CHIMOMBO'S USE OF THE M'BONA MYTH IN THE RAINMAKER (1)

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In this paper, I intend to examine the manner in which the Malawian writer Steve Chimombo has utilized material from Chewa and Mang'anja orature to give structural and thematic unity to his play, **The Rainmaker.** I shall dwell particularly on the playwright's adaptation of the two main traditions around the M'bona myth. The examination will also take into account the historical perspective of the events that make up the drama and the stylistic devices that Chimombo uses in the dialogue and the passages of poetry in the play. Emphasis will be placed on the significance of the names of the characters, the relevance of the proverbs scattered here and there in the dialogue and the extent to which the writer has succeeded or failed in the transliteration of Chewa and Mang'anja idiom.

Closely related to Chimombo's use of language is the problem of characterization. I will focus my attention here on the two conflicting personages in the play, namely Kamundi, the python priest, and M'bona, the rainmaker. My argument is that the playwright's abstract portrayal of M'bona as the embodiment of the suffering spirit in man, on the one hand, and his failure to articulate the profound motives and fears which prompt Kamundi to react in the way he does, on the other, have the effect not only of weakening both characters but also of diminishing the tragic quality of **The Rainmaker.** Finally, I will attempt to show how effectively Chimombo has linked the M'bona story with the predominant Chewa creation myth as well as with the **nyau** dance which takes place at the end of the play.

The plot of **The Rainmaker** is quite straightforward. There is drought in Msinja, the site of a shrine for the High God, Chiuta. After repeated attempts, Kamundi, the official rainmaker, fails to produce rain. A young man by the name of M'bona offers to lead the rain dance **(mgwetsa)** and the result is a torrential downpour. Thereupon Kamundi accuses M'bona of withholding rain all along and has him arrested. The chief then organizes a witch-hunt involving the ordeal of drinking the poisonous **mwabvi.** M'bona mysteriously

escapes before the ordeal and Kamundi sends trackers in his wake. After six years of wandering, M'bona gives himself up to his pursuers and is killed. At his request, his body is buried in the marshes at Ndione and his head on the hill at Khulubvi thicket. He designates the latter place as the location of his shrine, where people will pray for relief from drought and pestilence.

After M'bona's death, Kamundi begins to suffer from **chilope**, the hunter's disease. This is an ailment that afflicts butchers, hunters, soldiers and murderers. It is commonly regarded as the dead man's or animal's revenge. The symptoms are bloodshot eyes, incoherent speech and violent outbursts that may lead to more deaths. Those for whom killing is a trade must take special herbal concoctions to protect themselves from this disease. In Kamundi's case, Makewana, Chiuta's prophetess, suspects possession by an evil spirit and accordingly calls in a prophet-priest to exorcize it. The priest discovers, however, that it is M'bona rather than a malefic spirit that is tormenting Kamundi. The dead man demands that his body be accorded proper funeral rites. A **nyau** dance is duly performed.

Any discussion of the M'bona story must take into account the fact that it is an "heroical historical myth", to borrow Murray's term (2). The narrative is primarily concerned with the life and exploits of a culture-hero with preternatural abilities which at a particular point in Chewa and Mang'anja history enabled him to found a cult and to contribute in a distinctive way to the survival of his society.

Historians agree that the M'bona myth is not the story of one person or of one major event but that of two or more persons and two or more decisive events in Malawian oral history. The story straddles two crucial happenings: the migration of the Southern Chewa and Lundu's rebellion against the Karonga overlords based in the Central Region of present-day Malawi. The first event or series of events was well under way by the second half of the 16th century whereas the second occurred in the 17th century.

According to Ntara, the migration of the Southern Chewa came about as a result of a conflict between the leading chiefs over the administration of the poison ordeal. M'bona, who acted as a priest on behalf of a group of chiefs, had objected to the ordeal as being human and fallible, thus

attacking one of the major mechanisms of social control at the disposal of the Chewa rulers. However, the chiefs whose priest he was supported him and followed him when he fled for his life (3). This southward movement is referred to by historians as the Chipeta migrations, drawing attention to the clan name of the rebellious chiefs and identifying their place of origin: east of Kaphiri-Ntiwa, the site of the original shrine of the High God.

