

Performing the Legacy of War in Uganda

By

Charles Mulekwa

Ph. D., Brown University, 2012

Dissertation

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Dedication

To the memory of

My maternal grandmother

Joyce Kakai (1929-1998)

And

My paternal grandmother

Mariam Mutonyi (19-2011)

This Dissertation by Charles Mulekwa is accepted
in its present form
by the Department of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies as satisfying the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Charles Mulekwa is from Mbale, Uganda and has been practicing theatre in his homeland in different roles since his Secondary School days in 1983. He attended Nkozi National Teacher's College between 1988-1990, taught at King's College Buddo between 1990-1992, and worked at the National Theatre from 1992 - 2003. He attended: the Royal Court Theatre, Royal National Theatre (UK); Sundance Theatre Lab, New York Theatre Workshop, and Iowa International Writers Program (US); and worked on a number of radio plays with the BBC African Performance and World Service programs. In 1998, the British Council and the Peggy Ramsay Foundation granted him a joint scholarship for an MA in Playwriting at Birmingham University, where he wrote the play *A Time of Fire*. In 2003 he earned a Ford Foundation International Fellowship and joined Brown University, where he studied for a PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies resulting into the dissertation, *Performing the Legacy of War in Uganda*. In 2005 he served as the Ugandan consultant to the director of the movie about Idi Amin, *The Last King of Scotland*. In 2007, alongside other African playwrights from Rwanda, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Ghana, he wrote the Ugandan episode of the BBC World Service radio drama, *Free Juice for All*, to mark Ghana's 50th anniversary of Independence. He wrote Chapter 2. "Theatre, War, and Peace in Uganda" in *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict*, Volume I: Resistance and Reconciliation in Regions of Violence, Edited by Cynthia Cohen, Roberto Gutierrez, and Polly Walker (Oakland: New Village Press, 2011).

Abstract: Abstract of “Performing the Legacy of War in Uganda” by Charles Mulekwa, Ph. D., Brown University, May 2012.

This Dissertation explores the interaction of performance and warfare in the framework of colonial and post-colonial times. The issues in question unfold in relationship with political history, but are in fact bound by Ugandan playwriting, theatre, and performance practices, with a focus on 1962-2010. Although a number of dramatists draw from the colonial encounter for present day cultural expression, syncretism is at the heart of self-definition in post-colonial Ugandan society.

The thesis examines the works of a range of home-bred, as well as Diaspora Ugandan dramatists such as Sam Okello, Kenneth Kimuli, Okot p’Bitek, Byron Kawadwa, John Ruganda, George Seremba, Rose Mbowa, Alex Mukulu, and Ntare Mwine to argue that since Independence from British rule, Uganda has been hostage to a legacy of war – a post-colonial nation spiraling in a state of ruthless power contestations, with violence of various degrees. Inevitably, the history informs many of the plays and the plays become a part of the history. The dramatic works studied embody the hard realities as well as subjunctive version of post-colonial Ugandan cultural and political aspirations.

Theoretical projects of African as well as European/Western thinking inform the story, but ultimately it focuses on Ugandan society: 1962-2010. The narrative and analysis of content found in this dissertation represents my rendezvous with Ugandan performance vis a vis the legacy of war. The narrative will explore how performance articulates war and warfare engages with performance on a historical, political and cultural scale. The “emic” and “etic” strands of thought guide the analysis; the former refers to insider and the latter outsider information/response/action/ reaction. Most of the plays are “emic” and a fair amount of the theory is “etic.” Each chapter represents a different time-frame in Ugandan political history, in terms of (the ever shifting) paradigms of playwriting, theatre, and performance.

Preface

SURPRISE! Yelled the youthful lot of Kampala Pentecostal Church (KPC) drama wing one day, in 2003. These young theatre practitioners and I had worked on a number of fruitful plays together—*The Web*, *My Secret*, *You Are That Man*—with me doing the dramaturgical work, without having an idea that is what it was called, technically. Each year, they wrote a play, and I reflected their ideas back to them in rehearsal, questioned their choices during breaks, and challenged their vision when need be. I argued with them that repeating bible stories on stage was not a productive thing. What might work would be to turn bible stories into contemporary tales. This is something I had done with different groups over the years, and it seems the surprise event was a mark of how far our collaboration had come with this group. I was due to leave Uganda soon for PhD studies. They had forged a plot to say goodbye, and a good job of it was. We talked as never before. They asked some very bold questions about drama and theatre in Uganda. One question kept returning: “why have you not written about these things?” My reply: “I am going to study how to do that.”

The day came, and I left National Theatre Uganda for Brown University, USA intent on the role of women in East African theatre. But owing to unforeseen circumstances, that interest got displaced. I then opted to write about the interweaving of music, dance, and drama in Uganda. However, with the prospectus written and all, one day in 2005 I saw a documentary about the war in Northern Uganda. The war was about two-decades old at that point but hardly known in Uganda, and beyond. How could that be so? Post-Independence Uganda was over four decades old, and a leading columnist had claimed that there were in total about only 10 years when Uganda had not been at war. If so, why was that the case? And why were children—who had little to do with the murky Ugandan political history—apparently the major victims? And why was the story of war, repetitive in nature, always told for us on the world stage with varying notions of little or no agency on our part? These questions and more bothered me, creating in me

some seriously conflicting feelings. But in the process clarity of purpose took hold: this war, this incessant warfare, was the most profound problem of my existence.

That is not to say this amounts to a story about me. This is a story of my country. This is a story of a problem Ugandans have had to wrestle with from time to time. This is a story of what I deem to be the legacy of war in Uganda. This is a story I set out to explore in terms of my way of being, that is, engagement with drama, theatre, playwriting, and performance activity over the years. This is a story in which I play the roles of investigator, observer, narrator, and participant. This is a story of how performance articulates war and how war engages with performance in Ugandan society on a historical, political, and cultural scale.

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African people have a blessing: may your journey be rough. To incur the blessing took the whole village, and beyond. But, any shortcomings are my doing.

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I hold immense gratitude to the spirit of the late Masha Z. West, who "opened the door" for me into Africana Department, rendering me a product of two departments (Theater and Performance Studies and Africana Department). In the latter department I met Anani Dzidzienyo and Ama Ata Aidoo with whom I shared many comparative conversations about West and East Africa in light of colonial and postcolonial aspects, which shaped a lot of my thinking. Besides being generally supportive; Corey Walker, Karen Baxter and Elmore-Terry Morgan opened my eyes about the African American experience; Paget Henry and Teodoros Kiros lit the fuse of Africana Philosophy and consciousness, while Tricia Rose and Ekweume Michael Thelwell not only inspired me in the line of teaching, but also went the extra mile to intervene in, and ease my

funding situation. I value the TAPS experience and input, yet I cannot help thinking that without Africana Department this dissertation was liable to be incomplete.

Gratitude to the friends I met in Providence, for filling in the social as well some very personal but practical aspects of the project: Vanessa Gilbert and David Higgins (my American family); Quiara Hudes and Ray Beauchamp; Jennifer Madden and Tony Estrella; Anastasia Congdon and Jim Dennen; George Omanyo and Anna Omulo; plus Brown University graduate students Paige Sarlin (Media and Culture) and Ben Onyango (Sociology) who both intervened at critical moments of the process; as well as Prof. Geri Augusto who often inspired me by pushing me on, in Kiswahili; not to forget Gil and Bilie Mason who have been friends to several international students for half a century.

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Finally, to the playwrights and theatre practitioners of Uganda, those who let me interview them, and those who would not, uncertain why I was doing this kind of thing instead of what they know me for: writing and staging plays. Without the sustained struggles of these often-unfunded theatre makers to ensure the show goes on, this record would have been poorer. Many thanks, fellow strugglers; I wandered far away and one key thing I discovered is: the struggle continues...

I cannot forget the proverbial “two cents” of my seven mothers in Uganda who between them held on, rain or shine, and pushed and pulled, onwards: my grandmother (the late) Joyce Kakai, my mother (the late) Florence Nairuba, my aunt Rita Wambedde, my aunt Saida Afandi, my aunt MaryJane Musungu, and my teacher Phoebe Kyomukama. To them, I am permanently indebted.

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Last and most, gratitude to my daughters Emma Kakai and Flora Kituyi for bearing with my absence the whole time I was navigating new ways into the field life lay before me: cultural production. Kituyi, being rather young, is yet to become what she shall be, whereas Kakai, who is fairly grown up, treads in the footsteps of performance.

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INTRODUCTION: AN IMAGE OF MY COUNTRY

To many ordinary Africans, the only change [after independence] is the complexion of the oppressor.

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu.¹

THE STORY I want to tell is hardly new; it is an ongoing case. It is a continuation of some of the concerns—Agency (or lack thereof), Crisis, Displacement, Exile, Hegemony, Jail, *Kadogos*,² Murder, Rebellion, Repression, Revolution, Violence, and War—about my homeland that I have been wrestling with for many years in different ways and places: within the family, in the neighborhood, on the stage in Uganda and beyond, at public presentations abroad, and via relevant websites. The Internet may well be the best ally of citizens of and from nations subject to repression. But that is another story. This story shall explore the legacy of war in Uganda via the framework of performance, informed by aspects of folk and ritual cultural production in contemporary Ugandan drama. By birth, upbringing and citizenship I am a Ugandan; my own involvement by profession and inclination as a playwright and theatre-worker means I am a participant in, as well as a chronicler of, this history; this involvement points to the way I see the world, and it defines the tools with which I usually negotiate world affairs – in this case, what I deem to be the legacy of war in Uganda.

Performance is a useful framework with which to explore and analyze the legacy of war that is, arguably, central to the political history of post-colonial Uganda. In colonial and post-colonial times, Ugandan history and politics have been framed by the recurrence of war. So,

¹ South African activist, quoted in Jessica Kaahwa, "Uganda Theatre: Paradigm Shifts," *SATJ* 18 (2004), 100. Kaahwa links this quote, found in the works of Eileen MarCarthy-Arnolds, David R. Penna, and Debra Joy Cruz Sobrepena, eds., *Africa, Human Rights, and the Global System: The Political Economy of Human Rights in a Changing World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 18; with the work of Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), 30; to note a key issue. That is, the problem of "the oppressed who becomes the oppressor."

² Swahili reference to something little, or a child, also used for the phenomenon of the child soldiers within Ugandan armies.

although my analysis leans heavily on playwriting and theatrical production in Uganda, this narrative turns out to be an exploration of “the relationship between the historical legacy of colonialism and post-colonial politics”³ My aim, in the final analysis is to explore the problem in a post-colonial frame of reference. However, to focus on one era is not to ignore the other, since colonial and post-colonial matters are hemmed at the folds of history and politics.

Performance is the key word: performance as practiced in the African ritual and oral traditions, as well as in the syncretic forms borne out of the colonial excursion into the continent; performance in the parallels of everyday life and stage life; performance in terms of what we in post-colonial Africa in the East and West of the continent (as far as I know it), argue is part and parcel of the circle of life. A list of African commentators echoing this view would include Michael J.C. Echeruo and Ossie Enekwe, Okot p'Bitek, Robert Serumaga, and Ngugi wa'Thiong'O, and more specific contributions will be noted below.

Legacy, here, references the enduring imprint of both colonial and post-colonial issues of power shifts, conflict, violence, repression, agency, and, again, lack of agency; these are some of the major concerns spread out in the chapters assembled here. Legacy here also encompasses the different roles played by different figures in the context of these events and lingering issues, especially by theatre artists, vis-à-vis the political rulers. Okot p'Bitek frames their relationship:

I am insisting that in any society, anywhere, in any age, there are two types of rulers: namely, the artist who provides and sustains the fundamental ideas, the foundation of society; and the political chieftain, who comes to power with the aid of his soldier and rich business brethren, who merely puts these ideas into practice in ruling or misruling society⁴

Okot's argument brings into sharp focus the uneasy relationship between cultural production and political trends in Uganda. Eckhard Breitingen writes of the “schism between the cultural and political spheres, in which politics dictate the topics for artistic creation, control outlets, the

³ Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers* (New Jersey: Princeton, 2000), 8.

⁴ Okot p'Bitek, *Artist The Ruler* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), 39.

