

Lupenga Mphande, *Crackle at Midnight* (Poems), Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Plc. 1998, 147pp. (paperback)

In this first collection of his own poetry, Lupenga Mphande is fascinated by what he calls 'the absolute beauty' of his homeland and of nature in general. The fragrance on the Vipya (Mountains) and the ultimate beauty, flaming waters, shimmers of unforgettable memories of Lake Malawi capture his attention more than anything else. He describes 'An Outing on Dedza Mountain' (p.18) where he marvels at the proximity of heaven and earth seen from the primordial ranges trailing to Lake Malawi. Thoza Village where the poet was born and grew up offers the poet the main point of reference. It is the centre of the experiences he describes in his poetry and he believes it is the ideal place to be. To him, Thoza view offers not just another sight of the beauty of nature and his homeland, but it is the only place where beauty and fragrance combine. It is only in Thoza that you can bask in so much sunshine (p.23). It is here where a lone tree dying of old age can mysteriously blossom into "a lustre of lyrical charm and fragrance" (p.15).

Thoza naturally evokes memories of his growing up and going to school with friends in the village. However, the poems about Thoza are not only about playing and fun as they grew up in the village. It is in these poems that Lupenga Mphande also tries to take stock of the political history of his country. For example, in 'Where I was Born' (p.38) he recounts, apart from his growing up, his going into exile as well. The fight against colonialism by people like Kamwana and Domingo, Chikuse and Chilembwe, and the men and women that died in Nkhata Bay during the State of Emergency in 1959 are acknowledged. And he was "the youth who knew the paths criss-/Crossing the staggered hills evading colonial soldiers,/The scout who sighted the dwellings of informers/And guided the patriotic fighters at dawn" (p.39); he was "the youth who knew the fighters by name,/The errand boy who survived by exploits of my own,/Who chronicled events and therefore remembers;..." (p.40). He therefore asks to be remembered in his own right and along those that lost their lives to gain freedom for the country. He says that Thoza will tell stories of great exploits and much more, stories "about the tyrant who at a swish of his flywhisk/Mowed people into dust, unaware that even dust/Will rise in the wind and soar to the sky" (pp.40-41). A reference to late President Banda.

'Visiting Friends', is a planned visit to the poet's home village, Thoza, after years of exile. More than visiting what is at home now, the poet plans to relive his childhood life - take the herd out to pasture, eat wild fruits and carve fighting bulls out of clay. He also plans to plant flowers on the graves of his two dear friends now dead, Tichafa and Vuso, with whom he went to school at Embangweni. Their deaths left him alone to fulfill their childhood dreams - build schools and clinics for their village (p.56).

When he finally returns to Thoza, typical of Lupenga Mphande, what he notices first as he drops from the bus is that the morning is so glorious as he warms up to the beauty of his village. However, there is a sense of regret for not doing what he could have done for his village and for keeping silent when he could have said something to save his people. He acknowledges that he has been "a man sitting on the fence ...having written many novels in titles only " (p.60). A kind of self confession for having let down his own village. He expresses the same sentiments in 'I Was Sent For' (p.113) where the village called for help when it was under fire because the government thought they were enemies for whatever reason. But the sense of renewal at the prospects of being re-united with his village is unmistakable as he trudges on the hills towards Thoza which awaits him (p.60). 'How Shall I know' (p.68), 'Village Headman Jenjewe' (p.79) and 'Easter at Embangweni' (p.84) speak on various aspects of life in Thoza village.

Lupenga Mphande's sense of beauty and love of nature is definitely remarkable. He is, therefore, acutely concerned about the destruction to natural beauty and nature in general. In 'Along the Rift Valley' (p.21) he laments the mechanisation of farming that is more destructive than constructive for it puffs smoke and rips the soil sour. Similarly, he is worried with the bush fires ravaging the forests of Malosa and Machinga hills (p.27), and destruction in the name of development in 'The Anvil' (p.114) where a whole village is relocated to another area because the area has been declared a 'development' area. The displacement naturally causes a disruption in the life of the people who had lived there all long. The death of the father who could not be relocated alive and was carried dead is also another difficulty associated with displacement. And then there is the death of the old tree in the village (Thoza), the patriarch of the village woodland, sapped with no one seeming to know why, let alone the cure (p.31); and the fig tree battered away to tobacco farmers to use for firewood to cure their crop (p.44). 'A Crackle at Midnight' is a nocturnal disturbance, a fire that sweeps through the village at night and then there is the searching for casualties in the debris left behind. The animals are not spared either (p.33). Such destruction of beauty and peace are recounted with a feeling of pain and bitterness.