In the Mang'anja version of this tradition, M'bona is depicted as a chief who established himself and his followers near what is now Nsanje. To commemorate the occasion, he is said to have carved his tribal tattoos on some rocks. These marks are still known as Nemboza-aChipeta, that is, Chipeta's tattoos. His fame was so great, tradition runs, that after his death he became the principal guardian spirit of the area and a shrine was dedicated to him at Khope Hill near the tattoos. (4)

The M'bona we meet in the Lundu chiefdom of the south is not a Chipeta but a Phiri - that is, a member of a Chewa clan that migrated into Malawi at a later stage than the other clans. It was one of these Phiris, Undi, who moved the shrine of the High God from Kaphiri-Ntiwa to Msinja twelve miles south-east, setting up a predominantly Phiri officialdom around the new shrine. M'bona is here depicted not as a prophet-priest but as a junior kinsman to Paramount Chief Lundu. The following are the reasons given for M'bona's flight from Mbewe-wa-Mitengo, Lundu's seat of power: There was a severe drought, and Lundu summoned all his people to appeal to the spirits of the ancestors to cause rain to fall. After all the chief's counsellors had failed to produce rain, M'bona succeeded. The matter was reported to the chief and he immediately accused M'bona of withholding rain, challenging him to the test of all witches, the drinking of **mwabvi**. M'bona refused to undergo the poison ordeal, explaining that he had not withheld Lundu's rain but had special powers from God to bring rain. Refusal to take **mwabvi** is regarded as admission of guilt and M'bona had to flee for his life. Lundu ordered men to follow and kill him at Ndione on the edge of the Ndindi marsh. His head was then severed from his body and buried separately at a place called Khulubvi. Shortly afterwards, M'bona's medium made it known to Lundu that a shrine should be built at this spot in honour of M'bona.

We get a fairly accurate picture of the form M'bona's worship was later to take from E.D. Young's **The Search after Livingstone,** written in 1866, two centuries after M'bona's death:

> The hill on which the presiding spirit of the Shrine Valley reigns was passed today, the 12th of August. It forms the extreme peak of the Kolubvi hills, and the natives year by year resort to it to listen to the dictates of an unhappy woman who is incarcerated upon it in a hut. She is the wife of a spirit, who once in the human form, as a distinguished Chief named M'bonar, brought the Mang'anja tribe to listen to his laws. Now, he is supposed to speak through a prophetess, who is constantly being renewed, for death generally relieves the office of its tenant in a year or two. The worst of it is, any man's wife may be seized at a moment's notice as a successor, and great is the dismay when it is known 'Zarima's' life has fled from the hill top. (5)

A large part of Chimombo's originality in **The Rainmaker** lies in his masterly fusion of the story surrounding the major shrine at Nsanje with that surrounding the shrine at Msinja. He takes Msinja as M'bona's original home and Nsanje as the place of his death. Schoffeleers is right in asserting that, at the thematic level, this fusion allows the playwright to contrast the history of the northern and southern shrines in terms of war and peace, tradition and change, and female versus male ascendancy (6). Chimombo's intention is adequately summarized by M'bona in the middle scene, "The Flight": "How can they know that the fall of Msinja is the rise of Msanje? I will build a greater shrine here than Kamundi ever dreamed of". (7)

The linking of the two shrines also enables the writer to involve some of the legendary characters connected with the northern shrine in his play. Of particular interest here is the way the names of these personages relate to the

functions they perform both in legend and in Chimombo's play. The central figure at Msinja is Makewana, whose name means "the mother of children" but is intended to convey "the mother of all people", that is, the wife of Chiuta, the High God. She was the keeper of the shrine and Chiuta's prophetess. It is said that she never cut her hair, the belief being that as she controlled the rain, if she cut her hair she would also "cut the rain". Apparently Makewana rarely washed, and when she did it was only in the sacred pool of Malawi, a few hundred yards from Msinja. However, it is recorded that on one occasion she travelled to the lake shore "in order to fetch the water of the lake into the clouds to bring rain" (8). In his play, Chimombo is clearly referring to these two strands of tradition when he makes one of the characters, Tsang'oma, say to the python priest: "But I might remind you that when the python fails to make rain, the mother-of-children has been known to go to Maravi pool and live under water for three days" (p. 15). The same character again comments: "The mother-of-children could go to the great lake to fetch the waters to the clouds to bring rain". **(loc. cit.)**

