

Decoloniality and cultural promotion in selected Malawian plays

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jb.v32i2.6>

Abstract

Various cultural as well as religious beliefs and indigenous performance traditions were condemned as pagan rites and almost forced into extinction through the coming in of Christianity and colonialism in Malawi (Nyasaland). These included spirit mediums that would be invoked upon to intervene in the bringing of rains through performances by designated rainmakers, in addition to transmitting messages received in a state of ecstasis. There was also the invocation of beliefs in other gods and the promotion of the existence of only one God and one medium in the name of Jesus Christ. The condemnation of indigenous cultural and religious beliefs in mainstream dramatic literature has promoted epistemological coloniality in various aspects. The resultant praxis has been the eradication of knowledge systems (epistemicide), as well as the suffocation of indigenous culture (culturecide). The challenge is that generations born after colonialism and Christianity eschew their own cultural beliefs under the guise of modernity. Through critical discourse analysis, this article analyses the attempts of two selected playwrights in decoloniality of knowledge and speaking back for indigenous Malawian cultural and religious beliefs. The critical discourse analysis is done through script analysis of Steve Chimombo's *The Rainmaker* and Du Chisiza Jr's *Nyamirandu*. A reading of the two scripts surfaces decoloniality and cultural promotion. Through the results of this research, it shall be seen how some plays have engaged with coloniality and fronted indigenous cultural beliefs.

Keywords

Decoloniality, coloniality, culturecide, epistemicide, cultural promotion

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Introduction

People of Africa had their way of living long before the onset of colonialism. They had their cultural identities embedded in their beliefs and values consistent with their environment. They were worshippers of various gods and had different types of performances accompanied by their own instruments. In addition to all this, they had their own knowledge systems. The intrusion of their space through colonialism and concomitant introduction of foreign epistemologies and beliefs, such as Christianity, changed the original set-up and value systems.

The original performances were not dependent on written texts. Brocket and Hildy (2014:612) suggest that words are the least important element in indigenous forms of theatre since drumming and dance communicate more universally to most African audiences. In addition, there is visual imagery, symbolism, gesture, masks and costumes that convey specific meanings that cannot adequately be described in written form.

In this article, I posit that there have been instances of decoloniality and cultural promotion in some playscripts in Malawi. I show this through a decolonial reading of two selected plays to analyse the response to coloniality by two Malawian playwrights as well as the promotion of indigenous cultural values, through their writing. In the analysis, I identify the existence of decoloniality and indigenous cultural promotion. The plays under study are Dunduzu Chisiza Jr's *Nyamirandu* and Steve Chimombo's *The Rainmaker*.

Nyamirandu was written and performed during the years of the one-party state and intensified Christian Pentecostal evangelism with its associated theology, doctrines, worship styles and ecclesiastical structures. There were active attempts at resuscitating indigenous spiritual practices through such groupings as the 'African Ancestors' Religion in Malawi' known in the vernacular as 'Chipembedzo Cha Makolo Achikuda' among others. According to Englund (2003) and Kalu (2013), Pentecostalism in Malawi was rejuvenated in the late

1980s and early 1990s. Hefner (2013:14) asserts that a new wave of Pentecostalism surged across the global south in the 1980s and 1990s. The revival of Pentecostalism was premised on social transformation, spiritual transformation and divine healing among other attributes and therefore attracted people “frustrated by what their religious environment can offer” (Englund, 2003: 89). *Nyamirandu*, therefore presents an indigenous alternative to Pentecostalism.

With its linkages to early colonial activities in Africa, Christianity in Malawi had been practised for over a century by the time the play was written. The process of christianisation began around 1861 under the leadership of Bishop Charles Mackenzie and others after the formation of the Universities Mission to Central Africa following Dr David Livingstone’s earlier expedition to Africa (McCracken, 2013:39). Although early Christian expeditions and establishments were led by mainstream churches, there was a heightened wave of Christian Pentecostal evangelism in the 1980s with a number of international crusaders visiting Malawi and other neighbouring countries (Englund, 2003: 86-89; Gadama & Hofmeyr, 2016: 120-14). One such notable visit was that of Evangelist Reinhard Bonnke, a German-American Pentecostal evangelist and founder of *Christ for All Nations* principally known for his gospel missions throughout Africa since 1967 (Christ for All Nations, 2019). Bonnke first visited Malawi in 1986 (Mzungu, 2015). He was renowned for his conversion and redeeming of souls, healing, and prophesy. Colonialism significantly reshaped the religious landscape in colonised regions and Malawi is no exception. There was imposition of Christianity on indigenous belief systems, promoting cultural assimilation or erasing culture and its associated knowledge systems – undermining cultural autonomy and furthering culturecide and epistemicide.

Indigenous spirituality was heavily ridiculed by mainstream religions of Christianity and Islam in most of their sermons. Chakanza (1989:45), in “Religious Revitalization in Malawi: The African Ancestors’ Religion”, summarises contents of pamphlets of African Ancestors’ Religion in Malawi in three main ways. The summary blames Malawians for rejecting the God of their ancestors and accepting

foreign God of the whites; it rejects the Bible as the word of God, and notoriously twists the whole truth about Jesus in the Gospels and treats him as the son of a nobleman in Palestine; and it denies the Christian claim that Jesus is the Son of God and that He still lives and that if the said Jesus brought salvation at all, then it was to his fellow Jews and other Europeans and not to Africans. The second point in the summary done by Chakanza, a Catholic priest, is not surprising as it embeds his opinion about what he terms as ‘notoriously’ twisting the ‘truth’ about Christianity.

