

The example of Shakespeare: acting over and rewriting Shakespeare in Malawi, Ghana and Nigeria

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Thunder. Second apparition: a bloody child. Macbeth, IV, i, 77.

CASSIUS ...How many ages hence
Shall this our scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown! *Julius Caesar, III, i, 111-3.*

By 1769, David Garrick responded to an invitation from the town council of Stratford-Avon to organise the Shakespeare Jubilee, the position of the Warwickshire playwright in the esteem of his literate countrymen was firmly established. The education system which emerged in Britain from the end of the Nineteenth Century and which acknowledged that the study of English literature was a rigorous intellectual enterprise, increasingly recognised the centrality of the "greatest writer in the English language." For this reason it was inevitable that the son of the Stratford glove-maker would take his place in the procession that was painting a substantial part of the map of the world red, a procession in which sometimes trade, sometimes the flag and sometimes the Bible led the way. Shakespeare's work was in with the colonial baggage together with Johnny Walker gin, Oxford geometry sets, and Leonard shoes. Of course, when the texts of his plays reached the outposts of Empire they occupied a different position within the culture. Shakespeare cast a longer shadow in the Empire than he did in the metropole.

The Swan of Avon became a griffin, a fearsome monster from a foreign clime who had to be subdued or conquered by those who hoped to pass along the arts side at secondary school and university level. His work featured on many syllabuses, and the plays were often taught in an unimaginative manner. This was partly because they were presented within the rigid framework found "at home," partly because there was little or no attempt to establish links with the local culture. For example, the political debates Shakespeare engaged in and the popular theatrical traditions on which he drew were

generally neglected. Emphasis tended to be almost exclusively on such examination staples as plot and character. For some students, indeed for many, Shakespeare was just an examination-room challenge, part of a sifting process in which advancement to the next level was for the tiny minority and failure was for the vast majority. To "do Shakespeare" was really "to do English." To be able to indicate comprehension of such alien features as "chalky cliffs," "winter of discontent," "ladies boudoir" and "this your minion" was to penetrate to the inner sanctum of the colonial intellectual.

However, while Shakespeare's work was a hurdle for many, it was empowering and liberating for others. It created opportunities for the discussion of issues that were normally closed because of rigid censorship, it provided structures through which writers could tackle pressing themes, and it offered models of form and language through which writers could speak to their contemporaries. One only has to consider the other playwrights whose work appeared regularly on English Literature syllabuses, Sheridan, Bridie, and Shaw, to recognise how liberating it was for young men and women to encounter the robust, expansive, challenging work of William Shakespeare.

In the paragraphs that follow I shall glance at Malawi, Ghana and Nigeria. Plays referred to will include *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, and the following African writers will be given particular attention: Joe de Graft, Wole Soyinka and Ken Saro-Wiwa. They will be used to provide specific instances of what J P Clark called *The Example of Shakespeare*: their backgrounds in Shakespeare studies and productions will be indicated and selected passages from their works will be analysed. From the analyses, I hope to show that for the creative and confident some of the Elizabethan's plays were spring-boards that enabled them to go higher, further. Abdul R. JanMohammed has termed those who created art out of combining traditions "syncretic border intellectuals" - and I would include amongst them Shakespeare himself, Henrik Ibsen, J M Synge, and the three African writers I have just mentioned (Jan Mohammed 1993: 97.) I will begin by suggesting that even when Shakespeare attracted nothing expect a numb sense of awe that was sometimes important. In Malawi the sometimes petrifying respect with which he was regarded, opened up possibilities for political debate that would not otherwise have existed.

Malawi

In Malawi during a period of repression the unthinking reverence with which some regarded Shakespeare, Bardolatry, enabled others to use specific plays to communicate relatively subtle protests at the extent of Hastings Banda's tyranny. In the course

of 1992 and 1993, when the tide was turning against Banda, Steve Chimombo, playwright, poet, short story writer, novelist and Professor of English at Chancellor College, Zomba, published a series of four articles in *WASI Writer*. (At least I take the fact that he was editor and the articles were unsigned to indicate his authorship). The first two articles, printed incidentally in space donated (sinisterly?) by the British Council, traversed fairly familiar and safe territory in looking at witchcraft in *Macbeth* and in Malawi.