Makewana's personal attendants were the Matsano ("spirits of the graveyard" or "servants of Chiuta"). There were an unspecified number of them, though some sources say they were five to eight girls who had not yet reached puberty. According to other sources, they were girls or women of any age who felt the call to join Makewana as her helpers. They were not permitted any sexual intercourse with men as, like Makewana, they were considered to be "wives of god" (9). There are three Matsano in **The Rainmaker,** and Chimombo has given them the role of chorus-narrator. It is in their poetic passages that the main thread of the plot is worked out. In terms of dramatic function, their male counterparts are the three shrine officials: Matsime (whose duty, as his name suggests, was to make charcoal), Kudziko (who had the task of keeping the cups, **dzikho,** clean), and Makwelera (whose responsibility it was to make and thatch the shrine, and to see to its repair). It is these three officials who give us the views of the common people on the conflict between M'bona and the python priest.

Like all other women who became "possessed", Makewana was not supposed to have a husband. Nevertheless, she had a male consort by the name of Kamundi Mbewe with whom she had ritual intercourse on such special occasions as the

close of the initiation of girls. Kamundi was referred to as a snake, by the term **nthunga** or by the designation **nsato** (python). The ritual intercourse was accordingly referred to as a snake having entered the hut of Makewana (10). In Chimombo's play, the prophetess herself alludes to sexual intercourse when, in an attempt to find an explanation for the python priest's failure to produce rain, she asks him: "You didn't coil yourself round my hut in my sleep, did you?" (p. 19). Kamundi is also addressed as "Fire-bringer" and "Giver-of-fire". This is because, traditionally, it was he who made fire whenever hearths were cleaned and fires quenched, and on such occasions as during great droughts and famines, when man-eating lions plagued the people, and when offerings were made to the spirits. He made fire in the traditional way by twirling a stick in a hole with another stick. The epithets accorded him are particularly significant because they link Kamundi both with the Phiri clan (oral tradition credits them with discovering fire) and with the predominant creation myth. It was by making fire that man drove God away from earth **in illo tempore.**

After Kamundi, the next important functionary was Malemia Mwale, the messenger of Makewana, so called because his duties involved walking until he was very tired (the Chichewa word **kulema** means "to get tired"). It was Malemia who received messages from Makewana, and who was told her prophecies. He would then instruct Tsang'oma to beat the sacred drum, summoning all the people to Msinja.

Tsang'oma Mwale, who in the hierarchy of the shrine officialdom comes immediately below Malemia, is also named after the nature of his occupation. He is "the person of the drum" or "the master of the drum", for in Chichewa **ng'oma** means "drum". A Tsang'oma's life was normally short. If the rains failed to fall after **mgwetsa,** if Makewana failed to deliver an oracle after the people had been summoned, or if the rains failed at all even if **mgwetsa** was not performed, Tsang'oma was to blame and was put to death. The Tsang'oma in **The Rainmaker** says as much to Kamundi after the latter's abortive dance:

KAMUNDI : I don't need to tell you how serious the situation is.

TSANG'OMA: It's not necessary, my lord. It's been the subject of my nightmares the past

seven nights. When Makewana has an oracle to deliver, or there is a rain dance, doesn't failure of either mean death to Tsang'oma? No Tsang'oma has ever died a natural death.