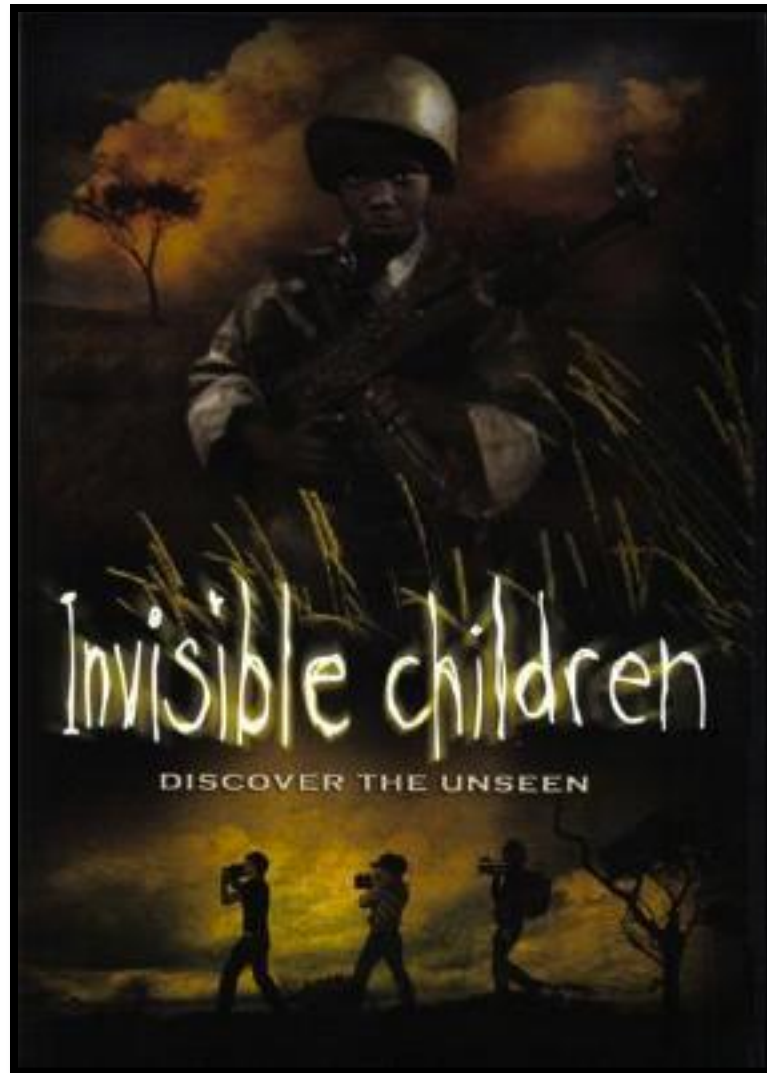
institutions, the market and – the individual lives of the artists.”⁵ The given state of affairs implicates me, as well, as an observer, and as a participant in some of the events, especially in the theatre, my life’s threshold. Core for me is the relationship of dramatic writing and the people who make theatre in Uganda to the legacy of war, beyond which point hangs the Shakespearean question: “Who is here so vile that will not love his country?” For Ugandans, that love has been often troubled in the brief period, 49 years (1962-2010), since independence.

Boy with the AK-47

I CAME to the USA to study about African issues – it is a curious idea – via the performance studies discipline, a broader framework of my chosen way of life. The immediate challenge, upon arrival, was digging for an African perspective, harder still a Ugandan viewpoint, in the vast realm of world affairs – historical, political, cultural, and topical – for no matter how impressive I may have found Greek, European, and American drama, theatre, and performance practice and/or scholarly discourse; no matter the connections of colonial subjectivity between African, Caribbean, and Indian experiences, I had to dig out for myself, with lots of help, an entry point that goes from the known to the unknown, in order to figure out what applies and what does not, what is similar and what is different, what to engage with now and what to confront in the future, what to keep and what to let be.

In the fall season of 2005, I came across an image I could not ignore. The image was unforgettable; an image of a small boy with a big gun—actually, of a small black boy with a big AK-47 assault rifle.

⁵ Eckhard Breiting, "Introduction," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breiting, (Kampala: Fountain, 2000), 2.



1. An image of my country; my moment of clarity

An impression of a little boy with a big gun brings to mind the child soldier phenomenon. And I had long known of that actuality in my own country of Uganda. But Uganda has no monopoly on this matter; it is a problem of international proportions. The child on the poster could have been from any war stricken part of Africa and beyond: that is to say, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mozambique, or Burma, Columbia, Sri Lanka. The child in this picture was distinctly black. But of course that does not mean he is strictly African. In any case, the poster stopped me because the image in itself was disturbing on a rather

personal level. I think that I survived some of the war incidents in Uganda because it was hard for the gunmen to shoot a child (or young person). But living in times where children, often forcibly, hold and proceed to use the guns that kill implies that the safety net of the innocence of childhood has been eroded.

Ishmael Beah, former child soldier, author of *A Long Way Gone*,⁶ now fortunately UNICEF ambassador, who knows well the world of a child soldier, has concretized the stakes such a child has to contend with, “The basic madness of war is that when you are there, in order for you to be alive, someone else has to die.”⁷ To compel children to kill, or be killed, breeds crisis. Beah, a representative of other children who have been subjected to such a fate has been there and understands well the magnitude of the problem: “You cannot take a boy out of war, dust him up, and say good boy.”⁸ Beah’s book, his impact on me when I had heard him speak, the fact of repeated war in Uganda (in my own lifetime), and my own experience in the contexts of those wars, meant I would be remiss not to go and see for myself what *Invisible Children*⁹ was all about.

The turnout was impressive; the documentary itself had evidently caused ripples around American society and the poster had done its work. Going by the sheer recollection of bodies present in the auditorium of the Rhode Island School for Design that afternoon, this was some extra-ordinary event. Lights out, the documentary video rolled, and I found myself taking notes. I had come to take note, of course, but I had thought it would be mentally so, rather than by means of paper and pen. For, as it turned out, this tale of children hostage to war, more or less forgotten by their country, and by the world at large, was a story of my own country. The image I could not

⁶ Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

⁷ Beah was talking at Brown University, Wilson Hall, Fall 2008.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Invisible Children*, Documentary, DVD, directed by Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey and Laren Poole, 2006.

ignore of black child with an AK-47 was an image of my own country. Not only have we brought the war to the children, we have dragged them into it. The image, out in the open, depicted the grim reality: we are hostage to the legacy of war. But, what is worse, we have gone and spilled the war to the children.

That an image of a boy clad in full military attire wielding weapons of warfare was an image of my country was tough to accept. It was an image that was more pungent, more symbolically loaded than any particular event; the picture focuses on a lone figure, yet it spoke thousands of hitherto unspoken words – words that were unspoken due to a systematic “silencing of northern Uganda.”¹⁰ I was moved to speak to the audience at the end. I got up on impulse, but spoke with difficulty because the whole matter, without even regard to “fault” or “responsibility” is so very tragic and its framing so very troubling. “I am from Uganda” I started. A great silence followed. I found some words, choked over the others, and gave in to the difficulty of the whole thing. There was not enough time to make sense.

My emotional response was not simply the result of the tragic situation represented. While the image on the poster could be considered stereotypical, the attention it suggested and the symbolism it generated were appropriate enough. But (as is all too commonly the case) the documentary makers had framed the issues around their own experiences so that the story ended up being about their anxieties in and for Africa; “disgusted and inspired” they took the approach of “see these people, how they suffer,” without any historical analysis and with very little understanding of how this situation had come about. The focus was more on their compassion than on the children or the events that had brutalized these children’s lives. I could hardly have been more bothered, annoyed even, my identity pricked, not least because I felt that the young Western whistle-blowers had elevated themselves to the status of heroes on the backs of

¹⁰ See, Laura Edmondson, “Marketing Trauma and the Theatre of War in Northern Uganda,” *Theatre Journal* (John Hopkins University Press) 57, no. 3 (October 2005): 451- 474.

unwitting victims, in many ways portraying the story in voyeuristic style. Abderrahmane Sissako, director of the impressive African film, *Bamako*, has the proper words:

It is impossible to describe, the total degeneration of the foundations that represented our societies' key values. To that we need to add, this flood of information we receive that only flows one way, at times it cancels out all our efforts to try to live as we really are. Because even within our imaginations, we are raped. They don't just take our resources, our work, and our money; they take our minds too. We have reached the best threshold of the human heartbeat. And now, in a totally biased manner, they come to observe this failure.¹¹

However, I could not deny that life in Uganda is framed by war. Where there was no war there was violence, which makes two different problems – that is, yesterday's victims can become today's perpetrators – as demonstrated by Mahmood Mamdani's inspired book, *When Victims Become Killers*, written in regard to the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda.¹² Critically, the warfare both consolidates and serves as an excuse for more random violence. Violence, then, is an attribute of and frequently a precursor to and aftermath of outright warfare, with its more explicitly declared antagonists. Arguably, Uganda is a paradoxical nation-state, at once the "pearl of Africa," and also the "blood-stained pearl of Africa."¹³ The Republic of Uganda (since the 1967 constitution) was fated to become, in the words of Okello Oculi, "a nation split by ethnic rivalries and imbued with an instinct for settling old scores."¹⁴

¹¹ Abderrahmane Sissako, *Bamako*, DVD, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako, Artificial Eye/New Yorker Films, 2007.

¹² See, Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 10.

¹³ The earlier phrase is loosely attributed to Winston Churchill and is used in his book, *My African Journey* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908) 197. Actually, Churchill states "Uganda is the pearl" Ugandan Blogger and writer Jonathan Musere shows that it was the explorer Henry Morton Stanley who wrote the phrase, "Uganda, the pearl of Africa," in 1898. Whereas the latter phrase is a parody of the same phrase, appearing in an archival text. See, "Uganda: The Bloodstained Pearl of Africa and Its Struggle for Peace," *DRUM*, (1994), Title Page.

¹⁴ See, Okello Oculi, "How Revolutionary Violence Entered Uganda's Politics," *Weekly Topic* (Newspaper, 11 January 1992), 9 and 18.

Night Commuters

WHATEVER its shortcomings, *Invisible Children* revealed to the world images of a hitherto mythical tale of children commuting every night, from the countryside of Acholi land, into the town, Gulu,¹⁵ to sleep on verandahs, under almost impossible conditions, in a bid to be safe from the ramifications of a two-decade long war that they did not start, and cannot stop. This natural instinct to survive earned them the tag, “Night Commuters,” this being a description of the pattern of living they had been subjected to: to seek refuge, every night fall, from the real and present danger of abduction and being forced into child soldiering and sex slavery. The children have become the subject of many bloggers, the theme of many NGO reports and documents, subjects for portraiture by photojournalists, and statistical figures of crisis; they are subject to cold nights on the stone floor, and those who could not muscle their way into sheltered spots suffered unpredictable weather factors for a more than a decade.

Despite my reservations, the image that drew me to *Invisible Children* had actually captured the famed one thousand words with some truth. It was an inconvenient truth, especially from a Ugandan viewpoint, but a truth nonetheless: silenced though the matter was, children in Gulu (as well as Lira, Pader, and Kitgum), northern Uganda, were faced with untold atrocities, actions, and a remarkable lack of support of their homeland. The children were in a state of fear and despair, in a forsaken place devoid of due care and peace. But the stated truth, because it was arrived at via the lens of “A Single Story”¹⁶ – really a situation more than a story, and devoid of narrative and nuance—marred the empathetic spirit behind the project.

The experience of having watched *Invisible Children* was as crucial to me as it was conflicting. On one hand, I was riled. Negative thoughts nagged at me. This was another version

¹⁵The *Invisible Children* documentary was shot in Gulu, however, the problem spread over large parts of the northern area of Uganda as far apart yet regionally close knit as: Lira, Kitgum, or Pader, hence the phrase, “the war in northern Uganda.”

of “the wretched African and redeeming white figure” model of representation. An issue presented as being about the “forgotten children of war” ended up being about three young Americans with a camera who set off for Africa – the destination point was Sudan, but the final point was Uganda. On the other hand, once I had gone beyond the point of being riled, positive thoughts worked on me. Seeing how long the crisis in my country had eaten at children whose misfortune was to be born into it, representational misgivings aside, *Invisible Children* was doing a necessary job – informing the world about their predicament. I reminded myself that University students in the USA have often been involved with injustices affecting young people in the world. For example Brown University students were active in crusading against the 1976 Soweto Crisis in South Africa, and in this case, they have set up a body, Uganda Action Movement. At other school environments as far apart as Washington and California, the *Invisible Children* video has caused awareness and reaction to the problem. But watching the video, the situation of the “Invisible Children” was told with certain exaggerations and sensationalism. To cite a seemingly trivial but revealing example, a chicken is slaughtered and abandoned to flap about till it dies. But that is food, not to be played with. As far as I know, people who slaughter animals for a meal, or trade, are trained how to do so. It is duly impressed upon the apprentice to have regard for the life being taken. However the images presented are there to reinforce the impression of a crude, heartless, and “savage” way of life. That ought to be a tired tale.

Both moved and conflicted, as a Ugandan I had to answer nagging questions that consumed me for long thereafter. Was this, ultimately, a true representation? And, to the degree that it was, how could I best respond? The packaging of the story aside, it was based on a terrible reality, more so for the children affected by the war-mongering of adults bent on grasping power at any cost. Many Ugandans had lamented Amin and decried Obote, but in post Amin and Obote politics, how could it be that the rest of us (in the south) were bragging about being able to sleep

¹⁶See, Chimamanda Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” *TED* (TEDGlobal, 2009 July-October).

at long last, while the children of other Ugandans (in the north) had to commute for several miles every night to be able to lay down a rib and rest without fear of being abducted? The children, as the video shows, were well aware of the horrors of life in abduction. Why were we shying from it? Locally and globally, nationally and internationally, why was it more important to tell the world that Africa (in general) had “a new breed of leaders” and that in Uganda (in particular) things had taken a turn for the better, but abominable to so much as mention that there were children paying a bitter price for the much-hyped revolution? The questions took hold of me, and would not go away: how did we come to this? And how had artists working in Uganda’s theatres and other performance sites both countered and contributed to this tragic narrative?

The Resultant Decision to Shift Topics

MAHMOOD MAMDANI suggests that,

African tragedies usually happen as it were in the dead of the night: not noticed, not reported upon. I got used to the fact that Africa is place where young reporters are sent, usually on their first assignment. It is like a laboratory, it is where you make your first mistakes, and if you are good enough you get transferred to some other place, “out of Africa.”¹⁷

I was already launched on a dissertation that would detail some of the ways that the “folk” traditions of Uganda had been utilized by contemporary playwrights, including myself, to interweave song, dance, and drama in process of theatre making. It would be relatively easy, and was a subject I was very familiar with. The image of the boy, however, mocked my project. I felt forced to change course, to take on the history and legacy of war in my country and how it had shaped (and sometimes, perhaps) misshaped the efforts of those who made theatre there in spite of, in response to, and as an integral part of this legacy.

