THE TRICKSTER AND THE SAINT

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Authorial Denials

Jolly Max Ntaba, the author of **Mtima Sukhuta** denies that his novel is based on "Kalikalanje" the trickster in Malawian folklore.[1] He also denies that the story is inspired by Simon Templar, "The Saint", created by Leslie Charteris in his novels. In this paper I would like to prove the author wrong by demonstrating, through comparisons, that the parallels with Kalikalanje and The Saint are too close to be dismissed either as coincidences or unconscious borrowings. I will start with the traditional sources before discussing the modern western influences.

The Trickster Heroes: Kalikalanje and Bimbo

There are several Malawian folkstories with human trickster figures, **enfants terribles** or child prodigies: "Nzerunkupangwa", the wonder boy who slew the swallowing monster, or "Kansabwe" the louse-ridden brother who saved his sister from her hyena husband. The figure that combines most of the child prodigies, however, is "Kalikalanje" who also comes close to Bimbo Kalikanyani the hero of **Mtima Sukhuta** whose birth and characteristics bear some striking resemblances.

There are some folk motifs one can isolate in **Mtima Sukhuta** like the mysterious birth of the hero, the inanimate figure that comes to life, the childless mother who makes a pact with a monster, fatal desires or passions, etc. All these summarize parts of the novel. In "Kalikalanje" and some of its variants, the hero is born from a boil on his mother's knee. His early exploits include frying himself, hence his name "Kalikalanje", the fried one. Bimbo Kalikanyani (note the similar sounding names) is born from a picture the father had drawn i.e. the picture comes to life through the mother's wishes or dreams for a child.

The plot of "Kalikalanje" consists of episodes in which the hero tries to outwit the monster to which his mother had promised the child. In **Mtima Sukhuta,** similarly, the plot depends on how Bimbo outwits some criminals who want to kill him and his mother. In both stories the heroes are found in situations created by their mothers. Kalikalanje's mother made a pact with a monster that when the child is born he will be given away, hence the problem is, for the monster, how to get the child, and how to stay alive, for the hero. In **Mtima Sukhuta** the mother's obsession with riches becomes a problem for the son since he has to satisfy her fatal desire and at the same time be a step ahead of the criminals who are after their lives.

The relations between mother and son are also similar in that both mothers plan to get rid of their sons in one case to a monster, in the other to criminals. (Sofiya, Bimbo's mother, it should not be forgotten, actively conspires with the criminals, and, in the end, it is she who nearly kills him by denying that he is her son, i.e. Bimbo's existence depends on the parents' constant and conscious acceptance of their son.) The battle for survival has the heroes emerging triumphant, and a truce between mother and son (in some of the Kalikalanje variants) is called for.

As can be seen from the above observations the plot in both stories is simple, the characters minimal, the motivation is a dichotomy between good and evil characters, and the setting is just as sketchy. Although the setting remains unnamed in the folkstory, it is not even that strongly realised in the novel. In spite of the mention of places like Chilakolako, or Pamkonda (notice again the symbolic use of place names) in the novel, the physical description is minimal.

From Folkstory to Modern Fiction?

If the similarities noted above are not enough proof of the author's indebtedness to folk narratives, the single and strongest evidence is the formulaic opening and closing of **Mtima Sukhuta.** The story starts in the manner of an oral performance and the choral response: "Padangotere: Tili Tonse" (Once upon a time, we are together).[2] It also ends with the usual ... "Kaphuleni mbatata, yapsyerera".[3] There are also internal oral narrative devices: for example, when the narrator addresses his audience: "Koma nthano

sikondweretsa kuyiyambira komalizira, eti? Tamverani tsono" (a story is not nice, if you start it at the end, isn't that so? Now you listen.)[4] When describing events there is also a switch of tenses from the simple past to the narrative present (see, for example, when the narrator describes how Thyola chased Gong'o on page 130). Furthermore, the narrative has Sofiya's songs.[5] The text is again interspersed with proverbs, idioms and cliches. Finally, although the third person point of view is retained there are switches to the first person communal or choral "we" and "us".