KAMUNDI : No. They have always been executed at the gorge in Dzanzi Hills. If no rain falls today, you will be taken there, bound hand and foot, blindfolded, and pushed into the hole. Chadza will hammer a stake from the top of your skull through your body until it appears at your bottom end. Do you hear that? (p. 15)

Unfortunately, this is one of the passages in **The Rainmaker** where the reader may feel that the playwright's Muse has deserted him and he has leant too heavily on his oral or written sources. The result is a laboured exposition, more appropriate to an essay than to drama. The dialogue is devoid of life.

Chimombo's desire to give Chewa authenticity to his play is reflected in his employment or adaptation of local proverbs and his transliteration of Chewa speech. The underlying assumption is that if the characters were speaking Chichewa they would be capable of fluent idiomatic expression, and they would use metaphor and imagery of a high order. However, since the playwright must write in English in order to reach a wider audience, he makes his characters speak a kind of English which attempts to reflect the Chichewa language.

A careful examination of the proverbs in **The Rainmaker** will reveal that at times they are effectively employed as vehicles for the major themes of the play and at others they are almost irrelevant. Particularly in the first scene of the play, Chimombo tends to include a proverb in every other line of dialogue. The result is that the conversation appears forced and the language generally stilted. Some of the proverbs are patently out of context. Where his repertoire does not furnish him with a ready-made proverb for the occasion, Chimombo feels free to coin his own, using as his guidelines the three basic forms that a Chewa proverb

may take. These are:

(a) The plain and simple statement free from metaphor or allusion.

(b) The saying that relies on metaphor and in which the meaning is not so obvious to the uninitiated.

(c) The type of proverb which depends entirely for its meaning on an underlying **nthano** (story) or **mwambo** (custom). (11)

An example of the first type is the proverb Kamundi uses to welcome M'bona in the first scene: "Let the elder fold his legs so that the youth may pass" (p. 17). The message intended is that if a man is too old or weak to perform certain duties, he should give way to younger blood. Kamundi's use of the proverb is ultimately ironical, for the conflict in the play arises precisely because the python is reluctant to cede his place to a more competent rainmaker.

What Kamundi fails to appreciate about the personality of M'bona is again expressed in the form of a proverb: "Wisdom comes even from a small ant-hill", an allusion to the fact that Chewa chiefs were buried in ant-hills. We are thus meant to identify ant-hills with chiefly authority. The meaning of M'bona's statement is therefore that even great people should have the humility to take the advice of their minions. Towards the end of the first scene, Kamundi says of M'bona: "He must learn that a cock does not crow away from home" (p. 18), a reference to the fact that M'bona is a stranger to Msinja. The more common version of the proverb used here is **Galu sauwa kutali ndi kwao,** "A dog does not bark away from home". What this means is that when a man is at home, he may act with independence and confidence, but once away from home he should be humble and not give himself airs. Chimombo has substituted "cock" for "dog" because the former is an image of power which he can develop more easily in the play. After M'bona's successful rain dance, for example, Kudzikho remarks: "The royal python will no longer crow as proudly as before" (p. 21). Later on in the play, M'bona tells his captors: "Msinja could not have held both M'bona and Kumundi at the same time" (p. 38), a statement which echoes the proverb **Atambala**

awiri salila mkhola limodzi, "No two cocks crow in the same chicken coop". Through the recurring use of the cock image, Chimombo indicates the extent to which Kamundi considers M'bona a threat in **The Rainmaker.**

The prophet's nomadic life is explained by Matsime in terms of a proverb: "A crocodile's child does not grow in one pool" (p. 21), a literal translation of **Mwana wa ng'ona sakulila mdziwe limodzi.** The saying implies that to gain experience one must either travel extensively or take part in a wide range of activities. If the crocodile is respected for its boldness and adventurous spirit, the crow is admired for the opposite virtue, prudence. Hence the proverb **Khwangwala wa mantha anafa ndi ukalamba,** "The cowardly crow died of old age". Chimombo uses a variant of this proverb in his play, substituting **njoka** (snake) for **khwangwala** (crow): "It is the timid snake that lives long" (p. 22). As an explanation for M'bona's submission "to being tied up in ropes and thrown into the rubbish pit" (**loc. cit.**), the proverb is slightly misleading. It would be more relevant to M'bona's flight from Msinja than to the episode in question. Another proverb which, in my opinion, has been improperly used is "What comes does not beat a drum", again a literal translation of **Chakudza sichiimba ng'oma.** The expression is intended as an answer to Matsime's question concerning M'bona's sudden appearance in Msinja. **Chakudza,** "that-which-comes", invariably implies some form of emergency, danger or misfortune. Thus while the proverb adequately expresses the suddenness of M'bona's arrival it gives a distorted view of his role in the drama that is unfolding. Kamundi's nemesis and the downfall of Msinja are the python priest's doing and not M'bona's. The proverb would have been more appropriate if it had been used to explain the incidence of the drought at the beginning of the play, for example.

