrained as Serumaga is, he provides a comprehensive insight into the pogromatic and genocidal architects of this postcolonial disaster. Obote and Amin, though never mentioned, maintain a significant sub-textual and textual presence. The destruction of Majangwa's house and their drum and more so, 'the adventure of metal against the earth'[394], in which the anthill is squelched under the wheels of the monstrous tractor, reminds one of yet another of Fanon's observations on

[393] Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (trans.) Constance Farrington, London: Penguin, 1963, p. 132.
[394] *Majangwa*: *A Promise of Rains*, Act 1, p. 32.

postcolonial power run amok:' It makes a display, it jostles people and bullies them, thus intimating to the citizen that he is in continual danger.'[395] One probably does not need to be intimately familiar with Obote's Uganda to concur with Fanon, even though the state he has in mind appears milder in its excesses compared to Obote's Uganda, the focus of the bulk of *Majangwa*.

Obote's first 'display' would have been in the Kampala suburb of Nakulabye.[396] Only two years after Independence (1962), with Obote as Prime Minister, a dispute over the contentious, so-called lost counties, to which both Buganda and Bunyoro had claims, was 'resolved' in Bunyoro's favour. The Baganda were disappointed and restless. Obote used their democratic protests as an opportunity to let the army loose on the Baganda. The result was the Nakulabye massacre, which, as Mbowa observes, took the lives of 'innocent Baganda school children and civilians'.[397] The playwright Byron Kawadwa also lost his father in the same panoptic 'exhibition'. Then, on 24 May 1966, the army, under then-Colonel Idi Amin, was ordered to storm the palace of Sir Edward Mutesa. The battle of Mengo unambiguously served to intimate to the Baganda and other like-minded Ugandans that Nakulabye was a comparatively civilised episode. After the pogroms that came with the battle of Mengo, the writing was on the wall: Obote had unequivocally intimated, 'to the citizen', if one may invoke Fanon's words (cited a little earlier), 'that he [was] in continual danger.' Submission and silence were the intended orders of the day. Those who cried out against it, particularly in the arts, only had to recall what happened to Kawadwa in 1966 and Okot p'Bitek in 1967 (imprisonment and exile respectively).

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[395] Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (trans.) Constance Farrington, London: Penguin, 1963, p. 132.

[396] Incidentally, Nakulabye happens to have been one of the fixtures on the daily itinerary of townships where Majangwa and Nakirijja entertained their crowds.

[397] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in: Eckhard Breitinger, (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, University of Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, No. 31, 1994 p. 125.

In spite of that, Serumaga, Kawadwa, Ruganda and other playwrights, felt compelled to protest and resist. This they did by signifying in ways that would not encumber their limited freedoms, or indeed, their very lives. Almost invariably, those symbols and the satire would sometimes speak so vividly that the audiences themselves would be scared for the playwrights. One example of this is the ending of *Majangwa*. In the much cited *mise en scène* that brought the theatre and the Kampala street together; through the corpse that reminded one and all of a recent state sanctioned murder. Without doubt, the parallels and echoes to Obote's development and master plans, the absurdity of it all as well, would not have been lost on the audience either.

To further reiterate the malaise behind the sub-textual and thematic preoccupations of the play, Serumaga offers us a brief glimpse into the mind of the political architects. It is a brief but poignant moment that takes the form of a re-enactment. Once they run over the anthill in the Stirling Astaldi, play-within-a-play scene, Nakirijja and Majangwa instantly debate what to do. Majangwa suggests more of the same: road building (with all its implications, of course). On the other hand, Nakirijja suggests naming it 'Majangwa and Nakirijja Avenue' (Act 1, p. 34). In those few lines, Serumaga provides a single aspect of a postcolonial/neo-colonial profile of Obote, Amin and many of their counterparts by way of the lengths they go to feed their egos. It is no exaggeration to categorize that naming 'ritual' as a 'modest' step towards a process of self-apotheosization.

Eventually, the same road also offers the anxious couple something that comes perilously close to redemption but only for a brief moment. A car does certainly stop; indeed, the couple in it are probably coming from a movie. Prior to the assumed act on the backseat though, the young lady who steps out of the car to relieve herself '*stumbles on* [a dead body] *and falls* (Act 2, p. 51).' That corpse shatters the dreams and, with them, any lingering hopes for the rains of Majangwa's rejuvenation that is proclaimed in the play's subtitle. Death, therefore, finally reaches what would have appeared to

be a salubrious spot. It is not only Majangwa's hopes that are shattered; so, too, go those of the entire nation.

To discuss the dramaturgy and idiom of Majangwa is to also discuss the pathology of a postcolonial state. The images and symbols that Serumaga deploys also go a long way in helping him achieve an aesthetic goal: the indigenising of the theatrical sign. A time -honoured feature shared by Serumaga and artists from other genres, such as Sekinoomu who Serumaga alludes to earlier, is the 'trenchant' social critique. He does not use the word *satire*, but it is definitely one of the qualities he implies in that reflection on the precursors/parallels in form/genre, to the Western theatrical cultural sign. And Serumaga's job, therefore, was not just to see how he would emulate, satirise, and employ any other devices he needed, but to also ensure in that process, that he would be able not only to signify but to also ensure his survival, given the stifling hegemony of his postcolonial reality. Hence the use of satire, as well as symbolism, and part of the staple for that symbolism, was obtained through another aspect of his 'contemporary past': mythology.

Myth and mythopoeia

Roland Barthes has defined 'myth' as 'a type of speech.'[398] It can also be technically described as a double signifier. It operates in accordance with *Saussurean* or semiological rules, but it is concomitantly rooted in metalinguistic signification. But if myth is moved by way of adaptation, or made up in terms of figuration; once it becomes part of the creative fabric — by way of a song, a painting, a play, a poem and so on — then, in technical terms, it becomes: mythopoeia. Both Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss would probably agree on this.[399] But neither Barthes' secularism nor Strauss' formalism would, in my opinion, bring us any closer to the context in which I wish to examine

[398] Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, (1957) excerpted in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, Massachusetts (USA) and Oxford (UK): Blackwell Publishers, 2001, (Appendix One): p. 1119.
[399] Strauss, Claude-Lévi: *Structural Study of Myth*, (1958) excerpted in Ibid., pp.101-115.

myth. Derrida cites Jean-Pierre Vernant as follows: 'Thus myth puts in play a form of logic, which could be called — in contrast to the logic of non-contradiction of the philosophers a logic of the ambiguous, of the equivocal, of polarity.' [400] In other words those who seek to understand myth or its use in an African postcolonial context must, first of all, cast away a logocentric episteme. Because to get into the mythological realm is to attempt to understand the ontology or what Soyinka has summed up as 'the explication of being.'[401] One of the deepest sources literature still draws on in Africa is mythology[402]; and that 'explication of being', the answer to the why-and-how of the human plot could well be the most important thing to note about myth and its ontological essence. By ontology we are referring to the idea, the materiality of myth, not so much what the designation stands for.

In the Introduction to his much reprinted book *African Religions and Philosophy*, John Samuel Mbiti makes an observation that has a lot more to do with myth that one may think at first glance: 'Africans are notoriously religious [...] Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not [always] easy [...] to isolate it.'[403] The African world is, in general, highly complex, in part due to its loose, uncompartmentalised nature. Religion permeates many aspects of African life. It is impossible to isolate it from philosophy, for example. Myth is a key area that one must turn to for a deeper appreciation of the religious beliefs and spirit world of the various African peoples. Geoffrey Parriander has also noted thus: 'myths make

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[400] Cited in "Chora" by Jacques Derridda, this essay is appended to *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), but for this occasion I read the version of "Chora" translated by Ian Mcloud in a very interesting collaboration and architectural or "sculpted" looking book, a philosophical and architectural collaboration between Derrida and the equally renowned architect: Peter Eisenman. See: Derrida, Jacques and Peter Eisenman: *Chora L Works*, Jeffrey Kippins and Thomas Leeser (eds.), New York, NY: The Monaceli Press, 1977, p. 15

[401] Soyinka, Wole, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p.1

[402] In Soyinka's aesthetic both myth and literature play a sacerdotal and liturgical role in relation to the Gods of Africa and its people, but literature also fulfils other human needs, hence I believe, the use of the phrase: 'further service on behalf of human society (p.1).' The service here is not only spiritual but also secular I presume.

[403] Mbiti, Samuel John, *African Religions and Philosophy* (2nd Edition), Blantyre (Malawi) and Portsmouth (NH): Heinemann Educational Ltd., 1989, p. 1.

a sacred history of a people.'[404] One difference that should be pointed out between Africa and Europe, specifically in relation to myth, is that in the West legends tend to be curiously regarded as being synonymous with myth.[405] The same is true of folktales, fairytales or secular myths. Legends are by definition chronicles. They belong to the living archives of peoples' heroes and history, whereas myths encapsulate the divine, the sacred, the Gods, the origins of a people, of humanity, the earth, life, disease, pestilence, death and other phenomena.

The primary focus of this section is on myth as 'origins' and the divine or 'sacred history'; perhaps even more important, how it is used and what its utilisation implies artistically/theatrically in relation to Serumaga's *Majangwa*. The first example of mythopoeia in *Majangwa* is encountered Act 1(p. 2). When Majangwa berates Nakirijja for her slow pace and alleged laziness, he invokes the memory of another woman, a figure of legendary prowess. The woman, who happened to have been pregnant, was walking to a place called Nkumba. Long before 'she arrived' though, says Majangwa, 'the pains took her [...]. Those who knew placed the birthstone upon her and she brought forth twins — two rivers.'[406] According to Majangwa, it was, in fact, a more difficult process. With the first baby of a river (Kato) out, 'she had to walk for days, another birth pending between her thighs', before the second baby/river (Wasswa) was finally born. Majangwa cannot understand why Nakirijja is incapable of covering 'the distance between [those] two rivers' considering it was literally no match for the woman who brought the twin rivers, Mayanja Kato and Mayanja Wasswa, to life.

It should be pointed out that the first of the (male) twins in Buganda is always named Wasswa; it is the latter that is named Kato.

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[404] Geoffrey, Parriander, *African Mythology*, London: Chancellor Press, 1996, p. 14.

[405] There is a slight touch of irony in this looser or broad classification since the West (at the risk of totalising), the post-enlightenment (17th century) West as noted from Foucault's observations on Chinese taxonomy, in *The Order of Things* (1966), for example, is notorious for its rather febrile desire to compartmentalise and categorise at the earliest opportunity.

[406] This quotation and the others in the same paragraph are from *Majangwa*: *A Promise of Rains*, Act 1, p. 8.

It is hard to think that Serumaga may have forgotten that fact, in haste, perhaps, by turning the younger twin literally into the first-born. There is absolutely no doubt, based on the script from which all the parenthetic references come, that the first-born twin is here referred to as Kato instead of Wasswa. Here, it is Mayanja Wasswa who is born last. Neither Mbowa nor Macpherson or any other scholars appear to have ever questioned this inversion. Those unfamiliar with the traditional naming order among the Baganda may want to be alerted to the inversion in question.

The order or authenticity of the naming aside, there are a number of vital things to note. To begin with, this is organically woven material. It is not a lecture or disguised attempt to 'preach' mythology. Nor is it an attempt to plunge into myth purely as an end in itself. It is, rather, a result of what the characters think of each other and their world; how they interact and the inevitable tension and contentiousness that characterise this relationship. By using mythological material, Serumaga anchors his play locally, and firmly, in Uganda and, specifically, Buganda. He also begins an incremental but characteristic, 'involvement in the symbolic and poetic potential of the local setting'.[407] The use of mythological narrative, alongside the proverbs, aphorisms, story telling and other devices, also provides yet another solid example of Serumaga's fruitful quest to indigenise the theatre as a cultural sign. It should also be pointed out, that to discuss myth/mythopoeia in *Majangwa* is certainly not to end the discourse on dramaturgy and idiom, or in fact, symbolism.

One could also posit that the fact that the nation that those rivers represented were actually children, a representation likely to disturb even those that might be indifferent to the colossal environmental destruction, and way of foregrounding the human toll of Obote's project. But this is a mythological narrative, and it serves as a living

[407] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 18.

reminder that takes the people back into the realm of the Gods, specifically with regard to morality, social/moral transgressions and taboos, as well the consequences and punishment that follow. As Majangwa puts it: 'I forgot to tell you another thing: the woman was made pregnant by her brother (Act1, p. 29).' Society's attitude to incest and the inevitable, divine, punitive response to that transgression cannot be spelt out more emphatically. In so doing, mythology serves a role that, in this respect, it shares with proverbs and folktales; a rather informal way of instilling morality. Incidentally, Mbiti has posited that: 'It is in proverbs that we find the remains of the oldest forms of African religions and philosophical wisdom.'[408]

It is to mythology that we would have to turn in our quest for the origins of the twin rivers: Mayanja Wasswa (older) and Mayanja Kato (younger). 'Both history and pre-history', as Mbiti observes further, 'are dominated by myth.'[409] Considering that myth's preoccupations are predominantly divine, one would rightly infer that the history Mbiti has in mind is of the spiritual, as opposed to the secular variety. In providing those historical accounts, myth's role becomes specifically exegetic. As an exegetic medium, myth then provides a master text; an explanation, or answers to key questions about our being. That does not necessarily mean that any society will ever get to the bottom of those questions. If nothing else, myth certainly provides the closest account to 'the explication of being.'

In *Majangwa*, Serumaga starts with the origin of the two rivers and then, later on in the play, through a rather grim discovery that Majangwa makes in the second Act. Majangwa stumbles over something soon after relieving himself. A few moments later, he discovers where they are. It is a place that he, incidentally, refers to earlier on, during 'the Stirling Astaldi scene' (Act 1, p. 32.), without knowing that they happen to be in, what turns out to be, the village of Tanda. Tanda is far from an ordinary village. To speak of Tanda

[408] Mbiti, Samuel John, *African Religions and Philosophy* (2nd Edition), Blantyre (Malawi) and Portsmouth (NH): Heinemann Educational Ltd., p. 67.
[409] Ibid., p. 4.

among the Baganda, is to return to where it all started according to Serumaga's people — their genesis. But this mythological tale is also about how death came among the Baganda. In this case it is triggered by an innocuous stumble that leads Majangwa to a milestone, which enables him to know exactly where they are. It is that discovery that plunges the mystical, tradition-espousing Majangwa into the narrative of where it all began, as Kintu and his wife Nambi journeyed to this part of the earth that many years ago. Incidentally, Kintu and Nambi are the founders of the nation of Buganda.[410]

Majangwa

> Long before you and me there was a beginning. Long
> Before dry winds blew across the red earth there was
> A beginning [...] Twenty clans who knew life but did not
> Death. Then from east of the rising sun they arrived. Men
> and women and children. At their head: Kintu, the first in
> a long line of centuries. Yes, Kintu and his wife Nambi
> and their hen. Yes, that hen. For when they first came they
> had left Death behind, east of the rising sun.[411]

Serumaga's tale unfolds in much the same way as the oral archives tell it. Kintu and Nambi are on their way down to the 20 clans of Buganda; a community that knew life, but to whom death was not even in the lexicon. That was to change almost instantly. They had brought their hen with them, but had forgotten its food. When Nambi returned to pick up the hen's food, death was awake and death followed her. But Kayikuuzi (a friend to humanity), the legendary digger of tunnels, followed death in relentless pursuit.

But at the village of Tanda, Death decided to go underground into the belly of the earth. Even there, Kayikuuzi, the legendary digger of tunnels, pursued him through a crack that Death had dug in the village of Tanda. Through that opening, Death regularly returns in search of victims for his insatiable appetite. To this day, incidentally, it is not

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[410] The choice of the word nation is a very deliberate attempt to eschew any references to 'tribe' in this discourse. It is, after all, a floating signifier that the colonial masters coined to serve their Orientalist desires.
To this very day, it is not uncommon for the Baganda to refer to one another as *Abaanabakintu* (children of Kintu).

[411] Serumaga, Robert, *Majangwa* (*A Promise of Rains*), Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974, p.48.

unusual for commuters to throw coffee beans and coins as they cross that river and go over the cracks on the tarmac in the village of Tanda to placate the irrepressible Death. Not far away in the same village is a hill where intercessions are made and sacrifices offered to the oracle of Death.[412] Anyone driving along that road is at some point bound to notice a crack in the tarmac. That is the same crack that Majangwa notices.

Among other things, myth provides the very setting of Serumaga's *Majangwa*. This is certainly no ordinary setting. It is the side of a road, but it is a road that runs 'across the necks of two rivers', which are far from ordinary. Then, of course, what neither Majangwa nor the audience knows is that the village of Tanda is really where it all unfolds. To a degree, the use of mythological material moves the proceedings away from the 'illusion' of the theatre into a more concretised truth, one for which they do not even need to suspend disbelief, the realm of the real (however surreal), if not the authentic.

There could not have been a better choice to set a play with a death motif in its 'score'. In fact death is more than a motif here, it is one of the key themes. The ancient Kingdom of Serumaga's Buganda dies in some ways. The same is true of art, however much Majangwa rationalises about their 'latter day performances'. The same can also be said about morals and values in the wake of urbanisation, technology and dictatorship. In addition, perhaps to begin with, the glowing, feeble wick of Majangwa's virility, in the end, has indisputably burnt out. And the corpse at the very end could well be a mirror image of what awaits him in fairly short order. The key theme is, therefore, augmented and advanced by the setting itself, which becomes part and parcel of the plot in the nightmarish mime (scene)/dream sequence where Death emerges. It is warded off by his eternal foe (Kayikuuzi), before he devours Majangwa (Act 2, p. 50). That scene, is interestingly

[412] For more on the origin of death among the Baganda and how death came to stay in their midst, see Kaggwa, Apollo, *Ekitabo Kye Mpisa Za Baganda*, Kampala: Uganda Printing and Publishing, 1918, pp. 209-210. There is also an English translation by Ernest B. Kalibala, *The Customs of the Baganda*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1934.

described as 'a carefully choreographed dance of death as death tries to eat [Majangwa's] "prostrate" 'figure, 'Kayikuuzi wins and death flees (Act 2, p. 50).' The mime, dance and the implicit drumming do not only enhance and heighten the visual and aural as well as physical rendition and tension, they also point to more elements in the process of indigenisation of the sign. Incidentally, Death — as noted at the beginning of the chapter — was played by Byron Kawadwa who also donned a mask for this occasion.[413]

This discussion of myth and mythopoeia, in reality, also serves as an extension of the earlier section on dramaturgy and idiom. If there is a salient thread that runs through both of these sections it is Serumaga's quest to indigenise the sign. At the same time, one cannot but see the work as a response, critique, exposé in the form of protest and resistance to the postcolonial pathology that had assailed his country. The deployment of mythology, the pressing of it into symbolic service, can also be read, at least in part, as a distancing device. Serumaga's work and that of many of his peers had evolved, as Mbowa also notes: 'into a vehicle for political commentary and criticisms'.[414] Given the equally burning factor of safety and survival, the signification had to attempt to surmount or, in some way, efface itself by way of chronological distancing. Myth pays extra dividends since, in this respect, it is almost tailor-made. In this sense, myth is an example of what Serumaga would describe as 'clarification by metaphor and the distortion of outer reality'.[415] Traditional registers seem then, to ironically have offered a means of signification and survival, far much more than they would have ever been called upon to in the past. But Serumaga is also providing an analysis that takes the

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[413] I was informed of Kawadwa's 'attire', the mask in particular, during a recent interview with Kalundi (Serumaga). It is yet another example of indigenisation of the theatrical sign by Serumaga.

Incidentally, the role of Kayikuuzi was assigned to Jack Sekajugo. Sekajugo was as renowned an actor as Kezia Nasejje, who was popularly known as (Ms. Elivania Agaati) or Dan Zirimenya, popularly known as (Mwami Kyesswa).

[414] Ibid., p. 125.

[415] Serumaga, Robert, 'History of the Abafumi Theatre Company', *Sunday Nation* (Nairobi): January 29th, 1978. p. 20.

form of isolating some of the different parts or aspects that comprise the entire entity or creation, which is the sum of the various parts. The play as a totality is a sign that combines a sort of signifier and signified, in terms of his interventionist content on the one hand, and the disguised form, on the other. In the end it is hard to draw an arbitrary demarcation between the two.