The third article proclaimed its entirely different orientation in its title was entitled "African Politics and *Macbeth*." In it Chimombo handled the text in public, in print in a manner that would have been inconceivable a few years earlier. He began:

Julius Nyerere translated *Julius Caesar* into Swahili and Sylvester Paliani did the same into Chichewa. What the Kenyan [sic] president and the Malawian playwright saw in Shakespeare's play were some of the politics and politicking that build or destroy a nation or an empire.

He then pointed out that, in his opinion, the Scottish play was closer to African experience than *Julius Caesar*:

Many more African countries have re-enacted *Macbeth* in real life than we realise. ... Some of the correspondences between *Macbeth* and African leadership styles were recognised by the South African musical adaptation of the play, *Umabatha*, in which Chaka and the Zulu nation were substitutes for the Scottish kingdom. In our own country, *Mkabethi*, by Chancellor College's Travelling Theatre is a most successful adaptation.

By the time Chimombo's essay appeared multi-partyism was sufficiently firmly established for the author to disentangle references without risking detention. For instance, he drew attention to the parallels between Duncan travelling with his entourage and an African president with "dancing women in his wake" (Chimombo 1993: 11). The page which follows this paragraph was eloquently taken up with a photograph of "President (Banda) and his Mbumba" -his female supporters. Chimombo went on to discuss *Macbeth's* assaults on the families of Duncan and Macduff, and asked with a prolonged glance at Banda's State House and, it seemed, childless hearth:

It is interesting to draw correspondences here with some African dictators who have or have not got families or children. ...How African dictators who are without family compensate for this deprivation would make a fascinating psychological treatise (Chimombo 1993: 13).

After quoting Macbeth's boast about the thoroughness of his surveillance system ("There's not a one of them, but in his house/ I keep a servant fee'd"), Chimombo wrote:

Households are not safe to leave any documents around, sitting rooms are not safe for free conversation with family or friends. Hotel lounges, cocktail bars, restaurants and resthouses are infested with spies and intelligence officers. Telephones, cars, houses are bugged. Suspects are under constant surveillance (Chimombo 1993 a:, 14).

From this it is clear just how far the focus has shifted: Shakespeare is now being openly read as our contemporary. His work is being used to describe the situation in late Twentieth Century Malawi, with its "restaurants and resthouses," telephones and cars, informers and tyrants.

Macbeth had featured on reading lists and had remained on library shelves throughout a period of intense censorship. It had also been staged, notably in the pre-independence, pre-censorship period by David Rubadiri at Dedza Secondary School. From the early nineties we have evidence that ordinary Malawians, as well as professors of English, recognised the relevance of "the Scottish play." A British touring company was given permission to take their production of *Macbeth* to towns and villages, and they were accompanied by a television crew whose footage was subsequently used in a BBC 2 documentary entitled *The Poet, the Players and the President*. They may have found in their audiences an acknowledgement of similarities in ideas about the supernatural, but more striking, underlined in interview after interview, was the easy recognition of the kinship between Shakespeare's bloody butcher and their Hastings Banda, and between Macbeth's "fiend-like queen" and their Cecelia Kadzamira. Shakespeare became not only a countryman but very obviously a contemporary in a way that Jan Kott would have recognised. Given that the Censorship Board was still in place, in fact I understand it remains *in situ* up to today, it was astonishing that the company was able to put on the play and tour it so widely. A reason has to be found and I think I can supply it from my own experience as a teacher at Chancellor College.¹

While I was teaching at Chancellor College between 1972 and 1978, I had extensive first-hand experience of the approach of the Censorship Board that included an uncritical, indiscriminating reverence for the works of Shakespeare. The Chairman of the Censorship Board during the material period was Tobias Banda, a former Catholic priest with a doctorate in Canon Law. He operated under an Act which insisted on "our own Malawian standards" and which required that every script a director wanted to put on had to be submitted to the Board for approval. The Act also required that every place

where a performance was to be mounted should have a theatre licence. Finally, a permit had to be obtained by the person in charge of the theatre for each performance. As might be expected, these regulations inhibited the activities of theatre enthusiasts, and made it virtually impossible to take theatre into villages.

Tobias Banda rejected many of the plays I submitted. He was especially hard on plays by African writers, and it was clear that he, or his "readers," scrutinised local work particularly closely. One play by a student, Wisdom Kamkondo, entitled *The Vacant Seat*, elicited the following judgement: "I'm afraid scenes in the play concerning cold-blooded murder, conspiracy and loose morals are repugnant to our Malawi concept of decency. Rejected" (TSB to JMG 25.11.1976.)