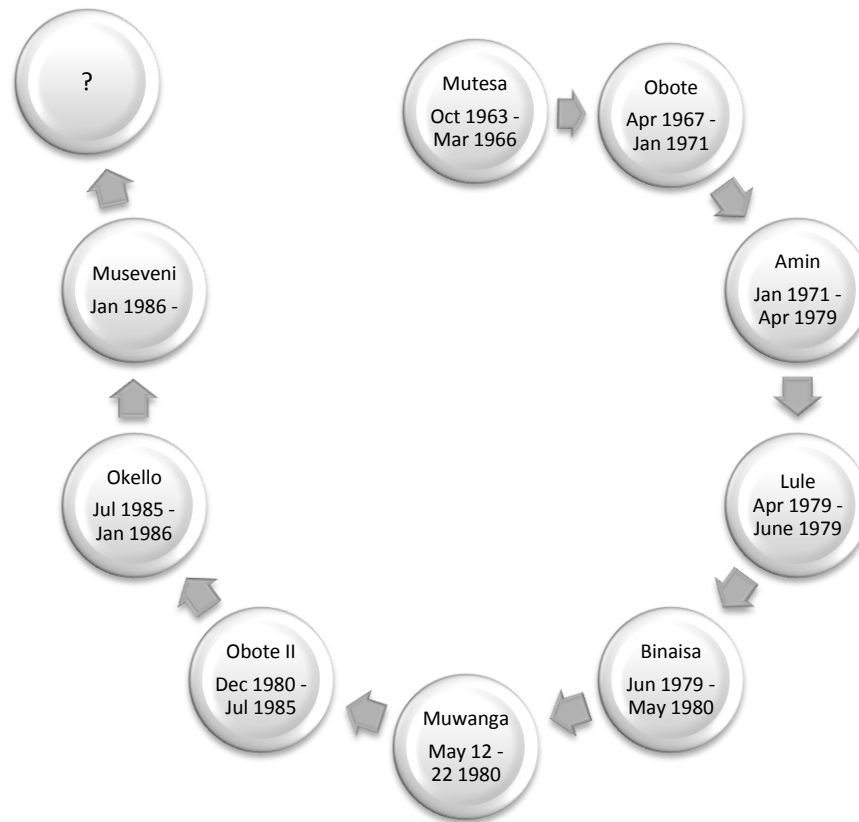
¹⁷ Mahmood Mamdani, Herbert Lehman Professor of Government and Professor of Anthropology Colombia University in New York, talking about his recent book *Saviors and Survivors*, (Online Broadcast, YouTube, March 27 2009).

The legacy of war itself is not easy to parse or explain succinctly.¹⁸ While focusing on theatre enactment and dramatic writing, the chapters that follow outline the warfare, showing the extent to which post-colonial Uganda is a country of coups and counter-coups. The legacy referred to, though, has deeper roots. To put under scrutiny Ugandan post-colonial rulers is not to forget the colonial rulers like Lord Lugard, “the English Idi Amin in the era of colonial conquest of Uganda,”¹⁹ who according to Okello Oculi “decimate[d] vast regions of Acholi, Bunyoro, Toro and Buganda in order to impose British morality and a colonial regime built on death and demoralization.”²⁰ If colonial rule used war, among other means, to establish its empire, post-colonial rule has not only sustained warfare, but has also progressively taken the practice to even more critical levels, both within Uganda and stretching beyond its borders.

¹⁸ See, for further details, Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1992); Oculi, “How Revolutionary Violence Entered Uganda's Politics,” 9 and 18; Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda, 1986-97* (Kampala: Fountain, Eastern African Studies Series 1999).

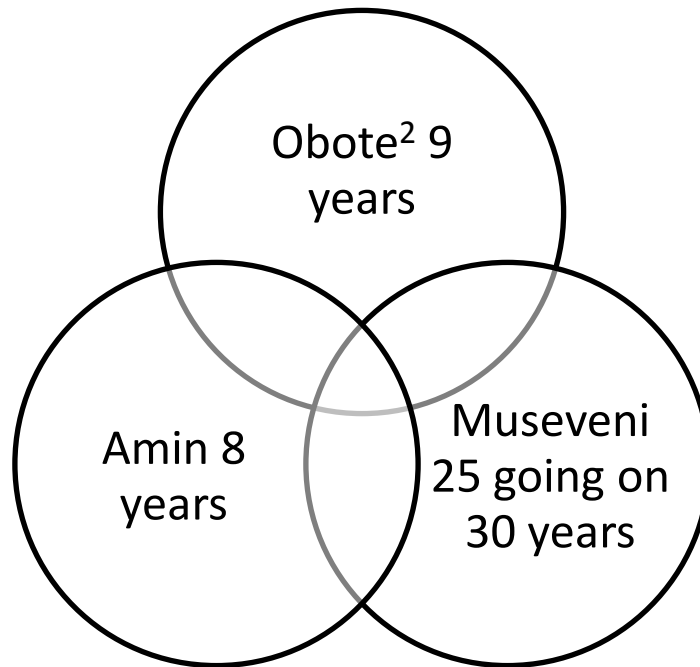
¹⁹ Oculi, “How Revolutionary Violence Entered Uganda's Politics,” 9 and 18.

²⁰ Ibid.



2. *Spiral of War = Legacy of War. Legacies become repetitive; effectively, they become the standard. The rulers are shown in order of succession. As will be detailed in the chapters that follow, certain patterns and attributes repeat spirally.*

Internally, the post-colonial rulers of Uganda are divisible into two: an inclusive club, naming all of the rulers brought to power by coups and counter-coups, as represented in figure 1, and an exclusive club, depicting those rulers who have figured most prominently in post-colonial history, shown in figure 2.

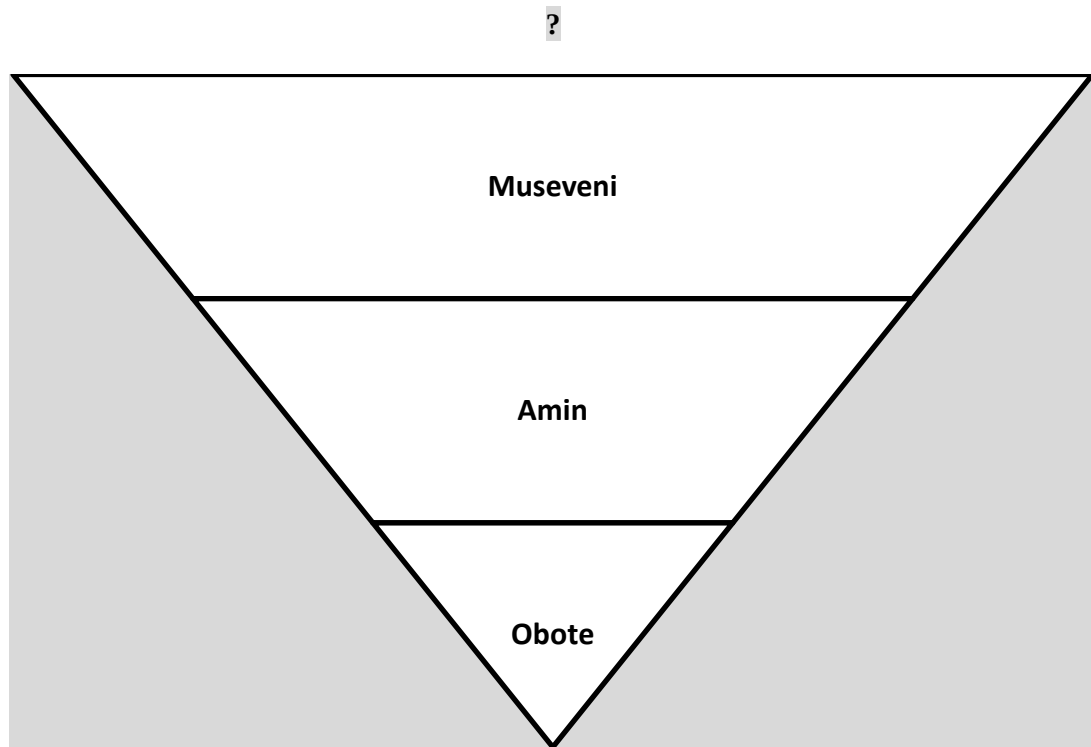


3. *The Unforgettable Trio: Uganda, a country beset by war, has had many Presidents in a relatively short span compared to its neighbors Kenya and Tanzania, but there are three the country may never forget: Obote, Amin and Museveni. Overlapping or interconnected relationships exist among the three men—including recourse to militarism, or war, to gain, retain, or show power.*



4. (Top) Obote, (Left) Amin and (Right) Museveni

Externally, the cycle takes on another shape, becoming triangular. Thus, instead of simply going round and round, the problematic legacy can be depicted as shedding its merry-go-round form and projecting outwards, so that the shape becomes a fan of sorts. The sphere of impact widens, in scale from the 1960s (at the bottom of this model) into the new millennium (at the top). Progressively, war has spread within Uganda, and has extended its reach to nations and diasporic figures beyond its borders.



5. *Fan of War: Obote = internal threat and threat to Congo < Amin = internal threat, threat to Kenya (South Africa, Israel), and war with Tanzania < Museveni = internal threat, also threat to Rwanda, Congo, Sudan and Somalia. I am very much indebted to Charles E Cobb, Jr. for this realization. The question is: what will the next bar look like? Will it shrink or expand?*

Uganda, then, is a country of coups and counter coups. Driven by “revolutionary violence”²¹ the numerous overthrows happen as: theatre watches, comments, negotiates repression, and sometimes intercedes in or precipitates the separate, though related, incidents and their outcomes. The continuing state of war frames and influences Ugandan performance practice, and, in particular, playwriting and theatrical production; conversely, theatrical paradigms and productions may sometimes influence the evolving political situation. Because many of the playwrights are born just before or just after independence, the theater practitioners are acutely aware of what Uganda has done, or failed to do with the dream of self-determination. So it is

²¹ Borrowed from Oculi who, recalling our history, writes of: "How Revolutionary Violence Entered Uganda's Politics."

inevitable that the influence of the state of war pervades Ugandan performing arts, and, in particular, Ugandan playwriting and theatrical production.

The problem of war in Uganda has worsened, progressively, beyond fathomable proportions leaving in its wake an extensive loss of human life, home establishments, and village settings as well as the wanton destruction of human dignity. The place has been ripped apart, and ordinary people forced into camps as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Before there were camps, people were living in their homesteads. The question is: why (and how) did a reported two million of these people end up in IDP camps?

Déjà Vu

IN 2002, on the outskirts of Lira town in Lango district, northern Uganda, I witnessed a sight I had only known about by remote means: hearsay, media coverage, and theatrical representation. I had gone there with Ntare Mwine, on account of the success of his one-man stage drama, *Biro* (discussed in Chapter 5). Alongside other Ugandan practitioners in the field of performance, Eva Tumwesigye, Eria Kiiza Lwanga, and Okurut, I was facilitating an Ntare Mwine led project: “See the Seed in the Tree.” The project was commissioned by AIDS related organizations, AIDS Integrated Model (AIM) and AIDS Information Center (AIC), and our task was to cultivate ideas for theatre as a life-skill and form of advocacy and reflection for people with AIDS (PWAs in NGO-speak). Despite my remote awareness of trouble in northern Uganda, I was hardly prepared for the revelations that we stumbled into that framed the intended project.

Come evening time, the verandahs of Lira town became crowded with people commuting to the town area to keep safe from the threat of the long-standing conflict between Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) versus Uganda People’s Defense Forces (UPDF). In fact, the IDP camps, that hitherto had sounded like they belonged to a mythical tale, were not too far from where we were located. We wanted to see “with our own eyes,” what the Internet, pamphlets, rumors,

eyewitness claims, and scanty media reports had reported regarding the problem of war in northern Uganda.

We got our wish. Soon, we were face to face with a memorable site of crisis. Men and women, boys and girls, herded together in an IDP camp; the lot subjected to deplorable and dejected conditions of being. The impact of the moment far outweighed any perceptions I had, up to this point, held in my imagination regarding problems in the north. Like many people in Uganda, I knew that things were bad there; tales of war and of terrible things happening in the northern region were about a decade and a half old by this stage. For instance, in 1996 I had read a booklet made by UNICEF and World Vision recording the personal experiences of up to a dozen boys and girls. But none of the listed sources of information had fully prepared my senses for the impact of the moment. The extent of the crisis was staggering; I remember a mass of people gathered under hopeless conditions: the mother who placed a child sick to the limit right before our faces; adults bathing in the open, while beside them a teacher tried to teach some of the young, seven in number; and the figure, covered from head to toe, that lay about lifeless, as far as I could tell, were it not for the other camp dwellers suggested otherwise to me. I asked how they were certain he was still alive. “If he was dead,” one of them assured me, “we would know.”

