

Interview

Biography of a Political Icon: Timwa Lipenga's *Lomathinda: Rose Chibambo Speaks*

Abstract

The following interview was conducted in the Little Theatre, Chancellor College, University of Malawi on 19 December 2019, as part of the English Department's monthly Staff and Students Research Seminar. **Timwa Lipenga** was invited to talk to **Nick Tembo** on her recently published book, *Lomathinda: Rose Chibambo Speaks*.

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Introduction

Lomathinda is a mature book by a mature academic about a mature freedom fighter and political activist: Lomathinda Ziba (known to most Malawians as Rose Chibambo). In the book, Timwa Lipenga tells, retells and curates this political icon's life story. She tells of how Lomathinda is memorialized through song and dance (p.122) and, perhaps more visibly, through what the author calls "a place on the banknote" (p.177), her way of saying that Rose Chibambo appears on Malawi's K200 banknote as a mark of recognition for the services she selflessly rendered to her country. More crucially, Lipenga participates in the memorialization process through writing this book, literally testifying to us about a political figure that stood up to tyranny and injustice in a political regime when it was foolhardy for anyone to do so. In many ways, Lipenga entreats us to memorialise all those sons and daughters that matter in the political history of Malawi.

Tembo: Timwa, thank you very much for agreeing to grace our Staff and Students Research Seminar at a very short notice.

Lipenga: *Thank you for giving me this space.*

Tembo: I found the following quotation very poignant as I was reading your book: “There will be plenty of times when the present will interrupt the past, when writing will interrupt speech, when many voices, including mine, will interrupt her narrative” (p.3). For me, one of the ways through which writing interrupts speech is through the incisive commentaries and well researched pieces you helpfully give at the end of each chapter. They go beyond summation to delve into history and existing scholarship to fill in some lacunae and inconsistencies one may have noticed in Rose Chibambo’s testimony. Your writing style in the book gives me the sense that you are bearing witness to us after listening to a primary witness. What literary pilgrimages have you embarked on to come up with this book?

Lipenga: *Indeed, it was a pilgrimage of sorts because when I started out, I think I was anxious about something else: that this should not be just me talking about her. It should be about Rose Chibambo telling her story. So, if we talk of literary pilgrimages, I would perhaps refer to how one of my primary concerns was to make sure that it wouldn't be my voice that dominated the text. I kept thinking of how, when it comes to narratives, there is always concern about who is doing the actual speaking. So I was trying to be really conscious of the 'I', and I had in mind Philippe LeJeune's Le Je est Un Autre (the I is another) which examines the way the 'I' changes in narratives. I also drew from concepts of “herstory”, particularly in its tropes of “women of substance” and “women's contribution” to history. I believe Lomathinda fits both these tropes.*

Tembo: That’s very interesting. What else did you contend with when writing this book?

Lipenga: *A few loose ends. For example, I had to grapple with how I was going to begin and end the book, and what I had to include as well as exclude when writing the book. Because writing the book came out of the numerous interview sessions and recordings I had with Rose Chibambo herself and some of her family members. I always asked myself, at what point should I switch off the recorder and stop recording? How objective am I going to be during the actual writing of the book? It was a tough balancing act.*

Tembo: Your project follows and reflects upon the changes Malawi has gone through during the last five decades. I keep thinking that your work has a strong ethical component to it, as it, in many ways, not only memorialises and immortalizes one of Malawi's female political icons in the fight against colonial injustice and the neopatrimonialism that followed in its wake. As a Malawian author, do you feel that you have a certain ethical responsibility to bear witness to the changing times in Malawi's political landscape?

Lipenga: *Yes, I do. I feel that I have that responsibility. We are all witnesses of our times, and we have that obligation to record events. Imagine if Chibambo had not told her story, or if research material for the story had been hard to come by. We owe present and future generations such stories.*

Tembo: Interesting! This reminds me of a comment that Sam Mpasu once made in his Foreword to *Political Prisoner 3/75*, that one of the major problems most Malawians have is that they've never seriously sat down to think about writing about the so many sons and daughters of this land that have done great things for this country. And he wonders whether this is a mark of laziness on our part or we simply don't seem to care. Such that when your book came out, I said to myself that at least one daughter is listening to that chiding that Mpasu appears to make. We seem to be appallingly silent when it comes to writing about the so many great men and women in this country who have done a lot that is worth writing about.