In the opening lines of the third and final scene, Mkwelera introduces the subject of Kamundi's dementia by quoting a proverb: "Our elders say: to know the roots of anything, you should first ask what broke the elephant's tusk" (p. 41). This is a free but nevertheless acceptable rendering of **Umanena chatsitsa dzaye kuti njobvu ithyoke nyanga.** A proverb that is frequently quoted in litigation, it advocates a logical approach: one should not only look at the effect of a certain action but also try to find the root cause. That Kamundi's madness must be linked with M'bona's death is

made clear later on in the conversation when Kudzikho remarks: "A great crime, like bones of the dead, takes long in rotting" (p. 42). What we have here is the fusion of two different sayings: **Mafupa saola** ("Bones never rot") and **Mlandu suola** ("A lawsuit never rots"). Both express the belief that however long it may take, justice will eventually be done. When Matsime asks why Kumundi didn't leave M'bona alone after he had escaped, Kudzikho glibly replies: "To punish a monkey, you smash its head" (**loc. cit.**), a neat translation of **Kulanga nyani nkuphwanya mutu.** An equally common alternative is **Kupha njoka nkudula mutu,** "To kill a snake, you must cut off its head". The belief behind this saying is that if you don't cut off the head, the snake will return to life and wreak more havoc than before.

In general, the proverbs in the last scene are more skilfully woven into the dialogue than those in the first one. There are fewer discrepancies between meaning and context. Thus Matsime deftly adapts the proverb **Wamisala anaona nkhondo,** "The madman saw the war coming", to the events depicted in the play when he says of Kamundi: "Although the elders said the madman saw the war coming, I don't think the python sees the imminent fall of Msinja" (**loc. cit.**). What the proverb at the core of this quotation means is that the utterances of deranged or despised members of society should sometimes be taken seriously as they may contain rare insights or even seeds of prophecy. The very last proverb in the play has a particularly powerful impact: "The still warm hearth lured the comfortable dog to a quick death" (**loc. cit.**). The Chewa original is simply **Pakadafunda padajiwitsa galu.** This alludes to the story of the dog that lingered too long at the fireside and was consequently devoured by prowling hyenas. The proverb thus warns against overindulgence or procrastination. Seeing no sign of rain, Mkwelera strongly recommends that the inhabitants of Msinja migrate to the south before disaster overtakes them.

Chimombo resorts to transliteration wherever he considers it instrumental in conveying the flavour of Chewa language and culture. As we shall see, the experiment has its rewards and pitfalls. The most obvious weaknesses are a certain artificiality in the dialogue and an unintended obscurity. An example of this technique is found in Kamundi's accusation to M'bona: "You tied the rains and caused drought in Msinja" (p. 17). The Chewa original of the first part of the proposition is **unamanga mvula. Kumanga mvula,**

literally "to tie the rain", is a form of sorcery which enables certain individuals to withhold rain from people against whom they harbour a grudge. In time of severe drought witch-hunts are organized and those found guilty forced, sometimes under pain of death, to "untie" the rain.