The Rainmaker was written at a time when the repertoire was being shifted from western dominated to an African one. Local playwrights were being encouraged to produce original Malawian works (Kamlongera, 1984:272). For instance, James Gibbs, the Patron for the Chancellor College Travelling Theatre, was in a bid to assist African playwrights. He not only wrote plays based on African folklore and experiences, but also presented literature on folktales to his students. These efforts spurred some of his students to write plays based on folktales. James Ng’ombe wrote *The Banana Tree* and *The Beauty of Dawn* while Joe Mosiwa wrote *Who Will Marry Our Daughter* (Kamlongera, 1984:273). Chimombo was one of Gibbs’ former students and one of his objectives was to revive Malawi’s cultural heritage (Kamlongera, 1984:273).

Scholarship has often lamented the negative effects of colonialism on indigenous epistemologies including performances. These effects include a radical and forced transformation in communication and knowledge systems, including ideas about what performance is, how it is created and within which parameters a performance is created and executed. Amankulor, (1993: 141) states that “British colonialism came down heavily on indigenous African culture, especially the performing arts”. Traditional culture, storytelling and related performances were assumed to be outside the realm of theatre. It can be deduced that the objective of the settlers was to promote their own culture and portray indigenous culture and performances as devoid of civilisation. In Malawi, the scholarly acknowledgement of decoloniality in artistic works is not easy to come by if it exists at all. There

is almost absence of scholarly discourse in decoloniality in playwriting in Malawi. While this absence would contribute to limited appreciation of colonial legacies and their ongoing effects on society at the risk of inadvertently perpetuating colonial narratives and coloniality in general, the availability of such would contribute to international conversations on decoloniality, especially in playwriting, and place Malawi as one of the many players worldwide.

The motivations for selecting the two plays are linked. I chose *Nyamirandu* for two reasons. Firstly, unlike what is often displayed openly in religious circles, the play examines the religio-spiritual disenchantment of some citizens by resorting to the services of Nyamirandu, an indigenous prophetic, benevolent magician and total stranger. Secondly, it presents a counter-narrative to the existence of the 'only' God as championed by Eurocentric Christian missionaries to Malawi. *The Rainmaker*, just like *Nyamirandu*, presents an indigenous and mysterious saviour who rescues people from problems. The play also displays indigenous epistemology in the process of bringing rain to the people and the disillusionment with existing leadership.

This article, therefore, is aimed at identifying traits of decoloniality in the selected plays. By doing a decolonial reading of *Nyamirandu* and *The Rainmaker*, I demonstrate how the plays challenge conventional Western narratives and offer alternative perspectives based on indigenous epistemology and experiences. Through the analysis, I intend to contribute to discourse on decolonisation with regard to literature through highlighting the resilience of the marginalised in the face of ongoing coloniality. I identify the strategies employed by the selected playscripts in the fight against culturecide and promotion of indigenous culture.

There is little or no known scholarship for the play *Nyamirandu* but for newspaper reviews, and this analysis is reflective of that. For *The Rainmaker*, Kamlongera (1984: 275-278) critiques Chimombo for being obsessed with the presentation of anthropological information obtained from the reading of Schoffeleers's research material at the expense of character development and dramatic action.

Nazombe (1987:37, 42-43) concurs with Kamlongera on the weakness of character development and on the use of raw research data without proper dramatisation. Nazombe (1987: 43-47) also analyses Chimombo's use of proverbs and concludes that some proverbs are used appropriately and effectively while others are irrelevant and have been included out of context just for the sake of proverb inclusion. Whereas Nazombe finds fault with the use of some proverbs, he ignores the fact that one major objective for Chimombo was, as Kamlongera (1984: 273-274) puts it, to rehabilitate the alienated African scholar/writer who is in an estranged position and not able to perform an abrogation of the English language. Abrogation is originally the rejection of standard use of English of former colonial masters resulting in its modification to suit specific purposes. With European languages used as instruments of dominance and control, the abrogation of postcolonial writers shows they no longer allow such control (Nayar, 2015:3). According to Ashcroft et al. (2007:4), abrogation may be used to describe "a great range of cultural and political activities – film, theatre, the writing of history, political organization, modes of thought and argument. Individuals who are involved in these things may abrogate any centralizing notion of the 'correct', or standard, way of doing things and re-define the practice in a different setting".

Molande (2011: 110) analyses *The Rainmaker* from a political perspective. He observes the hubris displayed by the failed rainmaker, Mlauli, in comparing himself with the creator and failing to accept that he has reached a point where he can no longer deliver what the people expect of him. Molande (2011) compares the failed rainmaker to the President of Malawi, Kamuzu Banda in his later¹ years of rule. Perhaps the difference between Mlauli and Banda is that while Mlauli personally engages in active altercation with M'bona, the youthful rainmaker, Banda is largely seen to have challenged upcoming leadership indirectly through his followers. Banda is on record to have offered a public apology to the atrocities done under his rule as he may not have been in full control due to his advanced

¹ Phiri (2010: 327-356) records Kamuzu Banda's fall from grace where he was held as a messiah (saviour) and a hero to many Malawians and gradually lost his popularity leading to change in government system from one-party to multi-party politics, before finally losing the Presidential elections.

age. The apology was aired on the national broadcaster, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation radio on 4th January, 1996 after Banda was acquitted in the verdict in the Mwanza murder trial (Humanities and Social Sciences online). Unlike Mlauli, Banda's desire to continue was influenced by close associates.