Despite numerous rejections, on the kind of flimsy grounds illustrated above,² of local and African work, I experienced no difficulty in obtaining permission to direct *Julius Caesar* even though, of course, it contains conspiracy and cold-blooded murder. Tobias Banda was, it seemed, not perturbed by the fact that the play shows how the Head of (the Roman) State, no less, is assassinated. I admit that there was an element of challenge involved in submitting the play in the first place, but it was a play I particularly wanted to do. In addition to the drama's obvious qualities, I was aware that there had been various productions in Africa (one with a cast that included Milton Obote) had been well received in Uganda, and that Julius Nyerere had thought it worth translating into Kiswahili. It was also a recurring presence on the literature syllabus.

The script was approved without hesitation, as I suspected it would be, because Tobias Banda frequently genuflected, following his political master, before icons of classical western civilization. He told me he did not bother to read texts submitted to him by such masters as "Shakespeare and Dickens." What could be more worthy of worship than a play by the undisputed master of English about the noblest Romans of them all?

I made sure Cassius was heard describing Caesar and I opted for modern dress. I produced scenes from *Julius Caesar* on an imposing flight of steps at Chancellor College, part of the University of Malawi. The athletic Anthony cut a contemporary figure in a track-suit, and I had members of the audience standing around the "corpse of Caesar" with the actors playing the Citizens planted amongst them. The experience engulfed the audience, and the fact that this scene was enacted within a few yards of the rostra, or scaffold, from which Banda spoke during Congregation added a further frisson of excitement. For the Forum Scene, I made everyone move some 150 yards to the Chirunga Open-Air Theatre. There Antony's rhetoric was much enjoyed and the fickleness of the crowd exposed.

I like to think that through such productions, the Travelling Theatre of Chancellor College was able to keep open intellectual spaces in which debates normally prohibited by the Censorship Board could be held. From what Chimombo indicates a localised version, *Mkabethi*, was put on by the students.

Much more was done for the cause of breaching the walls of censorship and in defiance of the culture of silence by the touring of the production of *Macbeth* already mentioned. I suspect they were able to put on their play and produce it widely because of the unthinking respect that characterised Tobias Banda's attitude to "the classics," an attitude that was well illustrated by his attitude to *Julius Caesar*.

Tobias Banda stands at one end of the spectrum: he sees Shakespeare as an intellectual and cultural icon, a respectable, dead and irrelevant author, whose works pose a challenge that has to be faced in an examination hall but who cannot possibly speak to the present.

Ghana

Among those who have left accounts of drama teaching and productions in Ghana are Catherine McEvoy and DS Barker. Their accounts of their experiences provide both an indication of the value of working with play-texts on the stage, and insight into the responses of local audiences. I want, however, to leave them on one side and glance quickly at the impact of an organisation whose presence has already been noted, the British Council, and then move on to trace the encounter with Shakespeare of Joe de Graft.

The British Council encouraged the formation of amateur drama groups, and in 1963 sponsored a visit by John Neville and the Nottingham Playhouse Company on a West African tour. *Arms and the Man*, *Twelfth Night* and *Macbeth* were performed in Accra, Cape Coast, Kumasi and Takoradi. Teachers were pleased that their pupils had the opportunity to watch plays that they had read in class, and in many cases knew well. Actors were delighted, and sometimes taken aback, by the responsiveness of audiences - and often surprised by the evidence of familiarity with the text. The British Council, which was anxious to provide Ghanaians with experience of professional theatre, and the tour was also encouraged by the Institute of Art and Culture. That body wanted, according to a newspaper article of the time,

to get local playwrights and stage producers something of value to learn from; and its the

popular wish of many that it would give the push for the early establishment of a professional theatre in Ghana (Enninful 1963).

Probably the most active director during the late fifties was Joe de Graft, a graduate of University College, Ghana. He had already benefited from a British Council travel award to visit the United Kingdom, and had long admired Shakespeare's work greatly: while a teacher at Mfantshipim School, in Cape Coast, de Graft directed a Shakespeare play with his pupils almost ever year. He also wrote plays but his early work was modest in scope and conventional in style. For example, *Sons and Daughters* is a domestic drama, a realistic, problem play, in which briskly drawn characters come into conflict over career choices before all works out well for artistic children. The bright young things are able to opt for creative rather than "safe" professions.