One of Makewana's reasons for asserting that the Matsano were ritually pure before the python's rain dance is encapsulated in the observation: "None of them has gone to earth this week" (p. 19). This makes no sense unless one realizes that it is Chimombo's adaptation of the deliberately cryptic Chewa expression **Kugwa mdothi,** literally "To fall to the earth (or ground)", denoting menstruation. The same expression is alluded to later in the play when one of the shrine officials remarks that Makewana "goes to earth like all other women". (p. 41)

At times Chimombo appears conscious of the fact that his audience may not immediately grasp the significance of a translated Chewa idiom, and so he tries to clarify the meaning through an explanatory statement. Such is the case when Kudzikho says: "M'bona seems to have eaten the buttocks of a dog. Something always happens to make him move on to the next hill" (p. 21). The Chewa expression is **kudya matako a galu,** a mocking reference to a restless person or a perennial wanderer. A somewhat similar expression is **kudza ndi mphepo,** "to come with the wind", an indication of unpredictability and unexpectedness. Thus Matsime observes: "It still puzzles me how he [M'bona] came with the wind like that at the right moment" (p. 22). Perhaps the most successful instance of transliteration in the play is Chimombo's use of the idiom **kupalana chibwenzi ndi mphasa,** "to make friends with the mat". The intended meaning is "to be constantly ill". It is with this sense in mind that Matsime says at the end of the play: "The hungry have befriended their mats to die slowly" (p. 42), a poignant description of Msinja at the height of the drought.

Chimombo's portrayal of M'bona's background and character largely conforms to what Joseph Henderson calls the universal pattern of hero myth (12). Most of the ingredients are there: miraculous birth, early proof of superhuman qualities, rapid rise to prominence and a "heroic" sacrifice that ends in death. We learn from the shrine officials that M'bona came with the wind to a virgin called Chembe and within twelve days he had grown to a man. The reason given

for his flight from home is reminiscent of the Cain and Abel story in Genesis. Kudzikho explains: "It started with his brothers. Apparently they were playing at making sacrifices in the bush. M'bona's smoke rose straight into the sky like a **njale** tree, while his brothers' did not. They wanted to kill him and M'bona had to flee" (p. 21). Again, as an apprentice to the great prophet Mlauli, M'bona is said to have outclassed everybody else and even his master began to fear him.

Rainmaking is not the only miracle M'bona is credited with. He is also associated with a number of etiological myths. It is said that when, in the course of his flight, M'bona reclined on a rock at a place known as Mfunda-wa-Lundu, his body left a permanent impression there. Chimombo also makes this the scene of another miracle attributed to M'bona: the pool that never dries up. Appropriately, the relevant information is contained in one of the Matsano choruses:

> Look, a well has sprung up
> Where his foot dug
> The hard rock! (p. 30)

That Chimombo intends M'bona's death to be taken as a willing and inevitable sacrifice is indicated by the prophet's statement: "Clouds are forming on the horizon and the time has come for M'bona to rejoin Chisumphi [God-in-the-whirlwind] in the whirlwind of life" (p. 38). It is significant in this respect that M'bona goes so far as to tell his clumsy captors that only a reed can kill him; they use the information to good effect. Chiuta's prophet must die in order to found an alternative shrine to Msinja that will save mankind from drought and pestilence. His murderers thus become unwitting agents of the High God's will.

The playwright consistently depicts M'bona as a martyr. Nowhere in the play is the prophet held to have done anything wrong or committed any act of hubris that demands expiation. The accusation of witchcraft is patently without foundation. Personal ambition or the impatience of the young in what is essentially a generational conflict are both missing in M'bona's character. As a result, there is an abstract, disinterested quality about his sacrifice, one which suggests influences of the Christian passion play. What Soyinka has to say about the ritual of Obatala in **Myth, Literature and**

the African World applies with equal force to **The Rainmaker.** The drama is all essence: captivity, suffering, endurance, martyrdom and redemption. (13)

Myth, however profound and symbolic, is not necessarily a coherent dramatic picture of the actions of living men and women. If it is to succeed on stage, the dramatist must give it human depth. Unfortunately, such depth is often lacking in **The Rainmaker.** This weakness is evident not only in Chimombo's portrait of M'bona but also in his delineation of Kamundi's character. Chimombo fails to convey to the audience any moral dimension in Kamundi which would serve to justify his conflict with M'bona. Nowhere is any motivation suggested for Kamundi's behaviour other than a rather grumpy desire for self-protection. Thus the python lacks weight and complexity. One feels that Chimombo should have gone beyond mere symbolism to a sustained exploration of Kamundi's motives and fears, thereby providing a convincing psychological basis for his actions in the play. As it is, the python's rages and threats tend merely to raise a laugh, and his role strikes one as comic when in fact it should be tragic. (14)