Chirwa (1990) in a newspaper article titled 'Nyamulandu²: Showcasing African prophet, Jesus Christ in African context' submits that:

Nyamulandu, the latest piece from Wakhumbata Ensemble Theatre, may end up being a strong candidate as a Malawian offering on the international theatre scene... (it) is a re-enactment of the biblical story of Jesus in an African context... watching the play... one could not help feeling that here was a playwright daring enough in experimenting with the African identity... on the first level, the play hovers as an argument that well before the coming of Christianity, Africa too had its own prophets...

This quotation postulates the existence of a playscript that displays a unique African, and specifically Malawian identity. It is clear Chirwa was mesmerised with the performance, hence the quick declaration of the play being a possible candidate for international repute. A reading of the script to a larger extent aligns with Chirwa's sentiment.

Juwayeyi (2020:45-47) records the existence of various performances in Maravi Kingdom, which is now Malawi, long before colonialism. These performances include rainmaking, which was essentially a sacrificial ceremony of presenting petitions for rain before Chisumphu the creator. There were also spirit mediums that mediated between the human beings and the gods. The indigenous inhabitants had their own cultural identities and had their epistemology about creation and origins of the human race (Juwayeyi, 2020). This is solidifying the claim of the existence of indigenous performing arts before colonialism. It is the writing aspect that was added to the already existing art forms.

² The play is *Nyamirandu*. The journalist writes *Nyamuandu* because in Chichewa 'ŋ' is mostly interchangeable with 'r'. The journalist may not have read the written script but watched a performance from it. So, minor differences are inevitable.

Amongst cultural identities, indigenous art forms have been adulterated in various ways. According to Nyoni (2015) the coming of colonial masters brought to Africa three Cs, namely; Commerce, Civilisation and Christianity. Citing Nyathi, Nyoni (2015) posits that of the three, Christianity was the most harmful because it required one to denounce one's identity in order to assume a new identity. In most cases people were baptised and had to acquire names of foreign saints. Kamlongera (1984:15) expresses similar sentiments as Nyoni. He argues that "if there was damage done to indigenous art, it came from a far cruder and callous enemy in the guise of Christianity which equated all indigenous practices to heathenism".

The applicable theory in this analysis is decoloniality. It happens after decolonisation. Decoloniality, among other issues, counters the eradication of knowledge systems, referred to as *epistemicide*, as well as the suffocation of indigenous culture referred to as *culturecide* (Stein, 2004:99-100). Epistemicide and culturecide may not completely be achieved at endogenous level with local people but rather it is the transcultural transmission and global diffusion of the endogenous knowledge that gets affected. In this article, I demonstrate how epistemicide is countered in the plays. Similarly, as another aspect of decoloniality in the plays, there are attempts at countering linguicide which is the decentralisation of indigenous languages leading to systematic killing and extinction of indigenous languages (Ndlovu-Gathsheni cited in Omanga, 2000).

Decoloniality in this analysis is premised on the existence of indigenous African epistemology in the field of African drama and playwriting. Whereas there may not be universal agreement as to what constitutes African drama – as universality would also defeat the purpose of providing alternative perspectives in countering Eurocentrism – several scholars have attempted to provide some working descriptions of indigenous African drama. Ukala (2001:30) proposes that in order to seek aesthetic independence, the African creative writer needs to engage in politics of aesthetics so as to free the African mind with literature. Ukala (2001:32) identifies three distinctive features of authentic African drama as (i) language enriched with indigenous stylistics readily identified with by the majority

of its African audiences, (ii) performance structure that allows for audience participation (iii) simplicity and clarity of the story. Here, when he mentions audience participation, Ukala may be specifically interested in participatory theatre for change. Otherwise the other two features would equally apply to most types of plays. In analysis of Sam Ukala's plays and citing Osofisan, Nwaozuzu (2018:216) observes that the plays *The Slave Wife* and *Akpakaland* conform with characteristics of truly indigenous African drama as they employ a proverb-enriched diction played out through the medium of dance, music, dialogue and song.

In seeking to formulate a theoretical framework rooted in African people's cultural frames of reference, Chinyowa (2007:14) identifies symbolic forms as storytelling, ritual, music, song, dance, poetry, drumming and masquerade as being common among Shona-speaking people of Zimbabwe where they use the collective term *mutambo* to refer to all these cultural performance genres. Chinyowa (2007:14) further observes an interesting phenomenon where one term is also used for similar performance activities by other Bantu-speaking peoples such as the Venda of South Africa and the Chewa of Malawi among others. Among the Chewa-speaking people of Malawi as well as a few other languages the equivalent terminologies would be *zisudzo* or *masevero*. Although Chinyowa is attempting to formulate a theoretical framework, he essentially identifies most common performative practices concomitant with indigenous Bantu African performances that should be considered when analysing African drama. On a similar path to creating a theoretical framework that challenges the dominance of western epistemologies in the field of theatre and performance, Ravengai (2024:2) proposes a new theory known as Afrosceology, which is an extension of Molefe Asante's Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity has been useful in the field of literature and social Analysis. Afrosceology extends its tenets to the field of theatre and performance studies by providing a system of thought and practice to guide performance and playwriting among others uses. "Afrosceology challenges the sustenance of existing power structures by dismantling the system to reform it" (Ravengai, 2024: 8).