Invited by Efua Sutherland to help in her work with the Drama Studio in Accra, the National Theatre Movement and the School of Music and Drama at Legon, de Graft moved to Accra and allowed him to operate on a more ambitious scale. His achievements include plays such as *Ananse and the Gum-Man*, and the production and filming of a version of Hamlet set in the Northern Region of Ghana, *Hamile*. This deserved more critical examination than it received, and its enduring interest was shown by the decision of students in the University of Ghana's School of Performing Arts to revive it recently.

Hamile was followed by *Through a Film Darkly*, partly a look at race relations. This has been published and shows other influences, in this case Luigi Pirandello. From the end of the sixties, de Graft held a UNESCO post in Kenya: there he continued to be involved in working in and writing for the theatre. For example, he acted Othello and he responded to a commission from the World Council of Churches by writing *Muntu*, a pageant-drama that grapples with the issue of how to shape and present Africa's experience and that was presented in Nairobi at a WCC Conference. When he returned to the School of Music and Drama at the University of Ghana, Legon, in the mid-seventies, he produced the text I want to concentrate on *Mambo*. This was an extensively rewritten version of *Macbeth*.

In *Mambo*, de Graft begins with events familiar from *Macbeth* but radically relocates to a West African country in which the "crown" competed for is that worn by an entrepreneur (Brempong) so powerful that his business dominates the state. The play provides abundant evidence of de Graft's particular interest in Shakespeare, and shows the confidence with which he handled Shakespearean material. He is ready to plunder the Bard's storehouse, to build on the legacy of the Elizabethans in order to confront press-

ing contemporary issues. One does not have to regard *Mambo* as a major work to recognise an attractively independent spirit at work in it. It seems that, with *Macbeth* before him and with intimate knowledge of what had been happening in Idi Amin's Uganda as well as Ghana, de Graft was able to take on a large topic, to attempt a play about the horrors that were being unleashed on the African continent during the seventies. Comparison with *Through a Film Darkly* and *Muntu* reveals the extent to which *Macbeth* helped him to tap into a popular, strongly dramatic form. Liberated by Shakespeare, de Graft wrote a play that moves boldly, with rapid exchanges, and a confident sense of purpose. Yet it is not merely a "sable imitation." There are distinctive shifts in terms of stage-craft. For example, the play opens with a Prologue, incorporates "Fontofrom" dancers, and, merging the witches into the evil genius, divides the role of the Lady Macbeth figure among three actresses, Mrs Mambo 1,2,3. Extensive use is made of the auditorium as an acting space, suggesting, perhaps, the continuing influence of Pirandello, or perhaps, since those who occupy the auditorium are Workers, Bertolt Brecht.

There is also a rethinking of events in terms of local geography and social organisation. For instance, those familiar with the Akropong Escarpment that rises behind the Accra Plains and is topped by Kwame Nkrumah's Peduasi Lodge, will have a mental image of the scene of Brempong's assassination, and those familiar with West African funeral rites will appreciate the obligations, and violations of custom that follow Brempong's death.

There is a marked, and quite convincing shift, in the political allusions. For instance, Domma, a Ugandan woman, speaks about the reign of terror unleashed by an Amin figure on her homeland because good men kept silent. In the board-room battles, as well as in the labour unrest that builds powerfully towards the end, the pressures of commercial life in Ghana are effectively portrayed.

I confess to being disconcerted by the banality of some of de Graft's lines and the unsatisfactory juxtaposition of them with quotations from Shakespeare. I am also doubtful about the way that Brempong's will is introduced and manipulated, feeling that elements from *Julius Caesar* may have been half incorporated into the drama. However, I think what we have is a draft: the text I have is, appropriately, a cyclostyled version, strewn with typing errors. There is reason to suppose that, had he been given time and energy, de Graft would have revised the text in the light of the experience of directing it and have eliminated some or all of the weaknesses.