Lipenga: *He is on point.*

Tembo: You have said elsewhere that your book not only contains Rose Chibambo's story in her own words, but also contextualises that story by giving information about that particular historic period. For me, the question of contextualization evokes the use of indigenous languages or indigenized forms of English first discussed at a larger scale by writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o who have openly disagreed on the language question (i.e. whether African authors

should or should not use former colonial languages, particularly English in their writing). I was wondering, what is at stake today in the decision to write in English rather than in any of Malawi's local languages? By extension, why did you not choose to tell and retell the Rose Chibambo story in a language that can easily be accessed by many Malawians since, in a way, this is also their story about that particular historic period and even more post-Kamuzu Banda?

Lipenga: *Malawi is part of a global network. Although writing in a local language may reflect pride in one's origins, it may also mean that the story is only limited to a particular population. So the choice to write in English is influenced by the thought of reaching a wider audience. As to why I chose to tell and retell the Chibambo story in English, perhaps a simple explanation would be that our interviews were in English. If we break that down, we have the following complexities; I speak Chibewa, but my mother is of Nyanja and Yao lineage. My father is Lomwe. Chibambo herself had a Tumbuka and Ngoni heritage. Where does one start from if one is to isolate a "local" language? (Laughs). My point, then, is that one has to admit that audience matters. Because the more universal language you use the more the lessons in the book can reach a wider audience.*

Tembo: So, where does the Malawian audience come into the picture considering that most Malawians are not as conversant with the English language and yet they would want to learn about a daughter who did great things for their country?

Lipenga: *That is true. As I said, maybe the options would be to one day translate the book into local languages. Perhaps that would be one way out. However, I am not making any commitments here because as I said, we have to think about the politics of publishing and reaching out to a wider beyond-the-border audience.*

Tembo: Let's talk about women and the idea of rewriting history. In the Foreword to your book, Niculin Jäger says that "[t]he history of humankind is the history of men. Men fight wars and decide the fate of the nation. Men are heroes; men are discoverers, inventors and leaders." I keep thinking that your book advances

a certain form of agency, highlighting what Jäger himself calls “the power of women to organize themselves” in nationalist discourse. My view, therefore, is that the book has a certain historical imperative; a certain form of boldness demonstrated by a fighter and true nationalist who gave her all to save and serve a country that was, and still is, hurtling down a precipice of misrule. It also disrupts certain societal constructions of women in nationalist discourses that they cannot be true leaders, for example. And I am saying all this looking at Rose Chibambo’s determination and her fearless and impassioned speech on pages 145 to 148 in response to Kamuzu Banda’s unsubstantiated accusations that she and the other ministers were plotting to oust him from power. It is not just that passage, though. There are so many interventions that she makes in the book, things that lead us to say that perhaps this whole idea about women not being true leaders and so on and so forth is nothing but a case of misplaced sentiments. Would you like to comment on this?

Lipenga: *Yes, I would. And I’ll do it by making reference to what is known as ‘herstory’ in opposition to ‘hisstory.’ The idea of ‘herstory’ which is historical perspective is reflected in the book in two ways. When people talk about herstory, one of the aspects they allude to is the idea of women of substance. You know, chronicling the story of women of substance because we say that all along people have been talking about men. For me, the things Rose Chibambo did would qualify her as a woman of substance. She lived during a time when it was unheard of for women to be involved in politics, and yet she really demonstrated leadership, from drafting the Women’s League’s Constitution to leading protests against the Federation. So yes, her actions can be read as an interrogation of prevalent nationalist discourse at the time. Another aspect of herstory that is being talked about in historical studies is that of women’s contribution to history, as well as nationalism. So once you start looking at the story of nationalism and then we look at the role women played, it comes out as a more balanced picture. Because we are not saying the men did not do anything, but we are saying that they were not alone in doing what they were doing. Women were also there. This has for some time been absent in many books. I am participating in these kinds of dialogues through this book.*

Tembo: Let's talk about Rose Chibambo as a great nationalist and freedom fighter. She was not as educated as one would want to believe, at the time she was galvanising fellow women into nationalist consciousness (through the Women's League she founded and the ensuing freedom fighting of which she took a leading role). Part of the reason, she says, was because one of the chiefs had belittled her that she, a woman, should leave political matters to men. These chiefs were construed to be sympathetic to the ideas of federation. How does Chibambo deconstruct these troubling constructions of women in the national project in Malawi?