Among notable characteristics of Afroskenology is commitment to African spirituality, presentation of African perspective, construction of positive heroes from subaltern characters such as villagers, making the black personhood visible and privileging black political thought in whatever form (Ravengai, 2024:28).

In summary, Ravengai (2024:24) describes Afroskenology as not only a theory but also “a mode of thought and action, a body of knowledge that is still growing, which seeks to document, conceptualise, and analyse the ways African practitioners and Africanists write, perform, creatively make, direct, design, and vocalise their work.”

Script analysis for *Nyamirandu*

Script analysis, the research tool applicable in this paper, allows the researcher to discern latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text (Fursich, 2009:41). Wilson (2020: 231-232) suggests that the playwright's point of view can be deciphered from the script through scrutiny of words and actions where portrayal of specific attitudes is consistent. *Nyamirandu* critiques Christian religious saviourism as symptomatic and a front for the hegemonic one-party state in Malawi. It was first performed on 25th May, 1990 at the French Cultural Centre in Blantyre, Malawi (Chisiza, 1992:54). The story starts with the village chief expressing his wish to have his funeral re-enacted before he actually dies so he can see who loves him more and who does not. The chief hatches a plan where one of the slaves is going to be killed and covered in the chief's clothes while the chief is to disguise himself as one of the slaves. Before the plan could be carried out, Nyamirandu, a prophetic sorcerer, arrives in the area. The word 'sorcerer' in this context has been used in a positive sense to represent a person who practices magic and performs wonders. Nyamirandu has mystic powers and performs various miracles such as resurrecting a dead child and exorcising witchcraft to the chagrin of the chief and a clandestine grouping of elders surrounding the chief. This group of elders comprising Petros, Goba, Abelo and Zanda is known as the 'vicious circle' (Chisiza, 1992: 69-71). These

members all have different charms used to harm people and advance their own personal and evil goals. Apart from members of the 'vicious circle', there are also two characters with dwarfism namely Zinga Maturi and Guzi Mapiri who claim to have powers to transform people's sex from female to male and vice versa in addition to performing many miracles (Chisiza, 1992: 64-65). Nyamirandu gets more popular than the leadership after exorcising the witchcraft and helping the people in many ways including revealing causes of challenges and providing various solutions for local problems such as child bearing. The chief and the vicious circle, in noticing the disillusionment of the people with them as fueled by Nyamirandu's acts decide to get rid of this 'intruder'. They try him in absentia for polluting the village with blasphemy and the claims of making the crippled walk among other 'offences' (Chisiza, 1992:82). The verdict is that Nyamirandu should die (Chisiza, 1992:84). Nyamirandu has an instinct that he is going to die. He goes to the mountain with his assistants and holds a farewell function where he informs them Chimusi (god) is calling him back to where he came from (Chisiza, 1992: 85-86). He is killed by the 'vicious circle' as he comes down from the mountain and his body is dumped in the nearest river (Chisiza, 1992: 87). Emelia, Nyamirandu's right hand woman, expresses her belief that Nyamirandu is not dead and that he shall become even more powerful henceforth. Nyamirandu resurrects and briefly speaks to his 'disciples'. He is briefly seen in the form of a spirit by other people before disappearing. Emelia sits beside the stool used by Nyamirandu and as people with various problems follow her, she revives Nyamirandu's healing and other practices (Chisiza, 1992:88).

I shall start with an examination of structure and style. I shall purposefully employ western influenced terminologies in order to display how the plays under study depart from those epistemologies. The examination of structure and style in this decolonial reading is aimed at identifying whether and to what extent the playwrights have been influenced by western theatrical conventions and identifying and analysing whether there are indigenous narrative techniques emanating from the cultural contexts. *Nyamirandu*, juxtaposes both episodic and climactic plot structures. An episodic plot structure contains many short, fragmented scenes.

The play starts with plans of a re-enactment of the chief's 'funeral' in a short scene. Since the inciting incident happens early in the story in an episodic plot, this scene sets the pace in terms of the actions to follow. However, before the plans could be executed, a disruptive event happens in another short scene where Nyamirandu emerges in the area and threatens to disturb the authority of the chief and the apparent tranquillity in the area. Each episode contributes to the crescendo that comes at the very end with minimal dialogue and a lot of action through singing, dancing and drumming punctuating the most significant action of Nyamirandu's resurrection.

In spite of the scenes being episodic with most of them ending in a mini climax, the entire plot reaches its main climax in the last scene. The mini-climax of the first scene is when the elders agree to re-enact the 'funeral' of the chief (Chisiza, 1992:56). The next three scenes build into a mini-climax where Nyamirandu is introduced as someone in possession of mystic powers and ends up resurrecting a dead child before suddenly disappearing to the astonishment of the crowd (Chisiza, 1992:62). The scene that follows has a mini-climax where Nyamirandu instantly terminates his challengers, Guzi Mapiri and Zinga Maturi, and establishes his supremacy as a diviner by knowing and resolving various people's problems (Chisiza, 1992: 66-68). In the following two scenes, the mini-climax is when members of the 'vicious circle' show pride in the wizardly that they are able to perform before Nyamirandu exorcises their powers (Chisiza, 1992:69-81). In the next scene the mini-climax is when members of the 'vicious circle' resolve to kill Nyamirandu (Chisiza, 1992:84). The mini-climax for the next two scenes is when Nyamirandu is killed and his body dumped in a river (Chisiza, 1992:87). The final climax is when Nyamirandu resurrects and then disappears (Chisiza, 1992:88).