As Serumaga also states sometime before *Majangwa* was written: 'Between the theatrical technique of the foreign play, the symbolism of tradition, and the controversy of contemporary issues, a synthesis of body and spirit must be achieved.'[416] Serumaga is obviously reflecting further on his aesthetic in terms of form as well as content. 'The foreign' or European 'play' is an acknowledgement of the initial theatrical sign. This is a lifting of the veil from the work as total sum to the parts that ultimately become the totality of a play at the time. A point was made earlier about myth and mythopoeia not jettisoning, but enhancing the role of symbolism in Serumaga's dramaturgy and idiom. Serumaga's own view seems to corroborate that observation, due to the centrality of myth in its timeless, traditional form, but also as part and parcel of a here and now, that includes the deliberately nuanced reference (earlier in the paragraph) to the evils of the day, as 'the controversy of contemporary issues'. Mbowa's earlier reference to the Ugandan theatre evolving 'into a vehicle for political commentary and criticisms', illustrates the degree to which political response, by way of artistic intervention, had, in effect, become the *modus operandi* for Serumaga and his contemporaries. Given the wealth of the evidence in this context, it is hard not to wonder whether Horn is not in substantial denial, when he posits that: 'In form, *Majangwa* bears an arresting resemblance to Athol Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, although without Fugard's political resonances'.[417] Incidentally, if there were any aesthetic affinities between the two

[416] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda's Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, Vol. III, No. 3, Spring 1970, p. 53.
[417] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in: Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa (A Reader)*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 108.

plays, in the form of inter-textualisation, they would not have escaped Horn's eye. Indeed, it should also be pointed out that as Horn notes in footnote 48 of his essay: 'Serumaga saw Fugard's August 1971 production of *Boesman and Lena* at London's Young Vic theatre [...] most of [*Majangwa*] had already been written well before Serumaga's visit.'[418] There is no need to plunge into a discussion of Fugard's play. Horn's contention though, that *Majangwa* is devoid of the 'political resonances' that one cannot miss in Fugard's indictment and excoriation of apartheid and its hierarchichised racial binaries in *Boesman and Lena*, goes against the grain of far too many facts and evidence, based on all that has been discussed so far of *Majangwa*. Horn may merit a more worthwhile examination under nationstatism; it is the politics of that which appear to have rendered him ostensibly deaf and blind to the teeming political and conscientious cauldron that *Majangwa* undeniably is.

Nationstatism

All of Serumaga's work prior to *Majangwa* falls under Obote's first tenure (1966-71). The bulk of *Majangwa* is also focussed on the same period, but then the history of Uganda shifted gears. This turns the play into a bridge to Amin's tenure (1971-79). It is less than a year into Amin's rule that *Majangwa* was produced in Kampala for the first time. *Majangwa,* and all the works that preceded it, must be read/seen with the 'ancient' binary in mind of Uganda (state) 'versus' what was once known as the kingdom and autonomous nation of Buganda. To a lesser, but not insignificant degree, the same binary can be read into the general dynamic between the north and the predominantly Bantu south. It is important to keep that binary in mind and all that came with it by way of inhumanity and the postcolonial occupation of Buganda.

The question of individualism/solipsism on the one hand and activism on the other, can also, arguably, be attributed to that binary (State versus Buganda) mutating itself into a form of literary criticism/

[418] Ibid., 115.

performance analysis. It is therefore important to tease out the side of the Ugandan political fault-line on which certain critics and scholars stand. On occasion, the process is not even that intricate; since nothing is really nuanced or hidden, as certain commentators go as far as stepping out of Serumaga's work, into his alleged politics, in order to discredit the work. The acid test that reveals and unites most of these commentators is their refusal to acknowledge the facts and the inhumanity that Serumaga and a number of the other Golden Age playwrights were crying out against.

In his book *The Black Man's Burden*, the Africanist scholar Basil Davidson casts his eye on the perils of the postcolonial nation state in Africa. He notes, among other things, that 'the nation-state in Eastern Europe — but just as in Africa — has failed to meet the high claims of its promoters and the promises of its propagandists.'[419] One does not even have to cite any particular sources to posit that the freedom and sovereignty a lot of Eastern Europeans may have hoped for, after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, soon turned into subjugation at the hands of the Soviet empire. One can also, legitimately turn the clock back to Western Europe itself, as Davidson does. Victor Emmanuel and his troops, for example, helped complete Garibaldi's vision of a united Italy in 1861. Not long after its unification, 'the new Italian nation-state would turn quite shamelessly to colonial enterprises in Africa.'[420] Germany's pre-Second World War socialism and nationalistic fervour soon led to the Holocaust. Italian fascism is also due, in large part, to nationalistic fervour. So nationstatism had or would fail where it was born and in latter day Central and Eastern Europe. Davidson's contribution can only be described as a bold and 'long-overdue' intervention into what he rightly designates in the subtitle, as *Africa and the Curse of the Nation State*. A colonial doctrine, relic and entity, the African nation state — for far too long and with tragic consequences — was and continues to be embraced

[419] Davidson, Basil, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State*, James Currey: London and Random House: New York, 1992. p. 18.
[420] Ibid., p. 127.

even as its colossal costs rise to prohibitively inhuman tallies. It is a far cry from the lofty ideals of emancipation, progress and democracy that gave birth to nationstatism in Europe. Davidson's incisive critique takes us back not only to Berlin 1885 — the partition of Africa — but to the home grounds of the imperial powers themselves where the so-called nation-state was born. He then goes on to discuss its limitations, failure, the myth of the transplantation to Africa, the wholesale disregard of Africa's emancipation: 'Liberation thus produced its own denial. Liberation led to alienation.'[421] The nationstatists' in Africa chose to turn their backs on their own history, civil society and other indigenous institutions. Instead they spouted the same colonial rhetoric, tribalising what were once proud, full-fledged nations and in Uganda's case, attempting to unite the rest of the postcolonial polity against the now demonised region of Buganda. All this, it is important to remember, was done by the postcolonial African leaders-cum-masters to entrench themselves and perpetuate their schemes. Africa as a whole did virtually nothing to address the colonially drawn borders; they were, if anything, sanctified. That kind of ahistorical thinking and the innocent blood that would be shed over unnecessary, inter-territorial wars over colonially drawn borders; would not go forever unnoticed by Davidson and others.

It is in that kind of spirit and overwhelming concern that Wole Soyinka has posed an interestingly informed question to the union of Africa's leaders: 'Does the Union intend, for instance, to beam its searchlight on terminating, as rapidly as possible, the cycle of wars that are waged so murderously over colonially awarded national boundaries — such as the recent Ethiopian-Eritrean bloodbath?[422] The African Union (formerly known as the Organisation of African Unity) trained a panoptic eye on its innocent inhabitants and for panoptic purposes. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o put it: 'Many of the states in Africa exist

[421] Ibid., p. 10.

[422] Soyinka, Wole, 'King Baabu and the Renaissance Vision', in: John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan (eds.), *African Drama and Performance*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 12.

merely to ensure that their populations do not rise against the new order.'[423] As for the leaders of those states and their Union radically terminating the endless territorial inter-territorial wars, Soyinka goes on to posit thus, with regard to the African Union: 'If it [the Union] does [stop those wars], it will have proved that the continent has indeed reached maturity and resolved not to perpetuate, as mindless agent, the callous disregard, indeed contempt, for African peoples that motivated the cavalier manner in which the continent was carved up in the first place.'[424] Soyinka's concern is due to both the inter-territorial as well as intra-territorial strife and bloodletting.

In Serumaga's *Majangwa*, the road, the drum and the anthill serve as perfect illustrations of that 'callous disregard [and] indeed contempt' and gratuitousness of postcolonial nationstatism. This is a pathology characterised by, among other things, a desire to enforce ahistorical nationstatism by attempting 'more or less' a 'complete flattening of the ethnic landscape.'[425] As Davidson notes a little earlier, to the new, postcolonial generation of African leaders, 'the ideology of nation-statism' implied that Africa's 'wealth of [diverse] cultures' which found themselves sharing the same nationstatist beds, 'were regarded' as nothing more than 'an impoverishment.'[426] To some degree, perhaps, Article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution would, have heartened Soyinka and Davidson. Subsection (1) of that 'revolutionary' document states as follows: 'Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.'[427]

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[423] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics*, Oxford: James Currey, Nairobi: E.A.E.P. and Portsmouth (NH): Heinemann (A Revised and Enlarged Edition), (1997), p. xii.

[424] Soyinka, Wole, 'King Baabu and the Renaissance Vision' in: *African Drama and Performance*, John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan (eds.), *African Drama and Performance*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 12.

[425] Davidson, Basil, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State*, James Currey: London and Random House: New York, 1992. p. 103.

[426] Ibid., p. 98.

[427] For the rest of Article 39 on 'Rights of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples', see, *Constitution of The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*; adopted on 8th December 1994, (trans.), from Amhraic, by Wolbert Smidt, June 2,000. One of the numerous sites to find it on the Web is: www.jurisafrica.net/

Ethiopia's Constitution was adopted after decades of war with the now neighbouring, autonomous Eritrea (and after years in the dictatorial rule of General Mengistu). Ethiopia is also a Federal Republic, much like Uganda was before Obote's 1966 coup. At the time of Independence in 1962, Uganda had agreed a Constitution, which, though not a replication of the pre-colonial past, was cogniscent of the histories, wealth of differences and diversity of the Country and its peoples. Mutibwa, Mbowa and many others have noted, that Obote's1966 Constitution was introduced 'in Parliament — while the building was surrounded by armed soldiers; the members of Parliament were advised that they would find copies of the Constitution in their pigeon-holes after the meeting.' Mutibwa also cites Ginyera Pinycwa just before this observation, noting that: 'the spirit of the 1966 [Obote] Constitution [was] "one of anger and unitarism" as opposed to the spirit of compromise, "tolerance and pluralism" which infused the 1962 Constitution.' [428] Neither Davidson nor Soyinka use Uganda as a case study, but the inevitable parallels are inescapable.

In spite of the resonances of the Ugandan situation in what Soyinka and Davidson state, one begins to think about the importance, for postcolonial scholars and theorists to speak more of postcolonialities and multiple entities as opposed to a kind of monolith that will forever be branded by that appalling colonial experience. Anne MacClintock speaks very passionately and convincingly about the need for the postcolonial to avoid self-inflicted constrictions and the risk of anachronising itself. In her essay 'The Pitfalls of the Term "Post-colonial",' MacClintock points to something that is directly relevant to the Ugandan situation: the question of what has hitherto been described as an occupation. In her own words — and the italics are hers: '*Internal colonisation occurs* where the dominant part of a

[428] Mutibwa, M. Phares, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes*, London: Hurst and Company, 1992, p. 58.

country treats a group or region as it might a foreign colony.'[429] The Baganda may have been the single largest group, but the reality of the nation state and Obote's goals turned them into a minority as Obote strived for an entity in which most of (the rest of the country) was pitted against them. Whether internal colonisation or occupation is the most appropriate term is not as important; but this largely theoretical excursion was necessary, as a forceful reminder at the very least, of how Davidson's '*Africa and* [its] *Curse of the Nation State'* and its accompanying pathologies played themselves out in Uganda, in Serumaga's *Majangwa,* and in the works prior to it. But again, there are still those who have opted, in their reading of *Majangwa*, to be impervious to its concerns, and the diachronic text it comes out of.

The Ugandan scholar Mercy Mirembe Ntangaare has noted that, 'While Mayanja Kato, the younger son grows into a perfect river, his twin brother Mayanja Wasswa, is a chaotic force.'[430] More importantly, though, while Ntangaare is right about Mayanja Kato turning into 'a perfect river' as the script itself states (Act1, p.8), even after numerous close readings and searches, her contention that the second born/twin river, 'Mayanja Wasswa, is a chaotic force', leaves me unconvinced. It does not appear to be borne out by evidence that I seem to encounter in any part of the text. The bibliography at the end of the essay in which that claim is made clearly cites the same edition of the play as the one used in this thesis. If Mayanja-Wasswa 'is a chaotic force' of a river, that is more a matter of opinion — not textual fact. And the chances of it being a sub-textual 'fact' seem extremely remote.

The only possible explanation for that conclusion appears to be rooted in an interpretative investment, in an assertion turned into self-fulfilling prophecy, that enables Ntangaare to fit the twin rivers into a

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[429] McClintock, Anne, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term: "Post-colonial" ', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, Edinburgh Gate; Harlow and Essex; England: Pearson Education Limited, 1994, p. 295.

[430] Ntangaare Mirembe, Mercy, 'Portraits of Women in Contemporary Ugandan Theatre', in Jane Plastow (ed.), *African Theatre: Women*, Oxford: James Currey, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, and Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2002, p. 59.

frame which coheres with the proof of an 'ontologically prior'. Even on purely literalist grounds, Ntangaare makes herself fall within the deconstructive zone. She clearly knows what she is doing by overemphasising the chaotic nature of the second of the two rivers. Soon after the allusion to the 'chaotic force' of a river, as she typifies the second of the twin rivers, she posits something that seems to reveal why she distinguishes the two rivers in the way she does:

> Mayanja Kato represents the Kabaka (traditional ruler) of Buganda Sir Edward Mutesa ... while Mayanja Wasswa represents Apolo (sic) Milton Obote [...] who organised the coup which led to Uganda's second, and in Serumaga's *view* [Italics mine] illegal government. [431]

It is important to remember that Mayanja Kato is the first of the two rivers to be born. True, it is described as 'a perfect river', but does it really symbolise the Kabaka of Buganda: Sir Edward Mutesa? In my opinion it does not. Obote and Mutesa were not related in a biological or cultural sense. The emphasis in that mythological tale is on the space between the two births and indomitable courage exhibited by that mythological figure: the mother — compared to Nakirijja. Incidentally, Ntangaare clearly states that figure's name as Nagaddya. What the script indubitably states is that she (the mother) was on her way to a place called, 'Nkumba, the home of Mukasa and his wife Nagaddya (Act 1, p. 8).' The mythological figure remains nameless. More importantly these are not rivers that are set against each other. If the second or the younger brother of the two (rivers) symbolises Apollo Milton Obote, then Serumaga would have clarified that in the subtext or the text, which he does not do. His interest in the rivers is mythological and anthropological; they also happen to be a product of an incestuous coupling. They are anthropomorphisized and are probably best remembered as symbols and evidence of the wanton environmental and other destruction in the name of building both road and state.

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[431] Ibid.,

Ntangaare is right about the play as an analysis and critique of 'Ugandan politics in the early post-independence period (1962-67).' She also tellingly mentions the Obote coup of 1966 'which' in her words, 'led to Uganda's second, and in Serumaga's *view* [italics mine], illegal government.'[432] The piracy with which Obote assumed office and absolute power in May 1966 is not a matter of opinion, it is a matter of law. One must ask, borrowing McClintock's question from a different context: 'by what fiat of historical amnesia'[433], would Obote's 'accession' to power, be characterised as anything but illegal? To Ntangaare, then, the law is really a matter of an opinion that Serumaga holds and probably an idiosyncratic one at that. One need not remind Ntangaare of the innocent lives that were lost in that process and all the other atrocities that were visited upon the populace even before May 1966; the 1964 Nakulabye massacre being an incontestable example. Perhaps, not surprisingly, Ntangaare goes on to note that: 'As a staunch Muganda (member of the dominant Ugandan ethnic group the Baganda) and a monarchist, Serumaga could not possibly accept Obote, because no-one could be seen as ruling the King.'[434]

Well, Obote was already 'ruling the King'; the Kabaka may have been an elected President of Uganda, but Obote was the Prime Minister in accordance with the 1962 federal Constitution. For the record, Buganda's monarchy was a constitutional one and the Lukiiko at Mengo where the local/regional government of Buganda was located, wielded a very significant degree of authority, if not much more than the King. This was true even before the 1962 (Independence) and the pre-1966 federal structure. To characterise Serumaga's attitude in the manner Ntangaare does, and to boil things down to a repugnant, visual semiotic, takes away from the colossal illegality of Obote's accession,

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[432]Ibid..

[433] MacClintock uses the expression in a very different context in an essay, which was cited earlier in this section. See MacClintock Anne, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-colonialism" ', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, (eds.): *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory (A Reader)*, Edinburgh and Essex: Pearson Education Limited: 1994, p. 294.

[434] Ntangaare Mirembe, Mercy, 'Portraits of Women in Contemporary Ugandan Theatre', in Jane Plastow (ed.), *African Theatre: Women*, Oxford: James Currey, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, and Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2002, p. 59.

and risks, for Ntangaare, charges of 'critical activism' and even worse: the infantilisation of Serumaga, a man she curiously refers to as 'Uganda's pre-eminent playwright'[435]. One need not have been 'a staunch Muganda'; neither does one have be from Buganda, nor indeed, does one have to have been 'a staunch'— anything; to see the hegemony and inhumanity of Obote's Uganda. And no one should be infantilised for that, or cast into a tribesman-like, pre-literate mould, reserved for a simpleton of a creature (in transition) that could one day enjoy the light of Obote's or Amin's fascism or indeed, be crushed by the wheels of progress and nationstatism. This is not to say that Ntangaare is in any way 'Aminist'. This is, simply, a deconstruction of nationstatist literary criticism/performance analysis of a congenital ahistoricism, selectivity and *aporia* in relation to contemporary, postcolonial events and facts.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Horn also weighs in on *Majangwa* in a way that can best be described as symptomatic (however varied his comments may be from Ntangaare's) of a nationstatist kind of myopia. Horn begins by comparatively pitting *Majangwa* against the 'political resonances' of Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*. I would argue, however, that even as he circumnavigated the choppy seas of signification and survival under the panoptic glare of post-independence fascism, Serumaga did not put *Majangwa* through a thematic emasculation; his diagnosis of the postcolonial pathology and its debilitating inhumanity remains unequivocally clear. Horn's apparent failure to detect the obvious 'political resonances' is a misleading and patently false claim. It may, however, provide a useful example of the 'pathology' of certain postcolonial critiques that emanate from those who have cast their own fortunes in, with an unproblematised, sanctified, nationstatism. Horn goes on to suggest that 'But while Serumaga sees society as a demonic assailant, Fugard sees community as the only salvation, one denied by

[435] Ibid.,

the cynical divisiveness of an oppressive state.'[436] There is really no need for binarising the two authors. What Horn unfortunately illustrates here is a cynical selectiveness and unnecessary divisiveness.

Considering that both Horn's and Ntangaare's views appear in relatively recent publications (2002), it certainly has taken a long while for certain postcolonial scholars and Africanists to be disabused of their conflation of oppression with progress. Their unswerving belief in an imposed, debilitating, unitarist, sanctity of a colonial construct that Obote's Uganda is, has rendered them impervious to the excesses and hegemony that made certain denizens of Uganda and elsewhere in Africa long for a return to colonial rule. As Mutibwa noted, 'It is hard for us African nationalists to say this, and it is not to underestimate the evils of colonialism,' but the fact remains that 'the irony of our [post-Independence] history is that the agonies to which people have been subjected often did not start with the arrival of the European colonisers but with their departure in the 1960's.'[437]

Horn too, may subscribe to this statement, but only in so far as it applies to the Uganda of Amin, not, it seems, to that of Obote. He evidently could not have read or seen the final parts of *Majangwa*, which undoubtedly point a finger at Amin, as well; if he had, then a degree of inhumanity would have been visible. The *mise en scène* that has been numerously cited in this chapter also seems to have escaped Horn's attention, in his hasty characterisation of the play as one without 'political resonances'. To Horn, Serumaga's potent symbols, such as the road as leveller of the anthill and the entire, complex world it harbours, its destruction, (an incontrovertible example of ethnic cleansing) and 'an act of [colossal] murder', all imply, absolutely nothing, politically. Neither does Nakirijja's satirical suggestion to name it after themselves, or even murder as a spectatorial sport, which conjures the public firing squads that were to become part of ordinary

[436] Horn, Andrew, 'Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga', in Frances Harding (ed.), *The Performance Arts in Africa* (*A Reader*), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 108.
[437] Mutibwa M. Phares, *Uganda Since Independence*: *A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes*, London: Hurst and Company, 1992, p. ix.

life in Amin's Uganda. To Horn, all these potent symbols are not political. If Horn is to be believed, then things such as, progress — as an illusion; the neo-colonial theme; epitomised by Stirling Astaldi and other multinationals; the rampant materialism that afflicts Kampala; the ecological wrecking of Kampala and other areas; must be references to another play and not *Majangwa*, even though they would be obvious to virtually anyone who pays close enough attention to the play. Obote's plans and master plans which are echoed in the exchanges between the duelling couple, Majangwa and Nakirijja's alienation, their palpable disillusionment and despair, all seem to have been missed by Horn. In reading Serumaga's *Majangwa*, Horn and others would be well advised to take heed of these words by Basil Davidson: 'nationalism has shown itself a contradictory creature. Its brutalities have outmatched its mercies, its losses have effaced its gains, and several times over.'[438]

Horn's other 'charge' is that, society is regarded by Serumaga 'as a demonic assailant', instead of the agent of 'salvation'. This is just a variation on a major theme in the critical discourse; the key allegation made about Serumaga as individualist/solipsist, who syllogistically, therefore, must be devoid of a social conscience or activism. It is an allegation that is not rooted in fact. Mbowa, Macpherson and the vast majority of commentators would strongly disagree with that allegation. *Majangwa* alone provides overwhelming evidence of art as an intervention on behalf of, not just the artist, but also Serumaga's entire society. Not all of Majangwa's downfall is 'authored' by the 'fifty cents'/ 'one- more- inch' society; Majangwa himself bears a significant brunt of that blame; having gone against Nakirijja's advice and pandered to the whimsical crowds. But there are also as many ways of making art, as there are artists; if Serumaga extols the 'individualist' way, that does not make him an artist that is elitist and one who reviles society. As for Majangwa and the society that supported him on only to

[438] Davidson, Basil, *The Black Man's Burden*: *Africa and the Curse of the Nation State*, James Currey: London and Random House: New York, 1992. p. 16.

desert him later, again, the blame goes both ways. One does not have to do a close reading of the play to come to that conclusion. It is only those who have a vested interest in maintaining the illusion of Serumaga as an individualist, elitist, and solipsist, who will deny that Serumaga's individualism is allegorical and probably aesthetic; if they were to accept that fact, then their hypothesis would collapse, rendering them unable to prove, what is in reality, no more than 'an ontologically prior', that Serumaga is an extreme individualist and elitist.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of the chapter, *Majangwa* first opened in Kampala at 7:30 p.m., on 13th October 1971. There was a guest of honour at the National Theatre that evening whose capitalised name and title appear in the *Programme Magazine*: 'His Excellency'; General Idi Amin Dada. For the record, these things were done for people to protect themselves, probably because it was no longer enough just to survive the Censor.[439] In the Golden Age years, the bulk of which happened to be under Amin's rule, this was a strategically essential practice and should therefore not be regarded as a contradiction. All authors were also probably aware of the possibility of this practice backfiring, which would have meant the paying of a fatal price.