Whatever the hope (or reasons) for setting up the IDP camps, the reality is they are a haven for incredible despair. Cases of pedophilia, rape, AIDS, consummation of the union between adults before children, lack of school, abject poverty, high death toll, alcoholism, and overcrowding are but a few of the definable forms of dehumanization that arise. But the human spirit, the camp showed, has a tendency to refuse to be quelled. Beside the anomaly, a lady teacher taught a handful of the children. She said to us the war will not always be there, but the children will always need a future.²² The encamped citizens performed some mournful songs, revealing, in the process, the emotional as well as physical scars many of the participants bore, Mwine by then

²² I regret only that I noted and admired what she did as a teacher in the IDP camp without the presence of mind to take note of her name; the opportunity for follow-up was lost.

a well-known playwright and performer was on hand to document these surreal moments. The people in the camps implored us to get the word out, to let the world know. The plea suggests a belief in necessary help coming from beyond Uganda, from the European/Western world to be exact. This is a telling indictment on Ugandan indifference to the prevalent suffering. So, begrudgingly, I must admit that when three young men and a camera show up from America to reveal the case of the displaced and dispossessed masses of northern Uganda, with significant attention to the children, the project is, whatever its shortcomings and self-aggrandizement, some form of answer to the call of the victims.

Hoping for intervention from the West is an age-old pattern rooted in missionary times and stemmed in the colonial period. Globalization has come to take the place of colonization,²³ and Non Government Organizations (NGOs), the place of Missions. It has to be noted, despite the discernable exploitation, that in places, both Missions and NGOs have delivered for “the people” more than the people’s own representatives in terms of the distribution of scarce basic resources and crisis time intervention. Similarly, that actually is one of the plus points of *Invisible Children*: bringing wide attention to a long standing problem within Ugandan society by means other than the written form (important because audiences vary) and exposing an otherwise silenced problem.

Point of View

REPRESENTATION across plays, film, journalism, books, is a vital matter, too important to be left to one world’s perspectives of another. “The story we have to tell cannot told for us by someone else” states Achebe, “no matter how well gifted or intentioned.”²⁴ As avid a follower of Achebe as I am, my view differs a little bit on the matter. Our story can be told by another party; for me the question is where the storyteller stands.

²³ Phrase borrowed from Dr. Ian Clark, Kampala, Uganda.

²⁴ Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: selected essays* (New York, Anchor Books, 1989), 25.

The issue of viewpoint crops up in a number of Afro-centric writings. Celebrated Caribbean writer and philosopher (he denies this), George Lamming, in the aptly named essay, “A Way of Seeing,” reckons the way you see something shows the way you think.²⁵ And Kenyan activist Ngugi wa’Thiong’O echoes, “the way you see something depends on your point of view.” In more recent times, two compelling youthful African writers, thinkers and activists, Binyavanga Wainaina and Chimamanda Adichie have sustained the demand for a balance in presentational as well as representational issues.²⁶ In his enlightening and fearless collection of essays, *Hopes and Impediments*, Chinua Achebe, arguably the foremost flame-torch of self-affirmation in post-colonial Africa, candidly outlays “an image of racism” – hence my title for this chapter – in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.²⁷ To do this, notes blogger Mena [Odu], “Achebe moves from the world of the imaginary,” for which he is well known, in order to be able to play “another role as writer for his community,”

that of counteracting condescending Western attitudes about African reality; a posturing which claimed to promote the concept of the “universal” while simultaneously denying others equal ownership to it. The post-colonial writer was painted as “unredeemed and unregenerated” because of their “in-between” status: their immersion in Western culture had separated them from their “own people” (that is, the “real” Africans), but their “abortive effort at education” had not pushed them quite far enough into the world of the white man. Achebe turns this twisted logic on its head and asserts that the African writer’s stance between these two worlds places them in an ideal position to respond to and critique them far better than any Westerner...²⁸

Achebe’s footprints make for invaluable signposts. For Achebe, such signposts might read: “Reclaim the African Story” and, at the same time, “Mind the Image.”

²⁵ George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (University of Michigan: 1992), 56.

²⁶ See, Binyavanga Wainaina, “How To Write About Africa,” *Granta*, 2005; and Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story.”

²⁷ Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments*, 1-29.

²⁸ Mena Odu, “Achebe’s “Hopes and Impediments: A Review,” *Idaya Magazine: Global Issues From An African Perspective* (March 25, 2010).

Representational viewpoints between cultures have been and continue to be contentious. The long and critical story of war in Uganda needs to be told from as many points of view as possible. The wars to be addressed affect Ugandans, mainly, but that does not limit issues of concern, observation, reflection, reportage, study, or even questioning to Ugandans only. Indeed, “the central questions of dispossession and its consequences” – inescapable themes of the legacy of war – “are not matters for Africa alone to worry about.”²⁹ Successful plays like *Ruined* by Lynn Nottage and *The Overwhelming* by J.T. Rogers demonstrate that authors born and working outside of Africa can deal with African themes in a nuanced and well-informed way.³⁰

Ultimately, this is a history of post-colonial Ugandan performance in relation to its ongoing wars, and while I inevitably need to outline the country's post-colonial political history to do this, political history is not the focus of my work and the details of that history are available elsewhere.³¹ At the same time, this is not a full history of performance or even theatre in post-colonial Uganda (it cannot be); given my self-assigned task, I have focused on those plays and performances that deal most effectively or significantly with Uganda's civil strife, and some of the plays selected, while written by Ugandans, were written in exile and have never yet been performed on Ugandan stages; with repression, jail, and murder comes flight to perceived safer, or at least less hostile territories.

²⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (New York: Anchor, 2000), 59.

³⁰ See, Lynn Nottage, *Ruined* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009); J T Rogers, *The Overwhelming* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2006).

³¹ For example: Garth Glentworth and Ian Hancock, "Obote and Amin: Change and Continuity in Modern Uganda Politics," *African Affairs*, Vol.72, No 288: The Royal African Society, (1973), 237-255; John S Saul, "The Unsteady State: Uganda, Obote and General Amin," *Review of African Politics and Economics* (ROAPE) 3, no. 5 (1976): 12-38; Gad Wilson Toko, *Intervention in Uganda: The Power Struggle and Soviet Involvement : Reflections of a Ugandan Exil* (Pittsburgh, PA: University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1979); Hugh Dinwiddie, "The Search For Unity In Uganda: Early Days To 1966," *African Affairs* (Oxford) 80, no. 321 (1981): 501-588; Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey, *War in Uganda: The Legacy of Idi Amin* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Co, 1982); Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*; Oculi, "How Revolutionary Violence Entered Uganda's Politics"; Pat Hutton and Jonathan Bloch, "The Making of Idi Amin," *World History Archives*, New African, 2001 February 2001, <http://www.africasia.com/icpubs /na/feb01/cover2.htm>; Bailey's African Photo Archives, "Uganda: The Bloodstained Pearl of Africa And Its Struggle for Peace," *DRUM*, 1994.

Because of my personal involvement as playwright and citizen, my writing will move back and forth between standard academic writing and a more informal and personal use of the English language. I shall rely on both “emic” and “etic” materials trying for a balance in the narrative. To rely on only the “etic” (outsider) accounts is to risk missing out on a good amount of the “emic” (insider) version and vice versa. The external and internal sources need to be utilized together (like the black and white keys of a piano) so that what may be lacking in one direction is (one hopes and looks to the day) counter-balanced from the other direction. The Mongo, in Central Africa, have a proverb: “the root does not know what the leaf has in mind.”³²

For a sense of the root causes owed to colonialism, see for example, Jesse James Miller and Pete McCormack’s excellent documentary (Produced by Alison Lawton), *Uganda Rising*, a work that documents post-colonial perspectives as well. Other useful works on the post-colonial crisis include: Laura Edmondson, “*Marketing Trauma and the Theatre of War in Northern Uganda*”; Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda*; Adam Branch, “Neither Peace nor Justice: Political Violence and the Peasantry in Northern Uganda, 1986-1998.” The book, *Aboke Girls*, by Els De Temmermann and, more problematically, the documentary, *Invisible Children*, discussed in some detail above, are other well-known works, told from a European/Western point of view.³³

The nature of my Ugandan sources includes historians, researchers, scholars and some of the witnesses at certain events, and participants in the productions to be analyzed. Fred Golooba-Mutebi, Phares Mutibwa, Sam Kasule 2002, and Jessica Kaahwa, constitute some of the Ugandan

³² Quoted in John Ryle, “The Many Voices of Africa,” *Granta*, no. 92 (2005), 13.

³³ Pete McCormack, *Uganda Rising*, directed by Pete McCormack and Jesse James Miller (Produced by Alison Lawton, Mindset Media, 2006); Edmondson, “Marketing Trauma and the Theatre of War,” 451- 474; Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits*, (2004) 97-196; Adam Branch, “Neither Peace Nor Justice: Political Violence and the Peasantry in Northern Uganda, 1986-1998,” *African Studies Quarterly, The Online Journal For African Studies*, Vol. 8, No 2 (Spring 2005), 1.31; Els DeTemmerman, *Aboke Girls: Children Abducted in Northern Uganda* (Kampala: Fountain, 2001) and *Invisible Children*, directed by Jason Russell, Laren Poole and Bobby Bailey, 2006.

sources.³⁴ Also included is firsthand knowledge and interviews of real life players at different times, in different locations, during different events, the voices of Ugandans on the scene – which, when taken together, constitute the grounds of an “oral critical history.”³⁵

Mahmood Mamdani suggests that issues of colonial genealogy are key factors to the discourse on crisis in Africa. There is, of course, some truth to this claim, and, as noted at the outset, I will have to deal with colonial legacies. However, despite the yoke of colonialism and the damage done to African locales and peoples during that period, we live in post-colonial times, a reality that needs to be confronted in ways that leave little room for recourse to hiding behind the colonial encounter every time adults, for example, drag children into current wars. Our former colonizers and later (neo) imperial lords have always been around and about—sometimes for better, other times for worse.

But what about Ugandans: western intervention notwithstanding, what have Ugandans themselves done in the face of the legacy of war; have we simply looked away, conveniently gone about our lives, head in the sand, while round us crop the children of war; specifically, how have dramatists and theatre-makers responded to these unfolding events; and, to what effect? These are the recurring questions that guide the following chapters.

Nobody writes alone; and so I have learned from, and borrowed from many sources, some of which were not written with Uganda or even East Africa specifically in mind. For example, John Emigh’s account of the relation between performance and danger in Balinese society, serves well to further my own insights about related challenges in East Africa, Uganda to

³⁴ Fredrick Golooba Mutebi, *Collapse, War And Reconstruction In Uganda: An Analytical Narrative On State-Making*, Working Paper no 27 Development as State-Making, Makerere Institute of Social Research, Makerere University (Kampala: Crisis States Research Centre, 2008), 1-27; Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*; Kasule, "The Drama of Cliff Lubwa P’Chong” in *The Performing Arts in Africa*,” 91.

³⁵ Breitingner, "Introduction," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, 5.

be exact.³⁶ I subscribe to Barrymore Bogues view that, “every single shift of contemporary thought has had to wrestle with Fanon,”³⁷ whose resounding prayer I espouse: “O my body, make of me always a man who questions.”³⁸ Fanon is a good source of courage for facing habitually repressive countries like my own. Victor Turner and Richard Schechner’s theories of the complex, reflexive relationship of “social drama” to “cultural” or “aesthetic drama”³⁹ have proved useful to me, though with some qualifications necessitated by the situations of Ugandan dramatists working both in the country and in exile; issues of agency (and of repression) militate, significantly, against an uncritical deployment of their “relational functions” of “social dramas” and “cultural practice.” Although the issues surrounding violence, war, and performance are traceable, throughout Africa, as far back as colonial times (and even prior to these), my project focuses on post-colonial times. In addressing these times, I found Olakunle George’s writings about agency by Africans and in African societies of particular value.⁴⁰ I am interested in African agency, continentally and diasporically, especially regarding issues such as how the subject of war repeatedly informs performance and would-be performers in and from Africa.

But Africa not being a homogenous entity compels the need to zero down to clear-cut examples of how the vexing subjectivity of colonial rule is compounded by the troublesome era of post-colonial rule in Uganda, specifically. The lack of Ugandan voices and agency I encountered was a significant aspect of my decision to voice/record what I know and what I have

³⁶ John Emigh, “Culture, killings and criticism in the years of living dangerously: Bali and Baliology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. Tracy C Davis, 60-73 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³⁷ Barrymore Bogues, Harmon Family Lecture: “And what About the Human: Africana Political Thought and the Politics of Freedom,” Thursday, March 19, 2009, Brown University, Providence Rhode Island.

³⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967), 232.

³⁹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 211-218.

⁴⁰ Olakunle George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 73-196.

learned in the process of research and writing. Mahmood Mamdani's thoughts and discoveries about our East and Central African region are enlightening and inspiring.⁴¹ While Heike Behrend's objectivity is refreshing and reassuring in the knowledge that something close to truth, not subject to the political rhetoric of "change," is out there.⁴² I am drawn to Adam Branch for his commitment that "something is rotten" in Northern Uganda,⁴³ and to Laura Edmondson's candid observations about the IDP crisis at a time of great silence and silencing of the problem,⁴⁴ the intervention of NGO organs notwithstanding. Frances Harding and Eckhard Breitingner (2000), have done a good job exploring cultural trends and performance about a cross-section of African nations, while Mutibwa (1992), Andrew Horn (2002), Rose Mbowa (1976), Mercy Ntangaare (2000), p'Chong (2002), Sam Kasule (2002), George Seremba (2007) and Jessica Kaahwa (2004), have tilled well the ground of political history and cultural work in Uganda,⁴⁵ enabling my own digging to happen on fair ground, by providing details my yet young project may not have unearthed.

⁴¹ See, Mahmood Mamdani, "Congo: Preliminary Thoughts," *Social Text* 17, no. 3 (1999): 53-62; Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers* (2001).

⁴² Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits*, (2004).

⁴³ Branch, "Neither Peace Nor Justice" (2005).