Since the locale is restricted to a few places within a limited space of time and with intense action until the end, the play would be categorised as having a climactic structure. However, what happens in the scene titled "NYAMIRANDU'S CAMP" is ritualistic where witchcraft exorcism takes place in a specially arranged ceremony. This makes the play a combination of climactic structure and ritual.

Ritual drama encompasses the harmonisation of environment, physical, social and psychic (Soyinka, 1976: 1-2). Ganyi and Okpiliya (2019: 120-121) postulate that African traditional drama, in spite of some influence of western forms, still exists in a distinct and unique form such as ritual, dance, masquerades, as well as storytelling and folk traditions. The play structure seems to be in concurrence with the broad generalisations advanced by both Soyinka (1976) and Ganyi and Okpiliya (2019). In conventional theatre, the combination of climactic and ritual structures is unusual because most plays are clearly categorised into already existing play structures. Therefore, the play structure is an abrogation of the established categories of play structures.

Style is the distinctive technique or mode of expression and method of presentation of a play (Prince & Jackson, 2005: 226). Stylistically, because of the departure from established theatre and scriptwriting practice (Wilson & Goldfarb, 2019:66), *Nyamirandu* fits into the experimental category. The naming of the scenes to fit into specific areas and activities of the play also caters for the style as Prince and Jackson (2005:226) describe style as a distinctive mode of presentation. However, the style is not consistent because it states a place to name one scene and an activity to name another as highlighted in one of the preceding paragraphs. In scenes with many characters or groups of people the 'call and response' style is used to present indigenous performance practices. 'Call and response' style is mainly used for audience interaction where the audience are familiar with the expected response such that the performance is meaningful and functional to the community (Sale, 1992: 41-42). However, it may also be used in instances such as the one for the vicious world. In line with traditional African performances, the script features a lot of dancing and drumming. The style of *Nyamirandu* is not a direct adherence of the dictates of dramatic theatre. It fits into experimental style because of the departure from commonly known theatre practice (Wilson & Goldfarb, 2019:66). This is a reaction, albeit indirectly, to colonial discourse in order to achieve specific objectives that would not fit into what I would call 'an already made clay pot'. It is an act of appropriation where post-colonial societies integrate some aspects of imperial culture including forms of writing and create

their own type from the same to suit their cultural environment (Ashcroft et al, 2007:15).

There are insinuations and connotations in *Nyamirandu*. This decolonial study of insinuations and connotations allows for reader/audience interpretation or construction of meaning of subtle elements using relevant cultural or socio-political awareness. It also contributes to the appreciation of local cultural identities and traditions. From a critical reading of the play it seems the overarching insinuation is that *Nyamirandu* is the indigenous version of Jesus Christ as highlighted in the paragraphs that follow. Whereas there is belief in Christianity, the play introduces a parallel version of belief system through a prophetic sorcerer known as *Nyamirandu*. An examination of a few verses from the Bible shall suffice to prove this.

The Bible records several instances where Jesus Christ resurrects the dead, i.e. Luke 7 verses 11 to 16 (GNB, 1994:85), Mark 5 verses 37 to 42 (GNB, 1994:53), and John 11 verses 39 to 43 (GNB, 1994: 135). In the scene titled FUNERAL, *Nyamirandu* comes across a funeral procession of Petros' son. He stops the procession, takes off Petros' hat, and removes a needle from Petros' head before resurrecting the boy to the astonishment of the crowd. He disappears as soon as he does that (Chisiza, 1992: 62). This seems to be a reenactment of Jesus' resurrection of the widow's only son in the funeral procession in Nain as in the book of Luke 7 verse 17(GNB, 1994:85). With familiar songs and dances, including other local beliefs such as in sorcery, the indigenous audiences would identify more with *Nyamirandu* than Jesus Christ.

On His crucifixion on the Golgotha mountain people mocked Jesus. "You were going to tear down the temple and build it up again in three days! Save yourself if you are God's Son! Come on down from the cross!" (Matthew 27 vs 40) (GNB, 1994: 43). Similarly, when *Nyamirandu* was captured, he was mocked as they killed him. The Chief said "You have the powers and herbs to heal people, to remove witchcraft...Save yourself" (Chisiza, 1992: 87).

During what is referred to as ‘The Last Supper’ or ‘The Lord’s Supper’, Jesus met his disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem and gave them a piece of bread and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me.” And after supper He took a cup and said, “This cup is God’s covenant, sealed with my blood. Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of me.” (1 Corinthians 11 vs 24- 25) (GNB, 1994: 217). Similarly, Nyamirandu goes to the top of the mountain and meets his followers, Emelia and Mzondi. He tells them Chimusi is calling him and he has to return home. They are puzzled and do not grasp what he is talking about. After a series of questions, Nyamirandu says:

Now ask no more questions for I must complete my duty. Stand up. (*They all stand up beside him one on each side. He gets a piece of a bark of a tree from Mzondi.*) This is a bark of life. Take a bite of it, each in turn. (*Then he gets the gourd from Emelia and pours the contents on his head.*) I pour this libation on my head, catch the drippings of it from the locks. (*As they sip the drippings, Nyamirandu continues to speak.*) This is the saviour’s flesh and blood. He that is to come or come again. This is strength, this is life. You have learned a lot, now go and spread the word and perform works. (*Exit Nyamirandu followed by Mzondi and Emelia.*) (Chisiza, 1992: 86).

