

A. Nazombe(ed); **The Haunting Wind**, Blantyre; Dzuka Publishing Co., 1990

As Dr Nazombe admits in his fine introduction, this volume is long overdue, a child whose gestation has covered not nine months but nineteen years. The explanation, however, is well known and needs no rehearsal. The child is with us, alive and well, and no less welcome for arriving late. Indeed, aren't there serious risks attendant upon premature births?

Let us congratulate Dr Nazombe, then, on bringing us the first national anthology since **Mau: 39 Poems from Malawi** appeared in July 1971. With 44 poets (**Mau** had 10) and 100 poems, **The Haunting Wind** captures dramatically the growth of local verse since the appearance of that first slim volume. And, happily, it appears in the same year as another publication which marks Malawi's poetic coming of age. For the new **Heinemann Book of African Poetry in English**, which chooses 21 poets to represent "the best African poetry written in English over the last thirty years", features no less than four Malawians - Chimombo, Chipasula, Mapanje, and Mphande - and gives two of them more titles even than Soyinka. With its appetite whetted, the international audience for that volume will find **The Haunting Wind** an admirable companion text.

The delay has also helped Nazombe to distinguish and represent three stages of growth. Pioneers, ranging from Innocent Banda, Steve Chimombo, David Kerr, Blaise Machila and Jack Mapanje to Felix Mnthali, Lupenga Mphande, and Anthony Namalomba, Nazombe calls the Blantyre generation. The second or Chirunga generation, coinciding with the university's move to the Chirunga Estate at Zomba includes Catherine Lipenga, Jika Nkolokosa, Patrick O'Malley and Nazombe himself. The third or **Muse** generation, so called after the magazine of that name founded by Ken Lipenga, includes Sam Chatola, Zangaphee Chizeze, Sokayawo Kaunda, Harris Limwame, and Sam Raiti Mtamba.

Central to the business of making an anthology of course is the delicate question of selection - and who envies an editor that responsibility? With an impeccable feel for the imperatives of African traditional collectivism, however, Dr Nazombe assigned this task to a team of assistants - Zangaphee Chizeze, Garton Sandifolo, and my fondly remembered Chichewa teacher, Jessie Sagawa - who, after energetic trawling through the Writers' Workshop archive, "came up with the poems they felt represented the best that had been written in Malawi since the publication in 1971 of **Mau**".

To this scholarly triumvirate, then, we must address concerns about real presences and absences, over or under-exposure. And these scholars also we must thank for a selection policy which rules *in* such writers as Patrick O'Malley, Swanzie Agnew, David Kerr, Francis Sefe, and Ed Segal - expatriates moved to verse by a genuinely deep affection for Malawi and its people. It was such magnanimity, surely, that Angus Calder had in mind when he said that the African literary scene is peopled with perhaps the finest humanists of the modern world.

Diverse considerations presumably affected the selection process: the question of balance, for example, in terms of generation, gender, and even perhaps region, the book's size, with its implications for cost; poems' accessibility and the relevance of this for the audience; the need to capture extramural as well as intramural voices (had it appeared only a few years earlier *The Haunting Wind* would have brought us nothing from Edison Mpina). Protests about the minimal representation of some of Malawi's finest poets will doubtless draw the response that individual volumes have already brought them fame: *this* text seeks exposure for their lesser known colleagues; and its total of 44 poets amounts to impressive coverage, even if some, fertile in their undergraduate days, have long since traded verse for insurance, a bottle store, or the Stock Exchange. One would like to think, for example, that Geoff Mwanja, E.M. Msuku, Sam Raiti Mtamba, and Ken Lipenga are still writing. But are they? Or are their pieces printed here merely epitaphs to youthful promise that bloomed and died in an afternoon?

The verse as a whole displays a technical and thematic diversity natural in a scene where, if there are discernible generations, there are as yet no discernible schools. What could be more disparate than, say, the inner psychological landscapes of Chimombo and the outer physical landscapes of Mphande, or the deeply serious lyricism of Innocent Banda and the sidelong irony of Jack Mapanje? There is too, *pace* the post-modernists, a quality of freshness here. Malawian poetry suffered no period of Colonial Romanticism, that unhelpful attachment to Wordsworth and Tennyson marking the early verse of West Africa, Canada, the USA, and Australasia; and even a serious flirtation with Eliot, that most infectious of poets, seems to have gone cold. So those who enjoy literary genealogy (surely one of scholarship's most stimulating pursuits?) will find it hard to trace here patterns of tutelage, whether African or Western. This will be a relief for those Workshop poets

sufficiently sensitive about their originality to need these reassuring lines from Mwalimu Mnthali:

Comparisons will be made:
 contrasts will be drawn
 and conclusions reached -
 but never mind us
 unholy parasites who resemble you to a hair
 save for the anguish in your heart
 and the music upon your lips.

Unless deliberately conjured, therefore, encounters with the ghosts of Hopkins or Okigbo are unlikely. One might occasionally complain about a dull image, verbal overload, a failure of closure, rhythmic weakness, or, worst of all, a sense that the poetic power lines carry no current at all; but often this turns out to be no more than indulgence of one's own aesthetic eccentricity or even plain critical myopia. Only the neophyte would fail to know that, such are the rhetorical subtleties of Malawian poetic discourse, the least assertive creations (and much work here shares the demur quality for which the nation is admired) will reveal riches to the careful ear and open mind.