A few of his poems comment on international events or phenomena. 'The Refugees' (p.52), for example, comments on the universal problem of refugees fleeing famine, ethnic rivalries or the cross-fire heat of ideology (p.52). He does not lay any blame on anyone for the calamities, most of which are man-made, nor propose any solution but simply adds his own voice as a footnote.

Love and Courtship occupies Lupenga Mphande's 'Didn't We' (p.123) for example, where the persona recalls the love of a girl he could get hold of only in dreams. Tasiyana, however, is more tangible appearing in 'Courting Tasiyana' (p.125), 'Paying Lobola' (p.127) and 'Search for a Bride' (p.147). The persona is prepared to do the Ngoni dance if that is what she would respond to (p.126). He decries the unnecessarily huge 'lobola' that make many a young man fail to marry their dream girls. The persona is, however, certain that he will get his Tasiyana. The other love pieces include 'Maria's Photograph' (131), 'Perdita' (p.132), 'A Letter to Anjana' (p.136) and 'Strange Ways' (p.140), which among other things bemoan the lack of moral values as girls flirt around giving false hopes of marriage to men.

In the poems dedicated to others, Lupenga Mphande takes opportunity to recount the political experiences of his country. However, even in these poems he is lured away by the beauty of nature which he finds more captivating than the political landscape. His bitterness at the destruction brought about by politics is buried as his tone is extremely controlled. "Shooting the guinea fowl" is dedicated to Anthony Nazombe, a writer and critic with the English Department in the University of Malawi. Nazombe's own contribution to poetry is acknowledged in his autograph of the complimentary copy to him of this collection. The poem is about efforts to shoot a guinea fowl which appears when the hunter is about to quit. However, the fowl perches on the bow such that the persona feels incapacitated and never shoots (p.9).

The poem dedicated to Jack Mapanje is 'Palsied Tyrant' (p.86), which without concealment refers to late President Banda, who "scorns his subjects" - the dispossessed and the disappeared etc. Mapanje disappeared when he was detained without trial at Mikuyu Prison for more than three years under late President Banda.

Orton Chirwa receives a dedication through, 'Getting Past the Darkside'. Orton Chirwa died in prison in 1991 where he was serving life imprisonment for treason. The poem, in the first person, narrates what could be his day dreams of an inmate. The persona wanders away beyond the prison walls daydreaming. Typical of Lupenga Mphande and his preoccupation with nature, in the daydreaming the persona screens

on the grey walls “the beauty of youth/melody of nature, and free air/that roams over vales and brooks... (p.94) and is only brought back into the reality of his confinement through the clicking doors signaling the change of guards.

‘Charred Pegs’ (p.97), is a dedication to Vera Chirwa, the wife of late Orton Chirwa, who also served part of her life imprisonment for treason together with her husband. It recounts the efforts and denials by the government’s officials that there were no prisoners in Malawi’s jails. Thus foreign visitors would be taken on guided tours of prisons and during such visits, prisoners would be transferred from one place to another to keep them away from visitors. However, the poem insinuates that there were not only prisoners congested in the prisons but many were killed in there and are buried in graves such as those at the former Malawi Young Pioneers’ camp in Kanjedza (p.97).

‘Austin, Frank and I’ (p.99) is probably a tribute to his two friends Frank Chipasula and Austin and himself. He recounts their days together in the University probably at Chancellor College before his two friends had to go out of the country. Austin returned home only to disappear into late President Banda’s prisons and apparently died in there (p.100). Frank Chipasula chose to remain in exile and so did the poet himself. Most likely, the reasons for the detention and killing of Austin and the exile, chosen or not, are political.