The presentation above suggests that Chisiza may have wanted to bring to the local people a localised version of the story of salvation. Even if it may sound satirical, the entire play seems to challenge the singular divinity of Jesus Christ by presenting an alternative. In a similar decoloniality travail with an alternative to Jesus Christ is a play titled *Dream on Monkey Mountain* written by Derek Walcott of Saint Lucia in the Caribbean. It was first performed in 1967 (Walcott:1970:210). Just like Jesus Christ, the main character known as Makak, a charcoal burner, is also tempted by agents of the devil to produce miracles (Walcott:1970:272-274). In the epilogue of the play, Makak undergoes a symbolic resurrection (Walcott:1970:321-326). Throughout the play, Walcott employs biblical imagery in an attempt to present an indigenous saviour from within a West Indian island as the setting portrays.

In his newspaper critique after watching a performance of *Nyamirandu*, Isaac Chirwa makes a similar observation. He titles his article as follows; ‘*Nyamulandu’: Showcasing African prophet, Jesus Christ in an African context* (Chirwa, 1990a:11).

Chirwa’s analysis suggests that “On the first level, the play hovers as an argument that well before Christianity, Africa too had its own prophets who were also endowed with mystic powers that they used to heal and cleanse people of evil powers” (Chirwa, 1990a:11). The main argument Chirwa is advancing is that the play represents an original African contribution to the realm of playwriting in the world. The belief in one supreme deity being superior to all other gods has been challenged. There is evidently some delinking of western epistemic beliefs and the creation of alternative perception of religious beliefs presented in the play as Tlostanova (2020:167), would put it. The placement of Nyamirandu as an alternative to Jesus Christ and Christianity resonates with epistemic disobedience. It is decoloniality of knowledge and of being as it constitutes what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020:34) would call an insurrectionist-liberatory project and critical thoughts emerging from a formerly colonised country such as Malawi. Mignolo and Walsh (2018:17) discuss an epistemic and existence-based response to the possible existence of other saviours and this would be one example.

Nyamirandu’s resurrection implies that the indigenous people of this particular land can also have their own indigenous saviour who defeats death thereby attempting to fight against coloniality of knowledge and empowering the indigenous people (Seroto, 2018:4). The creation of an indigenous saviour in the character of Nyamirandu with Chimusi as the god is a rejection of the epistemological imposition of the existence of one God imposed by the European colonisers.

The analysis of speech patterns and diction unveils some contribution towards overall meaning of the play. In terms of speech patterns, the script directs Nyamirandu, the main character to speak in his own idiosyncratic manner. He speaks in a poetic way and most of what he says requires critical analysis to decipher the meanings. His diction is cryptic, sarcastic and sometimes satirical. He

often uses metaphors and various figures of speech. In most cases where satire is used, he uses Juvenalian satire.³ This is a type of satire that is angry, caustic, resentful, personal. One examples of such satirical statements is presented below:

Feeling like a ravenous lioness, you shall prey on your own kinsmen when the struggles are allowed to sleep. You shall prepare your food together in burnt can but when time bubbles, some of you will retreat with calabashes of stagnant water while others will advance with pots of distilled water (Chisiza, 1992: 61).

It is important to note that this statement is made in the section of the play titled 'PROPHECY' where he is speaking to the villagers that have gathered around him and not any particular character in the play. Nyamirandu plays the role of a prophet and chides the community of betrayal that is going to manifest itself amongst them. They shall in the first place appear to be working in unison against foreign influences and oppression but when the might of the oppressor comes strong upon them, a few shall proceed with their sacrosanct mission to press for their identity while the rest shall cringe away.

In a play written in English, the songs had to be in the Tumbuka language to be in line with the traditions and dances involved. However, there are small sections of the play that are in the local Tumbuka language. The effect of this is simply to align with and probably remind the audience of the traditions and language of the characters involved.

The coloniality of being which causes a particular concept to become generalised and applicable to others (Maldonado-Torres, 2007:257), especially through the uplifting of the supposed superiority of the reasoning is disputed in *Nyamirandu*. The challenge, however, is that *Nyamirandu* has stuck very close to the

³ In Juvenalian satire the speaker is a serious moralist who uses a dignified and public utterance to decry modes of vice and error which are no less dangerous because they are ridiculous, and who undertakes to evoke from readers contempt, moral indignation, or an unillused sadness at the aberrations of humanity (Abrams & Harpham, 2012:354)

idea of the existence of Jesus Christ and counter-offered the existence of another saviour.

The overall perspective of the play therefore is that of counter-discourse to ‘de-culturization’ and mental colonisation and the promotion of indigenous originality to parallel what was popularised through foreign western influence. The play exhibits decoloniality in the manner it explores the question of identity and culture as it promotes indigenous knowledge and provides counter narrative to the Eurocentric knowledge systems. It works against colonialities of power, being, and knowledge.