⁴⁴ See, Edmondson, "Marketing Trauma and the Theatre of War," 453.

⁴⁵ See, Frances Harding, "Introduction," in *The Performance Arts in Africa: a reader*, ed. Frances Harding, 7 (London: Routledge, 2000); Eckhard Breitingner, "Divergent Trends in Contemporary African Theatre," in *New Theatre in Francophone and Anglophone Africa*, ed. Anne Fuchs, 3-16 (Amsterdam/Atlanta, 1999); Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, (1992); Andrew Horn, "Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga," in *The Performance Arts in Africa: a reader*, ed. Frances Harding, 97-111. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Rose Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingner, 220 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000); Mercy Ntangaare and Eckhard Breitingner, "Ugandan Drama in English," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingner, 226-227 (Kampala, 2000); Cliff Lubwa p'Chong, "Okot p'Bitek: The Cultural Matrix of the Acholi in his Writings," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingner, 95 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000); Sam Kasule, "The Drama of Cliff Lubwa P'Chong" in *The Performing Arts in Africa: a reader*, ed. Frances Harding, 247 (2002); George Bwanika Seremba, "Robert Serumaga And The Golden Age Of Uganda's Theatre: Slopsism, Activism, Innovation (1968-1978)," *PhD diss.*, (Dublin: University of Dublin Trinity College, 2007), 66; and Jessica Kaahwa, "Uganda Theatre: Paradigm Shifts," *SATJ* 18 (2004), 91.

Theatrical venues, religious bodies, and educational institutions have been derailed as social entities able to stand against political extremity. The last bastion of such resistance seems to be the “social media.” Repression has been (and arguably continues to be) a real and present impediment to issues of good governance, including freedom of expression, democracy, accountability, justice, and the quest for peace. History shows repression is a trigger for war, a landmine hidden in the ground – you go about not knowing exactly where it is at, but once the weight of your foot bears on it, nothing can stop what comes next: an explosion. And that is more or less Ugandan political history. Many of the plays dealt with below have sought to warn where the land mines are.

Things were not always gloomy and no state of affairs is permanent. Before things fell apart, Ugandan writers and artists “enjoyed a high international reputation,” notes Breitingner: “Uganda had succeeded in developing an institutional cultural framework—Makerere University, The National Theatre, and The National Museum—that was highly respected and supported by Ugandan society – or at least sections of Ugandan society.”⁴⁶ Some long-lasting projects and practical choices that outlived the innovators, such as “Travelling Theatre” and “The Inter School Drama Festivals” worked to delay the derailment. Harmony not conflict informed the relationship between artists and the rulers:

It cannot be disputed that the soul of a nation is to be found in the temple of its literature and arts... But it is not often realized that with regard to the achievements of, for instance, a statesman and those of a man of letters, it is the works of the latter which are remembered and preserved for generations. A study of history shows most clearly that between statesman and men of letters, it is the latter, once more, who always won unquestioning recognition for generations... As is often said, there is not exact measure of greatness of a statesman. But a man of arts—be he a poet, dramatist, composer, painter or sculptor—is judged in the main by definite and specific achievements: achievements over ignorance and prejudice, and in the fields of joy and enlightenment which he brought to the consciousness of generations...⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Breitingner, “Introduction,” in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, 1.

⁴⁷ From a speech delivered at the Makerere Arts Festival, November 1968, by President Milton Obote; Gala, January 1969 quoted in Okot p'Bitek, *Artist The Ruler* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), vii.

Still, the legacy of war, though in immediate terms a political problem, has often spelled erasure for cultural production: “play-scripts were lost or destroyed, the script documentation with the national theatre is less than satisfactory...photographs of productions were not systematically collected...”⁴⁸ The “ethnic” divisions within Ugandan society have proved a particularly lethal aspect of this legacy. Rifts created or intensified by the “divide-and-rule” policies of colonial overlords have never healed. The policy served colonial rulers well, and it has been sustained and manipulated by post-colonial rulers in Uganda, despite claims of democracy to the watching world and slogans of unity to the restless citizenry at election time. These divisions often find their way onto the stage in ways that both challenge and sustain them. The effect is evident both in acts of commission (as discussed in some detail in the chapters that follow) and of omission: performers in the south often appropriate Luo culture, but an authentic Luo production is a rarity. Sean Fine and Andrea Nix’s fine documentary, *War Dance*⁴⁹ depicts undertones of this anomaly. Unwittingly, the situation is such that just as in Ugandan political affairs, in matters of cultural production regionalism outweighs nationalism, even on the National Theatre stage.

General colonial and post-colonial studies tend to be focused on West and South Africa, but each place is special, hence my modest attempt to counter the little attention paid to how Ugandan theatre makers pay attention to the pressing issues related to recurrent warfare. And how, for all the acts of repression and brutalization, the models for living instantiated in theatre do matter. For instance, Ugandan political justice remains haunted by its theatrical heritage, as demonstrated by a 2007 Parliamentary session in which the opposition speaker invoked two

⁴⁸ Breitingner, “Introduction,” in *Uganda: the Cultural Landscape*, 5.

⁴⁹ Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine, *War Dance*, DVD, directed by Sean Fine and Andrea Nix, THINKFilm, 2007.

plays, *Julius Caesar* and *Biro* to question the Government's stance of clinging onto power regardless of the harsh lessons of history.⁵⁰

The narrative that follows, then, will join emic works (for the most part plays) with etic works (for the most part theoretical) to explore the interaction between performance and war in Uganda in historical, political and topical terms. The overriding question is: How does performance articulate war and how does war engage with performance? This dissertation may not change things in Uganda, but it will be a record of matters as I witnessed them, as others saw them to be, and as I learned and unlearned to regard them, far away from home.

⁵⁰ Parliament session at 2.48 p.m. in Parliament House, Opposite National Theatre, Kampala, The Deputy Speaker, Ms Rebecca Kadaga, in the Chair. The use of bold face is in the source: Leader of The Opposition, House Session, The Parliament of The Republic of Uganda (Kampala: Hansard, 2007). The proceeding, in part, was as follows:

PROF. [OGENGA] LATIGO: On 29 January 1986, before the steps of this very Parliament, Yoweri Museveni, upon being sworn-in as the President of Uganda, solemnly stated: This is not a mere change of guards. This is a fundamental change. Never again shall Ugandans... [Something is missing here on original script]. With that pronouncement, Ugandans received the NRM regime with such emotion, hope and love and they put all their trust in it. Yoweri Museveni became a cult hero; loved, adored, and imitated by many. Hope for democracy and freedom filled the air. As we look back now, can someone tell Ugandans what happened since? What went wrong and where that hope and love went? Is the incarceration of individuals, torture, tear-gassing of opponents and even killings by state agents the freedom and the never again that was promised to Ugandans in 1986?

Will intimidation, violence, police brutality, abuse of due processes and all that we are talking against bring back the love and trust that we were so freely given in 1986? Will ill-gotten wealth, oil money or even fear, buy long-term support and security for those now despised and hated by their victims? When will it be time to stop, reflect, and say no, not again?

For us, we are but just like the Roman soothsayer who told Julius Caesar, the great emperor, that: *Beware the ides of March*. We are also merely following the great Ugandan actor and playwright from the President's own district, Mr. Mwiine, who in his one-man prophetic play entitled *Mwerinde Biro* warned our dear leaders to Beware of time! Yes -(*Interruption*)

PROF. SEMAKULA: Thank you, Madam Speaker and I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition. Madam Speaker, is the honourable member of the Opposition in order to be quoting Shakespeare and threatening the head of state?

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER: Honourable member, Leader of the Opposition, Rule 41 says you should not introduce controversial matters because someone will ask what you are anticipating. Can you please, just conclude and we end this matter.

PROF. OGENGA LATIGO: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I mean no harm to anybody.

A Summary of the Chapters' Contents

CHAPTER ONE focuses on two specific instances of contemporary performance in Uganda, taking up issues related to performance and spectatorship in relation to the Hope North Camp in northern Uganda, aspects of national and international presence and activity there, and using interviews with the camp dwellers; along with explorations of the stage play, *Forged in Fire*, a collaboration between Camp founder Sam Okello, Laura Edmondson and Robert Ajwang, in juxtaposition to the stand up-piece of Kenneth Kimuli, *My NGO Girlfriend*, as performed outside of the National Theatre in Kampala.⁵¹ Kimuli is a popular comedian, and Okello a leading theatrical practitioner as well as the founder of Hope North—a different kind of camp from what was on offer (from the State) for formerly abducted children. Globalization is a core issue here. While colonial and indeed post-colonial staging often met resistance, the global stage seems to have been embraced. To be sure, globalism—like colonialism and post-colonialism – projects certain functionalities, often hegemonic in nature. Still, both Okello's work as a theatre-maker and at Hope North and Kimuli's comedy act, while they are radically different in nature, combine global and local concerns in ways that point to new paradigms for Ugandan performance, as well as providing evidence of a great divide between the current concerns of performers and spectators in the capital city in the south and those in the war-torn north.

⁵¹ Sam Okello, Laura Edmondson and Robert Ajwang, *Forged in Fire*, directed by Laura Edmondson, performed by Sam Okello and Robert Ajwang, Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, New York, July 22, 2008; Kenneth Kimuli, "My NGO Girlfriend" (unpublished, performed 2008).

Chapter Two deals with the colonial and immediate post-independence era. The chapter will begin with an account of why it is important to go back to the moment of Independence (*Uhuru*) in order to show how events from the end of the colonial era and the beginning of *Uhuru* can be understood in terms of drama and performance, and how these events have been explored by Ugandan playwrights. Important here is the rise of Apollo Milton Obote, the little known issue of what is behind his name, his 1948 portrayal of the role of the eponymous character of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and its impact on socio-political affairs and on his reputation as orator. Also useful is Okot p'Bitek's poetic *Song of a Prisoner*, a lament of colonial times reflecting upon Uganda in particular and implicating Africa in general. Another point of focus will be Byron Kawadwa's 1971 play – Uganda's entry for the 1977 FESTAC (Festival of Arts and Culture) in Nigeria – *Oluyimba Lwa Wankomko/Song of the Cockerel*, which became a foundational play in regard to the shape of things to come in Ugandan theatrical (and political) history.⁵²

Chapter Three deals with the struggle for power that resulted in a shift from Obote to Amin as President and Amin's reign of terror over Ugandan artists and intellectuals. It goes on to analyze John Ruganda's 1973 play, *The Floods*,⁵³ written in exile. The play was one of the earliest responses to "the Amin problem," and is early evidence of the ways in which certain playwrights wrote to warn about Amin, while the European and Western popular media and political powers "praised" him," and "consorted with him," before fixing on him as a figure of fascination and horror. This fetish-like fascination with Amin, for better or worse, made Uganda's problems global.

⁵² William Shakespeare, "Julius Caesar," *Sourcebooks* (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks MediaFusion, 2006); Okot p'Bitek, *Song of a Prisoner* (New York: Third Press, 1971); Byron Kawadwa, "Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko/Song of The Cockerel" (Kampala: Unpublished, 1971).

⁵³ John Ruganda, *The Burdens* (Oxford University Press, 1972).

Chapter Four engages with issues of the human condition in a State at war, the inevitable fall of Amin and the less predictable return of Obote, and the stage play by George Seremba, *Come Good Rain*,⁵⁴ written in 1993, based on the December 10th 1980 *Namanve* incident whereby a university student (author/performer Seremba) suffered a near death shooting on an otherwise historic occasion: the first Presidential election since Independence Day. The aim is to discuss the play, showing why or how it sheds light on the North/South problem back then, in the 1980s. Like the earlier play, *The Floods* (featured in Chapter Two) and the later *Forged in Fire* (discussed in Chapter One), *Come Good Rain* is a voice from the Diaspora, which whenever it is staged abroad both makes visible and expands upon the legacy of war in Uganda.

Chapter Five discusses “revolution,” highlighted by the ways that two Ugandan plays written after Museveni seized the reins of power address related issues. The plays at the center of this discussion are Alex Mukulu’s 1992, *Thirty Years of Bananas*,⁵⁵ crafted with the double-entendre of “bananas” in English on the one hand and in Luganda on the other making for a sharply satiric and engaging view of Ugandan history; and Ntare Mwine’s 2002, *Biro*,⁵⁶ a factual performance that portrays the after effects of war on the lives of lesser souls – led to believe they are fighting for peace – than the commanders and generals who wage the wars and often reap from the crisis, while the ordinary figures end up on trial in figurative and literal terms. *Biro* is one of the figures that set out to fight for a change in his country, but with time found himself facing his own personal war against HIV/AIDS and survival. In both cases, issues of Home and Exile rise to prominence.

⁵⁴ George Bwanika Seremba, “Come Good Rain” (Winnipeg: Blizzard, 1993). George Bwanika Seremba, “Come Good Rain” (Winnipeg: Blizzard, 1993).

Definitions of Terms for People and Places

THE LANGUAGES used in the various regions of Uganda follow different patterns in the naming of peoples and places than are common in Western languages. The following definitions may prove useful:

Uganda refers to both the current Nation-State and the Colonial Protectorate.

Buganda refers to the former Central Kingdom of colonial Uganda, now a region that is home to Uganda's capital city, Kampala.

Baganda refers to the people of *Buganda* (a *Bantu* group).

Bantu refers to a larger group of peoples in southern and central *Uganda* that includes the *Baganda*.

Luganda refers to the language of the *Baganda*; the alternative is *Kiganda*.

Muganda is the singular form of *Baganda*.