Amin's presence at *Majangwa's* opening highlights the question of signification and survival even more. It was also a presence that was perpetually there even in his absence, due to his well-manned, notorious State Research Bureau and other organs of repression. The allegorical individualism certainly enhances Serumaga's aesthetic pursuits, but it does not obscure (to a point of incomprehension) Serumaga's unambiguous response to the inhumanity, his severe critique of the powers that be, and exposé of an acute, postcolonial and

[439]Now it is almost standard operating procedure, but, I am reliably informed that, sometimes, the practice of inviting the Head of State to an opening (as President Museveni has been on numerous occasions, apparently); also means interminably lengthy periods of waiting.

neo-colonial pathology. *Majangwa* is a rare illustration of art as a form of resistance against the hegemony; not just in the name of the Baganda or Uganda's Bantu South, but indeed, for all who cared as deeply. For certain critics and scholars though, activism is congenitally tied to expediency, to the prioritisation of the nation state, an irrefutably relative and alien construct that is not only ahistorical, but has indeed done Africa far more harm than good. To be a good and loyal Muganda should not be perceived as being anti-Ugandan. One could be both under the Federal Constitution that Obote abrogated in 1966.

Following on from *Majangwa*, Serumaga, he of the 'restless intellect', to borrow Macpherson's description of him, was already aspiring to indigenise the sign even more. This he was to do through the formation of a new company: The Abafumi (Storytellers) as a first step that would literary turn into a giant leap for Serumaga. Even the conventional dialogic sign would soon be regarded as a liability in the wordless play *Amayirikiti* (*The Flame Tree*) and to a significant extent, the one that preceded it and launched the new company: *Renga Moi* (*The Red Warrior*). In both these plays, as well as in *Majangwa* and the earlier work, the quest for an African idiom, together with the prodigious talent and sense of the theatrical, are put through a single test based on contemporaneity of the concerns, signification, survival and interventionism.

Chapter 5

Renga Moi and Amayirikiti:

Of Myth, Ritual and the Contemporary Past

> The artists from Uganda refreshed the whole fresco of the Belgrade International Theatre Festival giving it the glitter Of the savannah, and an intoxicating breath which has been in the past brought to only by the 'Kathakalia' and the 'Living Theatre.' [440]
>
> — *Politika Express*: Yugoslavia

> Theatre Limited of Uganda has discovered a forgotten feast; a world lost to those who no longer know how to make drums sing, and their bodies dance; in rhythm with their spirits.
>
> — *L'Est Republicain*: Nancy, France

> *Renga Moi* is a sustained rite [...] which fills the heart even as it assails the senses.
>
> J. A. Collins: *San Juan Star*: Puerto Rico

This chapter will be virtually devoted to *Renga Moi*. This choice is based, in part, on the sheer abundance of literature on it; compared to what is available on *Amayirikiti*. *Amayirikiti* is, in fact, virtually without a script — let alone words/dialogue. Even the synopsis for *Amayirikiti* is less than half a page long. It is also, understandably perhaps, a synopsis that inevitably reminds one of a phrase Serumaga

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[440] This clip as well the next two are from: Serumaga Robert, *Programme Magazine* for *Renga Moi* ('4th Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies'), Theatre Limited: Kampala, January 1974, pp. 4-5. *Renga Moi* (*Brave Warrior*) is also occasionally referred to as *The Red Warrior*.
There is also a bit of an overlap with regard to the company name/names: Theatre Limited and the Abafumi (Storytellers); sometimes information on the Abafumi appears on Theatre Limited letterheads or the two names are used synonymously; one may also find the Abafumi, simply referred to as Theatre Limited. But that should not obscure the radical differences between the two. It does though, get into the citations as well and the best thing to do is to remind oneself that the moment a post-*Majangwa* play is mentioned; then it is the Abafumi as opposed to Theatre Limited that is at work.

once used: 'clarification by metaphor and the distortion of outer reality',[441] thus making it even more inscrutable. *Renga Moi*, on the other hand, has a page-long synopsis. Although the script is lost, some of the dialogue can be constituted through various reviews of the play. The vision and idiom of the two plays is very similar — radically visual. It is made even more so, due to the very deliberate underplaying and minimalisation of language and dialogue in favour of a language of mime, gesture, movement, images and symbols. The very nature of that aesthetic will certainly demand significant attention. Serumaga's desire to indigenise the theatrical sign was a huge part of the impetus behind that visual sign system. The fracturing of time, by moving away from the conventional beginning, middle and end structure, and Serumaga's absolute negation of naturalism are all part of his quest for the indigenisation of the theatrical sign and his chosen aesthetic. So, too, is the centrality, supremacy and 'monopoly' of the body, to the extent that one may begin to wonder whether this theatre is a meta-linguistic, perhaps even a post-linguistic, sign. However ironic this may sound to some, this discussion of Serumaga, at his most indigenous, will also raise the question of the European *avant-garde*. The evidence will clearly show that both *Renga Moi* and *Amayirikiti* happen to be very aesthetically informed by the world of African traditional music and art, specifically sculpture; and probably far much less by European techniques.

Serumaga's choice of a new form of signification also speaks, without doubt, to the sad and tragic state of the Uganda of Amin. The question of signification and survival is even more crucial in these plays than the three scripted dramas. So, too, in a sense, is the question of individualism and activism. But are the two things as diametrically opposed, as some would have us believe?

No discussion of *Renga Moi* would be complete without dealing with ritual. It is probably why one reviewer has described it as 'a

[441] Serumaga, Robert, 'History of the Abafumi Theatre Company', *Sunday Nation* (Nairobi): January 29th 1978. p. 20.

sustained rite [...] which fills the heart even as it assails the senses.'[442]So, perhaps last, but far from least, is the question of ritual as it applies to *Renga Moi*, to Serumaga's aesthetic and to the theatre in general. In this chapter, the postcolonial is even more predominant as the critical paradigm in use, but this should in no way be construed as a disavowal of poststructuralism or deconstruction, as the task at hand tends to dictate the critical tools one employs.

I now wish to begin by looking at *Renga Moi*, the Abafumi Company, and their regimen and methodology. I will then return to the play, to the question of ritual and the initial reception in Uganda and the United Kingdom and a number of other places.

Renga Moi

> 'In this land of despair I make coffins and society has been very kind to me. I could make chairs, of course, but think of the prosperity.'[443]

Renga Moi first opened at Uganda's National Theatre on 10 July 1972. The running time was approximately 90 minutes. The original cast of 14 included, among others: Robert Serumaga, as the storyteller (narrator); Richard Seruwagi, doubling as the Carpenter and the Priest-Diviner; Jane Majoro, as Nakazzi, Renga Moi's wife and mother of the twins; and Jeffrey Oryema, as the eponymic — Renga Moi.[444]

Set in the fictional village of Seven Hills, *Renga Moi* is the story of a modern equivalent of an Armed Forces Commander or General, whose village is invaded soon after his wife Nakazzi (played by Jane Majoro), gives birth to twins. Among the Acholi, as well as the

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[442] This is a clip from a review by J.A. Collins, *San Juan Star*: Puerto Rico, cited in Serumaga Robert, *Programme Magazine* for *Renga Moi* ('4th Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies'), Theatre Limited: Kampala, January 1974, p. 2.

[443] Those understated and, no doubt, ironic words are from *Renga Moi*; specifically spoken by the Carpenter who was played by Richard Kaigoma Seruwagi. Seruwagi was one of the original members of the Abafumi Company. They are cited by Irving Wardlle, *The Times*, London, April 22nd 1975.

Renga Moi (Brave Warrior) is the name of the eponymic warrior. The name marked its first appearance on the literary landscape in Okot p'Bitek's seminal work: Song of Lawino; Quote: [ ]. It is fitting that its next appearance would be of equally ... magnitude as the eponymic character and hero of Serumaga's dialogically minimal play.

[444] The rest of the cast included Marie Kirindi, Charles Buyondo, Jones Kiwanuka, Charles Tumwesigye, Dede Majoro, Jane Kobusingye, Paul Mpagi, and Margaret Oryema.

Baganda, twins come with certain spiritual demands; they are sacred. They must of necessity undergo certain rituals in order to prevent calamitous and tragic events from occurring. The Priest-Diviner of the village sets the ritual train in motion; having ordered Renga Moi to undergo a series of personal rites and obligations. These include an order not to spill a single drop of blood before the twins are ritually cleansed. However, the village of seven hills has enjoyed a 'prosperity and peace' that has turned into the envy of some of the 'neighbouring villages'[445]; for this, they are invaded.

Without the legendary warrior (Renga Moi), the village will be destroyed. If he does go to war, calamity will, no doubt, befall him and the village; should he happen not to go, the entire village will not be spared. This is his dilemma: his familial and individual obligations on the one hand, and the equally compelling demands of his society on the other.

Renga Moi makes a choice: he goes to war and inevitably spills blood. In his absence, a series of cosmological forces plunge the village into a series of misfortunes. With the exception of the coffin maker, no one has benefited from what could well become a vicious cycle of calamities. The transgression of the codes that govern the ritual cleansing of the twins is the root cause of the problems, and the Priest-Diviner sees only one way out of this: 'the twins must be sacrificed.'

But the inhabitants of the Seven Hills are a fickle lot; not long after the sacrifice, they turn against the Priest-Diviner. Renga Moi finally returns home. The victorious warrior must undergo a cleansing of his own before he is re-incoporated into the village. This he does; it

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[445] I should point out that things get stapled together and the pagination can get rather confusing. This quotation, for instance is from what ought to be (p. 6), even though it is technically labelled p. 2, based on the material I got from the family Archive. In it, the Synopsis comes after Mr. Serumaga's short Bio., and the 'Abafumi Manifesto'; all in a single document, which includes the Press clippings as well. My page count puts the Synopsis on pp. 6-7, somewhere else, depending on the source of the material, it could, in fact be page 1. Since this document is cited a great deal in this chapter, I have chosen to abide by my pagination. Serumaga Robert, *Programme Magazine* for *Renga Moi* ('4th Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies'), Theatre Limited: Kampala, January 1974, p. 6.

may be a prohibitively painful and punitive ritual, but no price is too steep to stop him from reuniting with the twins. It is then that Renga Moi finds out the awful truth of the sacrifice of the twins. The brave and ferocious warrior then takes the Priest-Diviner's life, and: 'rather like the modern politician, he assumes the diviner's unenviable position', securing for himself both secular and spiritual 'control'.

History and Vision

Writing in the Kenyan *Sunday Nation* newspaper in 1978, Serumaga started by saying that: 'Perhaps at some future date and with greater retrospective advantage, the full story of the beginnings, development and eventual coming of age of the Abafumi Company might be told.'[446] Tragically, Serumaga's fervent hope did not, and, to date has still not come to pass. If there is any consolation in this it is that he did leave enough material of his own which, combined with a number of other primary sources, will help ensure a degree of stabilisation and posterity, as much as one can, within the remits of a study of this nature.

The story of the Abafumi, not surprisingly, seems to start with the formation of Theatre Limited in Kampala (1969). Serumaga, as was seen in Chapter 1, was a key player in the formation of it. But as early as his return to Uganda and through its formation, Serumaga had made his aspiration known that 'Circumstances must be created which can give birth to the professional [Company].'[447] That dream required a stable of full-time actors to whom he could turn to put his vision of theory/theories into practice. Serumaga, the theatrical heritage already existed to work towards the indigenisation of the theatrical sign. His glowing allusion to the 'famous Sekinoomu of Uganda' (see previous chapter) emphatically reveals a good deal of the indigenous aesthetic and traditional heritage he exalted and to which he aspired.

[446] Serumaga, Robert, 'History of the Abafumi Theatre Company', *Sunday Nation* (Nairobi): January 29th 1978. p. 20.
[447] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, p. 53.

Sekinoomu's tales 'of trenchant social criticism, dramatised in voice, movement and the music of his Ndingidi [had] been with us for centuries'[448]; Serumaga stated. And he regarded that as 'the true theatre of East Africa'[449], at least his part of that region. To attain that through, a university based group or Theatre Limited must have seemed like a dereliction of duty.

If the move towards the Golden Age of Ugandan Theatre was akin to the disenchantment, anger and fervour which gave birth to poststructuralism in late 1960s France; then one ought to look at Serumaga more like a man possessed with revolutionary fervour proclaiming, like Jean Baudrillard did in the burning streets of Paris, that 'Even the signs must burn [...] the catastrophic situation opened up by May 1968 is not over.'[450]

Baudrillard was, of course, talking about the Saussurean sign; for the post-*Majangwa* Serumaga, English was about to be supplanted by indigenous tongues. One of the advantages of that would be a wider audience. Language itself was about to be radically minimised, to be replaced by a visual medium of images and symbols, movement and stillness, that were all, by and large, hewn out of what would become the new-found wealth of the actors' body. This, in turn, would garner them audiences in virtually any part of the world. Describing the Abafumi's relationship with language, Serumaga was to note: 'our company has developed its form of theatre which uses few words when any, no dialogue; and in its plastic form comes nearer to sculpture than the realism of the cinema.'[451] As one thinks through this, it is important to bear in mind the synopsis of *Renga Moi* that was provided in advance, and to think of it in all its tragic grandeur and perhaps, even more importantly, to think of its language as one of an initially perplexing, but unambiguously and continually percolating and

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[448] Ibid., p. 52.
[449] Ibid.,
[450] Baudrillard, Jean, *The Political Economy of the Sign*, cited in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (eds.), Malden Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2001, p. 334.
[451] Serumaga, Robert, 'History of the Abafumi Theatre Company', *Sunday Nation* (Nairobi): January 29th 1978. p. 20.

distilled hieroglyphic of emotion, movement, stillness, images and symbols. There were songs, lots of music of the percussive variety and other forms of sound too; mourning, for example, ululation in moments of euphoria and other sounds from the human, as well as the insect world. But it is important to emphasise the fact that words and dialogue are probably at the lowest rung of the ladder. During a brief visit to Nairobi to organise *Renga Moi's* opening there, Serumaga had this to say about the counter-dialogic sign: 'We believe in the body as the supreme instrument of the theatre and then the voice, and when I say voice, I simply mean sound. Even words to us are sound first and meaning second.'[452] Serumaga goes on to say that the Abafumi had found silence a far more eloquent vehicle to the extent that when words had to be deployed in order to communicate, it was generally perceived as a form of transgression: 'a breach of silence.'[453]

But if the decision to sideline words and dialogue is arguably more of an aesthetic choice than it may have been congenitally indigenous, then one need not go far to find evidence of some patently African forms to which Serumaga very consciously turned. Sekinoomu's story telling, through his songs and the lyre, were, as pointed out in this section, regarded by Serumaga as evidence of ancient, pre-contact — in fact — 'true theatre of East Africa.'[454] The question of origin and form with regard to the African theatrical sign is a running theme; explicated through the work and through the occasional observations in the primary resources available.[455] In 1978, for example, Serumaga made the following observation: 'African

[452] Kimenye, Barbara, 'Uganda's Theatre Pros Take Critics by Storm', *The Daily Nation*, Nairobi, November 24th 1972, p. 13.
[453] Ibid.,
[454] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, p. 52.
[455] Apart from the plays themselves, perhaps the most illuminating of those sources, is something that Serumaga wrote (published in 1970); this was even before *Majangwa* was written — perhaps it had not even become an idea yet — but 'Uganda's Experimental Theatre', is the title of an entwined but separate contribution by Serumaga and also Johnson. It is almost edifying to realise that a great deal of his vision was as crystal clear, even before *Majangwa*, and the post- *Majangwa* plays. This is not to say that Serumaga made no new observations after that, it is simply to acknowledge the clarity and depth of his vision, the monastic dedication to it; and the dramatic pace with which it was implemented. And a good deal of what he theorised later, sounded, at times like a variation on his seminal observations in 'Uganda's Experimental Theatre'.

sculpture and music [...] has in its original form maintained its qualities of asymmetry, rhythmic complication, clarification by metaphor and the distortion of outer reality'[456]. Serumaga cites the Makonde, the Tanzanian and Mozambican people famous for their woodcarving, their deliberate, asymmetrically rendered, but very complete sculptures. And 'the distortion of outer reality' seems to heighten, rather than obscure, the essence of that artwork. Serumaga's interest in African art goes back to his student days in Trinity College (see introduction). Serumaga notes in his Biography that 'he [...] organised the first African Art Exhibition in Dublin borrowing works of art from more than 15 African countries.'[457] *Compassion,* a sculpture by the Ugandan artist Gregory Maloba, was one of the artefacts he managed to secure. In his later reflections on African sculpture and music, Serumaga goes on to posit that not only does that sculpture and the music distort 'its outer reality' but it needs no more than an 'outline' and, furthermore, needs 'no melodic or naturalistic definition to [communicate].'[458] In order to create the kind of theatre that Serumaga would evidently make, particularly in the post-*Majangwa* phase, the 'lessons' learned from that music and sculpture conferred on him the freedom and a time-tested, tangible theoretical paradigm that would help in the scaffolding of his plays; he was free from the constraints of naturalism. By 1978, Serumaga and the Abafumi had *Renga Moi* and *Amayirikiti* serving as concrete examples of the kind of vision and inspiration derived from his meditations and their experiments, research and discoveries, phenomenal success and (disavowal) of naturalism. As Serumaga himself put it, and these words have already been cited in this section: 'our company has developed its form of theatre which uses few words when any, no dialogue; and in its plastic form comes nearer to sculpture than the

[456] Serumaga, Robert, 'History of the Abafumi Theatre Company', *Sunday Nation* (Nairobi): January 29th 1978. p. 20.
[457] Serumaga, Robert, *Programme Magazine* (4th Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) Theatre Limited: Kampala, January 1974, p. 1.
[458] Serumaga, Robert, 'History of the Abafumi Theatre Company', *Sunday Nation* (Nairobi): January 29th 1978. p. 20.

realism of the cinema.'[459] The allusion to sculpture and music is definitely a lot more than an intellectual exercise; it is one of the key elements on the flagpole of his vision, on the theory and practice of the Abafumi, and it will become even clearer as this discussion continues.