Script analysis for *The Rainmaker*

The play seems to be in line with Afrosociology with its promotion of African spirituality, the creation of a hero out of the ordinary people and subscribes to Ukala’s (2001) and Nwaozuzu’s (2018) proposition of language enriched with indigenous stylistics such as proverb-enriched diction readily identified with by the majority of its African audiences. It involves, song, dance, drumming, folklore and ritual such as rainmaking like Chinyowa (2007) would categorise. The play starts at Msinja shrine with an abortive rainmaking⁴ ceremony led by Kamundi the python priest to Makewana. When Kamundi fails to make rain, Makewana reminds him of what ought to be done. She says, “The royal python who fails to make rain, or who gets too old or ill, takes poison and makes way for the new python priest. Otherwise, he infects the whole land” (Chimombo, 1978:19). A young mysterious man called M’bona emerges. It is believed that the spirit of the python left Kamundi and alighted on M’bona, who performs various miracles. Previously, as an apprentice to Mlauli, the diviner and prophet, he proved to be the best rainmaker amongst the rest (Chimombo, 1978:19).

Makewana, therefore, plans to replace Kamundi with M’bona as the python priest to the annoyance of Kamundi who plans to have M’bona killed. The first

⁴ The rainmaking process involves the mgwetsa dance led by python priest with Tsang’oma playing the mbiriwiri drum.

attempt is by a witch-hunt ‘cleansing’ ceremony where people are supposed to take *mvabvi*, a concoction that kills witches and wizards while the ‘innocent’ just vomit. M’bona refuses to take the *mvabvi* even before Chikanga, the witch-hunter arrives. To prevent him from fleeing, M’bona is tied with ropes and thrown in a rubbish pit with Chidzonzi guarding him. However, by Chikanga’s arrival, M’bona escapes. Ropes are found outside the rubbish pit. Chidzonzi goes mad and rambles about spirits. The majority of the play is dedicated to chasing M’bona who later allows the pursuers to kill him, but he advises them to use a reed. He accepts fate saying, “clouds are forming in the horizon and the time has come for M’bona to rejoin Chisumpho...” (Chimombo, 1978:38). Following his instructions, pursuers decapitate him, bury his body in the marshes near Ndione, and the head on the hill at Khulubvi thicket, where a shrine should be built. At the shrine, they are to offer prayers and sacrifices for relief from drought and pestilence. Meanwhile back at the village Kamundi suffers from *chilope*, a peculiar disease characterised by loss of cognitive abilities. The suffering of a doer of bad deeds is consistent with Nwaozuzu (2018) observation that the use of folktales in African drama is often aimed at providing morals. However, although this is one distinct characteristic of indigenous African drama, the issue of poetic justice is also prevalent in western type of drama.

The play uses an episodic structure. It is a play that is more leaned towards social drama as opposed to aesthetic drama. Social drama interrogates social issues and structures with the main objective of influencing change while aesthetic drama emphasises on the artistic dimension of the presentation (Schechner, 2020:156). However, the aesthetics are still inherent in the indigenous performances. Although there are scenes, they are not labelled as such. For the social purpose, the play’s scenes are labelled for the functions they serve. The first scene is MSINJA, which is the place where the action is taking place. The next scene is THE FLIGHT, because it is about M’bona running away from the pursuers. The last scene is MSANJE. In Chichewa language, *nsanje* means jealousy. There is the depiction of jealousy in the scene. Ideally the word should be *nsanje*, starting with an ‘n’ and not

msanje, where the word starts with ‘m’. In pronunciation, there are many words that interchange ‘n’ and ‘m’.

Stylistically, starting from the creation of the play, Chimombo was attempting to completely ignore the pattern of colonial influenced plays by not only using anthropological research on traditions as the germinal idea for the script but also relying heavily on indigenous traditions including dance performances, songs, folklore and myths as the main driving force of the play. The style used does not strictly adhere to well-known western elements of plot structure but is nonetheless exciting to the audiences because of the indigenous spectacle. Where the play falls into the colonial trap is the use of the Matsano, spirit-wives, as a chorus. A chorus in a traditional African set-up would not be used to comment on the actions of the characters as it would replicate the Greek chorus. The indigenous role that a chorus would play is the call-and-response action where they would sing in unison to a song or respond to some action in a similar manner where justified. Chimombo is also trapped in the western playwriting style with the use of actual poems in some parts of the play like in *Msinja* (Chimombo, 1978:11-12, 20-21), *The Flight* (Chimombo, 1978:25-27, 28-30, 34-35), *Msanje* (Chimombo, 1976: 43, 48-49).

The use of ritual as in the rainmaking performance is an important stylistic aspect that acknowledges and uplifts indigenous knowledge by using it as a foundation of storytelling. Characteristic of decoloniality, it is a reclamation of indigenous stories and cultural practices that would have been suppressed during colonisation.

Chimombo had anti-colonial approach when he wrote the play. During the 1975 inaugural launch of the play, at Chancellor College, most members of the audience, probably knowing specific formula for plays, had negative reaction to the performance. However, Kamlongera (1984:283) quotes Chimombo’s reaction to the negative reviews as follows:

the academics at Chancellor College are trying to categorize or trying to fit it into a certain dramatic compartment. And they’re trying to decide

whether it is influenced by great plays or Western plays or whether it's just purely a Malawian play. Whilst from the people who are not concerned so much about these classifications, they quite enjoyed it because it takes its inspiration from very local material

Apart from the playwright's sentiments, a study of the actual script including the responses from analysts and academics lead to the same conclusion in terms of form. *The Rainmaker* is therefore in a category of plays attempting to introduce a unique African genre of plays based on indigenous culture, tradition, folklore and dance.