Ammon Phiri was a fugitive from the police for whatever treasonous act. The mother shared the blame for apparently sheltering him. The mother was arrested and detained at Mikuyu Prison. She died in detention. ‘Charged with Treason’ is a dedication to the mother of Ammon Phiri. When her body was delivered home for burial, unusual in late President Banda’s time, the people were obviously angry but could not express it. However, the poet further subdues the anger,

She was the brittle bundle of firewood waiting for a match,
She was the shiny set of marbles for our game at the village kraal,
She was the melodious village song that we had all learned to sing,
She was our grandmother taken away by the Special Branch police.
And we, children, clustered round her grave in anger.

We will remember her! (pp.105-106).

where the tone suppresses the fury of the people robbed of a dear one. The same is noticeable in ‘They Took Suzgo Away’ (p.88), apparently picked up by Special Branch police from campus. A serious matter is told with such a simplicity that it sounds less

an ordeal or a traumatic experience. It is for this reason that though written from exile, the poetry in this collection may not be described as exile poetry in the vein of such other poets like Frank Chipasula whose bitterness and frustration at events back home that led to his exile are obvious. For Lupenga Mphande, the beauty of the landscape in his home more than the turmoil in the political, social and economic landscape is worth of more attention. Serve for the instances of natural disruptions to the village life from natural phenomenon, the country is as beautiful as one would love it to be. Given Lupenga Mphande's obsession with nature and its beauty, his attachment to the soil and his homeland inspires him more than the politics and social upheavals that characterized life in his country not sparing his village.

However, considering that almost all poems in this collection were written in exile, the freshness of his expression of life at his home is unique. He lives among his people and participates in their life through his poetry. About this collection, one thing that is clear is that there is no one theme running across the poems nor a concerted effort to present a life journey of the poet. They seem and sound like pieces belonging to bits and pieces spanning his life in different places with the home setting being dominant.

A few mistakes that seem to have been left in possibly oversights during proof-reading: p.18 'fro' for 'for'; p.29 'zipps' for 'zip'; p.31 'patriach' for 'patriarch', 'sappling' for 'sapling', 'wanders' for 'wander' and words whose meaning is unclear, p.5 'brangeoned'; p.21 'inverts'.

Lupenga Mphande's poems have appeared in journals and anthologies published in Africa and Europe such as *West Africa*, *The Review* and Frank Chipasula's *When My Brothers Come Home*. His collection, *Crackle at Midnight*, is a valuable contribution to the growing body of poetry from Malawi so far published. It is, therefore, a commendable effort. With his choice of simple words and a predominantly narrative style in his poems, his collection makes interesting reading and should easily be accessible to the vast majority of the readership to enjoy. He succeeds in presenting a precise message of his love for his homeland and the beauty and tranquil of the scenery of his country to his readers by carefully avoiding the pitfalls of being cryptic or heavily ambiguous. These can sometimes be serious barriers to communicating through poetry. I do recommend it to the general readership in Malawi and elsewhere who wish to learn of the joys of growing up in a village in Malawi and the efforts of exiles to remain in touch with their roots over the years and distances that separate them from their loved people and country. The passion with which Lupenga Mphande relives his childhood in the village and the attachment to his people and homeland though in exile should be appealing to both young and old.

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The first part of the book is a collection of essays on the history of the English language in Malawi. It begins with a chapter on the early history of the English language in Malawi, followed by a chapter on the development of the English language in Malawi during the colonial period. The final chapter in this section discusses the role of the English language in Malawi today.

The second part of the book is a collection of essays on the teaching of English in Malawi. It begins with a chapter on the current state of English teaching in Malawi, followed by a chapter on the challenges of teaching English in Malawi. The final chapter in this section discusses the future of English teaching in Malawi.

The third part of the book is a collection of essays on the use of English in Malawi. It begins with a chapter on the use of English in Malawi in the workplace, followed by a chapter on the use of English in Malawi in the media. The final chapter in this section discusses the use of English in Malawi in education.

The fourth part of the book is a collection of essays on the role of English in Malawi. It begins with a chapter on the role of English in Malawi in the economy, followed by a chapter on the role of English in Malawi in the culture. The final chapter in this section discusses the role of English in Malawi in the future.

The book is a comprehensive survey of the English language in Malawi, and it is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the history and development of the English language in Malawi.