The modern novelistic techniques which distinguish **Mtima Sukhuta** from a folk story are also just as obvious: a title for each chapter division or sequence; the extended plot, dialogue and use of flashbacks. Beyond these modern ways of writing stories are the facts of publication: the technology that went into the printing of the book for several readers separated in time and space (instead of a live audience around the fire side). That the author has been exposed to modern technology needs to be mentioned. The author's sociology, too: he is a Lecturer in English (i.e. he has read modern novels as part of his training and profession). His exposure to English is so strong it influences the style of the story: the story is full of Anglicisms: vernacularised or loan words, apart from straight forward English words and phrases which are in great contrast to the proverbial sayings mentioned earlier. The plot and setting furthermore are influenced by the modern age: underground laboratories as a defence against nuclear or neutron warfare; robots emitting deadly electricity; bugging or spying devices: television and telescopes, etc. It is a modern setting full of cars, cameras, newspapers, radios, hotels and disco dancing. The story belongs, however, not to science fiction but to the detective thriller as the next section will now demonstrate.

The Modern Heroes: The Saint and Bimbo

There are several detective or adventure thrillers with heroes who have so endeared the readers that their signatures, signs, nicknames or pseudonyms are more famous than either their real names or even their authors. Cases in point are "1066", or Norman Conquest created by Berkeley Gray; "The Toff" by John Creasey. "The Toff" comes near to what we are seeking since his signature is a bowler hat, glasses and walking stick. The series always have this symbol on the covers, too.

Although I could have established the correspondences between "The Toff" and Kalikalanje those I find most interesting are with "The Saint" whose real name is Simon Templar, created by Leslie Charteris. He is the closest to Bimbo since he also leaves his symbol on most of his exploits as a sign of his presence. (The series also carry The Saint's motif on the covers.) The Saint's symbol is a matchstick man with a halo on top of his head. Similarly Bimbo Kalikalanje's symbol is a red hat. He uses this symbol no less than sixteen times in **Mtima Sukhuta** with the same effect on his victims as the Saint achieves in his own adventures. Both the Saint and Bimbo are crime-busters: their activities make them the terror of the underworld and the friends of the police. Bimbo is called "polisi wochenjera",[6] i.e. crack cop.

The plot(s) of The Saint series are as simple as the one found in **Mtima Sukhuta:** there is a criminal (gangster/monster/hood/a good man gone wrong etc.) or a group of criminals who are after the hero or vice versa. The Saint is after them. The plot depends on how successful each side is in outwitting the other as in the old folkstory. In this case also it is always The Saint who comes out the winner, either through his superior intelligence or through the help of the police or one of his friends. Whereas The Saint has Scotland Yard (or its equivalent elsewhere) or Happy Uniatz or Patricia Holm behind him, Bimbo of **Mtima Sukhuta** has unnamed police officers, too, who not only provide him with transport, they also give him monetary rewards for capturing criminals. Bimbo also has Thyolani as a friend, who, because of an experiment performed on him, has the superior strength enabling him to combat adults. In the place of "damsels-in-distress" as in the case of The Saint, Bimbo, due to his age (he is only ten years of age), has only his mother to look after.

The setting of The Saint series varies from U.K. to U.S.A. to Germany, etc. In spite of the changes in setting, however, emphasis is on the hero's exploits rather than the physical realisation of place. Where the setting is described at length it is always in relation to the hero's passage. Similar comments were made earlier about Bimbo in Chilakolako, Pamkonda, or Linthunzi.

Finally, although of mysterious birth, conceived of as a spirit able to make himself invisible at will, Bimbo behaves like The Saint i.e. a human being: at times he gets hungry, tired, frustrated, at other he is misunderstood, feels the need for relaxation or recreation; goes through the daily rhythms of sleeping, waking up and eating or working, when swimming he has the ordinary fears of drowning etc. All in all, both super-heroes are made to behave like humans in both their strengths and weaknesses or failures.

In sum, then, both modern heroes move through very linear plots, operate with a small number of characters (divided into two obvious groups, good or bad) living in a world where action is more important than place.