What is more important at this stage is to remember that Serumaga desperately advocated the formation of a professional company, literally, before Theatre Limited. In Serumaga's view for example, the theatre would always be considered marginal, a form of extra curricular activity, a hobby made even much worse by the mould of received Western wisdom out of which the imposed colonial sign sprung, and that expressly erected a demarcation line between the performer and the spectator. This, to Serumaga, was 'far from the African tradition'[460] in which everyone in any given space that these things happened was an active participant. The final stage direction of *Majangwa* has Nakirijja running off into the auditorium (Act 2, p. 51), for example. Serumaga made much use of strobe lighting; though people such as Macpherson questioned its advantages, the point was not lost on them that he wanted to bridge the gap between the spectator and the event.[461] The Western theatrical sign was problematic and just as alien in its narratological focus as it was, as manifested in the nature, symmetry and architecture of the proscenium arch — as opposed to the round — which would be the most African of structures/arenas. But for Serumaga, the ancient art of acting and the theatre also had to be rightfully elevated to a professional level so that society could begin to see it as a viable career; they would then, eventually regard the 'theatre an economic proposition, a way of life'. Needless to say, it would be taken more seriously and embraced by more; but its playing out via the monastic devotion of the cast was the only way of ensuring

[459] Ibid.,

[460] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, p. 52.

[461] See Margaret, Macpherson, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 16.

that his vision would ultimately be brought to life. His vision was rooted in his heritage: through indigenous forms of performance, such as story telling, voice, movement, music and sculpture. With that would come the break from naturalism, linearity and symmetricality. There is an ironic angle to the discourse on Serumaga that should be pointed out at this stage. Even before more is said about *Renga Moi* and *Amayirikiti*, and their receptions in the West, specifically, it is probably not surprising that parallels were bound to be made to the absurdist, postmodernist and the *avant-garde*. The fact that Serumaga had studied and lived in Europe for almost an entire decade would add more fuel to the fire of those who would see *Renga Moi* and *Amayirikiti*, particularly, as natural outcomes of a European 'legacy'. Kalundi cites at least six critics who fall into that trap: forgetting the mammoth task and research behind what was ironically, a monastic quest for an indigenous (African) sign. As Kalundi has noted: 'Paradoxically, much has been made in criticism and otherwise of [...] what is perceived as the *avant-garde* or experimental nature of Serumaga's [...] work,'[462] this as Kalundi points out is true of *Majangwa*, to an extent, and much more so of *Renga Moi* and *Amayirikiti*. The irony, of course, is in the fact that, if anything, Serumaga was de-Westernising the sign by digging as deep as he possibly could into his own heritage. In addition, the avant-garde as technique is nobody's sole possession; neither does it, in that sense, reflect on the content or its source.

To Serumaga, unlike music and sculpture, the postcolonial 'theatre had gone [such] a different way'; Europeanising itself to the extent 'that many [...] doubted the existence of an African theatre before [...] colonialism.'[463] By the time he said those words in 1978, Serumaga and the Abafumi had certainly gone a long way in reclaiming Africa's theatrical heritage. Serumaga does not dismiss 'the

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[462] Kalundi R. Serumaga, 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 7.
[463] Serumaga, Robert, 'History of the Abafumi Theatre Company', *Sunday Nation* (Nairobi): January 29th 1978. p. 20.

foreign' or European play entirely, his conviction appears to be that East Africans should turn to it if there was anything to garner by way of 'theatrical technique', which would then be combined with 'the symbolism of tradition,' and what he interestingly nuances and refers to as the 'the controversy of contemporary issues'[464].

Having examined Serumaga's vision — by delving into its nature and history — it is possible to posit, given this evolution that led towards the creation of the Abafumi, that *Majangwa* is, indeed, the bridge that links Serumaga's theory to his later practice. Indeed, there are, in *Majangwa,* elements such as story telling/narration, re-enactments, mime, movement and music that would become more prominent; as a kind of *lingua franca* of the virtually dialogue-less, wordless, visual theatrical tomes that Serumaga was soon to make with the Abafumi Company.

In view of all that has been discussed so far, it comes as no surprise to note that fresh from the phenomenal success enjoyed by *Majangwa* in Uganda, Kenya and the Philippines, Serumaga was about to experiment 'in [yet another] new way.'[465] The time was January 1972, and Theatre Limited was about to be replaced by a professional company — the first of its kind in East and Central Africa — appropriately named the Abafumi (Story Tellers). All that Serumaga kept of Theatre Limited were the letterheads and anyone seeking to wade through archival material should be aware of this; years after the Abafumi Company was launched, it was still referred to by some, as Theatre Limited.

In reality, however, the story of the Abafumi starts with Serumaga's long-held vision and aspirations, as well as the end of Theatre Limited. The formation of this very first professional company in the region was also due to Serumaga's economic and entrepreneurial

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[464] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, 111, 3, Spring 1970, p. 53.

[465] See Margaret, Macpherson, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 17.

ability; his marketing and public relations skills would also come in useful. A concomitant step was taken with the formation of the company and that was the launching of a theatre academy in which the new, malleable recruits—straight out of their 'O' levels—were to be trained. Serumaga's goals and aesthetic rigour are evidently outlined in a mission statement that amounts to the Abafumi Manifesto.

Manifesto

In a short preamble to the mission statement, Serumaga characteristically bemoans the pre-Independence and postcolonial theatrical pursuits; his exasperation is clearly summed up in two simple words: a 'fruitless path.' The reasons are probably obvious given all that the previous section is pre-occupied with. Now he goes even further, by turning his spotlight on the few African troupes that had gone as far as touring overseas. In Serumaga's view they became part of the problem. Their 'photographic' presentations 'merely reproduced traditional music and dance in a new setting'.[466] In other words no attempts were made to adjust to their new presentational abodes and even constraints, of the proscenium arch, for example. The architecture and lack of technical know-how conspired against them; the result was boredom and monotony that these dances and the music clearly did not deserve. He goes even further by noting emphatically that, as if those problems were not enough, there was no attempt through performance to address or deal with 'the socio-political problems of contemporary Africa.' Apart from the aesthetic and technical shortcomings, the latter certainly was a burning issue for Serumaga, and it is clearly reiterated by its prominent place among the objectives of the company, and they are reproduced in their numerical entirety, as well as word for word:

1. To discover and develop a theatre form that is truly African, with its roots deep in African culture, but at the same time accessible to the wider

[466] This and all the other quotations in this paragraph, together with the Company's objectives (Manifesto) in the next paragraph are from, Serumaga Robert, *Programme Magazine* (4th Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) Theatre Limited: Kampala, January 1974, p. 3.

audience. This involved experimentation with the traditional arts of storytelling, song and dance, on the one hand, and the possibilities contained in our myths and legends. In other words, to discover the essence of Africanness, and give it theatrical expression.

2. To create a theatre that deals without fear, with the problems of contemporary Africa. [...] The African form would of necessity carry an African content.
3. In the end, to have a theatre which would contribute to human understanding.

To avoid any charges of totalisation on Serumaga's part, the use of African/East African should be read as references to Uganda primarily. Why, one might ask, would they seek to ensure accessibility 'to the wider [international] audience'? The answer must lie in economic viability, among other things; the box-office receipts in Kampala would not ensure a self-sustained company. But more importantly, these were Africans, seeking to represent themselves in an unmediated manner, who had also decided to use their languages but also de-emphasise language, in favour of an emotional, visual, symbolic sign system that would be accessible to all. Thanks to Serumaga and his *Majangwa*, Uganda, due to their Philippines performances, had become a member of the International Theatre Institute (I.T.I). The time had come: to 'educate' the world about their part of Africa. And that education was to come through his exposés of the Ugandan postcolonial condition in a form that surpassed any linguistic boundaries.

Mythology and legend were discussed at length in the previous chapter, including their place, with regard to the ontology of a people as well as the transplantation and use of myth in its mythopoeic form. The important thing to remember alongside the use of myths and legends is the fact that Serumaga is not aiming at a bucolic trip into the past; rather, to see what it may all offer in the context of, as he puts it in the already cited Article 2 of the preamble (Manifesto): 'the social-political problems of contemporary Africa.'

It is important note that the Article does call for some bravery. Given the equally burning issue of signification and survival that only got worse when Amin assumed power, it is remarkable that he could still explicitly spell out his prioritised role for art as an intervention.

Serumaga's deliberate minimalisation and marginalisation of words and dialogue, could arguably have been precipitated by more than aesthetic needs, or the indigenisation of the theatrical sign; the need to circumvent the censor and get away with a lot more pungent critiques and exposés of Amin's 'genocidal humanism' is also one that is worth consideration. It is this that led the South African writer Lewis Nkosi to posit thus: 'Serumaga's stratagem of staying clear of literal language may have been partly self-serving. Given the political situation in that country, dialogue in the theatre could have been too dangerously explicit and implicating.'[467] Indeed, even the relevant words in the Mission Manifesto, that speak to his fervent commitment are very carefully chosen to almost deliberately underplay, though not obscure, what Serumaga means. But one should not underplay or underestimate in any way; the onerous task that burdens any actor daring enough to attempt the sign system that Serumaga chose for the company.

Regimen and Methodology

> Each member of the group is not only working for a perfect physical development but also has to master five musical instruments and five dances from five different regions of Uganda. This will mean that Robert's ultimate aim of a company of 15 [...] professionals can do the work [of] 45 players. [468]

I should point out that primary sources are pretty crucial for the two plays in question; there are no scripts and it has been impossible to track down anything that would have been shot on film. I have, though, been fortunate to interview actors such as Richard Seruwagi, Charles Tumwesigye, and the late Jane Majoro; who were some of the eight,

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[467] Nkosi, Lewis, 'The British Theatre and Africa', *Africa*, London, March 1976, p. 63.
[468] White, Bill, (On Robert Serumaga), 'Towards a Theatre of Africa: Uganda's Olivier', *Sunday Nation* (Nairobi), January 30th 1972.

original members of the cast; incidentally that number soon increased to 14. The original members of the group, together with those who were to join the company later, have all been valuable sources of information. So, too, has the documented literature on the company and the plays; by way of reviews, interviews in print, and production photographs.

Once people were recruited, the relentless process begun; an immersion into virtually every aspect of acting, dancing, movement, stillness, imagination, vocal technique, improvisation and an exemplary ensemble spirit. The training was intense, long and hard. Aspirants would go through an initial interview, given two weeks of enduring the 'normal routine'. That 'routine' was anything but 'normal'. He was, after all, determined to 'turn each performer into [...] "a total theatrical animal".'[469] The prospective cast-members would then be interviewed again on a variety of subjects. One key issue was to assess their analytical ability. This is, at least in part, to do with their imaginative abilities and comprehension. Stanislavski's system, for example, was a cornerstone of their education, and they were lectured and tutored in this by Serumaga himself as well as his friend David Rubadiri. Some could argue that the use of the system smacks of a Western tradition; others would argue that it was simply a means to an end; and one that was modified to suit their needs. It was also far from the sole component of their process. The system was also a natural fit for a company to whom emotions were the dialogic and virtual currency. Both the body and the mind were pushed to their very limits. Again, Stanislavski's psychoanalytic system — the 'magic if', the building of a characters and how to let go, emotionally — were crucial. So, too, was the work on the voice, which they needed for the various songs. Though the voice was probably even more vital for the ability to reproduce anything that was reproducible. Premium was placed not so much on words, as already noted, but on the sounds and

[469] Gilbert, Stephen. W, 'Interview with Serumaga', just before the Abafumi opened *Renga Moi* at the Aldwych (London) as part of the World Theatre Season: 'Around the World in Eighty Days', *Plays and Players*, April 1975, p. 11.

emotions that they had to convey. There is also 'body- coordination'; they did not have to know any of the five requisite dances,[470] but had to demonstrate the capability to do so.[471] On the emotional front, a fair amount has been noted already, but it might help to look at Serumaga's own words on this equally crucial matter: 'And I look for a person [...] who can learn the psychological process of passing on, of transmitting very strong emotions. In this he has to be intelligent.'[472] Emotions being their primary sign system, they definitely called for nuances, shades and tones. But one, also, had to be able, not only to summon them ferociously, if the need arose, perhaps, in a blink of an eye; but also be absolutely capable of turning them off. As Serumaga stated in a London interview: 'the hard part is to be able to control the emotion [...] that [they] can get out of it at will.'[473] The ability to practice going through the emotions like the scales of a piano is what Serumaga refers to as 'Emotional Practice'; an integral part of the training and regimen. It was important not to be overwhelmed by them, and to remember the requisite teamwork/ensemble spirit and nature of the plays. Anyone familiar with the plays in question or any subsequent work of the Abafumi will agree that the importance of teamwork/the ensemble spirit cannot be overemphasised. Serumaga envisaged a training period that would last a total of six months with the other half of each and every year devoted to touring. As the years went by, the company saw even more of a need for what had become increasingly rare studio/rehearsal time. As Serumaga himself was to say in 1978: 'The company works full time and is more interested in the research and development [...] than in frequent performances without advancement

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[470] White, Bill, On Robert Serumaga, 'Towards A Theatre Of Africa: Uganda's Olivier', *The Sunday Nation*, Nairobi, January 30th 1972, p. 28.

[471] Charles Tumwesigye recalled in vivid detail during an interview with me in Toronto (September 2003), how they had to give up on one aspirant that was almost 'a-rythmic', and it showed when he was 'confronted' by an instrument or had to attempt any steps or movement. The individual will remain nameless. But Charles shook his head and said, in a mixture of English and Luganda: 'He was just, beyond rythmic redemption.'

[472] Gilbert, Stephen W., Interview with Serumaga: 'Around the World in Eighty Days', *Plays and Players*, April 1975, p. 14.

[473] Serumaga, Robert, On the Abafumi, 'Interview with Julie Welch', *The Guardian*, London: September 1975.

in method.'[474] That was years after they started of course. From the very first day of the company, long before the research yielded any tangible results, social skills and discipline were some of the other imperatives that the aspirants had to posses in abundance.[475] This was not the place for the fainthearted or those with illusions of glamour.

It is also important to point out that though Stanislavski was strenuously studied in the context of building character/s, 'given circumstances' and 'the magic if', for example, their process and explorations did not start or end with him. It is Serumaga's written or scripted dramas, for example, that provided the 'fodder' for those explorations. And to mention Stanislavski or even Grotowski in an open-ended way (as Horn has done),[476] could lead to confusion and unnecessary allegations of derivativeness. This is a kind of confusion that enhances a crucial misrepresentation and outright incomprehension of the post-*Majangwa* Serumaga. Serumaga was never shy about mentioning Stanislavski or any other theorists and practitioners whom he found to be useful.[477] Whenever these names and influences, are mentioned by critics and scholars, however, it is incumbent upon us to make sure that a key qualification is made; the mention of those names/influences should not obscure a key fact, as Frances Harding has noted, that Serumaga 'sought to 'tame' them [theorists/practitioners], to make use of them, not to be dominated by them.'[478] Eurocentrists and others might start to also think about the possibility that Grotowski and Peter Brook, for example, may have learned a thing or two from Serumaga and the Abafumi. Virtually all the Abafumi I have met have very fond memories of performing in

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[474] Serumaga, Robert, 'History of the Abafumi Theatre Company', *Sunday Nation* (Nairobi): January 29th 1978. p. 20.

[475] Gilbert, Stephen W, 'Interview with Serumaga': 'Around the World in Eighty Days', *Plays and Players*, April 1975. pp. 11-12.

[476] See Horn, Andrew,' Individualism and community in the theatre of Serumaga', in *The Performance Arts in Africa (a reader)*, Frances Harding (ed.), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, pp 108-109.

[477] The Japanese classical influences, which are mentioned as early as 1972, the very year *Renga Moi* started to appear in all sorts of literature about Serumaga and the Abafumi; it is not necessary to cite sources even.

[478] Harding's forceful observation is cited in Serumaga Kalundi, R., 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies; Robert Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 17.

Gdansk, Lodz, and Wrocklaw, Poland. Wrocklaw was home to Grotowski's company. Charles Buyondo has informed me in a recent e-mail, about their active participation in a workshop with Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski.[479] The Polish tour of *Renga Moi* took place in June 1974. Both Brook and Grotowski saw the play and it is quite possible to surmise that they may have learned more from the Abafumi, on and off the stage.

The Abafumi were very heavily immersed in their indigenous cultures. That was part of the process as well as the research they had to undertake. They hailed from different parts of Uganda, and Rwanda, as well. So in a sense they began by learning, by exploring each other's cultures.

Their five-day week began with an emphasis on physical rigour. At 6:30 in the morning on the Football field at Makerere University, they would go for a three-mile run. That was the first step toward conditioning of a body that would be called into extra duty. After breakfast, they would all get into the green room at the National Theatre for more physical exercise. It is also there that they learned to relax and concentrate; it was important to be psychologically and emotionally ready to go through the minefields of emotion.[480] It was also extremely crucial that they spend as much time as possible together; the ensemble on the stage had to be much like a family in the creative explorations and endeavours. There was a considerable amount of time spent on formal lectures. These included things such as theatre history and, of course, Stanislavski and the system. There was also the music, breathing, singing (including four-part harmony), under the instruction of the School of Music, Dance and Drama at Makerere; as well as people, such as Wassanyi Serukenya, the engineer and composer who co-wrote most of the music for Kawadwa's plays. They also used some specialists in movement as well the specific dances

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[479] The email from Charles Buyondo is dated 11th , April 2008.

[480] For the record, Bill White, W. Stephen Gilbert and virtually all the commentators cited in this chapter have provided these details. What I did not gather through their articles I deduced through my Interviews with Charles Tumwesigye.

from five different regions of Uganda. The same is true of the various musical instruments and the different beats and rhythms the diverse choices called for, musically. For these too, various experts came in from Makerere and what was then known as Kyambogo Teacher Training College. Serumaga and Rubadiri taught the acting and theatre history classes on occasion, there were many classes on improvisation, and the research was both collective and individual depending on the role one was assigned.

Many who recall *Renga Moi* tend to remember the ensemble, they also single out Jane Majoro in the role of Nakazzi. They would remember, among other things, her primeval, vocalised grief in the scene where the twins are taken away from her in order to be sacrificed so the village can regain its balance and harmony. Jane was as steeped in the art of acting as her brother, Dede, was in percussion and the other instruments they used. In the years to come, she would recall with pride and confidence how crucial Stanislavski's system, and Serumaga's understanding of it, was, as well as her own research for that role, and that moment in particular. Another, perhaps equally memorable role is that of the Coffin Maker, played by Richard Seruwagi. Seruwagi still works as an actor, mostly in Swedish language as he spends most of his time in Sweden. He still chuckles, much like the audiences did (without trivialising the scene in question), recalling the lines: 'In this land of despair I make coffins and society has been very kind to me. I could make chairs, of course, but think of the prosperity.'[481] Prosperity, in that sense, that came with the 'dramatic boom' in the number of deaths. The point is, though, that the character was based on a real Coffin maker, who also made bark-cloth, in fact. Seruwagi had literally shadowed this figure during his research as he made the rounds in Mulago National hospital (Kampala), exchanging pleasantries and offering flowers, consoling those whose

[481] Those understated and, no doubt, ironic words are from *Renga Moi*; specifically spoken by the Carpenter who was played by Richard Kaigoma, Seruwagi. Seruwagi was one of the original members of the Abafumi Company. Irving Wardlle cites them, in the *Times*, London, April 22nd 1975.

relations were terminally ill. Seruwagi never did find out how the man knew those whose loved ones had passed away; but he would be back early the next morning delivering his condolences and asking them whether they had made any arrangements by way of a coffin or bark cloth which he was always happy to provide, for a fee of course.

The title of the play Renga Moi means Brave/Red Warrior. The name appears to have marked its first appearance on the literary landscape in Okot p'Bitek's seminal work *Song of Lawino* (1966) where an 'L' replaces the 'R'. The brief excerpt that follows is from Lawino herself:

> My father's name is
> Otoo Lenga-moi,
>
> He ate the title Lenga-moi
> In the battle of the hills
>
> You earn the moi
> With your spear
> Or gun, or sword.[482]

It is fitting that the venerable name's next appearance would be as the eponymous character and hero of Serumaga's play. It is probably that excerpt, particularly in relation to war and 'the Hills', that has led many to posit that Serumaga's play is rooted in an Acholi legend. All through the tutorials, improvisation and playmaking; they did not jettison the playwright, who also happened to be the director. And when you are dealing with non-enunciated signs, images, symbols and words that are meant to be more akin to sounds and the other forms of signification that the Abafumi used, there might even be more of a need for the playwright than one may think at first glance.