Ganda is a root word, sometimes used to refer to *Baganda* (the people) or to *Buganda* (the place).

Acholi refers to a *Nilotic* group of people living in northern *Uganda*.

Langi refers to a group neighboring the *Acholi* in northern *Uganda* (also *Nilotic*).

Nilotic is a term used for several related groups who live in and around northern *Uganda* (near the source of the *Nile River*).

Nilotes refers to *Nilotic* people.

Luo refers to the large ethnic group of *Nilotes*, found in *Uganda*, *Kenya*, *Tanzania*, *Congo*, and *Sudan*.

CHAPTER 1: CHILDREN OF WAR

*Children live – only children,
Ripeness already marks the beginning of death.*

-Fyodor Sologub.¹

PERFORMANCE – as a cultural practice, as a historical body of knowledge, and as a discipline in higher education² – is a useful framework with which to explore the legacy of war in Uganda. Put differently, the legacy of war troubles Ugandan society, but theatre and performance have been ever-present watchdogs of the crisis, acting both to shape and counteract that legacy. Key here is the intersection between war and performance – how the two forces wittingly and unwittingly fuel or draw from each other and, at times, contest the society's past, present and future. For whereas the society invariably breaks down due to the toll of war, (some of) the citizens variably use the subjunctive mode of performance to try to repair and rebuild their war-torn homeland.

War breaks down society with more ease than it takes to forge or build the same society. In Ugandan society we are hostage to war. What is worse, we have gone and spilled the war to the children. The evidence is glaring in the riling but hard to deny story conveyed in the documentary, *Invisible Children*.³ But in the end, it amounts to the story of the lions and the hunters: the glory of the hunt will always go to the hunters, until the lions get their own storytellers. No provenance necessary for that proverb, according to Chinua Achebe.⁴ Even the excellent *Uganda Rising* and the uplifting *War Dance* (documentaries about the same problem

¹ Fyodor Sologub, *The Created Legend*, Electronic, trans. John Cournos (The Literature Network, 1905), XIX.

² Shannon Jackson, "Genealogies of Performance Studies," in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, (Sage: Sage, 2005), 73-86.

³ Carol Mansour, *Invisible Children*, Documentary, DVD, directed by Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey and Laren Poole, Invisible Children, Inc. , 2006.

made by more experienced film makers)⁵ still leave a certain nagging question, a point of view missing or curtailed. What are Ugandans doing about the recurrence of war in their homeland? For sure, Ugandans are not altogether occluded in these works. You get to hear some of their voices. In *War Dance* the main characters are three Ugandan children of war. And Mahmood Mamdani is a key figure in *Uganda Rising*. But the acts of voicing something compared to producing something or of bearing a position compared to shaping a standpoint are worlds apart when it comes to the vital issue of framing the subject matter, in this case, “the war in northern Uganda.” Lacking material resources means of distribution, and (to a large extent) technical know-how, Ugandans themselves have not authored these well-intentioned documentaries; their voices are mediated. Simply put, what are the Ugandan perspectives on the problem of the country’s recurring wars, and how, in Ugandan performance, has the agency necessary to shape these perspectives been both exercised and denied?

In Uganda, theatre and war (and peace) have been intricately connected, though the individuals involved never set out to make it so. Saying “in Uganda” immediately raises a massive and more or less insurmountable question: is it Uganda the nation or (B)uganda the region? What is the relationship of Buganda to Uganda? The question is not new, and remains open; it is a question and a challenge that prominent theatre figures like Robert Serumaga and Okot p’Bitek – who happen to be from the “bifurcated” southern and northern regions of Uganda respectively – had to face soon after the dawn of independence from colonial rule.

Robert Serumaga: [T]heatre in Uganda should not start from the National Theatre in the city and then spread outwards, but should start from the villages, and then build up to the National Theatre in the city.

Okot p’Bitek: I agree. I like to see the National Theatre as a kind of workshop, where we do a lot of experimental work. The problem really is that in the countryside we don’t

⁴ Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (New York: Anchor, 2000), 73-74.

⁵ See, Pete McCormack, *Uganda Rising*, Documentary, DVD, directed by Pete McCormack and Jesse James Miller, Mindset Media, 2006; Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine, *War Dance*, Documentary DVD, directed by Sean Fine and Andrea Nix, THINKFilm, 2007.

have artificial drama or artificial music . . . and by “artificial” I mean things taken out of context. In the villages you have death dances and marriage dances and so on, and the poetry and the death dances are about death. And they are very real, and when people repeat these poems they are shedding tears at the same time. I would like to see that in the National Theatre we take this very real thing, very real drama from the countryside, experiment on it, and see how we can project this.⁶

As an institution sitting squarely in the capital city of Kampala in the once dominant region of Buganda, The National Theatre is significant both as a coveted site of actions and counter-actions for artists throughout Uganda, and also as an iconic center of cultural hegemony. See the contrasting views of Kaahwa and Mbowa as opposed to those of Cook and Macpherson. Mbowa and Kaahwa point out the repressive and hegemonic issues, while Macpherson and Cook propose the British establishment’s well-meaning intentions.⁷ I intend to navigate through the post-colonial histories of Ugandan politics and performance, aiming to illuminate not so much the complex political history itself, or even the full theatre history of that period and place, but, rather, to explore the ramifications of the ways in which the war-marked political history gave rise to plays and performances and the ramifications of the ways in which some of these plays and performances (but not all) became integral parts of Uganda’s political and social history

Many Ugandan plays address the conditions of war in which so many of us have lived. But I have to say it is the quest for peace, I believe, not war, which has been the driving force of Ugandan theatre in the postcolonial era. Many of the plays depicting war are actually expressions of a great yearning for peace.⁸ Ugandans want peace: we can’t wait. We’ve been waiting forever

⁶Quoted in Mercy Ntangaare and Eckhard Breitingner, "Ugandan Drama in English," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingner, 224 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000).

⁷Cf. Rose Mbowa, "Theatre and Political Respression in Uganda," *Research in African Literatures* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 87-88; Jessica Kaahwa, "Uganda Theatre: Paradigm Shifts," *SATJ* 18 (2004): 91-92.; David Cook, "The Makerere Free Travelling Theatre: An Experimental Model," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingner, 37-51 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000); Margaret Macpherson, "Makerere: The Place of The Early Sunrise," in *Uganda: The Culutral Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingner, 23-36 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000). Among other issues, Mbowa and Kaahwa note the repression and instantiation of cultural hegemony, while Cook and Macpherson point to the well meaning efforts of the British.

⁸ Plays I have witnessed, for example, *Abagiri/People from "Giri" [a fictional place]* (unpublished, performed 1987); *The Reject of My Country* (unpublished, performed 1992); and

for peace to come. In Bertolt Brecht's great drama, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, a similar yearning is expressed paradoxically: "What they could do with round here is a good war. What else can you expect with peace running wild all over the place?"⁹ While we are no strangers to paradox, Brecht's lines indicated sharply the thin line between war and peace. And there we were, thanks in part to the practices of theatre figures from faraway lands, and in part to our own playwriting, theatre, and other performance endeavors asking ourselves that particular question.

I am writing about the role of theatre in the face of war because theatre is (most often) my way of seeing the world – it's my favored lens. With so many vital records and documents lost or falsified during and after war,¹⁰ the stage has become an important way to chronicle the postcolonial Uganda in which I grew up. Many contemporary Ugandan playwrights and theatre artists were born just before or just after the country achieved independence from the British, in 1962, and they have been astute observers of what Uganda has done, or failed to do, with its dream of self-determination. They have watched as that dream was overshadowed by ruthless power struggles and widespread humanitarian crises. They know well the Ugandan landscape, the sites of celebration and violence, the dreams and nightmares of the people. When I say "they," I include myself. Thus I am participant, observer, and storyteller. The theatre has been my life's threshold, my way of investigating this troubled place into which I was born. Or perhaps it is

Omutaputa/The Interpreter (unpublished, performed 1996) to name but a few seemed to say: "We don't want this thing. We're exhausted with war; see the damage it has done?"

⁹ See, Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage And Her Children*, 1966 Edition, Ed. Eric Bentley, Trans. Lee Baxandall et al (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1955), 23. The given line was quite devastating in Luganda when we staged the play as, *Maama Nalukalala N'ezadde Lye*, in many parts of Uganda (1998 & 2000), [as well as at the Kennedy Centre (1998) and at the Grahams Town Festival in South Africa (2000)] The late Rose Mbowa befittingly played Mother Courage in what was the first authorized production of the play in an African language. And in part because she wrote *Mother Uganda and Her Children* in 1987, she was upon her demise eulogized as "Mother Uganda" in the Guardian Newspaper, UK.

¹⁰ Two examples: 1) The original State House in Entebbe – which contained many civic documents – was mysteriously torn down. There were no reports about this, no announcements made, no public knowledge. 2) Eyewitness accounts of the demolition of another institution, Uganda Television, tell of a tremendous amount of archival material destroyed with it.

more accurate to say this troubled time into which I was born – *A Time of Fire*.¹¹ That is the title of one of my own plays – a take on the subject of war in Uganda – which I wrote in 1999, inspired by two sources: a war song (in Swahili) of the 1981–1986 bush-war, “Moto Wa Waka,” that was composed to boost courage, but unwittingly recounts the collateral damages of war; and August Wilson’s compelling American play *The Piano Lesson*, produced in 1987, but set in 1936.¹² Through his characters, Wilson reflects upon the sort of time he (as an African American) was born to in a way that forced me to reflect upon the sort of time I (as a Ugandan) was born to. Undoubtedly, the Ugandan experience amounts to a different kind of “fire” from Boy Willy’s “fire” in depression era USA. The thing is: why is the rain beating us unable to put out the flames?

Ugandan artists have been venturing into this state of affairs and trying to confront this coral-headed problem since the nation-state’s inception, often at great personal risk.¹³ My generation of theatre artists is well aware of the sacrifices our forebears, our mentors, had to undergo including: jail, exile, and even death – Wycliff Kiyingi, Lubwa p’Chong, Robert Serumaga, John Ruganda, Okot p’Bitek, Byron Kawadwa – Kawadwa especially, for he was the first to pay in blood. Question marks hang over the manner in which Robert Serumaga (d. 1980) and Okot p’Bitek (d. 1982) met their ends. George Seremba (and others) believe Serumaga was killed. Lubwa p’Chong suggests that foul play was involved in p’Bitek’s end. Seremba and Lubwa were protégés of Serumaga and p’Bitek, respectively. Serumaga and p’Bitek were two of the earliest cases among the many Ugandans – not just artists – who died and who continue to die

¹¹ Charles Mulekwa, *A Time of Fire* (London: Nick Hern, 1999).

¹² August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (New York: Plume, 1990).

¹³For details see: Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 204-221 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000); Ntangaare and Breitingner, "Ugandan Drama in English," 224-235; Andrew Horn, "Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga," in *The Performance Arts in Africa: a reader*, ed. Frances Harding, 97-111 (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Sam Kasule, "The Drama of Cliff Lubwa P’Chong” in The Performing Arts in Africa," in *The Performing Arts in Africa: a reader*, ed. Frances Harding, 243-257 (2002).

under mysterious circumstances in post-colonial Uganda. There are, for example, almost as many stories of the cause of Kawadwa's death as there are tellers. One consistency is that he was picked up from the National Theatre in 1977 Artists' Club (now Musicians' Club), in broad daylight. The other is that he was found butchered. The who and the why, between the what, vary from account to account: the most consistent version is that Idi Amin's hit men did the job; some people blame it on professional (artistic) rivalry and jealousy; while other people suspect it was someone else, not Amin, who sanctioned the murder, but dare not say any more. In any case, Amin, by his reign of terror, rendered any of the conditions that led to his brutal deed possible. Moreover, considering how many other people died at the whims of Amin, he is perhaps the most plausible culprit.

Kawadwa was a key figure in musical theatre and Luganda-language opera in the 1960s and 1970s, until his life was brutally ended. Although he is credited a central role in the setting up of the enduring but often changing inter-school theatre festivals in which competing plays were in English (with songs in any language), Luganda was the operational language for his own productions. Of about 57 local languages in Uganda, Luganda is the most widely spread, though English and Swahili are the country's "official" languages. Swahili is still being resisted by certain sections of Ugandans who argue that the language brings back bad memories (of soldiers and thugs using the language while brutalizing people during war times). This argument carries considerable weight, but becomes questionable in as far as the said groups of Ugandans then proffer their own languages as the alternative. The rest, wary of further subjugation along hegemonic lines – and especially leery of Luganda's claims to pre-eminence – then derail the debate. And so the contestation of the National language became one of the thematic pillars in Alex Mukulu's, *Wounds of Africa*, and Charles Senkubuge carried off that one pillar (Mukulu's play involved several issues), and made a successful stage play, *Omunaala/The Tower [of*

Babel].¹⁴ But whereas the play worked well as an aesthetic drama, in the arena of the social drama, the issue remains contentious, unresolved, and appears to have been set aside to cool off, in no man's land.

Of course, language was but one of the issues we wrestled with. From a long list of issues including, say, misrule, family affairs, killer diseases, or the burdens of taxation, my core concern has become the subject of war and how it has overshadowed the state of life in Uganda.

The problem spreads and shifts from time to time, place to place; however, the town of Gulu in the north and the city of Kampala in the south are epicenters of the conflict. Like the English novelist Charles Dickens' comparison of the paradox of life in France and in Britain during the French Revolution in, *A Tale Of Two Cities*, the polarity between Gulu town and Kampala city – a product of the forced unification and then “bifurcation” of northern Uganda and southern Uganda – amounts to a tale of two contrasting and frequently warring regions. In part the result of the well-known “divide and rule” tactic, this situation, so acute and painful in the present moment, like so many other situations in contemporary Africa has roots that go back to the colonial period, and have been sustained in the post-colonial times.