I do not agree with those, including Kofi Agovi, who have argued that de Graft's "fond-

ness for Shakespeare was a significant factor in his career because it prevented him from a total allegiance to the African theatre ..." (Agovi 1992). I regard as particularly unfortunate Agovi's suggestion that de Graft's "fondness" was a weakness, part of a "psychic" ambivalence towards African traditions" (Agovi 1990). It should be recognised that Agovi, whom I link with Chinweizu and the Africanist critics, came from a radically different angle from mine; the view from that angle did not allow that any work owing a major debt to Shakespeare could be African. I don't particularly like Jan-Mohammed's term "border syncretic intellectual," but it is useful in confronting this kind of narrow thinking. De Graft was one of those who found Shakespeare a liberating presence, a source of valuable precedents, providing possibilities as to how to explore issues and define particular qualities. Interaction with Shakespeare's work was for him not evidence of a "psychic" state, a colonial mentality, or an immature intellect but a challenge that creative individuals had to take up. In the process, they take advantage of what history has bequeathed them, as Shakespeare himself did. They regard themselves as the heirs of an international tradition. *Mambo* is a brave contribution to social, economic and political debate at a time when politicians were equipping their thugs with automatic weapons while Africanist critics were advocating reliance on "total allegiance" to indigenous forms.

Nigeria

Wole Soyinka

Like other intelligent and privileged members of his generation who followed the arts route at school and at University College, Wole Soyinka took on Shakespeare in class room and examination hall: he triumphed in "Cambridge" while at Government College, Ibadan. And he then went on to University College (1952-54) where he studied *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night* for the Intermediate Arts Examination. The paper required him to show an awareness of the form and structure of Shakespeare's plays, to know about the use of sub-plots and be familiar with the genres of tragedy and comedy. Once again he was victorious and he set off for Leeds, where he did a three-year honours degree in English. Not surprisingly, the Final Examination included a Shakespeare paper, the "old mole" had to be confronted once again. He came in a particular guise.

The major Shakespearean scholar at Leeds during the fifties was George Wilson Knight and Soyinka undoubtedly read his work, and, to some extent, he read Shakespeare

through the eyes of the influential critic. The lasting impact that Wilson Knight had on Soyinka is apparent from two of the Nigerian's essays: "The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the origin of Yoruba tragedy," and "Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist." The former originally appeared in a *festschrift* for Wilson Knight and, with an ex-student's insouciance, it uses the terms Dionysian and Apollonian that Wilson Knight, acknowledging Friedrich Nietzsche, made his own. In the essay, Soyinka explores ideas about the origin of Yoruba tragedy, and there are many points at which the similarities between his thinking and that of Wilson Knight are striking. The second essay, the text of a lecture delivered at Stratford-on-Avon, examines ideas about the transition to death, and in examining them draws on *Antony and Cleopatra* and on Knight's analysis of that play. The essay is of particular relevance to Soyinka's most Shakespearean tragedy *Death and the King's Horseman*. Given this situation, I want to move back and try to estimate not so much the impact of Shakespeare on Soyinka, as the impact of Wilson Knight's writing about Shakespeare on Soyinka. Clearly this is embarking on a topic of labyrinthine complexity; fortunately there are a couple of threads to follow, a couple of clues.

Wilson Knight did not lecture Soyinka on Shakespeare but the senior academic, who was also a noted Shakespearean actor in university circles, led an important World Drama course. He also read and commented on creative writing that the young Nigerian showed him, and he marked or moderated his finals exam paper. In the Preface to his study of world drama, *The Golden Labyrinth*, Wilson Knight acknowledged that Soyinka had written an examination answer that "touched and clarified (his) plans, both in that essay and elsewhere" (x). When I asked Wilson Knight about this, he said the idea was that Lear was most royal on the heath (Letter to Gibbs 16 March 1971.) Following this idea into *The Golden Labyrinth*, one is struck by the paragraph in the chapter on Shakespeare:

Shakespeare gains as a dramatist by laying a primary emphasis on his royal or other protagonists as individuals whilst not omitting to relate them to the community and the wider universe, either directly or through symbolism: his mystique of royalty allows an artistic lucidity and condensation which have much to do with his dramatic pre-eminence. Later dramatists often blur their effects by tilting the balance too far either one way or the other; and they lack the royal essence. Drama must work first in personal terms, though its persons and their drama only attain full reality through the wider relation (Knight 1962, 86.).

This would seem to offer itself as the point about which Soyinka "clarified" Knight's thinking. I would have liked to have confirmed this but when I questioned Wilson

Knight further about the acknowledgement, he pointed out that he had, in fact, already expressed the idea in essays published some time before. In other words, in his old age he did not credit Soyinka with as much originality or influence as he had earlier.