The actors' research mined the past but they were always conscious of the exigencies of the present day. As Serumaga noted, even before he started the group:

> The traditions of the past can only inspire the present. They cannot satisfy the creative urge of our generation. Between the theatrical technique of the foreign play, the symbolism of tradition, and the controversy of contemporary issues, a

[482] Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino* (first published 1966) and *Song of Ocol* (first published 1967), London: Heinemann Educational Books Inc., 1984, p. 83.

synthesis of body and spirit must be achieved.[483]

Any excursions Serumaga made into the past, and there were quite a number through his entire *oeuvre* (that word is used advisedly), were dictated more by the burning issues of his day as well as the indeterminate and desperate future, as opposed to a need to rhapsodise or for sentimentality. The allusion to the 'foreign play' seems to be an acceptance of the theatre as a predominantly — though not exclusively — Western sign; that one could even borrow from without becoming, 'it', in epistemic terms. Serumaga's exposure to classical Japanese theatre in the Philippines, for example, was cited by Barbara Kimenye as a source of inspiration, in some way, for *Renga Moi*.[484] The congenital symbolism of the proverbs and aphorisms in *Majangwa* is not altogether banished through the minimal role of words and dialogue of the post-*Majangwa* plays; it now takes a more visual form instead, at a time when it is more crucial to attempt to ensure one's survival as they expose the postcolonial pathologies of their nation.

Ritual

Ritual has been described, specifically in relation to Africa and India, as 'one of the most enduring — and most appropriated and misunderstood — markers of cultural difference and stability'.[485] The charges of appropriation and misunderstanding are levelled against Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, whose haste and desire 'to map' out the 'commonalities'[486] that the different rituals and societies may share/reveal, obliterates the far more important attributes embedded in ritual. Those attributes can best be seen through what amounts to the paradigm of ritual as identity, based in turn on ritual as difference and

[483] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda's Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, p. 53.
[484] See Kimenye Barbara, 'Uganda's Theatre Pros Take Critics by Storm', *The Daily Nation*, Nairobi, November 24th 1972, p. 13.
[485] Gilbert, Helen and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-colonial drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 55.
[486] Ibid.,

ritual as stabilising force in a societal and individual sense.[487] To Gilbert and Tompkins, it is the peculiarities and differences, not 'homogenising' and evolutionistic[488] theorising to which we should turn in order to get to the essence of ritual. To walk away from the heterogeneity and go the other way, in their opinion, amounts to — if one may be allowed to use Basil Davidson words in a different context, 'a flattening of the "ethnic" landscape'; instead of celebrating the wealth of global differences that provide the key to a fuller understanding of the ancient process called ritual. What then is ritual? What does it share with mythology? What qualities, if any, inseparably align it to the theatre? This is a wide-ranging discussion and one that is not necessarily characterised by unanimity in terms of the alignment between the two (theatre and ritual) in a postcolonial theatre context as well as theatre circles in general.

It may also be helpful to emphatically state that the focus here is on ritual in its religious as opposed to secular form. Ritual is manifestly, if not solely religious and it is actually 'easy [...] to isolate' and identify it. It was further noted in the same chapter that myth occupies a distinct role in 'its [ ] quest for the explication of being.'[489] Myth then provides a *master text*, an explanation, or answers to key questions about our origins and being. If nothing else, myth certainly provides the closest account of the enigmatic issue of being. Ritual too, is as time- tested as mythology. But if myth is a narrative, ritual, however narrative/narrativised it may be, is a formal process, which helps to explain the ease with which it can be delineated and identified. Ritual is also, almost invariably, physical, performative and theatrical. Like the theatre and other forms of performance, ritual too, uses visual images and symbols, as well as sartorial symbolism, not to mention props for example. In semiotic terms, it can also be described

[487] This is a very different form of identity from a, what-you- are-not, Saussurean (linguistic/semiotic) type of identity.
[488] Gilbert, Helen and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-colonial drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 55.
[489] Soyinka, Wole, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 1.

as an example of meta-signification, and at times, even, a post — if not pre- linguistic form of signification. Its use of dance, for example is a good illustration of the latter trait. Again, it is important to note that unlike the theatre, as it is widely known at least, ritual is not a secular practice. Ritual is an enactment; furthermore, as Gilbert and Tompkins have noted, 'Unlike drama which is mostly a re-enactment (even of a true story), ritual is never fiction.'[490] The arena in which a ritual drama unfolds is one in which, instead of actors, you have celebrants or participants; Gilbert and Tompkins, opt for the term: 'actant/s'.[491] These participants or players in the arena of ritual (wherever it unfolds) may be, a family, clan, a people, group, or even, a generation. It is equally important, though, to point out that sometimes the sole focus or subject of a particular ritual may be an individual. The emphasis on society is no coincidence. Ritual's primary role is to provide a service for any or all of the above- mentioned categories and they are predominantly community oriented.

As Gilbert and Tompkins have noted, the purpose of ritual is, 'to preserve the order and meaning of anything from harvests to marriage, birth and death.'[492] This all tends to be done through performance. Comparing ritual to the theatre or performance may foster our understanding of the two, however, it is equally important that we all guard against blurring the lines between them by being acutely conscious of their distinctions. But the comparisons are inevitable, particularly in Africa, where one of ritual's other (latter-day) roles, has been to inform and feed the theatre. That is probably why, Serumaga himself makes the following observation with regard to ritual: 'Ritual dances of birth, circumcision, marriage, war, victory, death, and even resurrection, have been the fountain of Africa's aesthetic inspiration [...]. African rituals still are, and will continue to

[490] Gilbert, Helen and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-colonial drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 57.
[491] Ibid., p. 56.
[492] Ibid., p. 57.

be, part of the tradition of theatre in East Africa.'[493] One might want to look at initiatory rituals for example, and periodic annual rites as generational processes that are triggered by age and calendars. Then there are occasions such as marriage, naming, puberty, funerals and succession, which call for, or put into play, certain specific, ritualised, norms. The processes that unfold in all these examples, is what Turner has rightly described as 'social drama'[494]. There is a certain kind of 'social drama[s]' that is 'initiated' as Turner has noted, 'when the peaceful tenor of regular, norm-governed social life is interrupted by the *breach* of a rule controlling one of its salient relationships.'[495] These breaches or violations of the, otherwise, 'norm-governed' communities, are far from regular, but wherever these violations occur, be it by family, lineage, village, clan, or an individual; standardised ways of dealing with them are put into play. These codified and formal processes are vital; without them the entire community would have a price to pay.

Having discussed the nature of the 'social drama' and the needs and violations that trigger it, how it defines and identifies the process of society and the role of individuals, I now wish to return to a play that has, among other things, been described as a 'sustained rite.'[496] The radical nature of the largely semiological signification demands a kind of visual, and to an extent, aural overview of *Renga Moi*, in the interests of time and space however, I have opted to proceed by a discussion of the play as a ritual drama.

The Ritual Drama

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[493] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, p. 51.

[494] Turner, victor, *From Ritual to Theatre*: *The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York: PAJ Publications, 1982, p. 92.

[495] Ibid.,

[496] This is from one of the clips cited at the very beginning of this chapter, it is by J.A. Collins of the *San Juan Star* (Puerto Rico): see Serumaga Robert, *Programme Magazine* for *Renga Moi* ('4th Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies'), Theatre Limited: Kampala, January 1974, p. 5.

To discuss *Renga Moi* is to almost invariably take an excursion into certain rituals. It is ritual that puts into play a lot of the key events in the play. This is true of ritual, as something that the denizens of the Village of Seven Hills abide by; and also restorative ritual, ritual as a result of a transgression, and, in this particular context, a fatal transgression from a specific norm and the procedural steps that govern that process. If one were to ask for a fulcrum around which *Renga Moi* revolves, it would be provided in no more than a single word: *ritual*. If one was to delineate form from content, or vice versa, then ritual would — more than likely — be both form and content.

Technically, the moment a ritual is transplanted onto stage, then the staging conventions take precedence and the ritual must concede to the narratological imperatives of the given production. The use of a cast as opposed to the actual 'actants' of a given ritual and community further widens the gulf between ritual-as-lived and ritual-as-simulated meta-performance. In that sense, ritual might even be strictly designated as meta-ritual. Ritual though is such an overarching concern of the play; in fact, a lot of its trajectory has ritual (or a simulacrum of it) at its centre. Even when the audience is not witnessing the unfolding of a ritual process, they are still not far from ritual; in that they are probably witnessing the consequences of not abiding by certain codes of behaviour. And, more often than not, the harmony and balance the Villagers seek to restore can only be attained through ritual.

The ritual process around the twins amounts to a lengthy pacification exercise. The twins stay because they have been pacified. At least in part, what *Renga Moi* does when his wife Nakazzi gives birth to the twins in the early moments of the play, is to start a process of pacification of the new- born twins. Renga Moi is also, as expressly ordered by the Priest-diviner, not to shed a single drop of blood (be it human or animal) before the ceremonies are concluded.

The invasion of the Village by the envious neighbours could not have come at a worse time: when the ceremonies have only begun. Renga Moi, therefore, opts to go to war. But the aborted ceremony and his personal obligation place his entire village on the precipice of

something perhaps even more damaging than the invasion. The birth of those twins is 'an event as portentous for the warrior and his village as the eclipse of the moon. [...] twins are unusually powerful and can wreak havoc'.[497] But the village has had its problems too, forgetting to heed regular attention to some of the norms that govern their very existence. In the Priest-diviner's own words to them at the beginning of the play: 'Your spears are cold. You dance to strange Gods. You offer your bodies for a fistful of cowrie shells.'[498] And so the inhabitants of the Village are lambasted for their greed and materialism, what appears to be the embrace of alien religious beliefs, and perhaps even prostitution. They have, in other words, earned for themselves the ire of the traditional Gods. And the only solution to this endless cycle of calamities, decrees the Priest-diviner, is the sacrifice of the twins.

The first demand Renga Moi makes on his triumphal return is to see his children. But according to the norms of the village, Renga Moi must undergo a mandatory purification. Like everybody in the community who has shed any blood, he is regarded as cursed, and the way to wash that blood all off, and reintegrate, by being pushed through an anthill. The ritual purification is completed by yet another ritual, a second birth or rebirth, which is signified by the act of crawling through his wife's legs.

Serumaga's aesthetic is characterised by visual images and symbols infused in the set as well as the props; combine that with mimicry, movement, dance as well as stillness and you get a semiology that could be described as ritualised. In moments such as the sacrificial scene or Renga Moi's cleansing and rebirth, the audience comes face to face with actual ritual, albeit in a theatrical setting. It is therefore possible to posit that *Renga Moi* is a ritual drama — a series of rituals,

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[497] Gilbert, Stephen. W, 'Around the World in Thirty Days', *Plays and Players*, XXII, London: April 1975, p.14.
[498] Cited in Hudson Christopher, 'A Tribal Ritual', *The Evening Standard,* (London): April 24th 1975.

in fact — which turns it into a ritual process in both form and content; indeed, some might simply sum it up as 'a sustained rite'.[499]

Reception

In her discussion of the 1973 production, Kamanyi noted of the ensemble: 'Most interesting was the ease with which the cast changed roles. The males, for instance, changed from attacking warriors to villagers.'[500] She goes on to point to the narrator (Serumaga) who also doubled as the Priest-diviner as well as the Carpenter turned into catholic Priest, and back to Carpenter; coffin-maker, to be exact. The ensemble's spirit, discipline, focus, commitment, concentration, and their astonishing ability to emote in character are all qualities that Kamanyi lauds unequivocally. Kamanyi's praise also extends to the radical, unprecedented departure from the semiotic to the semiological: 'Although there was very little dialogue, the action communicated the message very well.'[501] By *action* Kamanyi includes interactions as well as reactions. She actually cites 'moments of terror', such as the attack on the Village and the sacrificial scene, and the stillness that accompanied those moments; Renga Moi's reintegration through the arduous cleansing process; his second birth; and also the Priest-diviner's death by strangulation. The percussion, dance, and even the lighting, which, though not mentioned earlier, was, to Kamanyi, also an equally laudatory element in this groundbreaking production.

A vast number of the reviews devote ample time to the sacrificial scene, with reference to the mother and her incalculable pain. (The scene was discussed earlier, in connection with the research and Jane Majoro's performance). That ten-minute scene is probably the most affecting in this 90- minute play. In the words of one reviewer: 'I pretended to dry

[499] Cited in Serumaga, Robert, *Programme Magazine* for *Renga Moi* ('4th Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies'), Theatre Limited: Kampala, January 1974, p. 5.

[500] Kamanyi, Joanna, *A Comparative Study of Theatrical Productions in Uganda Today*, M.A. thesis, Kampala: Makerere University, 1978, p. 144.

[501] Ibid., p. 145.

my sweat but I was in fact wiping my tears.'[502] Kamanyi actually cites a number of other memorable moments; such as the attack on the Village and the sacrificial scene, and the stillness that accompanied them; Renga Moi's reintegration through the arduous cleansing process; his second birth; and also the Priest-diviner's death by strangulation. The percussion, dance, and even the lighting, which, though not mentioned earlier, were, to Kamanyi, also an equally laudatory in this groundbreaking production.

However deserved the critical euphoria that greeted *Renga Moi*, it is also worth noting the reservations of some. In spite of her praise for Serumaga's radical, largely semiological signification, Kamanyi wonders whether the signification of the wooden scaffolding, the entire set and props (such as the spears and the drums) and the war and tragedy they symbolised, may have been lost on the audience: 'One wonders [...] whether or not the audience see all the symbolism in the set.'[503]

For Macpherson, 'the dances and the ritual' had 'dramatic relevance', and *Renga Moi* was an, 'undoubtedly [...] exciting theatrical experience.'[504] Having been drawn from a diversity of sources, though predominantly Ugandan, these 'dances and ritual', she goes on to note, 'occasionally [made for] rather uneasy bedfellows.' This seems to be a legitimate cautionary note. In Macpherson's opinion, those who employ dance and ritual must ensure that they do not fall into an anthropological trap. The plays then could start to look like exercises in the mapping of things, which stand out for their cultural differences. They must, almost always, be organic and flow from the dictates of the drama; instead of appearing to be deliberately

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[502] The review is entitled, 'A Black Explosion', *Libre Belgique*, May 6th 1973, p. 5.

[503] Kamanyi, Joanna, *A Comparative Study of Theatrical Productions in Uganda Today*, M.A. thesis, Kampala: Makerere University, 1978, p. 143.

[504] This and all the other quotations in the paragraph are from: Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 17.

imposed. The end result could be that unease which may obviously impede the theatrical flow.

Signification and Survival

To discuss Serumaga's aesthetic, the centrality and nature of ritual as well as the play as a ritual drama, should not obscure the fact that *Renga Moi*, like all the other works of Serumaga's, was a response to the Uganda of the day. The rampant inhumanity that was to characterise Amin's Uganda, the postcolonial history of that colonial construct, and the much-discussed question of the binarised region of Buganda in that tragic equation of nation-statism are all well worth noting. And indeed he diagnosed and exposed the colossal inhumanity that had spread like a malignant cancer through the body politic of that constructed entity called Uganda. The unique and radical idiom of the post-*Majangwa* plays is unquestionably an aesthetic choice; nevertheless, Nkosi (who was cited earlier on) is right to see it as a strategic imperative at the same time; for the sole purpose of crying out against the postcolonial evils of his day and attempting to ensure his survival.

The predominantly visual form of signification left, for the Ugandan censor, not much more than a synopsis in a *Programme Magazine* in their hands. As was the case when *Majangwa* opened in 1971, when *Renga Moi* first opened in July (1972), Idi Amin also saw it.[505] Almost every commentator has mentioned that, to Amin, at that particular time, the play was compelling because it was an athletic display of gymnastics.[506] It is probably useless to attempt an explanation of Amin's fondness for the gymnastic displays, but he could have enjoyed the *esprits de corps* behind it, the athleticism and military-like discipline, but this much is certain; North Korean gymnastics was the athletic pastime *du jour*, and many a Ugandan

[505] See Kimenye, Barbara, 'Uganda's Theatre Pros Take Critics by Storm', *The Daily Nation*, Nairobi, November 24th 1972, p. 13.

[506] See Mbowa, Rose, ' Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, 31, 1994, (revised and enlarged) 2003, pp. 129-130.

school at the time were asked to train their students in those displays. For a while at least, Serumaga's chosen idiom had succeeded in surmounting the censor and obscuring the subject matter from Amin.

Ritual itself can also be further read, in this respect, as an innately distancing device. This is due to the chronological temptation to equate tradition with the past rather than the contemporary, even when the ritual in question is still ubiquitously practised. To read it that way helps to further obscure the play's concerns from the subject/s and the censor. The audience, on the other hand, enter into an unspoken conspiracy of silence with the author: pretending to accept this theatre of resistance as an anachronism (maybe even an inscrutable tale) as opposed to a timeless fable in response to 'a clear and present' tragedy. And Ritual also helps to further disguise and distance these pungent critiques, as it lends itself easily to a predominantly visual and more inscrutable signification in the form of images and symbols.

Given such burdens and concerns, it is to be regretted, perhaps, that a scholar of Adrian Roscoe's status would posit that Serumaga's choice of this radical new idiom was simply a product of his unease with the English language. In his 'Footnote on Drama' Roscoe notes in relation to *Renga Moi*: 'Four vernaculars are fine, and silence even better.'[507] That sounds more like a deliberate echo of *Animal Farm* calculated to ridicule rather than praise Serumaga. Roscoe then goes on to declare that this 'preferred philosophy' is not an aesthetic or philosophy, but rather a result of 'personal weakness.'[508] To Roscoe, 'The texts of Serumaga's plays often suggest a slight discomfort with English and his strengths are more technically theatrical than linguistic.'[509] Roscoe fails to acknowledge that Serumaga's embrace of the indigenous tongues was a necessary and laudable step, not only in terms of linguistic decolonisation, but also, epistemic liberation. As for what amounts to a congenital linguistic unease in Serumaga, far more

[507] Roscoe, Adrian, *Uhuru's Fire: African Literature East to South*, London, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 263.
[508] Ibid.,
[509] Ibid.,

people who have read and seen *Majangwa* or *The Elephants* are bound to disagree with Roscoe's views. Last but not least, the binarisation and prioritisation of language over performance provides further proof of why theatre and performance at large had, and should continue to assert and ensure, their own independence — instead of forever condemning themselves to exist under a literalist roof — from the auspices of English/Literature departments.

The point is that while Roscoe saw essentialist linguistic ineptness in Serumaga, fortunately, others saw poetry, a post-colonial imperative, an indigenised theatrical sign and a redoubtable expansion of the frontiers of the theatre. It is in large part due to both the ritual and the radical semiology he deployed that Serumaga managed to evade the censor and Amin himself for as long as he did. The strangling of the priest-diviner by Renga Moi would have revolted many an audience, and in that as well, where some may not have read beyond the legendary warrior's justified rage, others would have clearly seen a manifestly doomed attempt to usurp an office. And, an office, whose attributes could only have been conferred from the spiritual realm and only for a chosen few. This attempt to assume, through a foul murder, what appears like total secular as well as spiritual power is a lethal concoction, Serumaga seems to say.

Individualism and Activism

Based on the way these two words are used or overused in certain quarters, it is possible to forget that there is nothing in either of those words to suggest that they are diametrically opposed. The evidence that has emerged from the plays discussed in the last three chapters suggests that individualism has a lot more to do with Serumaga's aesthetic and methodology than with a lack of a social conscience or activism. It is, in fact, possible to deconstruct the question of individualism, or solipsism, as nothing more than a ruse on the part of certain scholars to avoid engaging with what Serumaga is dealing with, or to serve the whims of their preferred ideologies. And it is a seemingly 'progressive', post-colonially vigilant agenda that, as a

matter of unacknowledged fact, is trapped in an ironic embrace of a colonial construct, under the guise of a postcolonial nationstatist entity. A lot of what Serumaga strove to enjoy was the right to be both a Muganda and a Ugandan. This is a right that virtually all other Ugandans enjoyed apart from the Baganda who, after Obote's 1966 coup, were subjected to an internal form of colonialism. The moment the pen and the theatre ceased to be effectively interventionist, Serumaga eventually picked up arms to liberate his country (in much the same way as Renga Moi, incidentally). For the record, none of his critics did. What may look like an exultation of individualism or its more 'severe form,' solipsism, is a strategic, aesthetic, allegorical approach towards the exposé of the postcolonial malaise that afflicted the Uganda of his day. Furthermore, Serumaga needed a survival kit in order to accomplish that, and didactism was not part of his artistic weapon of choice. In *Renga Moi*, ritual and other forms of distancing such as the semiological signification all helped him to expose the teeming inhumanity that was Amin's Uganda and where its origins lay. The question of individualism versus activism ought not be ignored, but should be regarded as an opportunity to expose the myth behind the binarisation, as well as the ideological interests at play.[510] It is also an opportunity to further examine *Renga Moi*, with the aim of providing incontrovertible proof of a social, political, interventionist conscience at work. One way of getting to that proof is through identifying Serumaga's deliberate distortion and distancing. That, in turn, takes us through the ostensible to the real story and concerns. And lest we forget, the distortion and distancing were also about survival. Still, Serumaga provides enough clues to ensure that his primary concerns are not obliterated in the intricate process.