Lipenga: *I'll be a bit flippant and say that Rose Chibambo had the Nike spirit. You know, the "just do it" kind of thing. For me, that's what kept driving her. She may not have gone further with her education, but she knew that she was intelligent. She knew she could do it. She wasn't the type of person who would say I'm going to wait until everything is fine before I can get started. She saw a problem, and she decided that something is going to be done to address this problem. There's a part in the book where I say that she decided that she had to do something to effect some change. She asked around about what needs to be done when someone wants to form or found an organisation. And then she took a piece of paper and wrote a constitution. Just like that. There were no printers. No nothing. But then, she told herself that was not going to stop her from doing what needed to be done. And then she went out to have the constitution printed. And that's how the first constitution of the Women's League was formulated. What you see in this is that she is speaking against a text that just says women cannot do this. I can allude to two other incidents where we see Rose Chibambo deconstructing troubling constructions of women. There was one incident in parliament that you referred to when she was reacting to what Dr [Kamuzu] Banda was saying. There were a lot of interruptions [from the men]. But she just went on to speak her mind. Another incident that stands out is what she did while pregnant. There was a man who was suspected of being a sell-out or an informant for the colonialist government. She got that man to write a retraction concerning the information he had given the government about the Nyasaland African Congress. He tried to avoid her several times, but she did not give up until she got the retraction. I would say this was one way of deconstructing the image of the helpless, pregnant woman.*

Tembo: Let's talk about her childhood. Rose Chibambo says that the only time her father beat her was when, as a small girl, she innocently tore into small bits a very beautiful clothing material that her father had bought her because she wanted to "wear what others wear" (p.17). This, for me, is a childhood gesture of identification with the needy and less privileged. Would you say there is an especially strong relationship between Rose the child and Rose the politician?

Lipenga: *Now that you bring it up, yes, to a certain extent. There is the idea of empathy with those who did not have adequate resources, but also the idea of wanting to change something, in this case, changing the clothing material. I would say that there's a lot that happens in her childhood which shapes her afterwards, for her life as a politician.*

Tembo: Would I be wrong to say that Rose comes through as the stronger one in the narrative context of the book? I mean, the husband is hardly heard. Not even when the wife is into full political participation. She is the one who seems to find clues and/or solutions to what next should be done when her colleagues are in prison.

Lipenga: *The husband is hardly heard because the book is mainly about Rose. But from the descriptions she gives of him I would say he was the strong, silent type. Rose credited him as her inspiration; he was the one who told her all about Federation and its implications.*

Tembo: I see. Come to think of it, the husband had a strong influence on her. To the extent that we know her as Rose because he gave her that name. Her original name was Lomathinda, but she changed it to Rose because her husband said 'you are my Rose'.

Lipenga: *Yeah, that's true. As she said it herself, she looked at their relationship as something that was very unique. Maybe that made it very easy for her to say 'I'm changing my first name to Rose.'*

Tembo: Let's talk about mothers, discipline and nation-building in your book. Both in the book and in real African time, one gets the sense that real discipline and disciplining of a child in most homes is left to the mother. She is the one who sees to it that all children are beaten into line; literally, ensuring that they are put on the straight and narrow. Rose Chibambo herself confesses as much on page 16 of the book. In my view, the father is (mostly) feared in the home, as someone who wields some kind of what I would call invisible yet overpowering discipline. Such that when mom says to you "I am going to report you to your dad," you immediately behave. You know, looking all sorry and apologetic. Do you think this familial role has any place in nation building?