The finals exam, and the acknowledgement provide a sub-text for "The Fourth Stage" which is part of the process of an extraordinary search, the sort only an Aristotle, a Nietzsche or a Casaubon could undertake with complete seriousness. The register Soyinka adopts suggests that his tongue is prepared to stray into his cheek. For example, he thunders "Our course to the heart of the Yoruba Mysteries leads by its own ironic truths through the light of Nietzsche and the Phrygian deity; ..." But true words can be spoken in bombast and the idea at the centre of the essay, that genuine qualities are revealed when *in extremis*, is one that Soyinka has lived with and embodied in his plays. This is the idea that Ogun was at his most Ogunian in the primordial swamp, challenged to make a path that would join gods with human the god of the forge asserted his will and, drawing on the deepest resources of his being, hacked his way through the vegetation.

Soyinka has responded to this image with deep and genuine creativity. It finds clear expression in the pattern he had provided for Ogunian tragedy: in his selection from the many stories about Ogun, the one that recounts how Ogun asserted himself when confronting the ultimate challenge, pitting himself and his iron implement, in the "primordial marsh." A pattern of testing in the chthonic realm, of being seared by lightning, is the experience of the protagonists, particularly Demoke, near the end of *A Dance of the Forests*. I am suggesting that there is a link between Lear on the heath, Ogun traversing the primordial marsh, and Demoke tested in the depths of the forests. While enduring torments and while exerting themselves, the protagonists reveal their true qualities (see also Katrak 1986, Chapter 3).

In addition to the pattern of the harrowing of the protagonist, there is also an aftermath. Wilson Knight has called this "supernal insight" and it too can be found very clearly in the concluding moments of the quintessential Soyinkan tragedy in *A Dance*, especially as realised in what seem to be the earlier drafts (Fraser 1979). All this suggests that Soyinka was familiar with the example of Shakespeare as mediated by Knight, and that he defined his ideas about Yoruba tragedy partly through a dialogue with Wilson Knight on Shakespearean tragedy.

Examples of direct interaction between Soyinka and Shakespeare can be found in the Triplets who appear in order to foretell the future in *A Dance* and who are kin to those

that Macbeth encounters when he visits the witches. Samson, playing African Millionaire in *The Road* from a vantage point on the top of a table, recalls Falstaff anticipating power (see also Moore). In an essay for *Shakespeare Survey* (Gibbs 1987), I have explored these, and some of the links between *Horseman* and Shakespeare's work. For example, I find in the speech Elesin delivers about the moon ("The moon was my messenger and guide" (Soyinka: 1975, 62) echoes of Enobarbus when he is about to die from melancholy. Others have developed parallel examinations, for example Henry Louis Gates Jr has emphasised the similarities between Soyinka's treatment of honour and Shakespeare's (Gates 1987.) Just how far these links can be clearly identified is impossible to assert. However, the responses of audiences to the 1994 Yoruba version of *Horseman* would appear to confirm the existence of considerable cultural overlap between Shakespearean and Yoruba notions. As part of a Shakespeare Festival held in Lagos in 1994, *Horseman* was successfully presented in a Yoruba translation by Akinwunmi Ishola. This experience, that took the drama to people who had never duelled with Shakespeare in the examination hall, suggests the play was widely acceptable.

One only has to look at the uncertain dramatic shape of Soyinka's other plays from the seventies to the nineties to appreciate how much he needs structures. And one only needs to observe the benefits he derived from other writers (Brecht in *Opera Wonyosi*; Genet in *Play of Giants*) to appreciate the importance for Soyinka's dramaturgy of interacting with parallel traditions. The example of Shakespeare, the precedence and the challenge, made it easier for him to handle the complex theme of responsibility in a dramatic manner.

Saro-Wiwa

I have left to the last the brief remarks I want to make about Ken Saro-Wiwa and Shakespeare because I want to use the example of Saro-Wiwa as a coda for the ideas I have been developing throughout. The Nigerian activist and writer employed Shakespearean echoes to send out a message about reverberating around the world that did in fact reverberate.

First some comments on the nature of Saro-Wiwa's contact with Shakespeare. Ken Saro-Wiwa was one of those who moved through the colonial education system encountering Shakespeare in many forms on the way. For example, at Umuahia Secondary school he took his Cambridge Overseas exams with their inevitable selection of Shakespeare's plays. At the University of Ibadan, he found Professor Molly Mahood, a distinguished Shakespearean scholar, whose special interests can be seen from her

books and from the portrait of her in novels and autobiographies, for example, Mphahlele 1973).