Those concerns can be teased out by noting, for example, that the name of the village in which the ritual drama unfolds is the Village

[510] These are two-fold, one being postcolonial nationstatism, as well as, socialism. With regard to the latter, it is important to emphasise that to critique or discredit it, is not to endorse any form of rampant, unbridled capitalism; it is, rather, to affirm the complexity of indigenous social-economic relations and kinship systems that pre-dated the colonial and postcolonial era.

of the Seven Hills. It is a telling choice; in reality, it is a reference to Kampala. Like Rome, the city of Kampala was originally built on seven hills. Indeed as Rose Mbowa has noted, Serumaga 'disguised his particular concern for Buganda by hiding behind the legend of the noble Acholi warrior, Renga Moi.'[511] Mbowa also points out that Serumaga's designation of the village is clearly an allusion to Kampala and Buganda. At no time does Serumaga mention the region or Kingdom of Buganda, which Obote (who essentially created Amin) had wiped off the map and banished from the political discourse in May 1966. But, in spite of all the masking and calibrated distortion of it, Serumaga's 'particular concern for Buganda' seems to surface at a very early stage in the play. That concern should not, in any way, be construed as an indifference to Amin's genocidal rule, which spared no single group in Uganda. Serumaga's prompt response to that is evident even in the earlier play *Majangwa*. In a sense, *Renga Moi* is unquestionably about Amin. But Amin did not come out of a vacuum; hence the historicisation that makes us revisit Obote, who represents where it all began, but also the presence of the past.

Macpherson has described *Renga Moi* as a dramatic vessel through which Serumaga expresses 'a feeling of deep unease at the violence beneath the skin of 20th-century Uganda.'[512] This violence is neither distant nor obscure; it is close and palpably real. It should also be noted that the violence Serumaga is responding to, has nothing to do with September 1973, when the predominantly pro-Obote groups attempted to overthrow Amin by launching an assault from neighbouring Tanzania. The fact that *Renga Moi* was first produced in August 1972 invalidates that assumption. The revolting violence Macpherson points to in *Renga Moi* is an intra-territorial one. Since the

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[511] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, 31, 1994, p. 129.

[512] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 17.

real setting of the play is Buganda, Buganda is bound the object of this violence in a historicized sense, of where it all began — before Idi Amin's genocidal rule. Kamanyi goes a little further by specifically characterising the battle in which the village is 'ravaged' as 'unequal'. That is a catalytic event in the early part of the play. It also echoes the asymmetrical battle of Mengo, in which Obote's numerical and technological might was used under the command of the then Colonel Idi Amin to eventually storm the palace of the Kabaka of Buganda in May 1966.

One of the very first acts of the hegemonies of both Obote and Idi Amin was their self-exemption from any legal liability in order to 'legalise', by decree/statute, their patently illegal assumption of office by military fiat. When Renga Moi strangles the Priest diviner, he, in effect, stages a coup and spills innocent blood in the process. It is an abominable act that is ultimately doomed to fail as yet another period of despair is ushered in. Renga Moi may have some justification for his act, but slaying priests/people is not really the route to the pinnacle of power. He will eventually have to account, or fall prey to the irrepressible hand of divine justice. In fact, in his case, there is still the question of the dead twins and their aborted rites; this guarantees that he will fall prey to their 'holy' wrath, an eventuality that even the legendary general cannot escape.

Serumaga also seems to be inviting the audience to interrogate the question of power. Is the lust for it the same thing as the wielding of it? What does it mean to lead? Does leadership, for example, mean listening as well as attaining the peoples' popular consent; or does it mean to be something akin to a slave master? And, furthermore, are gun barrels and skull-counts of innocent victims the determinants of postcolonial executive authority, or is it ballots cast in the name of the given president in a free and fair election? In Serumaga's words, Renga Moi 'kills the priest-diviner and rather like the modern

politician, he assumes the diviner's unenviable position.'[513] Those words may sound folkloric, restrained and distanced from Uganda's postcolonial afflictions, but it is those very afflictions that Serumaga is unequivocally addressing. As Fanon would say, power is not about jostling or 'intimating to the citizen that he is in continual danger';[514] that, though, appears to be the road that Renga Moi embarks on the moment he usurps absolute power. In spite of the constraints imposed by the genocidal regime, that is the reality, however surreal, that Serumaga is signifying. How this turns him into an individualist or solipsist is, at the very least, mystifying. Renga Moi's usurping/concretisation of power could, ultimately, be paralleled to a psychosis that appears to have afflicted many a Ugandan and African leader. The assumption of office soon turns into an aspiration to a life-long tenure of the Presidency; an eventual self-apotheosization into a 'monarchised' presidency.

This section is essentially a discussion of individualism on the one hand, and activism on the other. It has, however, increasingly focussed on Serumaga's activism, distancing and signification. But the discussion has also entailed the question of signification and survival, particularly as it relates to *Renga Moi*. To Serumaga, the callous inhumanity that Obote visited upon the Baganda in particular and the Bantu south in general must be repudiated in the same manner as the genocidal acts of Amin's rule, which spared no single region or peoples' in Uganda. Indeed, contrary to what some of his critics have stated, Serumaga's location, as well as thematic priorities in *Renga Moi,* strike one for how little they have really changed (if at all) from his very first work, all through the three scripted dramas and the post-*Majangwa* plays. An observation that Mbowa made is worth repeating in this context: 'It is necessary to emphasise that the whole of

[513] Serumaga, Robert, *Programme Magazine* (4th Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) Theatre Limited: Kampala, January 1974, p. 7.
[514] Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (trans.) Constance Farrington, London: Penguin, 1963, p. 132.

Serumaga's theatrical career fell within repressive eras';[515] and few, if any, would deny that he did nothing but intervene. And the evidence also seems to consistently show that although he may have exalted individuals such as Majangwa, his overriding concerns — the injustice and the inhumanity he cries out against — render the allegation of individualism, perhaps even solipsism, very circumspect at best. Indeed, for the most part, a lot of his individualism is methodological; it is a means and far from an end. The allegation of individualism/solipsism deliberately obscures Serumaga's activism and commitment. It can also be read as a call for didactic agitprop dramas or socialist realism from a playwright who, though ferociously activist in reality, did not subscribe to socialism, an ideology that was espoused by a number of his critics.[516] Neither did he subscribe to the didactic approach that seems to be manifestly implied in the literary activism he is alleged to have been impervious to. Serumaga's alleged individualism suited his psychological approach in dramaturgical terms, of which a lot has been said about already.

It should also be noted that Serumaga's individuals are flawed characters, and he is as critical of them as he is of the societies they inhabit. It is through those characters as well as the society that, more often than not, Serumaga manages to draw a portrait of the tragic nation state that Uganda turned into only a few years after the attainment of Independence. Those who do not see the abrogation of a Constitution, or the pogroms as egregious violations are bound to miss Uganda's enemy within and perhaps miss, or deliberately ignore, Serumaga's patent activism. Those who see dualism as a luxury or an inalienable entitlement that can only be enjoyed by every Ugandan, save for Serumaga and his region of Buganda, are bound to ignore Serumaga's activism as they are obliged to subscribe to a lethal and binarised nation-building process: an ideal whose *raison d'être* is

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[515] Mbowa, Rose, ' Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, 31, 1994, p. 129.

[516] See, for example: Serumaga, Robert, Margaret Roberts, *et al*, 'Talking Aloud on African Socialism', *Transition* 24, kampala, 1- 1966, Vol. 5, pp. 45-48.

really the evisceration of a culture and a people. Serumaga actively historicizes that process by taking us back to where it all began: to Obote and the ultimate results of his hegemony, including the political 'birth' of Idi Amin, the liberator-turned-tyrant.

In *Renga Moi*, as in all the work that preceded it, Buganda is clearly never too far from the axis of Serumaga's concerns. But the community and culture that he so cherished is itself, much like in *Majangwa*, not beyond reproach. It is important to recall something that was noted in an earlier section, and that is the lambasting of the denizens of the Village of Seven Hills by the Priest-diviner for turning their backs on their ancestral spirits. He also questions their readiness for war and berates them for their materialism and greed. At the very least, the playwright appears to say that they have co-authored their misfortunes and tragedies. The synopsis of the play states, for example, that when the aborted rites start to take their toll on the community, the twin-mother 'begins to question the morals of the society in which she lives.'[517] Predictably, the society denies having played any role in precipitating the hardships they now have to endure. The coffin-maker, who prospers from the misfortunes and tragedy, goes even further than his society by 'extolling the merits of his profession.'[518] When the Priest-diviner concludes that the aborted rites will lead to a spiral of calamities unless the twins are sacrificed, the society readily agrees to the solution. But after the twins' 'sacrificial [deaths by being impaled] upon the spears', the same 'society' is almost instantly 'revolted by its own part in the sacrifice and 'turns against the Priest-diviner'[519]. On Renga Moi's return from the war, they — together with the Priest-diviner — keep quiet about the sacrifice. They urge him to undergo the painful cleansing ritual 'to remove from him', or what is referred to in traditional parlance as 'the curse of blood.'[520] This is a fickle, hypocritical, opportunistic society and, more importantly, these salient,

[517] Serumaga, Robert, *Programme Magazine* (4th Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) Theatre Limited: Kampala, January 1974, p. 6.
[518] Ibid.,
[519] Ibid.,
[520] Ibid.,

deplorable traits are not without diachronic precedent among a minority of the Baganda, and probably a lot of the Bantu South. But *Renga Moi* is not necessarily an espousal of individualism and a concomitant disavowal of society; it is, rather, a clarion call for principle, for a political and social conscience over expediency, and all the other social ills behind the postcolonial malaise that plagued the Uganda of Serumaga's day. *Renga Moi* is also not, strictly speaking, a binarisation of the individual on the one hand and society/activism on the other. True, it revolves around a difficult choice: the dilemma of having to make a choice that (ideally) no one should. But this is a trying context. Whether he sticks to the prerogatives of family and ritual or opts to repulse the marauding invader, the one thing that is bound to unfold with certainty and classic, Aristotelian inevitability is tragedy. One ought to exercise more judiciousness before binarising the individual and the community in Serumaga; even in this play, which poses that question, but explores it, not in ontological or necessarily polarised terms, but as a tragic predicament. To stretch Serumaga's individualism to a virulent extreme: solipsism, as some have done, is to (wittingly or not) open themselves up to legitimate charges of violating Derrida's cardinal rule: '*I'll n'ya pas de hors texte*'. At the very least, a juxtaposition that characterises individual obligations as patently anti-communal (in Serumaga's work) smacks of oversimplification. And, under a deconstructive glare, that oversimplification may well reveal itself as being symptomatic of an ideological and nationstatist scheme that dictates the tone and content of those who portray Serumaga's work as mutually exclusive from activism.

Writing in 1974, Ugandan scholar Peter Nazareth noted that Serumaga, and a few other writers, though 'prolific', stood out for being 'non-political'[521] and, in Serumaga's case, incoherent. 'Their [...] non-political approach', Nazareth further notes, 'seems to be a lack of sensitivity to what is going on.'[522] Those writers

[521] Nazareth, Peter, 'East African Literacy Supplement', *Joliso*, 11.1, Nairobi, 1974, p. 13.

(Serumaga included), states Nazareth, have been, if not severely attacked, then 'totally ignored' (presumably by critics and scholars). Nazareth then goes on to note: 'Serumaga has even resorted, in desperation, to writing critical articles about his own plays; which have even been less coherent than the plays.'[523]

At least as a working hypothesis, what amounts to Nazareth's callous dismissal of Serumaga's work may be symptomatic of a binary that predates Serumaga's work or Nazareth's opinions of it. Through their contributions to *Transition* magazine, probably the leading intellectual and critical periodical of the time, both Serumaga and Nazareth seem to have held radically different views with regard to issues such as socialism.[524] And for people such as Nazareth, opponents appear to be characterised as being against the unproblematised, more egalitarian and caring society that Nazareth and others espoused.

Nazareth's remarks also raise another issue. Contrary to what may have been implied about Makerere, the Golden Age, and the Class of '68, one should not be under any illusion of a unanimity and unconditional camaraderie. The state of that union, at least at times, was not necessarily a blissful one. There is evidence of what could be described as fault-lines within the class. That polarisation may have made its way into Nazareth's callous dismissal of Serumaga. Some of that evidence can be found in an article that Nazareth dismisses as incoherent.

The article in question is 'The Critical Silence' written in the *Uganda Argus* newspaper (August 1972), after *Renga Moi's* second run in Kampala. It is a critique of the National Theatre Staff for leaving no space in their programming to allow for any extended runs, even when certain productions turned out to deserve them. The bulk of the article is devoted to an encounter Serumaga had with a scholar from

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[522] Ibid.,
[523] Ibid.,
[524] See, for example: Serumaga Robert, Margaret Roberts, *et al*, 'Talking Aloud on African Socialism', *Transition* 24, 1- 1966, Vol. 5, pp. 45-48; or: Nazareth Peter, 'The African Writer and Commitment', *Transition*, Vol. 4, Number 19, 2- 1965, pp. 6-7.

the University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), whom he had met at the Dupont Plaza Hotel in Washington, DC. The scholar apparently put it to Serumaga that those in Uganda's 'inner theatrical circle' had held a meeting at Makerere in his absence. At that meeting, Serumaga had been accused of being 'impertinent and misguided.'[525] A decision was subsequently made to ostracise him and to ensure that his work was received by a 'critical silence'. This 'severe reprimand' was triggered by his decision to invite a 'white critic' (presumably Nairobi based) to review the very first production of *Majangwa*. Hence, the critical blackout *Renga Moi* endured at its Kampala opening, which forced Serumaga to write his own review of the play. Nazareth's remarks can probably best be read as part and parcel of a concerted effort at Makerere and Dar es Salaam, where Nazareth, a Ugandan and ex-Makererean, seems to have been at the time.

As for Serumaga's invitation of a 'white' critic, the condemnation does, among other things, go against the multi-racial practice that had characterised these 'transactions' in general. But it also further justifies Serumaga's decision to abandon Theatre Limited and form the Abafumi. In addition, the condemnation reveals a rather narrow-minded nationalism and a parochialism, as well as a lack of business acumen. Serumaga was not indulging in a hobby; he was trying to create a professional company. What, after all, is wrong with being reviewed in advance by someone from a neighbouring country in which you have every intention of touring the same production? Some might see it all as a creatively healthy 'sibling rivalry,' though the racial aspect of it would be hard to rationalise. It is probably a matter of opinion whether it is *Majangwa* or *Renga Moi* that ushered in the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre. Sadly, neither Serumaga's adversaries at Makerere nor Nazareth seem to have realised the unprecedented, theatrical glory that *Renga Moi*, Serumaga and the Abafumi were about to secure for Uganda and East Africa among the

[525] All the quotations in this paragraph are from: Serumaga, Robert, 'The Critical Silence' (Serumaga's 'personal review' of his own play) *Renga Moi* (*The Red Warrior*), *Uganda Argus*, Kampala, 3rd August 1972, p. 4.

world's theatre community. If they had, perhaps that just did not matter to them. This was the play that David Rubadiri was to describe as 'shattering' and one that was 'staged in all the leading world theatre festivals, [and in] 'altogether 26 countries in six years.'[526]

Nevertheless, Mbowa, Macpherson and Kamanyi, who have been cited numerous times, provide an example of affirmation and even praise for Serumaga and *Renga Moi*. And in spite of the 'critical embargo', the *Uganda Argus* newspaper did favourably review *Renga Moi* and interviewed Serumaga.[527] The National Theatre also offered Serumaga and the Abafumi yet another run in August of the same year. His intervention in the *Uganda Argus* newspaper did, after all, bear some fruit.

In the light of Nazareth's criticism in a postcolonial space, how helpful is an either-or approach to literary criticism or performance analysis? In other words, if you happen not to subscribe to the 'Literary Marxist' or the 'Marxist-Fanonist' approach, does it follow that you are automatically a bourgeois scholar/writer, an aspiring or actual member of the *comprador* class and the local bourgeoisie? These questions were first posed in relation to Chris Wanjala (see Chapter 2), who, like Nazareth, appears to be a member of the 'Nairobi school of literary criticism'. Serumaga's legitimate concern for Buganda and the inhumanity that was visited upon it appears to be the cause of some, if not most, of the ire that precipitated Wanjala's and Nazareth's diatribes. But in their attempts to critique Serumaga's work, these two scholars (particularly Nazareth) offer virtually no single insight about the work. These ostensible critiques end up exposing even more of a critical activism at play in the pursuance and exaltation of an ahistorical nationstatism: a project whose dire implications can best be

[526] Rubadiri, David, 'Serumaga: Dramatist Who has Descended to Grassroots Level', Nairobi, The *Sunday (Standard)*, 29th January 1978.
[527] See 'Interview': 'Robert Serumaga Shows You War-torn Village', *Uganda Argus*, July 12th 1972, p. 2.

summed up in its 'noble' goal of a 'complete flattening of the ethnic landscape.'[528]

Serumaga's own statements on the postcolonial nation state reveal a far more nuanced, rigorous and complex attempt to grapple with the postcolonial construct that he and many others found themselves in. It should also be noted in parenthesis, at least, that in his creative work, specifically in *The Elephants,* his concerns went even beyond the confines of Uganda. They are inherent even in the following observation: 'Most states in Africa are a collection of people with different languages and varying cultural traditions, tenuously related to each other and enclosed within the expedience's of a political boundary.'[529] Incidentally, this observation predates *Majangwa*, the Abafumi and *Renga Moi*. He then goes on to note: 'From this collection of people, a nation must be formed, blending existing traditions and nurturing within its barely formed womb a new articulation.'[530] Serumaga may expose nationstatism for the colonial construct that it is — and it probably took a lot more courage to say truths of that nature at the time — but there is also a degree of reconciliation with that brutal imposition. And he certainly does not gloss over the facts or justify any of the shortcomings of that construct. But even if his position is nothing more than realistic or pragmatic, the fact remains that Serumaga's work and life are a far cry from the alleged individualism/solipsism. The formation of the Abafumi, their different languages, cultures and nationalities, all provide further incontrovertible proof of a pragmatism, activism, complexity, rigour, a sense of history and a social conscience at work. If anyone has to be put in the dock in this context, it is not Serumaga; but rather, his critical adversaries and their ideological fervour.

Amayirikiti

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[528] Davidson, Basil, *The Black Man's Burden*: *Africa and the Curse of the Nation State*, James Currey: London and Random House: New York, 1992. p. 103.
[529] Serumaga, Robert and Janet Johnson, 'Uganda Experimental Theatre', *African Arts*, III, 3, Spring 1970, p. 53.
[530] Ibid.,

It is *Renga Moi* that undoubtedly first brought to Uganda and the world, what Margaretta wa Gacheru has described as 'a fierce and fiery free flowing performance' that the Abafumi, among other things, came to be reputed for; together with 'a small-scale tradition for producing outstanding African theatre.'[531] These glowing remarks were made in a Kenyan newspaper, on the eve of the 1978 opening of *Amayirikiti* (1974), at Nairobi's French Cultural Centre. Margaretta wa Gacheru also noted, having been to a public dress rehearsal, that the play had 'already brought bystanders to tears or dumb-foundness', and goes on to explain what makes the play 'merit such resounding praise'[532]. Her praise, for *Amayirikiti*, Serumaga's wordless play, provides something akin to a clinic. This it does, not so much in attempting to outmatch any previous accolades; she does not have to, rather, through, an edifying understanding and rendition of Serumaga's wordless (dialogue-less) play. *Renga Moi* may have marked the arrival of the Golden Age, but *Amayirikiti* ensured that this unprecedented success was not an ephemeral achievement; and that the Abafumi were determined to keep Uganda on the theatrical map of the world. And it is on *Amayirikiti* that the focus will be for a little while.

Given that it is a virtually wordless play, *Amayirikiti*, even more than *Renga Moi*, confronts any interested party with a crucial hurdle; how can you discuss a play without a text? More ambitious, and even more daring than *Renga Moi*, *Amayirikiti* cannot even be 'accused' of having much of a story, in the conventional narratological sense. It is more like a pastiche, linked together by its palpable overarching concerns. It is those concerns, in their totality, that provide the audience with the story of the play. Here, far much more than in *Renga Moi*, there is no linear time. *Amayirikiti* takes the audience straight into the infamous Namanve forest, one of the dumping grounds for the victims of Amin's atrocious regime. Kalundi confirmed that Namanve was, indeed, given serious consideration, at least as a

[531] Margaretta wa Gacheru, '*Amayirikiti* set for tomorrow', Nairobi: *Sunday Standard*, January 29th 1978.
[532] Ibid.,

working title (if not the ultimate one) for *Amayirikiti*. But, of course, that is not a title that would have survived Amin's censors. In fact, it would have been a suicidal choice.