Lipenga: *Maybe, but I must confess I have never thought about it from that particular point of view.*

Tembo: You speak of the fluidity that Aaron Ziba, father to Rose Chibambo, introduced "into the code of 'men only' by eating with his daughter" (p.19). Later, he forbids his daughter from having her earlobes pierced [even though she went ahead to have them pierced]. I believe it's this disruption of social/cultural codes of "doing things" that enabled Rose to explore life around her and become the woman Malawians came to know over the years. Any curious resonances between Rose's father's outlook on his (Ngoni) society and the kinds of interventions you make on the girl child through Makewana's Daughters, the project for which you happen to be director?

Lipenga: *Hmmm. I had never thought about it in that way. Now that you mention it, I'd say yes. Though I don't think we've reached Rose Chibambo's level. She was willing to take risks and so on. We haven't had to take those kinds of risks at Makewana's Daughters. Nonetheless, the idea of let's give the girl child a voice through writing resonates with what Rose Chibambo used to do in her lifetime.*

Tembo: Would you like to shed more light on Makewana's Daughters, for the sake

of those of us who do not know what it is all about?

Lipenga: *Makewana's Daughters was co-founded by myself and Dr. Hendrina Kachapila Mazizwa with the intention of encouraging girls and women in Malawi to take part in creative writing. We visit schools, and we run competitions in poetry and short story writing. We believe that Malawian women can contribute a lot to the literary landscape. The response has been very encouraging, with many girls submitting manuscripts and taking part in the competitions, but also just submitting stories to our online forum. As for resonances, with the Chibambo story... well, maybe posterity will bear us out.*

Tembo: Rose Chibambo was not immediately arrested on 3 March 1959 because she was heavily pregnant. Her arrest only came after childbirth. She was taken, if not heavily guarded, from Makwasa hospital all the way to Zomba maximum security prison because, according to her, “she was the most wanted person” (p.117) by the colonial government. Would you like to comment on this?

Lipenga: *As I stated earlier, to me that was a mark of just how committed and courageous she was. I would also say it also speaks to us, challenges us regarding how far we would go as nation-builders.*

Tembo: What thorny issues does Rose Chibambo touch on in her testimony to you?

Lipenga: *Issues to do with tribalism, especially how it was demonstrated during the Cabinet Crisis of 1964. Issues of a family torn apart because of exile. Those are some of the issues.*

Tembo: Dictatorship destroys people, to the extent that they do not trust each other anymore. Chibambo thinks it is this distrust that has led Malawians to be so vile and corrupt in recent times. She further opines that when Malawi returned to multiparty democracy, everyone turned against everyone. Before long, greed and political cannibalism set in. What are your views on what Chibambo says about

Malawi?

Lipenga: *Hmm, I'm not so sure about the use of the term 'vile' ... but I'd say yes, people are impacted by the kind of politics they are subjected to. One could talk about this impact on a collective and individual psyche.*

Tembo: I notice that instead of coming up with a commentary that sheds more light on the issues in Chapter 19 (pp.185-94), you decide to come up with "A Daughter's Tribute" (pp.195-96) by way of closing the chapter, which is a complete departure from what you do in the previous chapters. Any particular reason why you decided to end your book this way?

Lipenga: *This departure was necessary ... I had interviewed one daughter, Khataza Barbara Mlenje, while her mother was still alive, but had not had the opportunity to interview the other daughter Dr. Gadi Chibambo-Smith. She was abroad during the time of my research. The difference was that Dr Chibambo-Smith's contribution came in after her mother's death, and it was fitting that it should be a tribute.*

Tembo: Any lessons one can take home upon reading this book?

Lipenga: *Well, that would make it prescriptive. All I can say is that I continue to be challenged by Mrs Chibambo's ability to tell her story without any trace of self-pity. That alone is a major lesson, but there are plenty, depending on the reader.*

Tembo: Dr Timwa Lipenga, thank you for your time.

Lipenga: *You are welcome.*

About the Authors

Timwa Lipenga is a lecturer in the Department of French at the University of Malawi, Chancellor College. She has a PhD in French from the University of Aberdeen, an MA (French) from the Sorbonne and an MA (English) from the University of Malawi. Her book, *Lomathinda: Rose Chibambo Speaks* was published by Logos Open Culture in December 2019.

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