In the narrative that follows, I focus on the National Theatre not necessarily to spotlight the capital city, Kampala, or to obliterate performance practices from elsewhere in the country. Rather, it is to concentrate on a vital focal point of Ugandan theatrical and cultural practices. As noted by Elizabeth Ayot, a peace-building educator from Gulu in northern Uganda, the Uganda National Cultural Center and National Theatre is a coveted theatrical venue that many practitioners dream of arriving at, no matter what part of Uganda they hail from; it is the “Mecca” of theatre in the country.¹⁵ It is also a space where the stresses and strains on the Ugandan

¹⁴ Alex Mukulu, *Wounds of Africa* (unpublished, performed by Concern International, National Theatre, Kampala, 1990); Charles James Senkubuge, *Omunaala/The Tower*, directed by Andrew Benon Kibuuka (unpublished, performed by Bakayimbira Dramactors, Pride Theatre and Pride Theatre, Kampala, 1992).

¹⁵ Personal communication, email, August 31 2010.

imagination of itself as a Nation are fully evident. Other hubs of action – like *Mato Oput* (a justice system of traditional ritual geared toward reconciliation between conflicting parties in northern Uganda communities lately created in the wake of the long war in northern Uganda); other projects, like Hope North, that cater to the reintegration of formerly abducted child soldiers; the efforts of smaller organizations such as schools, community-based centers, and churches; or the annual “theatre to the people” programs at Makerere University—complement this case study, as well as providing other potential chapters of Ugandan theatre history which are appreciated, but cannot be delved into here for reasons of space and focus.

By focusing on a select number of theatre and performance products from an arena featuring both a vast output of activity and considerable conflict of interests and agendas, I aim to show the role of performance in articulating the problem of war, and how war engages with performance in Ugandan society. I will not, however, hesitate to move outside of the walls of the National Theatre when it allows me to better pursue this aim. Given their contrasting tones, the tragic stage drama, *Forged in Fire*, by Sam Okello, in juxtaposition to a standup comedy act, *My NGO Girlfriend*, by Kenneth Kimuli, will serve to exemplify contemporary performance activity and to set the stage for the narrative of cultural history that follows.

A general note: Ugandan theatre artists adopted some of the colonial trappings, yet it seems that creating “theatre for a variety of cultural functions,” to borrow from Brian Crow, that to effectively “use the stage to define and affirm [our] people’s cultural ‘personality’ – in the face of continuing cultural, economic, and political subjugation,” such theatre, challenged by the “biases of metropolitan or mainstream history,”¹⁶ could only be reached when we drew on the traditional African sensibility and traditions of performance as well. Thus, despite the best efforts of the British, theatrical performances in Uganda were never fully Anglicized. Instead, a syncretic form of theatre was born – one made of both indigenous and imported forms. For even as they

¹⁶ Brian Crow and Chris Banfield, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

were being taught that Shakespeare was the thing with which to make theatre, Ugandan artists knew that addressing the needs of “the people” was what makes theatre vital. And even while the British were insisting on etiquette such as silence during performances, Ugandan artists realized they could not reach the people using a strict Western prescription. In fact, they had to resist that strict prescription in order to honor, validate, and move people. So they forged a bridge between the two traditions: they embraced Western theatre methods without losing sight of traditional African modes. They did not deny completely the merits of the European theatre, but they also did not deny or forget the merits of the Ugandan forms. *Thirty Years of Bananas*, for example (one of the focal points of chapter five), was successful in part because it blended Western and native Ugandan forms, languages, and themes into one play. This was the crucial development in Ugandan theatre and it emerged both in spite of and because of our subjective colonial history. When we realized we could draw on aspects of the colonizer’s form while still climbing down into the granary of native folklore and values, contemporary Ugandan theatre artists realized plays of consequence. As already noted, many of these plays dealt with the problem of war, and even more with the yearning for peace. Ironically, one of the plays that deals most effectively with these issues has not yet been produced in Uganda.

Exile At Home

OKELLO KELO SAM may not know when he started thinking about his play *Forged in Fire*,¹⁷ but I think I know. Okello is a close friend of mine; we went to school together, and he often came to me with dramatic, defining declarations like: “I’ve seen her! The woman I’m going to marry!”

¹⁷ Sam Okello, Laura Edmondson and Robert Ajwang, *Forged in Fire* (Unpublished, 2005). Okello is one of Uganda’s leading theatre artists, famous for his unique mix of music, dance, and drama. He worked for many years with *Ndere Troupe* at Ndere Center, a theatre as prestigious as the National Theatre. Edmondson is an American scholar and playwright whose work focuses on East Africa. Ajwang’ is a Tanzanian musician and dancer, trained in East African choreography, as well as an English-Swahili translator.

Once, in 2000, Okello, who is usually cheerful, came to me wearing a pained face, and told me a story. He had gone home to the North, and his mother had cooked a meal for him and put food on the table. But before he could eat it, there was shooting outside, and she started crying. She put him out of the house before he could eat. He tried to insist, but she cried and forced him out for his own safety. Okello declared to me then and there that he was going to move his mother out of the North because he couldn't bear her living in a place where he couldn't sit and eat her food. I believe it was this frustration with disruption – disruption of family, of ritual – that sparked *Forged in Fire*, a play that synthesizes Western and Ugandan theatre practices to very different effect than say, *30 Years of Bananas* (Chapter 5). The inability to commune meaningfully with his own mother, the inability to carry out certain normal social functions satisfactorily, the social strife that had engulfed his cradle land—these became unacceptable to Okello, and he responded by developing this intensely intimate play.

Forged in Fire is a performance born from collaboration among Okello Kelo Sam, Laura Edmondson, and Robert Ajwang'. Written in English in 2005, it has thus far only been staged in the US, at universities in New Hampshire, Florida, and New York, and is always staged as a work in progress. Okello plans to stage it in Uganda eventually; but from the beginning he felt it was important to reach Western audiences, including, as he told me, “scholars and the people who shape international politics and political dealings” and “mothers – the pain of a mother in USA, Europe, or Africa is the same [...] I wanted the ordinary American to see the situation from a more all-round perspective and not just that we have a mad man call Kony killing children. Why has this illiterate man been able to abduct children for twenty years and defeat the sophistication of scholarship, science, and modernity?”¹⁸ *Forged in Fire* illuminates the *system* that has allowed this to happen and portrays the humanity of ordinary Ugandans with whom people everywhere

¹⁸ Okello, Sam. E-mail correspondence with the author. October 16, 2008.

can empathize. But because this is so, it's all the more reason for staging the production at home in Uganda.

Forged in Fire is the tale of a northern Ugandan man and his painful search for peace. The main character has married a woman from the central region of the country and moved there with her and their children. He has started a new life, undisturbed by the violence of the North, but the peace and order outside belie the war and chaos he feels inside; he is not at home in this new place, and he cannot rest.

The play is a more or less autobiographical one-man show. Okello plays all of the roles, including the main character (called Okello), a tour guide, and a rebel commander. While one-person performances were common in pre-colonial Uganda, the "Shakespeare generation" was not at all used to it, and Okello was reaching back into tradition by employing this form. What I find significant about one-person shows, in terms of peace-building, is that they involve an intense version of the kind of "role-switching" commonly employed in native ritual performance (as well as in many postmodern performances in the West). One person must take on many characters – often playing people of various races, genders, persuasions – and must play them all well. It requires empathy and imagination not only from the performer, but also from the audience, who will be pushed to see each character's humanity and commonality through the vehicle of a single actor (although it should be noted that the musician Robert Ajwang' is also onstage throughout the performance, playing music and occasionally interacting with Okello or with the audience; in this sense, the play is not strictly "one-man.")

The world of *Forged in Fire* is simple, the stage scattered with common objects (such as a clay pot, a safari hat, a military cap, and a small canvas sack). However Okello's crisis over his homeland, we soon discover, is quite complex. While he has established a new life in the central region of the country, he longs to fulfill a crucial northern ritual, namely to bury the umbilical cords of his children in his homeland:

OKELLO

We do not celebrate birthdays.
 We celebrate the burial of the umbilical cord.
 Every year, they build a shrine around the spot
 where the child's umbilical cord is buried . . .
 It's a special day
 All of the attention is focused on you
 you are the special child.
 They wake you up early
 they bathe you
 they sprinkle you with herbs
 the elders come and give you
 the best smile of their lives.
 The elders drink alcohol from a pot
 and then they spit it on you . . .
 like this.

He turns to Robert.

Omera. [Hey man]

ROBERT
Omera.

OKELLO
 May I?

ROBERT
 Why not?

Okello takes a swallow of water and spits it on Robert, who shows his enjoyment through a burst of drumming.

ROBERT
Apwoyo matek. [Thank you.]

OKELLO
 You see? It is a blessing.¹⁹

Okello cannot bury his children's umbilical cords in northern Uganda, where peace has broken down. For his people, the ritual of burying the umbilical cord is so essential to a sense of home, and the national boundaries instituted during colonialism are so insignificant, that Okello feels virtually exiled in this central region of Uganda. "I am in a foreign land," he says. And he proceeds to compare:

¹⁹ Okello et al., *Forged in Fire* (unpublished).

Here in America
 people leave their home and get a new job
 and that place becomes their new home.
 I can live in Kampala and work in Kampala
 but that is not my home.
 Here you pledge allegiance to the flag
 there you pledge allegiance to the place
 where your umbilical cord is buried.²⁰

Forged in Fire is, thus, a story of how war can disrupt rituals and violate traditions, how it can keep people from performing the acts that are most sacred to them and most important to their sense of belonging and communion with ancestors. That Ugandan society was ruptured in this way during colonialism is a painful fact, but that deepening of that rupture during the postcolonial era is even more painful.

As in Okello's real life, the main character of *Forged in Fire* decides at a certain point that he has to move his mother out of the North, for her own safety. This causes him additional pain. He composes a song that serves as some sort of balm to suffering, and sings it to endure the pain of dislocation.

The play deals with at least two other major themes: the role of the international community – particularly America – in watching this suffering happen and the tragedy of children in the North being abducted and brainwashed into soldiers. Okello tackles the first issue through the character of a Ugandan tour guide who is taking a group of American tourists around the country. As the group visits game parks looking for their “exotic” safari experience, the audience sees themselves, now cast as curious but voiceless tourists, in the context of modern day Uganda:

TOUR GUIDE
 Welcome to beautiful Uganda, the friendliest country in Africa!
 Gifted by nature.
 The land of the source of the Nile
 the land of the mountain gorillas
 the land where the East African savannas meets the West African jungle.
 Is this your first journey?
 Have any of you been to Uganda before?

²⁰ Ibid.

The Tour Guide interacts with the audience, depending on whether any of them raise their hands.

You are a special group of people to have come here.
 Very, very special.
 You saw past the stories of Idi Amin
 AIDS
 Ebola virus
 the murdered tourists near the Congo border
 the travel advisories from the US state department
 you heard the stories and came anyway
 to see what a beautiful place Uganda can be.
 We are a stable country now
 everyone says so
 the IMF
 the World Bank
 even your very own
 George W.
 has come to visit us twice.
 Twice!
 We are very blessed.
 No need to be worried. We haven't had Ebola since 2001.
 I shouldn't have mentioned it. Forget all that I said.
 A dance will cheer you up.²¹

Like Kaleekeezi, the museum attendant in Mukulu's *Bananas*, the tour guide is a bit of a buffoon – but knows what he's doing. The guide panders to the tourists (as so many people are compelled to do), but also seems to be mocking them. The tourists are portrayed as clueless, believing whatever the guide tells them. In this way, the play critiques at once Uganda and the international gaze on Ugandan misery; it envisions the country as part of a system of both global and local neglect and oppression.

The play tackles the issue of child soldiers as Okello's character goes in search of his brother, who has been lost to the war. We see a commander who has abducted young people from their villages and is in the process of brainwashing them into "defending their people":

COMMANDER
 Recruits
 Look around you.
 The weak ones were cut down like vegetables.
 You are the only ones left.
 You have pulled many thorns from your feet.

²¹ Ibid.

You have drunk urine when there was no water.
 You have learned not to cry when you are beaten.
 You have killed with your hands.
 You have persevered.
 You understand our mission.
 You understand that for decades
 The government has tried to decimate the Acholi people.
 They sent soldiers.
 They sent AIDS.
 They sent Ebola virus.
 They wanted to do to us what they did in Rwanda.
 They wanted genocide.
 But the Acholi
 Are God's creation
 Whom he loves very much.
 So he has chosen you.
 And you have answered that call.
 You are the saviors of your people.
 You can lay an ambush.
 You can set a landmine.
 You can shoot down a motorcar.
 A military helicopter.
 A neighbor.
 Your aunt.
 You are no longer recruits.
 You are soldiers.
 And as soldiers
 You deserve a reward.²²

As with *Bananas*, I think the greatest challenge *Forged in Fire* faces is expanding its reach – finding more audiences. The play has not – and I hope it is merely a case of not *yet* – received the attention it deserves or reached all of the audiences it could reach. Structurally, the play fits well into what might be deemed a glocal lens: it is local and global in scope.