Critics will look for themes, as they will look for literary ancestors. They might find that, recalling those thematic lacunae David Kerr and Landeg White noted in their seminal 1972 essay, our volume still displays little evidence that Malawi has a large Muslim population and is virtually surrounded by Mozambique - or indeed that it has had a long and humanly disruptive relationship with South Africa (a fact which Mike Mvona's solitary exception "The Miner" only serves to emphasise). But what can one make of Nazombe's claim that the commonest theme here is not one of those old chestnuts like colonialism or alienation but death? Should we see this simply as one of the archetypal concerns of all art? A theme by no means archetypal yet productive of strong verse concerns what Nazombe delicately calls "mutual perception" - or what happens when you travel abroad to the countries of those you have only known as missionaries or teachers at home. Jack Mapanje had good sport with this in *Of Chameleons and Gods* and the tradition goes back at least to the early work of Soyinka and, in prose, to J.P. Clark's *America, Their America*. Here Blaise Machila, during his stay in Australia doing excellent research on racism, attacks a

western world apparently immovable from its stereotype view of Africa:

 Their Africa still derives
 from jungle mythology
 that feeds and nourishes them all
 from the cradle to the grave.

In his poem, Nazombe indicts British graduate training as a racket in which the developing world is again being exploited:

 The reverse of the Robin Hood saga
 Is solemnly enacted year in year out
 On the crown of this hill
 As our revered dons steal from the poor
 To give to the rich in the name of civilization,
 Full economic costs and Government cuts.

With its imagery of tomb, museum, and attic, the poem moves to a climax that all concerned with the health of global English Studies should pin up prominently on their noticeboards:

 The stiff upper lip: a dead end choking with trivia.
 Sleepwalkers through these august corridors
 Are bound by a vow of silence and fear,
 A conspiracy to ensure renewals of contracts
 And continual peddling of hollow awards.

With only six of our 41 poets women, there is editorial concern about this under-representation of the distaff muse. It would be helpful to have a woman's view on this. Do they find the Writers' Workshop (universally admired as perhaps the finest in Africa) an uncomfortable forum for debate? Do they shrink from both public censure and praise? Certainly they have always supported the Workshop in good numbers, even if they have been less than vociferous in its deliberations. Perhaps after all the Malawi pattern differs little from terms elsewhere in Africa, where women have produced far more prose than verse, though it differs dramatically from the record of women poets in anglophone countries like Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Still, it was refreshing to discover the work of Mathabo Chautsi, exceptional in her status as both a lady engineer and a poet, and exceptional too in her exploration (in "For Sunday, 11th May") of old age as a condition devoutly to be avoided~ Josephine Chirwa's verse was also new to me, her "A Prayer in Vain"

achieving a fusion of verbal economy and passionate lyricism not shared by every poet in this volume:

I still see them. . .
 Sleepless nights,
 Moments
 Of gentle genuflection,
 Followed by dawn
 Of holy bread.

But similar qualities *do* inform the verse of Ted Mwaya, whose tight lines, assured it less lyrical, carry his moral fervour with notable success. His three poems "For the Dustbin", "The Social Worker", and "The Red Cross" make a neat trio, and we want to hear more (a separate volume?) from a poet who can end a piece with a stanza like this:

For yourself
 Sitting at the edge of eternity
 Using a mirror to recall your name
 Compose a song of the universe
 and a better one for the lost of the earth.

That **The Haunting Wind** is so thoroughly a university anthology might cause some critical heartache. While academe, manifestly, has been midwife *par excellence* to modern African literature, not all would agree that its influence, deep-rooted in secondary discourse, is beneficial. Some warn about the killing hand of English Departments or advise aspiring writers wanting to retain their freshness to avoid universities altogether. This is too large a subject for investigation here; but it is worth mentioning that Edison Mpina, perhaps the only non-graduate in this text, and therefore untouched by the experience of the Writers' Workshop (though, says **Wasi Writer**, setting up his own in Lilongwe), has boldly addressed this topic in his own writing. His poems here - "In the Fields", "African Drought", "An Evening at Biwi Triangle", and the award-winning "Summer Fires of Mulanje Mountain", certainly capture the essence of his best work. But a shrewd move would have been to print here a few lines at least from his extraordinary **Malawi Poetry Today**, which climaxes with precisely an attack on what he sees as the dominant poetic ideology of academe. From a position defiant of both Romantic and neo-classic theory, Mpina insists on a solidly materialistic and external provenance for true

Malawian verse, which, he argues, arises out of doors, in field and garden, and not from university studies:

We do not make our verse from volcanoes erupting in
our minds. From isms seen through glass.

.....
I'm saying that our poetry isn't born in our minds to
emerge through our eyes, ears, noses. Like rotten brain.

And finally, with his sights finally trained on Zomba, he writes:

Because it's not a poetry that's given birth in a
workshop.

Like a coffin. Complete with formic.

This, and more in the same vein, would have seasoned nicely the fare offered in **The Haunting Wind**, not because Mpina is right - his poem subverts his own position with remarkable success and, as George Steiner would argue, even a non-university poet like Mpina is, as never before, under pressure of academic attention and expectation - but because the case he wants to argue deserves a hearing and is a reminder that beyond the university's walls there *is* a poetic life and salvation.

Finally, it would further enhance Malawi's poetic health if many of those appearing in this volume chose to imitate the courage and entrepreneurial spirit of Mpina and Chimombo who, without awaiting commercial publishing's grace and favour, go ahead and self-publish their own collections. In the meantime, a warm welcome to **The Haunting Wind**, whose collective achievement comes to us touched by Dr Nazombe's fine scholarship and his shrewd intuition that every good anthology needs helpful biographical notes and an excellent glossary.

Adrian Roscoe