The structural organization of **The Rainmaker** is such that one inevitably links the play with the predominant Chewa creation myth. The various characters base their interpretations of the actions and attitudes in the drama on this myth and frequently avail themselves of its dense symbolism. At the thematic level, it acts as a paradigm of the subtle relationship between recurrence, earthed in images of the seasonal cycle, and necessary change and regeneration. The connection between the M'bona and the creation myths is first suggested by the Matsano in the prologue. They describe Makewana's footprints as "pointing their toes to Msinja" and not giving "a backward glance to Kaphiri-Ntiwa, the cradle of mankind" (p. 11). From here onwards, Kaphiri-Ntiwa becomes a recurrent point of reference, and we often come across such statements as: "It has always been like this / since Kaphiri-Ntiwa" (p. 39). The creation myth emerges in its entirety in the last scene, before and during the **nyau** dance. The Matsano sing: "I remembered also the first rains / Brought by Chiuta" (p. 43), a reference to the circumstances in which Chiuta, the first human pair and all the animals descended from the sky and alighted on Kaphiri-Ntiwa Hill. Immediately after these lines, there is reference to the "imprints on

the rock surface". Those who have visited the hill in question say that these marks, made in the rock by the first men and animals, can still be seen.

The harmony between Chiuta, men and animals was disrupted when, one day, man accidentally invented fire by playing with two twirling sticks. The ensuing bush fire drove all the animals, except the dog and the goat, into the forest, while Chiuta fled to the skies on a thread spun by the spider. As he ascended, he declared that henceforth man must die and join him in the sky. It is interesting to note that, in the play, the character of Kamundi is associated with both man's wickedness and man's presumption, and to an extent the two are equated. In the prologue, the Matsano pray that the python's head be wrenched off and his ribs shattered so as to rid Msinja of his "soul-eroding embrace" (p. 12). In the last scene, Mlauli links Kamundi's traditional role as "firegiver" with man's ritual fault **in illo tempore:** "The python invents fire and pushes Chiuta from Kaphiri-Ntiwa, so Chiuta brings death to mankind". (p. 47)

A knowledge of the creation myth is important for a proper interpretation of the **nyau** dance that closes **The Rainmaker.** We have here a mime involving two masks: Jere, representing man the hunter, and Njobvu (Elephant), standing for animals. The hunter stalks the elephant and is in turn challenged by it. The man makes as if to stab the elephant, stops in mid-air, drops his spear, and goes forward to meet the animal in an embrace. What the mime signifies is explained by Mlauli in the following terms: "We are bringing about the reconciliation between god and man, man and animal, animal and spirit. All three are united, however temporarily, in the **nyau** dance" (p. 47). The process is again reflected by the beer offering made to M'bona, which is seen as "the union of seed, water and fire". (**loc. cit.**)

Nyau is performed at the major transition rites of death and female initiation. As Schoffeleers and Linden point out, in puberty ceremonies **nyau** members fulfil the role of castigator of the initiates, while in funeral rites the **nyau** can be classified with the "funeral friend" and sons-in-law of the deceased, who are traditionally set apart from the mourners proper (15). Seen in the context of transition, the performance of **nyau** in **The Rainmaker** is not merely the formal burial of a personage posthumously recognized

as great but, more importantly, a ritual enactment of the disappearance of the old order and the emergence of the new. That Msinja has definitely been superseded by Nsanje is indicated by the Matsano's epilogue:

> We climbed Maravi Hills
> Bound for Nkhulubvi grove
> There to divine at the new shrine
> What this ritual of blood-letting means (p. 48)