Parallels may be drawn between Jesus Christ of Nazareth and M'bona. To begin with, there was no known man that had impregnated their mothers, believed to have conceived through some divine intervention (Chimombo, 1978:21; Matthew 1:18). They both performed miracles (John 2:1-11; Mark 1:21-27; Chimombo, 1978:21, 34-35). They were both helpful in their societies but were killed by people jealous of their achievements (Chimombo, 1978:39; Matthew 27:45-56). These are just some of the many examples. The two continue to influence people's lives up to the present day. There are places of worship built where believers go to worship and use the two as mediators with their deities. There is the Khulubvi sacred shrine (UNESCO, 2011) in Nsanje District where people of *Chipembedzo cha Makolo* (*Ancestors' Religion*) go at given times to offer sacrifices to M'bona. The shrine exists presently and people, not only belonging to *Chipembedzo cha Makolo*, still go there. There are also churches built in many places all over the world where Christians go to worship God in the name of Jesus Christ. We can therefore conclude that M'bona has been presented as alternative to Jesus Christ.

The script exhibits a departure from Eurocentric epistemology brought by Christianity. There is belief in multiple gods, with some having wives, which would be considered blasphemous to the Christian faith. For instance, Kamundi asks Tsang'oma, "Would you have the wife of Chiuta do that to save your life?" (Chimombo, 1978: 15). Throughout the play there are attempts at fighting the coloniality of knowledge. The outstanding knowledge is that of depending on

the presentation of petitions of rain to the gods, including the manner in which it should be done in order to achieve success. The fight against culturecide is evident in various scenes. The use and promotion of the *mbiriviri* drum and a special drum-beater, the Tsang'oma brings the pre-colonial performance practices to the limelight. The witch hunting performance is another pre-colonial practice promoted in the play.

In terms of abrogation, the play uses figurative speech that would not make sense to English speaking audiences but Chichewa speaking audiences that understand English. This underlines the fact that traditional English idioms and figures of speech are not the only way to communicate even in English. Examples of such sayings are:

“Every head of the family was given the order to quench their fire a week before the rain dance.”⁵

“None of them (the Matsano) has gone to earth this week.”⁶

“M’bona seems to have eaten the buttocks of a dog.”⁷

These are just some of the many examples where the playwright shows that there are other correct ways of communicating in English apart from the traditional one.

As Ukala (2001:32) proposes, this is language that would be easily understood by indigenous African audiences for whom it is performed in spite of employing figurative speech. The overall objective of the play seems to be the preservation and promotion of indigenous cultural practices in addition to presenting alternative epistemologies.

5 No sexual activity for a minimum of a week before rain-making ceremony (Chimombo, 1978:14).

6 No menstruation among the Matsano (Chimombo, 1978:19).

7 M’bona is too mobile (Chimombo, 1978:21).

Conclusion

In *Nyamirandu*, there is a struggle against epistemological coloniality where the belief in prophets is shown to have existed before the existence of Christianity in Malawi around 1861 (McCracken, 2013: 39). The colonial knowledge of worship is therefore countered with indigenous practices with the character of Nyamirandu who was sent by the god Chimusi. The coloniality of knowledge, which forms part of epistemological coloniality is further countered when the characters in *Nyamirandu* display their knowledge and expertise in healing ailments such as the use of amulets to curb nightmares. The indigenous people therefore would not have started believing in the power of the creator after the arrival of colonialists. In this way, the propagation of a particular way of thinking imposed on the indigenous people by colonialists is countered.

The coloniality of being is challenged in both plays. *Nyamirandu* fights against the acceptance of superiority and prestige in all that is created and promoted by the colonisers. The Rainmaker derationalises the existence of one God.

The coloniality of language is challenged in both *Nyamirandu* and *The Rainmaker* through the challenge for only the English language to be used. Both plays in some way oppose linguicide by bringing songs in the vernacular in addition to some crucial scenes being presented in the vernacular. This is only an attempt and not complete decolonisation. The important aspect is the promotion and maintenance of the indigenous language. The fight against elimination of the local languages is present in both plays.

Chimombo's statement in reaction to critics that watched the first performance is a depiction of the fight against coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being. It shows that the preserve of knowledge is not only for the colonisers and that not every literary work should be analysed through Eurocentric methods. The entire play is a fight against culturecide as it promotes the culture of the indigenous people who still perform rainmaking ceremonies.

Stylistically and structurally, the two plays show considerable deviation from the patterns introduced during colonialism.

Whereas Chisiza's *Nyamirandu* is complete fiction, Chimombo's *The Rainmaker* is created from mythology as well as traceable historical facts. A decolonial reading of the plays therefore reveals some aspects of decoloniality in addition to promoting indigenous culture and epistemologies.

Both plays present some characters playing spirit mediums between man and gods, promote indigenous knowledge systems, and decolonise literary forms. Therefore, consistent with decolonial literature they offer counter-narratives to Eurocentrism.

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