Authorial Confessions

The cumulative impact of the points discussed above forces the reader to conclude that there are two major sources of inspiration working on the author of **Mtima Sukhuta:** the trickster of folk-narrative and The Saint of the modern detective novel. In spite of the denials mentioned above, the author has confessed on the "Lingaliro" page that the songs are taken from his own people's folksongs which he used to sing when young in the village under the moonlight.[7] The author also confesses in the introduction, 'Kodi Bimbo ndi Ndani' that he knows the Kalulu trickster stories.[8] He admits further that we are exposed to both the old and the new and that this has forced him to use the old and new techniques: "Bukhu lino lalembedwa mosasiyananso ndi 'Kale Kale padali Kalulu ndi Njobvu ...' Ndi **mwambi wanga wamakono.**" (I have written this book similar to 'A long time ago there was the Hare and the Elephant ...' It is **my modern folktale**) (emphasis mine).

Does it Work?

Theoretically it is possible to touch up a folkstory and create modern fiction (a short story or novel) out of it. Both genres depend on similar elements: plot, setting, character, point of view, theme, couched in appropriate language. These elements can be extended to the appropriate length. So, in the final analysis, a question the reader asks is: how successful has Ntaba been in creating a modern fable?

On one hand there are several modern fables on the market for comparison: Tolkein's **Lord of the Rings**, Carroll's **Alice in Wonderland**, Kingsley's **Peter Pan.** However, these are different worlds altogether not only because of the setting selected and the type of character created but because the authors **do not pretend** that they are creating anything else but fantasy. On the other hand, reading Gray's '1066', Creasey's 'The Toff' and Charteris's 'The Saint' one is not fooled into believing that they are folkstories or even modern fables because the folkloric element is missing, nor do the authors pretend they are writing anything else apart from detective thrillers. This second group may borrow folkloric motifs, such as the trickster, but the rest is in the realistic mode. Both groups are faithful to their chosen modes.

In other words, **Mtima Sukhuta** tries to satisfy the requirements of two narrative modes (the folkstory and modern fiction) without taking precautionary measures discussed below. A simple change of medium from the oral to the written does not turn a folkstory into modern fiction: the reader knows he is still reading a folkstory (e.g. "Kalikalanje"). There are, however, the larger issues below to take into consideration also.

The didactic element is too strong in **Mtima Sukhuta** for it to be taken as anything else other than a folkstory. From the didactic title to the proverbial sayings, the persistent moralising voice of the author is very loud and clear. As if that were not enough the plot itself is an automatic device created by the author to remind the reader of what the story is supposed to teach him; if he had not got the message from the title already ("the heart will never be satisfied"). This is one of the reasons why Ntaba cannot create credible characters; he is too intent on his moral purpose.

At best also Ntaba's characters will never grow out of the straightjacket he has put them into: Sofiya, the insatiable female striving for fame and riches until misfortune teaches her a lesson; Tombeza the unfortunate husband who, failing to satisfy the impossible demands made upon him by Sofiya, seeks refuge in drink and dies prematurely of consumption; Bwize and Gong'o the misguided scientists who would like to do good in a world constantly on the brink of nuclear warfare learn too late that they cannot take

the law into their own hands. Finally, at the worst, Thyolani and Bimbo, the two partners in crime-busting, Pan-like, will never grow up.

On the positive side, though, Jolly Max Ntaba is a story-teller dusting old folkstories to make them palatable to the modern reader who is used to another world which the old narrative did not incorporate: technology. In this self-imposed role Ntaba is moving with the times.

NOTES

1. Jolly Max Ntaba, **Mtima Sukhuta** (Limbe: Popular Publications, 1985) 137 pages. K4.25. The denials were personally communicated when I met the author in Zomba.

2. **Ibid.**, p. 9.

3. **Ibid.**, p. 139.

4. **Ibid.**, p. 9.

5. **Ibid.**, pp. 138-139.

6. **Ibid.**, p. 55.

7. **Ibid.**, p. 4.

8. **Ibid.**, p. 5.