Amayirikiti has a running time of approximately 45 minutes, about half that of *Renga Moi*. Unlike *Renga Moi*, which Serumaga had come to regard as word-heavy, *Amayirikiti* 'boasts' no more than a grand total of 17 words; excluding the few songs and chants. The 'micro-worded' *Programme Magazine* has a total of approximately 45 words, in the first of its three, brief paragraphs. It is therefore much longer than the number of words in the play whose overview it provides. It is also far more metaphorical than *Renga Moi's* synopsis, and very consciously cryptic. Amayirikiti is a Luganda word; the plural form of a name for a certain tree — some might actually describe it, as a shrub — the Flame-tree (or Flame-shrub), its singular is Ejirikiti. Serumaga obviously opted for the tree (as opposed to shrub); and he singularised his English translation of the title. Here is Serumaga's description of the chosen tree: 'Our type of Flame-tree is a sturdy tropical growth with a hard bark and the most astonishing outburst of red flowers that graces tropical savannah lands.'[533] Serumaga is obviously signifying a number of things here; the Flame-tree is commonly known for its resilience during the dry season. This certainly symbolises the phenomenal resilience of the populace, under the rampant inhumanity of Amin. Margaretta wa Gacheru seems to make the same point in her description of the play as a revelation of 'the elasticity and wonderful resiliency of the human soul.'[534] As for those 'red flowers', which grace the land, they appear to be a veiled reference to the skulls that littered the killing fields of Amin's Uganda.

Serumaga then goes on to compare that 'sturdy growth' to 'a fallen king whose crown still mocks his destiny.'[535] This is someone who has probably had a peek into the future, and is without any doubt,

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[533] Serumaga, Robert, *Amayirikiti* (*The Flame Tree*), wordless and unpublished apart from the Synopsis, 1974, p. 4.
[534] Margaretta wa Gacheru, '*Amayirikiti* Set for Tomorrow', Nairobi: *Sunday Standard*, January 29th 1978.
[535] Serumaga, Robert, *Amayirikiti* (Synopsis), 1974. p. 4.

as to what awaits Uganda's tyrant (Idi Amin). Amin's days seem to be numbered, his fate, having been sealed already by the gory deeds symbolised by the 'red flowers'. 'Such a dictatorship', if one may borrow Fanon's words to emphasise Serumaga's point, 'cannot halt the process of its own contradictions.'[536] This, of course, is not to underplay the astronomical human toll that the genocidal regime had already taken on the country, about, only, half way through Amin's presidential tenure.

It is that toll, the 'abounding human bestiality'[537] that Serumaga depicts in what he ostensibly describes in the same synopsis, as an attempt 'to interpret the complex feeling of the existence of Flame-trees'.[538] It is hard not to imagine that both Serumaga and the Abafumi must have been gripped by fits of roaring laughter, as they contemplated what the censors were to make of *Amayirikiti's* Synopsis. They must have, to a degree at least, managed to throw the Censor off their trail by describing the play in what sounds like a rather strange, if not eccentric pursuit. But the 'smoke screen' suddenly disappears, at least for a moment, when one gets to something else in the same synopsis that Serumaga draws out of the customs of his region. It is a tradition among the Baganda, that: 'when a dog dies, it is not buried, but [...] placed at the foot of a Flame-tree and the owner turns his back on it.'[539] But by invoking this traditional ritual, Serumaga is clearly intimating the dramatic depreciation in any value that human life may once have had. In Amin's Uganda, the State, which usually guarantees the lives of its citizens, had, instead, stripped them of even the barest of minimums of dignity, including that to which a dog is traditionally entitled, a decent funeral.

It is fair to say that in *Amayirikiti*, even the wordlessness is not just an aesthetic choice, but a poignant expression of a spine-chilling

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[536] Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (trans.) Constance Farrington, London: Penguin, 1963, p. 132.
[537] Margaretta wa Gacheru, '*Amayirikiti* set for tomorrow', Nairobi: *Sunday Standard*, January 29th, 1978.
[538] Serumaga, Robert, *Amayirikiti* (Synopsis), 1974, p. 4.
[539] Ibid.,

terror. There comes a time when, whether one invokes poetry or just words, one discovers that they still cannot find a combination, adequate enough, to bear or signify the horror. The genocide of Amin's Uganda, however comparatively 'minor' it may be, to the Holocaust or the Rwandan Genocide, certainly serves as a reminder of that unparalleled encounter with the very epitome of evil and the inadequacy of words. As Ntangaare and Eckhard Breitinger have observed, Serumaga had clearly 'been searching for a theatrical idiom that could carry the weight [of] the horror [that went way] beyond what can be expressed in words.'[540] In *Amayirikiti*, he had definitely found one. No wonder then that in this 45-minute mime, the only articulate character happens to be a mumbling coffin maker. It is the coffin that links the ritual realm of that play's world with contemporary Uganda. He cannot articulate his thoughts anymore as if he has finally choked on his obscene prosperity, fattening on the travails of the denizens of his village. The truth seems to be that, he too, like everybody else is terrified, anything anyone utters could be interpreted as subversive, and the penalty is death. In *Amayirikiti*, the audience starkly comes face to face with much more greed, death, cannibalism and indeed, evil. Margaretta wa Gacheru sums it all up thus: 'A nation, a family, a mother, a child and even the dead themselves are devastated and robbed by this force of evil that Serumaga is obsessed by.'[541]

It is no wonder then that the play begins with a lot of limp bodies 'spread over the vertical scaffold'.[542] Down on the stage floor is a prominently placed coffin. Perhaps even more important, a lone figure with a glowing candle gives the dead characters life, at the beginning of the play. But at the end, the candle is blown off; so, too, are their brief lives. As for the audience, they once more return to the

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[540] Mirembe Ntangaare, Mercy and Eckhard Breitinger, 'Ugandan Drama in English', in: Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies (Series 39), 1999, p. 258.

[541] Margaretta wa Gacheru, '*Amayirikiti* Set for Tomorrow', Nairobi: *Sunday Standard*, January 29th 1978.

[542] Mbowa, Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, 31, 1994, (revised and enlarged 2003), p. 129.

'deathly silence', to the 'lifeless bodies on the scaffold',[543] to paraphrase Ntangaare and Breitinger, the omnipresence of death,[544] that opens and punctuates the entire play.

Mbowa, too, makes similar observations and with equally resounding praise: 'Serumaga had finally found the form he had been searching for'[545] presumably since *Renga Moi* if not before. The performers themselves were even better now at the 'language' they had created, one that they now, undoubtedly owned. Of all the commentators, it is Margaretta wa Gacheru who singles the actors out as one of the reasons why the play 'merits such resounding praise'; the reason being 'the delicate balance of piqued sensitivity that the company is able to perpetually maintain.'[546] Perhaps she captures even more of their complexity and depth of their individual as well as collective achievement when she notes: 'The players are able to act with such spiritual synchronisation that it is as if they were of one mind.'[547]

Conclusion

A good deal has been said about the history of the Abafumi, their methodology and regimen, as well as Serumaga's aesthetic in this chapter. One thing that links all of them together is theatrical innovation. Serumaga recognised at a very early stage that the semi-professional Theatre Limited, fell short of the goal. The respect and seriousness Serumaga sought; as well as, the scope and demands of his artistic vision, could only have been accomplished by going professional. As Serumaga himself put it: 'The theatre will not develop

[543] Mirembe Ntangaare, Mercy and Eckhard Breitinger, 'Ugandan Drama in English', in: Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies (Series 39), 1999, p. 258.
[544] Ibid.,
[545] Mbowa, Rose, ' Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, 31, 1994, (revised and enlarged 2003), p. 129.
[546] Margaretta wa Gacheru, '*Amayirikiti* Set for Tomorrow', Nairobi: *Sunday Standard*, 29th January 1978.
[547] Margaretta wa Gacheru, 'Abafumi Perform Eloquent Theatre', Nairobi: *The Standard*, February 1978.

on the basis of the efforts of the enthusiastic amateur.'[548] With the formation of the Abafumi, also came the responsibility of a school for his chosen stable of actors; and so began the process of elevating the science and art of acting in Uganda to a truly, professional level. The multiplicity of semi-professional companies that subsequently mushroomed in and around Kampala may have had a lot to do with Kawadwa, and a number of his 'Golden Age' colleagues; but Serumaga and the Abafumi, also played an equally significant role in that. Now, more and more people could aspire to a living through the theatre and performance. An actual tradition was taking root and the theatre was becoming a wholly indigenous and extremely popular idiom.

On the aesthetic front, Serumaga's indefatigable search and struggle to indigenise the sign had finally paid more dividends than it ever had for him. Observations he had made and all the lessons learned, ranging from the act of 'clarification by metaphor' in African music and sculpture; to asymetricality, and the 'distortion of outer reality',[549] would finally be put to use in a way that he himself had never quite done. By weaving the sister arts of music, dance, drama, together, and seeking inspiration from the other arts; sculpture for example, Serumaga had indisputably found his voice through the indigenous granary. He had disavowed linearity and naturalism, as well as, largely abandoned the dialogic and even semiotic; in favour of a semiological signification. Mimicry, the emission of emotions through the sculptural corporeality and sound; dances, percussion, and more, become the order of the day in his theatre. Serumaga had, in a sense, liberated the theatrical sign, stripping it of its colonial heritage, indigenised it, and also, extended the global frontiers of that very sign. To cover 26 countries in six years, as the Abafumi notably did, is no small accomplishment.

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[548] Ibid., p. 53.

[549] Serumaga, Robert, 'History of the Abafumi Company', *Sunday Nation*, Nairobi: January 29th 1978, p.20.

It should also be noted once again, that words, when used, came by way of indigenous languages. That radical choice predated the language debates in Kenya, which to this day still ignite vigorous debates among postcolonial circles. For the record there were certain concerns, however minor, about accents, in those moments that were mediated by words. The company was culturally diverse, not everybody was as comfortable or flawless in every given tongue. Though not a native speaker of any of those languages, Macpherson, too, obviously noticed this incongruence, hence the following note: Serumaga 'needs to be rather more careful that his singers, etc., maintain the correct register in all languages — for someone [...] will understand them all.'[550] There is also the additional danger of a tragic moment being rather melodramatic. Furthermore, according to Kamanyi, there were moments when the few words came out of such emotional intensity that anything short of poetry could not effectively carry them; she singles out the 'Runyarwanda speakers' in this respect.[551] Very little, if anything, was said about the critical reception of *Renga Moi* in London. The play was initially part of the 1973 World Theatre season, as noted elsewhere in this chapter, but the Abafumi would return to the United Kingdom a few months later, performing at the Theatre Royal (Norwich), London's Roundhouse, as well as the Oxford Playhouse.[552] There are a number of things that strike one about the reception in the United Kingdom, and they are worth mentioning, even in passing. Virtually all the reviews, and Kalundi has been struck by this as well, make note of the fact 'that Serumaga was a graduate of a European University.'[553] There is nothing intrinsically troubling about this biographical information. The problem arises with

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[550] Macpherson, Margaret, 'Plays and People: An Examination of Three Ugandan Dramatists: Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga' in *The Writer and Society in Africa: The Last Fifty Years and Prospects for the Next*, Makerere Golden Jubilee Writers Workshop, Session paper No. 4, (University of Nairobi), 1972, p. 17.

[551] Kamanyi, Joanna, *A Comparative Study of Theatrical Productions in Uganda Today*, M.A. thesis, Kampala: Makerere University, 1978, pp. 142-143.

[552] The *Times*, London: July 30th 1975.

[553] Serumaga, Kalundi. R., 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 8.

the undue emphasis on the role of the *avant- garde.* Serumaga's experiments and innovation, his craft and vision had a lot more to do with Africa than his European legacy. As if that's not bad enough, he is then criticised for what they allegedly see as borrowed, 'sophisticated Western [...] techniques'; and the futile 'attempt to marry tribal rituals'[554] with the aforementioned *avant- garde techniques.* Note the axiomatic way in which sophistication and the West appear to be virtually synonymous with each other, and how they appear to be diametrically opposed to the so-called 'tribal rituals'.

If *Renga Moi* had been as bad as the majority of them purported it to be, then there would have been no return engagements; it also, would probably not have been invited to London's World Theatre Season, in the first place. The point is, though, that in a lot of the reviews, words, such as 'primitive', 'tribal', 'superstition', seem to be applied liberally. Further, the producers of the festival, from the Royal Shakespeare Company billed it as a 'primitive tribal drama' — a suggestion that Serumaga is said to have bristled at.[555] One senses a general reluctance by most of the reviewers, to accept the play, its complexity, sophistication and other 'virtues', that appear to have earned the play the ubiquitous praise it garnered, elsewhere in Europe and beyond. This is not to say that there was nothing positive or worth consideration from all those who reviewed the play in London; neither is it right to ignore the accolades that some accorded it. But many postcolonial scholars are bound to subject the bulk of those reviews to a deconstruction. And many postcolonial scholars would probably agree with Kalundi's summation of the reviews. To Kalundi, the point they glaringly make is that 'an African has a pre-ordained role; to be lively, animated and spontaneous [...].'[556] But the depiction of 'other moods, and the possibility of complex expression did not and could not

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[554] The *Sunday Telegraph*, London: April 27th 1975.
[555] See Gilbert, Stephen W., Interview with Serumaga, 'Around the World in Thirty Days' in *Plays and Players*, XXII, London, April 1975, p. 14.
[556] Serumaga, Kalundi, R., 'Silenced Voices and Hidden Legacies: Robert Serumaga and the Abafumi Theatre Company', p. 8.

exist within the African performance spectrum.'[557] Certain perceptions and preconceived notions, the stereotype included, clearly reign for an inordinately long time, particularly, in a colonial metropolis, such as London. But the Abafumi also had to cope with perceptions of those Africans that had performed prior to them, and in different genres; some of them may have enhanced the jaundiced and dismissive attitudes. As Serumaga himself put it in 1978: 'On the international scene, we had been preceded by the bare-bottom dance troupes and identifying ourselves as theatre and not a dance troupe was an uphill struggle.'[558] In the end, the point is not to dismiss these reviews, but to contextualise them within an intrinsically colonial paradigm of reception.

Surely, there is a case to be made here against a condescending, patronising tone, one that might even border on the Eurocentric, or, in fact, a latter day Orientalism. It is useless to single one out as most of them share that tone. What is probably most important about them is that they offer us a window into the intercultural episteme of the British reviewers. Brian Singleton has identified Interculturalism as a 'controversial cultural practice'.[559] When it works well in the theatre, it is characterised by 'sharing and mutual borrowing'; there is respect. In its 'rapacious' form, the ethics and respect are out of the transaction, the first world 'iconic' directors, march in and pilfer what they want with absolutely no thought about the spiritual role of those artefacts.[560] Their culture and spirituality become no more than adornments for the neo-Orientalist gaze.

Serumaga did not borrow anything in the latter manner. His was Interculturalism at its best. When he returned to his roots, particularly in the unscripted dramas, he borrowed from other Ugandan cultures and beyond and there was no cherry picking. Some of those cultural

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[557] Ibid.,
[558] Serumaga, Robert, 'History of the Abafumi Company', *Sunday Nation*, Nairobi: January 29th 1978, p. 20.
[559] Singleton, Brian, 'Interculturalism', in Dennis Kennedy (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Theatre and Performance (Vol.* 1), Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2003, p. 628.
[560] Ibid.,

practices, by way of dance or legends, myths and rituals, whether taken from the past or more recent past, were used to comment on the present in a true spirit of 'intraculturalism' as a postcolonial paradigm.[561]

[561] Ibid., p. 629.

CONCLUSION

In terms of the critical paradigm, this study began with a twin critical strategy. If the postcolonial has been more pronounced in its presence, it is due to the demands that confronted me, and the most adequate tools I could find. Poststructuralism, and in particular deconstruction, may have been more nuanced, but sometimes, only seemingly so. I would like to think that it was very much at play in my approach to Uganda's history and the analysis of the criticism and performance. But at times, even the twin methodologies had to give way to other critical tools, since, in my view, sometimes the problems dictate what tools we pick out of the analytical kit.

It is, by now I hope, abundantly clear, through the twin, predominantly postcolonial paradigm in my examination of Serumaga's plays; that individualism/solipsism, is not an antithesis of a social conscience or activism; and it is also, far from a fair characterisation of Serumaga's entire '*oeuvre*'. The two, apparently contrasting categorisations, should never have been binarised in the first place since they are outside of the critical scene of East Africa, neither synonymous with each other, nor mutually exclusive. Serumaga's individualism or solipsism is an allegorical one. And it should be regarded as an asset for a playwright whose work happens to be defined by psychological depth and portrayal, as well as, a predominantly small canvass, particularly in the written plays. The allegorical individualism is not only an aesthetic issue; it is also, very much a product of the question of signification and survival for a writer whose entire career run its course under the panoptic glare of a hegemony that eventually turned genocidal.

As noted in the final chapter, the alleged individualism is clearly a ruse. The more one reads the plays, the synchronic texts as well as the diachronic ones, the more one cannot help but conclude that behind the contentious characterisation of Serumaga's work is an ideological investment on the part of a handful of critics and scholars.

The investment is two fold: with the political economy, on the one hand, and nationstatism on the other. It does not take a stretch of imagination to discern that not far from the surface of that discourse, lurks words such as *petit bourgeois*, and perhaps even *comprador*. In this context, those words come straight out of, what some in East Africa call the Nairobi school of Literary Criticism. My goal is not to indict it — rather, to deconstruct the opinions of certain eminent scholars in East Africa in relation to Serumaga the man and his work. It may have served the Kenyans and even the Tanzanians well, but it certainly was not designed with the heterogeneity of Uganda and its different histories in mind.

Nationstatism is the other ideology that has fuelled the allegation of individualism and solipsism, and of course, the ostensible lack of activism or a social conscience in Serumaga's work. With the passage of time, individuals within the postcolonial ranks, such as Wole Soyinka and Basil Davidson, have put nationstatism under an unprecedented sharp focus. A lot of their observations have helped crystallise and inform my own views on the matter. Postcolonial nationstatism in Africa has in reality been an unadulterated continuation and revivification of the ahistorical colonial nationstatism. That is not only an ironic, but brutally tragic fact. This is a fact, in both, across the colonially demarcated borders and within those colonially constructed territories. There's no need to revisit the numerous examples of bloodletting in Rwanda, the DRC (Zaire), Biafra versus Nigeria; and Eritrea versus Ethiopia, all serve to illustrate the prohibitive and tragic costs of this colonial and postcolonial project. And the fact even after Independence the language and the episteme has remained the same. Words such as tribe (a floating signifier), natives, native ruler/s, savages, primitive, ethnic, (rather than nations, peoples' and 'human beings') are those 'inferiorising', constructed terms that soon became the currency of Africa's new breed of rulers, with Independence, those terms were inherited by the nationstatists. In Serumaga's Uganda the Constitution was abrogated and the Baganda were stripped of their dualism and effectively put

under occupation. The Nakulabye massacre was soon followed by the asymmetrical battle of Mengo. The same ahistorical and hegemonic project soon brought Idi Amin, who would be followed less than a decade later by the return of Obote and for the very first time the region whose name Obote had wiped off the map and banished from political discourse would be turned into the killing fields of Uganda; as if Amin alone had not wiped out enough innocent people.

It is against that background that nationstatist critiques of Serumaga's work, and even the man himself must be evaluated. Obote's hegemony, the genocide of Idi Amin were the postcolonial prerogatives that Serumaga, Ruganda, Kawadwa and many others in the Golden Age of Uganda's theatre, responded to and cried out against. They also appear to have done it without forgetting that they had chosen a medium whose form they had to grant a significant degree of fidelity.

While *A Play*, for example, takes us into the fractured mind of a guilty individual, as a result of a gruesome murder of his spouse, it is also a very conscious and unambiguous response to the travesty that was 1966. If *A Play* is a portrait of the perpetrator then *The Elephants* is akin to a victim impact statement, primarily through both David and Maurice by way of their legacies from their respective postcolonial states. From the very beginning of his career, through *Majangwa* and beyond, Serumaga's art was a response to the travesties, and an interventionist response at that. In *Majangwa*, Serumaga historicized the problems yet again, reminding the audience of where the postcolonial afflictions began, with Obote pitted against the Baganda, stripping them of their monarchy, their culture, as well as life and limb. In the same play, the arrival of Idi Amin onto the political scene and the unprecedented monstrosities that would define his rule would be identified in the early phase of his genocidal rule. In *Majangwa*, just like in *Renga Moi* and *Amayirikiti*, Serumaga spoke and cried out as a Muganda, a Ugandan and a human being subjected to a colossal inhumanity. In *Renga Moi*, where individual obligations and societal demands clash; Serumaga does not espouse one over the other,

choosing instead, to focus on the contemporary tragedy of postcolonial Uganda, and one that unfolds with a classical Aristotelian inevitability. His very company, the Abafumi, was comprised of young men and women from all over Uganda and beyond. When artistic intervention, eventually, reached its limits, he intervened militarily alongside the Ugandan exiles and the Tanzanian army. He was to find himself exiled yet again, not because he was an individualist; instead, because of his battle-tested activism.