While Saro-Wiwa was a student at Ibadan, Geoffrey Axworthy and others were determined to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's birth by touring a selection of scenes from his plays. Saro-Wiwa, already becoming established as a student author and passionately interested in the theatre, played the central character in scenes from *Hamlet*. He experienced the power that Shakespeare's language unleashed on huge audiences in many settings.

Some thirty years later, he found himself the central character in a court-room drama that was powering him inexorably towards the gallows. Eventually the time came for him to deliver a passionate closing statement to the tribunal that held his life in its hands. He began with a rhetorical flourish: "We all stand before history" and, after insisting on his commitment to peace and his confidence in the ultimate success of his cause, he pointed out that it was in reality Shell and the Nigerian nation that were on trial. "All," he said, "stood before history." As he approached the end of his statement he evoked the assassination of Julius Caesar - a leader killed, in the version mediated by Shakespeare and familiar to Saro-Wiwa, partly for his ambition, partly because of envy. He proclaimed: "I predict that the scene here will be played and replayed by generations yet unborn." And continued with the theatrical image: "Some have already cast themselves in the role of villains, some are tragic victims, some still have a chance to redeem themselves." Before summoning the ethnic minorities of Nigeria to "stand up now and fight fearlessly and peacefully for ... right" and quoting from the Quran: "All those that fight when oppressed incur no guilt, but Allah shall punish the oppressor." He added "Come the day."

The quotation from the Quran leaps off the page as an appeal to the (Moslem) leadership in Abuja. Less striking because more expected is the allusion to the high priest of colonial secular culture which is invoked with a touch of menace. Given the impact that *Julius Caesar* has had, the productions in Uganda and Malawi, given the life it enjoys in Kiswahili, and bearing in mind the many who have read it, one can appreciate the impact of "played and replayed by generations yet unborn." He anticipated that his death would haunt his persecutors. Indeed it began to do so almost as soon as he was executed. His name and his "judicial slaughter" was invoked so powerfully at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Auckland that Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth. Share-holders attending the Annual General Meeting of Shell at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, have had to run a gauntlet of scaffolds and swaying corpses. Whenever Abacha the Butcher of Abuja is mentioned the name of

Saro-Wiwa follows. The Ogoni leader's impact came not only through his mastery of the language of Shakespeare but also through his manipulation of Shakespeare's language: his words, images, ideas gave his own feelings wings. Despite repression, the Swan of Stratford was a liberating influence for Saro-Wiwa as for many others. He spoke of a scene being played and replayed. Surely the accents were new. And the state, Nigeria, was unborn in Shakespeare's time. But was Saro-Wiwa, and I want to leave you with this thought, as an example of the subtlety possible when manipulating other texts, smuggling in a reference to an even newer state. Was the driving force behind MOSOP, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, using Shakespeare in his campaign for a new, a daringly secessionist, Ogoni state?

Notes

1. The television production had a life of its own that reveals something of the Byzantine complexity of the Malawian political scene. On their return to the United Kingdom, the crew travelled to Leeds where they showed their film to Jack Mapanje and Lan White in Leeds, who recorded their comments -so providing "the poet" of the title. However, the documentary was not shown at the time advertised and rumours circulated that it might have been rescheduled because Mapanje had been threatened. Mapanje himself (personal communication 27/10/99) has drawn attention to other factors that were involved. These included the fact that Christopher Kamlongera had acted as interpreter on the project and was just at the point of coming out as a supporter of the Malawi Congress Party, having, some say, agreed to collect the names of "rebels" supporting the UDF in return for K15,000. It was also suggested that the British Council, particularly the Director in Malawi, Stewart Newton, might have been exposed as having been compromised by the film. Although supposedly "above politics", the Council had come involved in supporting opposition parties, they had for example employed Brown Mpinganjira after his release from detention. This, some felt, might have been exposed if the circumstances of the production were investigated too closely.
2. It has recently been pointed out to me that I may have been naive in taking the Chairman's objection to the play at face value. In a state in which the throne of power had long been occupied by one man, it is possible that the very title of Wisdom Kamkondo's play set alarm bells ringing. These might have been particularly clamorous since at one stage Banda proposed (vacating the seat and) installing John Tembo or Cecelia Kadzamira in power in a caretaker capacity while he spent some time in the United Kingdom. It may be that Dick Matenje and his three fellow par-

liamentarians who were "accidentalised" died because they had pointed out that such a line of action would have been unconstitutional.

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