The foregoing pages have shown the immensity of the task that Chimombo set himself in writing **The Rainmaker.** From the historical point of view, he has successfully fused the two main oral traditions of the M'bona myth, as well as the stories behind the rain shrine at Msinja and that at Nsanje. This fusion has enabled him to erect an elaborate structure of contrasting themes. It has also allowed him to draw on the legendary personages associated with Msinja, the northern shrine. Though he has retained the original names of these legendary characters, Chimombo has prudently underplayed their significance, a strategy which has enabled him to lump together into what is essentially one dramatic role the Matsano and the shrine officials. At the same time, this has made it possible for him to focus his attention on the central characters, Kamundi and M'bona. For dramaturgical reasons, the playwright has given an ironical twist to Kamundi's traditional role as "fire-bringer", underlining the parallels between him and the serpent in the Genesis story. It seems to me, however, that the action in the last scene, significantly entitled "Msanje", would more effectively have underscored the theme of necessary and inevitable change if it had taken place at the new shrine instead of at the old.

An important area in which the writer has excelled himself is in the way he has consistently linked the M'bona myth with the main Chewa creation myth, making the latter the touchstone of the various characters' responses to the issues in **The Rainmaker.** This structural feature greatly enhances the quality of coming-into-being or regeneration that is associated with M'bona's rainmaking powers, his wanderings, and ultimately the establishment of his shrine at Khulubvi. The poetic passages of the Matsano keep this vision of renewal constantly before the audience and the **nyau** dance at the end of the play powerfully dramatizes the passing of the old order and the beginning of the new.

One needs to see this dance of origin on stage in order to appreciate the way in which it fits into the structural design of the play, bringing into effortless union the various symbols and allusions scattered here and there in the text.

It is the playwright's successful imaginative leap from the purely historical context of the M'bona myth to a coherent cosmogonic interpretation in **The Rainmaker** that makes the merits of the play far outweigh its deficiencies in style and characterization.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the Conference on Research in Progress on Southern Africa held at the Centre for Southern African Studies, University of York, 22-24 March, 1982.

2. Henry A. Murray, **Myth and Mythmaking** (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 310.

3. J.M. Schoffeleers, Introduction to Steve Chimombo, **The Rainmaker** (Limbe: Popular Publications, n.d.), p. 6.

4. J.M. Schoffeleers, 'The History and Political Role of the M'bona Cult among the Mang'anja', in T.O. Ranger and I.N. Kimambo (eds.), **The Historical Study of African Religion** (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 77.

5. Quoted in W.H.J. Rangeley, 'M'bona - The Rainmaker', **The Nyasaland Journal,** Vol. 6, No. 1 (1953), p. 17.

6. Schoffeleers, Introduction to **The Rainmaker,** pp. 6-7.

7. Steve Chimombo, **The Rainmaker** (Limbe: Popular Publications, n.d.), p. 36. All page references are to this edition.

8. W.H.J. Rangeley, 'Makewana - The Mother of All People', **The Nyasaland Journal,** Vol. 5, No. 2 (1952), p. 35.

9. **Ibid.,** p. 36.

10. **Ibid.,** p. 33.

11. I have adapted this scheme from E. Gray, 'Some Proverbs of the Nyanja People', **African Studies,** Vol. 3 (1944), pp. 101-128.

12. Joseph L. Henderson, 'Ancient Myths and Modern Man', in Carl Jung (ed.), **Man and His Symbols** (London: Pan Books, 1978), p. 101.

13. Wole Soyinka, **Myth, Literature and the African World** (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 152.

14. The critical points made in this paragraph derive mainly from Jim Stewart's excellent review of the first performance of Chimombo's play, 'The Rains Have Still to Fall', in James Gibbs (ed.), **Theatre in Malawi 197076** (Zomba: English Department, University of Malawi, n.d),pp. 36-37.

15. J.M. Schoffeleers and I. Linden, 'The Resistance of the **Nyau** Societies to the Roman Catholic Missions in Colonial Malawi', in T.O. Ranger and I.N. Kimambo (eds.), **The Historical Study of African Religion** (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 258.