As noted in the previous chapter, those who do not see the abrogation of a Constitution, or the pogroms as egregious violations, are bound to miss Uganda's enemy within and perhaps miss, or deliberately ignore, Serumaga's patent activism. Those who see dualism as a luxury or an inalienable entitlement that can only be enjoyed by each and every Ugandan, save for Serumaga and his region of Buganda; are bound to ignore Serumaga's activism, as they are obliged to subscribe to a lethal and binarised nation-building process: an ideal whose *raison d'être* is really the evisceration of a culture and a people.

There is a lot more to the plays than his activism and one singular trait I sought to explore from the very beginning is the innovation. Of all Serumaga's plays, it is probably *Renga Moi*, rather than *Majangwa*, that should be deservedly hailed for having ushered in the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre. Amayirikiti was to go even further in the extension of the frontiers of innovation without taking its gaze away from the bestiality of the postcolonial condition of Uganda. But the innovation, the talent, originality and pungent criticism is abundant, even as early as *The Elephants*. Majangwa's innovative attributes need not be recounted. It is more important to note that that was yet another, high water mark in his quest to indigenise the Western theatrical sign. The formation of the Abafumi, their regimen, his vision were all part of an innovative process whose impact would eventually be felt even in terms of the extension of the frontiers of the art of the theatre itself as clearly evidenced in *Renga Moi* and *Amayirikiti*.

Both those plays and the one's that preceded them were also characterised by Serumaga's unwavering critiques of the colossal inhumanity that had become synonymous with Uganda. With the production of *Amayirikiti* (1974), Serumaga and his company must have known that they were skating so breathtakingly close to ending up in Namanve themselves. The reason being that their signification was more and more accessible, not just by the audiences, but also, it seems, Amin's notorious State Research Bureau, could decode *Amayirikiti's* subject matter/the subject of it, perhaps just as easily.

The question of signification had to be increasingly weighed against the risks of peoples' very lives, and a Censor's certificate was not necessarily enough to protect anyone. To put that in perspective, it is important to recall that the Nairobi performances of *Amayirikiti* took place in 1978, less than a year before that, Byron Kawadwa's life had been brutally ended by members of Idi Amin's State Research Bureau (SRB).

There are varying reports as to what exactly happened and why. Some of the reports fall short on detail and others are slightly muddled, probably due to the distance of exile. I wish to start my account with a little entry Kawadwa made as part of a Report, to the National Theatre (trustees), on his return from Caracas (Venezuela) in 1976.[562] Serumaga and the Abafumi were there, to give 3 performances of *Renga Moi* as part of the ITI organised Third World Theatre Festival. Kawadwa attended all the three performances, and duly noted in his Report the euphoric reception accorded to *Renga Moi* by the audiences and reviewers alike. Kawadwa also notes with pride that: 'The Ugandan flag was flying throughout the [duration], until all the delegates left [...] for home, after their two weeks stay in Venezuela.'[563] Less than a year later, Kawadwa's own play *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* (*Wankoko's Song*), was to represent Uganda at the now

[562] Kawadwa had been to Caracas in his capacity as Artistic director of the Uganda National Theatre, and Uganda's representative to the International Theatre Institute (ITI).
[563] Kawadwa, Byron, 'Artistic Director's Report on Recent Visit', (The Conference took place from 20th April to May 2nd 1976). See 'Report', p. 1.

defunct Festival of Negro Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos (Nigeria), 1977. Elivania Zirimu, another of the Golden Age veterans, directed the play. Kawadwa went to Lagos with the cast. But he had left a production in progress, a revival of an earlier play of his, indeed his very first full-length play, *St. Lwanga* (1969).

The play is a fictionalised version of events in the late 19th century that culminated in the execution of what came to be known as the Uganda martyrs in 1886. To the youthful Mwanga, the then King who ordered their deaths, their newly acquired Christianity was a threat to the nation of Buganda and they were to be regarded as rebels. The equally youthful men deemed their Christian faith as paramount, in the event of a clash between church and state, and so they went to their deaths, defiant, proclaiming their Christian ideals, which the youthful and tempestuous Mwanga, together with an Arab adviser, interpreted as nothing short of treason. 'As long as I am king, I will not let anybody be master here [...]. And if there is such a person, his end has come.'[564] So says King Mwanga in Kawadwa's play. Karoli (*Charles*), Lwanga was the first of Uganda's Christian martyrs, and in 1969, would become the eponymous character of Kawadwa's play.[565]

There is no evidence to suggest that Kawadwa had overhauled the script, but even the above excerpt, provides evidence that the play was not necessarily bound to be perceived in purely historical terms. *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* (1974), the play that represented Uganda in Nigeria (FESTAC) only a year before the slated revival of *St. Lwanga*, could also finally have been deemed to be offensive by Amin's State Research Bureau. Mbowa has noted that '*Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*' is a play, which exposes 'the tricks and

[564] Kawadwa's *St. Lwanga* is unpublished. These lines are used as part of an epigraph by Horn. See Horn Andrew, 'Ugandan Theatre-the exiled and the dead', *Index on Censorship*, London, 5, 1979, p. 12.

[565] For more on the history and the play, as well as Kawadwa's murder, see Mbowa, Rose: 'Luganda Theatre and its Audience', in: Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies (Series 39), 1999, pp. 241.

manoeuvres of politicians.'[566] She has gone even further than that in a different essay, in which she compares *St. Lwanga* to Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. Both plays, so posits Mbowa, bear a resemblance to each other, an indictment of 'a false idealisation of the pre-colonial past for propagandistic purposes in the period of cultural nationalism.'[567] One could even suggest that this is a ploy, by those in power, to deflect attention from their imperfections and eventual, gross postcolonial misdeeds. Either '*Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*', or, the then imminent revival of *St. Lwanga*, could have led to Kawadwa's brutal end. '*Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*' had enjoyed an extended run prior to its run in Lagos. Amin himself was reported on radio as having sanctioned the extension, mainly because he wanted (and urged) a lot more officers and men of the Armed forces to make sure they got a chance to see it. In Lagos, the cast of Kawadwa's play, with or without their knowledge, would also have had SRB agents disguised as one thing or another — in their company. The message may have finally got home, that the powers that be were, in a sense, the subjects of Kawadwa's satirical 'vitriol'. But also, prior to their return home, 'on the 5th February 1977, Anglican archbishop Janani Luwum was [...] murdered in Kampala.'[568] This precipitated 'world-wide protests against religious persecution in Uganda.'[569] The synchronic text and story of *St. Lwanga*, was turning into a diachronic fact that would certainly not help Kawadwa's 1969 play. It is also said that while in Lagos, Kawadwa was known to keep the company of certain prominent Ugandan exiles. Fellow Golden Age veteran Erisa Kironde (*The Trick* and *Kintu*) had escaped Amin, and was now residing in Nigeria. That Kawadwa had been seen in his company would also have been enough reason for getting rid of him. It will probably never be any clearer than

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[566] Mbowa, Rose, ' Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, 31, 1994, (revised and enlarged 2003), p. 125.
[567] Mbowa, Rose: 'Luganda Theatre and its Audience', in: Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies (Series 39), 1999, p. 242.
[568] Horn, Andrew, 'Ugandan Theatre-the Exiled and the Dead', *Index on Censorship*, London, 5, 1979, p. 13.
[569] Ibid. ,

it is now, as to what exactly triggered Kawadwa's abduction and murder. My feeling is that it was neither one factor, nor another; instead, it was both of the plays as well as the so-called 'company' of exiles. And one cannot afford to dismiss the theatre at all from this narrative, based for example on a number of things that happened at the abduction or shortly thereafter.

On the afternoon 'of the 21st February 1977, Byron Kawadwa was taken from the Theatre Arts Club [...] by security operatives of Amin's State Research Bureau. Within 48 hours he was dead.'[570] The SRB headquarters were located in Nakasero, one of the 7 hills of early Kampala. It is there, according to Kalundi, that 'Kawadwa was beaten to death in a torture chamber [...] less than 20 minutes drive from the theatre.'[571] It is said that some of Kawadwa's actors met the same tragic fate, and 'others managed to flee'.[572] Unfortunately, nobody, at the time, seems to have recorded their names.

Kawadwa met his death at the hands of Amin's atrocious regime, his own father's life had been tragically ended by Obote's troops 13 years before that, during the infamous Nakulabye massacre. Then came the two stints in jail, the first one as a member of the cast for Wycliffe Kiyingi's radio drama series *Wokulira* (1966) and then as a result of his own play *Serwajja Okwota* (1968). The atrocious murders of Kawadwa and his actors were soon to be followed, in July of the same year, by the murders of three others. One of those victims was Dan Kintu. Kintu had, prior to that, been Kawadwa's assistant, and it was his job to steer the ship now that Kawadwa was no more. There was also John Sebuliba who had been working as an Under-Secretary in the Ministry of Culture as well as a playwright by the name of John Male. All three names were thankfully noted by Andrew Horn. Horn goes on to mention that Male's play *The Empty Room* had opened that

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[570] Kalundi, R. Serumaga, 'The Arts; Slaughter House Or Graveyard?'. I have used an unpublished copy that Kalundi kindly offered me in 2004 (p.2). The same article now appears in an online literary magazine: [see Sablemagazine.com] I have used an unpublished version that Kalundi offered me which may or may not be different, from the one I received from Kalundi.

[571] Ibid.,

[572] Kabeba, Don, 'Uganda: No Censors Needed', *Index on Censorship*, 2, London, 1979, p. 19.

(July) evening in front of 'a large audience [...] and may have been interpreted as in some way offensive to the person of the President.'[573] An eye witness who happened to have helped to dispose of the remains was to reveal in exile a few months after the abductions 'that the three men had been taken from the National Theatre to an army barracks in Bombo [north of Kampala], tried in camera, and executed on the 23 July 1977.'[574]

And so, the role of the theatre in Kawadwa's murder becomes even more prominent given the context of what happened to his colleagues, only a few months after his murder. Perhaps, the worse things get, the more transparent the dramas become even to those at the top of the hegemonic pyramid. They, or their underlings, in organs such as Amin's notorious SRB, could, because of the stench of their inhumanity or the burden of guilt, start to see themselves reflected in the mirror of whatever they are watching. They might even see themselves in things that they may not even be inscribed in as their paranoia mounts. It is probably not that useful to attempt to theorise the inner workings of a hegemonic mind.

The fate of Kawadwa and the others signalled the end of the Golden Age of Uganda's theatre. Kawadwa, for example, had sought and ascertained permission from the President's office, months ahead of schedule. By the time he returned from Lagos to resume his rehearsals for *St. Lwanga*, they appear to have finally been able to decode, who the true subjects of his 'commentary and discourse'[575] were. The belatedness of the discovery, made them feel doubly foolish and angry. As Kalundi puts it: 'Perhaps what annoyed them the most and made them so vicious was the realisation that their artists had been "backbiting" them for [...] years and they had not noticed.'[576] What had hitherto been taken as entertainment, light and harmless, was in reality, an injury, a gaping wound, inflicted by those, armed with

[573] Horn Andrew, 'Ugandan Theatre-the Exiled and the Dead', *Index on Censorship*, London, 5, 1979, p. 13.
[574] Ibid.,
[575] Kalundi R. Serumaga, 'The Arts; Slaughter House Or Graveyard?' , p. 2.
[576] Ibid.,

nothing more than a pen, who had been granted time enough to add more salt to the wound.

The point to note here is that Kawadwa, and indeed Serumaga, knew, early enough, what Idi Amin was really like. Neither he, nor his secret police knew for a long while that they were indeed the subjects of the artists' contempt, scorn and ridicule. Amin, for example, is said to have enjoyed *Majangwa*. In fact he is reported to have become 'a constant fan of Theatre Limited'. On the eve of Serumaga and the Abafumi's departure for Belgrade in 1972, it is said, that 'General Amin again gave his utmost support and encouragement and even took time off to see Robert personally, wish him and the group every success'.[577] This was not collaboration with Amin; it should emphatically be read as strategic essentialism, as well as an incredibly tight rope to walk. Amin had clearly enjoyed *Renga Moi* and it appears, *Amayirikiti* as well. As Rose Mbowa has noted 'Amin, who was fascinated by the spectacle, invited the company to perform [the] "beautiful gymnastics" at the OAU summit meeting in Uganda in 1975.'[578] This was a gathering that included virtually all of Africa's heads of state. As Mbowa further notes, the Abafumi performed and 'there were no reprisals.'[579]

Amin was to invite the Abafumi one more time, for yet another Command performance, and indeed, by 1977, even the Abafumi were no longer immune, neither was their act considered to be 'beautiful gymnastics' as Amin had reportedly presumed. That performance was to be the Abafumi's last on Ugandan soil and they were to narrowly escape the same fate that befell Kawadwa and the others. Soyinka has noted that Serumaga 'did manipulate Idi Amin for as long as he could [...] creatively active under the nightmarish regime, [and] identifying with great prescience when the tight rope had sagged beyond recall and

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[577] Kimenye, Barbara, 'Uganda's Theatre Pros Take Critics by Storm', *The Daily Nation*, Nairobi, 24th November 1972, p. 13.
[578] Mbowa Rose, 'Artists Under Siege: Theatre and the Dictatorial Regimes in Uganda', in Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, African Studies Series, 31, 1994, (revised and enlarged) 2003, pp. 129-130.
[579] Ibid., p. 130.

leaping off to safety.'[580] When the moment came there was very little time, if at all, to leap 'to safety', for Serumaga, the troupe and his family. According to Kalundi: 'Late [in 1977] our whole family found itself crossing the Uganda-Kenya border via a *Panya* ("rat" in Swahili) route to join my father [...]. Before us, he had to organize the smuggling out of his entire theatrical group.'[581] According to a member of the Abafumi (Charles Tumwesigye) someone came backstage after a performance and informed Mr Serumaga that they had no more than 24 hours to leave the country. I recall distinctly listening to the news around 5: 00 pm the next day when the populace was informed that Serumaga and his Abafumi were a private company; they were not, and had never been representatives of the Ugandan Government. Then came allegations about them being saboteurs, sponsored by the C.I.A. Luckily, they all escaped unscathed.

In a letter to the Ford Foundation in New York, Serumaga would solicit 'financial assistance to enable [the company] to stay in Kenya'. The plan was to stay from December (1977) till the very end of March (1978). 'After that [they would] start playing festivals and other engagements'[582] in Europe and elsewhere. The other engagements included a new play that had been secretly rehearsed before their escape. It was entitled *Ebikekenke* (1977).[583] If it had been

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[580] Soyinka, Wole, "Climates of Art", in: *'Art, Dialogue, and Outrage'*, Ibadan, New Horn Press: 1984, p. 248.

[581] Kalundi, R. Serumaga, 'The Arts; Slaughter House Or Graveyard?' (unpublished version), p. 2.

[582] Serumaga, Robert, 'Letter to the Ford Foundation', this is a copy of Serumaga's original handwritten version. Kalundi was happy to furnish me with a copy of it, from the family Archive. It was written in Nairobi; 1977, p. 3.

[583] Apart from interviews with the group and Kalundi, the only information on the play can be found in 2 pages of unpublished, background material that Serumaga provided to Amsterdam's Stichting Mickery Workshop where the play was scheduled to open on the 1st March 1978. In it, Serumaga had dug even deeper into his own culture to expose and condemn the monstrosities of Idi Amin's rule.

Ebikekenke is the plural form for a very peculiar and frightening creature in the folklore of the Baganda. On page 1 of the background pamphlet (where all the following quotations are drawn), they are described as huge, multi-eyed and multi-eared with a 'basic human form', they are also, 'powerful, evil, sinister and do not wish to be seen by human beings.' Traditionally, they live in forests, but they also frequent village Wells and 'high rocks' on which they sit under the blazing sun. Over time these strange creatures have 'undergone [...] distortions and transformations, and can in fact, [...] merge with a tree, or a tin drum or evil human.' Serumaga goes on to say that 'These dictators of the marshes can strike fear deep into the souls of every one in the land.' Serumaga says even more about the fear and the firing squads (they had fled in Amin's Uganda). On page 2 of the same document the Mickery Theatre also point out that according to Serumaga, the play 'was made with Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

continued on next page

done then, officially, it would have been listed as Serumaga's 6th play. They had chosen Kenya to be their home away from home. That, though, was not meant to be. Perhaps due to Amin's propaganda machine and pressure on the Kenyan government, only days after *Amayirikiti's* two-week run at Nairobi's French Cultural Centre in February 1978, the Kenyan Police raided a hotel in Nairobi's Westlands; and a number of the cast were subsequently arrested. Serumaga was summoned to address the Kenyan Parliament on his company and their activities. They were to leave for Italy, prematurely, to resume their engagements.

One could argue that Act 2 of the Golden Age, ended in 1977, with Kawadwa's murder as well as those of some of his actors. Before that the there was, what is popularly referred to as the Asian Exodus. The expulsion of the Ugandan-Asians saw the departure of Mohindra Poppat, Jagdit Singh, and many others (1972). It was to be followed by the departure of most of the expatriate community. But the brutal murders of Kawadwa and his actors were followed in fairly short order by the abductions and summary executions of Dan Kintu, John Sebuliba, and John Male in July of the same year. The Abafumi's close encounter and hasty exit, only a few months later certainly ensured the slow fade to black on the short final Act, was well on its way. Of the class of '68, there were more of them outside Uganda than the other way around. Okot p'Bitek who had been exiled back in 1967 was forced to continue his exile under Idi Amin. John Ruganda had fled in 1973. In 1978, I was to be peripherally involved with a production of Ruganda's play: *The Burdens*. Rose Mbowa directed it, with Fagil Mandy, Joanna Kamanyi and Mbowa (as well) in the cast. It was a set-text for the 'O' levels, and with a cast of that ability, its two-week run was sold out in advance. It was, though, as we were to soon find out, one thing for a play to be read and for students to be examined on it; and a totally different thing for it to be performed. There was,

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[...] in mind. Like Coriolanus, Amin was a soldier as well as hero and he, too, of course, turned against his nation.)

therefore, no censorship certificate or go-ahead issued; just a lot of red lines underneath the dialogue. A later play of Ruganda's was to open in Nairobi in 1979. As Mbowa has noted: 'in the safe haven of Nairobi University, Ruganda exposed directly the horrors of Amin's murder squad and its gruesome handiwork in *The Floods* (1979) [...]. He further depicted the rising forces of liberation [...] and prophesied [Amin's] overthrow.'

Back in Uganda the slow fade to black of the lights on the period had finally ended with the exit of the Abafumi in 1978. As earlier noted, Serumaga and the Abafumi had a few trials and tribulations in Nairobi and left Kenya ahead of schedule for their engagements in Europe. The group was dissolved a few months later when Serumaga, like his hero Renga Moi and the Nigerian/Biafran poet Christopher Okigbo, returned to East Africa and joined the liberation struggle as a Field Commander. There clearly are limits to the theatre or art in general as an interventionist sign. He was to be back in exile just a few months after they overthrew Amin. And it was there that his life dramatically came to an end (the official explanation was an aneurysm) in September 1980.

The Golden Age was certainly no small accomplishment and Serumaga, Kawadwa, Ruganda, and many others, in various capacities all played very significant parts in this. Serumaga was not solely responsible for this; some of his Golden Age colleagues did play crucial roles in this as well, John Ruganda, Byron Kawadwa, and Wycliffe Kiyingi, and Christopher Mukibi for example, also made significant contributions through their playwriting, particularly. But when the history of that era is finally written, Serumaga, together with his professional company the Abafumi (Storytellers), will undoubtedly be accorded a well- deserved, indelible position among those whose contribution was critical, in turning the theatre an inalienable cultural pastime. The challenge in Uganda today is to replicate the quality, not so much in terms of performance, but certainly in terms of the work and dramaturgy. Perhaps they should emulate the other genres — as in sculpture, painting and music. Like the Class of '68, they have more

than enough issues to feed their stories; unlike them, but thanks to them, they have their own classics to turn to just in case.

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