I can imagine people in northern Uganda seeing this play as a much-needed public acknowledgment of their suffering and a support for their yearning for peace. I can imagine the play being staged in Kampala as a wake-up call about the suffering of northern people. I can also imagine the final script as a text for study in classrooms around the world. And finally, I can imagine it being staged throughout Africa, and throughout the world, to stimulate conversation about the suffering of child soldiers and the impact of war on families and communities.

²² Ibid.

Asked about the future of his work, Okello says: “I think that my campaign for peace is starting.”²³ Even as I remain unsure whether he has answered the question asked of him or not, I hope, earnestly, that Okello’s stated campaign will come home to Ugandan audiences.

Okello’s stance brings to mind Turner and Schechner’s depiction of the reflexive relationship between “social dramas” and “cultural performances.” Schechner’s infinity loop diagram shows how, “the hidden structure of one is the visible structure of the other.”²⁴ Here is Turner’s more detailed commentary:

Note that the *manifest* social drama feeds into the latent realm of stage drama; its characteristic form in a given culture, at a given time and place, unconsciously, or perhaps precociously, influences not the form but also the content of the stage drama of which it active or “magic” mirror. The stage drama, when it is meant to do more than entertain—though entertainment is always one of its vital aims – is a metacommentary, explicit or implicit, witting or unwitting, on the major social dramas of its social context (wars, scandals, institutional changes). Not only that, but its message its rhetoric feed back into the *latent* processual structure of the drama and partly accounts for its ready ritualization. Life itself becomes a mirror held up to art, and the living now *perform* lives, for the protagonists of a social drama, a “drama of living,” have been equipped by aesthetic drama with some of their most salient opinions, imageries, tropes, and ideological perspectives. Neither mutual mirroring, life by art, art by life, is exact, for each is not a planar mirror but a matricidal mirror; at each exchange something new is added and something old is lost or discarded. Human beings learn through experience, though all too often they repress experience, and perhaps the deepest experience is through drama; not through social drama, or stage drama (or its equivalent) alone but in the circulatory or oscillatory process of their mutual incessant modification.²⁵

The role of cultural practices vis-à-vis political forces in certain places – notably those driven by extreme tensions and marked by political repression – needs to be considered here, along with the dilemma facing would-be authors of such cultural products. Indeed, as Schechner and Turner suggest, many plays (and songs, etc.) are influenced by and in turn may influence political events. *Forged in Fire* would seem to be a play that corresponds well to the figure eight loops between “social dramas” and “cultural performances.” It responds critically and creatively

²³ Okello, Sam. E-mail correspondence with the author. October 16, 2008.

²⁴ See, Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 214.

²⁵ Turner Victor, (1985: 300-1) quoted in Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 216.

to the war in the North, functioning reflexively in the “subjunctive” and making visible what may be invisible in social process. There is, however, a key difference with the model as presented in that Okello has not (perhaps only not yet) staged the play in his homeland. The loop has not been closed. In hesitating to produce the play locally, Okello’s action/inaction points to what the Turner/Schechner model leaves out: in certain situations, “cultural performances” are folded into the political/societal events themselves. This happens in rituals (in so far as they are efficacious), and it also happens when plays directly prompt or counter actions in the political sphere – when they themselves are, in effect, actions within the political sphere – and when playwrights are responded to by those in power as political enemies or allies, or even when playwrights are influenced in their actions because they are mentally aware of such responses being accorded other practitioners. Perhaps the fate of some of the pioneers in our chosen field is not lost on Okello; or perhaps that misstates the reason for the play’s notable absence from the national stage. Okello won’t be pinned down on this point. Whatever the case behind the play’s absence, though, Okello has found other, more direct modes of social and cultural agency within Uganda. The counter-balance to the play’s lack of a Ugandan production maybe that *Forged in Fire*,

...[C]hronicles the formative experience that led Sam to establish, in 2003, Hope North, a 40-acre resettlement village for more than 160 orphans, displaced children and about 50 adults in the northwestern corner of Uganda. A school, farm and bakery, it is also the future site of the Peace Studies Institute. It took LRA’s kidnapping and killing of Sam’s younger brother (who was snatched from his bed in his boarding school in 1996) for Sam to realize that he had to do something--and that theatre could play a significant role in resisting the conflict and aiding children abused and traumatized by the war.²⁶

Thus, a fruitful analysis of *Forged in Fire* in relation to Okello’s social concerns would do well to explore not only the text itself but also Okello’s Hope North venture, which functions to provide a new “home” for former child soldiers and abductees—now returnees into society – as well as providing an extension of Okello’s efforts in wrestling with the crisis of war in Ugandan society.

²⁶ Randy Gener, "East Africa Remakes The World," *American Theatre* 25, no. 9 (2008): 28-29.

It is not at all clear that he could pursue this venture if his play was staged at the National Theatre.

Hope North

I VISITED HOPE NORTH in August 2007. I was not the only visitor. The residents, teenagers mostly – the drama and ordeal of their lives is of tragic proportions – sing and dance with a great deal of spirit upon arrival as well as upon departure of the visitors. The enthusiasm does not seem to wane. The energy is sustained or bettered, rendering the performance an integral and impressive part of the whole set up: it is as important to the Hope North establishment as are the other activities at the site.

Located along the road to Kampala city from Gulu town (or to Gulu from Kampala depending on where you are coming from), near the trading centre of Bweyale and accessible by a bus stop along the route, the Hope North project has a only few necessary buildings set down in a countryside with trees and gardens amidst a lush green atmosphere. Plus: a soccer field (football in this part of the world). There are well-made, hut-like brick houses, and also a traditional story telling arena marked by a campfire place. The buildings are set up with education in mind. And there is a foundation stone bearing the name of Forest Whitaker, star of *The Last King of Scotland*. The connection between the American actor and the Ugandan children of war started during the 2006 movie based on Idi Amin. The film contains a cultural dance scene, which features Whitaker performing with the Hope North boys and girls in a moment depicting Amin's quest to be seen as "a man of the people."²⁷ Whitaker prepared for that scene and learned

²⁷The phrase is borrowed from the title of the 1966 Chinua Achebe book, *A Man of The People*. Growing up in a postcolonial African society newly coming to terms with "the winds of change" from the colonial encounter, I often heard the expression during the linguistic "sociometric process" of quoting Achebe rather than, say, Shakespeare; or other African writers, where previously European writers held sway.

the dance from the Hope North residents. From that experience, an ongoing relationship developed between Whitaker and Hope North.

If the name of the location denotes hope, the people present inspire it. The visitors are a mixture of theatre arts students and professionals from the USA and Uganda, including Professors and theatre activists like Erik Ehn, who working together with Jean Pierre Karegeye of Rwanda is one of the brains behind, Arts in the One World (AOW), and Laura Edmondson, author of *Marketing Trauma and War in Northern Uganda*.²⁸ The two Americans were there together with Ugandan counterparts Deborah Asiimwe, author of the stage play *Forgotten World*,²⁹ and Sam Okello himself. It is Okello who has brought us all together: the people behind the staged the drama, the visitors, and the children of war; it is he who has worked with the former child soldiers to create the welcoming ritual we have just witnessed.

Later, after independently visiting and moving around in the artistic circles of the region, Ehn wrote a play, *Maria Kizito*. I was not there, but I hear John Bosco Kyabaggu directed the play in Uganda, and Edmondson has written about it (Ehn's play, not Kyabaggu's production).³⁰ More importantly, Ehn set up the AOW program, which explores bi-annually – in the spring season (USA) and in the summer season (East Africa) – the intersection between art and conflict. The project pulls and pools artists, scholars, and activists coming from differing cultural backgrounds to share praxis and thought, as well as experience. Laura Edmondson quotes Claudia Bernadi on the undertaking:

The most inspirational aspect of the recent conference at Cal Arts is the confirmation that we may be creating, together, the kernel of a new stage of the world [where] to exercise

²⁸ See, Laura Edmondson, "Marketing Trauma and and the Theatre of War in Northern Uganda," *Theatre Journal* (John Hopkins University Press) 57, no. 3 (October 2005).

²⁹ Deborah Asiimwe, "Forgotten World" (Unpublished, 2009).

³⁰ Laura Edmondson, "Genocide Unbound: Erik Ehn, Rwanda, and an Aesthetics of Discomfort," *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 1 (March 2009): 65-83; Erik Ehn, *Maria Kizito*, directed by John Bosco Kyabaggu, National Theatre, Kampala, April 12, 2011.

solidarity is possible, where to build communities through art is a tangible reality, where the [pursuit] of joy is not candid but [militant] and where the distances of the geographic frontiers are ever more near, not for the catastrophe imposed by globalization but, by the tenacity of men and women who do not want to live and die in sadness.³¹

Edmondson teaches African theatre and is engaged with the politics of theatre in East Africa as well as investigating issues of violence and genocide. She has argued that:

In the midst of personal and cultural destruction, private expressions of pain are a luxury that northern Uganda cannot afford.³² And also proclaimed that,

For those of 'us' who are *observers* of this quest but who also wish to "exercise solidarity," perhaps the pursuit of discomfort rather than joy is a more productive – even ethical – path.³³

She gives attention to a crucial fact: in war related crises, what is at stake most is what, in fact, happens to the victims, and not the crusading positions we – writers, media people, NGOs – who observe from remote ranks tend to champion.

Asiimwe's drama and theatre practice, especially outstanding because she comes from a country wanting in terms of female playwrights³⁴ has led her from Uganda to Cal Arts University, USA. She coordinates the summer session of Ehn's project when in Uganda, and is the East African cultural specialist for Sundance East Africa. Her 2009 play, *Forgotten World*,³⁵ wrestles with war issues in Uganda from the point of view of social dilemma, and critiques the looming role of the UN's involvement "from a distance."

Okello, apart from being the author of *Forged in Fire*, works with the impressive Ndere Troupe, a cultural organization that sustains a dance and theatre company and which gives

³¹ Ibid, 95.

³² Edmondson, "Marketing Trauma and the Theatre of War," 451- 474.

³³ Edmondson, "Genocide Unbound," 65-83.

³⁴ Ugandan female dramatists, singers, dancers, novelists and artists abound, but not playwrights. From Elvania Zirimu (the late) the next notable one was Rose Mbowa (the late) and then Harriet Busuulwa, Mariam Ndagire, Mercy Ntangaare and Deborah Asiimwe as far as commitment goes. I take a playwright to be different from a writer who occasionally comes up with a script for this or that project. If that were to be considered, the number of course increases.

³⁵ Asiimwe, "Forgotten World" (Unpublished, 2009).

training in these skills, as well as being the co-founder of Hope North. Like me, he has walked through this world by means of theatre and performance. He says he too was a child soldier at one time in his life, but that remains a difficult story to dig out of him.

Born in the town of Pajule in December 1969, Sam himself had confronted members of an earlier rebel group, Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (a now-defunct Acholi army that in the mid-1980s sought to violently overthrow the government and "cleanse" the Acholi people of perceived witches and sorcerers). Sam was 15 years old at the time, and it's been reported that he might have been a child soldier for a time in Sudan (though he refuses to discuss this part of his life). In 1986, on a return trip to Gulu, Lakwena's guerillas ambushed Sam and his companions. He managed to escape and headed to the capital, Kampala, where he lived with an uncle and joined a dance group, Ndere Troupe, where he is now a creative director.³⁶

Some of the international visitors in attendance that I knew less well I had met during conferences at United States universities. Ugandan theatre practitioners from Kampala, like John Bosco Kyabaggu, intimately known as "JB," Harriet Mbalinda, and Winkle, aka "Rutamirika" (the late), were also present. *Rutamirika* is a theatre practitioner who held the theatre scene spellbound in the 1990s; the nickname is a stage name of a character he played that stuck. He used the resulting fame to launch himself onto the political scene, formidably, in his home region of Western Uganda.³⁷ Kyabaggu, "JB," is active and youthful, and an effective organizer of artistic events and cultural interactions. He directed a production of *Come Good Rain* (to be explored in detail in a later chapter), an important drama depicting the mores of war-torn country. And last, but by no means least, the local practitioners from the affected region itself were present, as well as the Ugandan teachers who manage the day-to-day administration of the place and guide the camp dwellers from time to time.

³⁶ Gener, "East Africa Remakes The World," 28-89.

³⁷ Rutamirika's life was cut short soon after that: he was violently murdered. He was attacked just outside his home in Kampala. The assailant hit him repeatedly with a bar on the head. Anarchy and lawlessness are, arguably, ramifications of a society beset by warfare.

The assembly of such company in one place brings to mind Richard Schechner's hope that, "the history of rifts separating theorists, critics and practitioners may be ending,"³⁸ on one hand. On the other, the mood of camaraderie engendered upon arrival, and the hope represented in the venue itself can be blinding. It almost made me forget the toll the war has taken, and, somewhat, why I had come here in the first place. The visit for me is crucial: a means toward my quest to try and understand better the crisis of war spanning two decades in this part of my homeland.

Show Time

LATER ON, we are gathered at an outdoors space, the brush having been newly slashed and cleared for stage purposes. The young performers dance and sing some more but now the dynamic has changed. At the point of arrival the show was informal, spectator and performer together; at this point, however, the show is formal, spectator and performer apart. It is a full-fledged "traditional" performance of the (north Ugandan) Acholi culture, full costume and all. The performance level rises tremendously, rendering the moment both entertaining and engaging.

³⁸ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 19.



6. *Hope North: "Show Time," not merely camp dwellers, also performers. 2007.*

Still, I do not recall seeing any of the visitors (Ugandan or American) join in, as would have been the case in the African ways of past, where spectator and performer could not only join in but sometimes inter-changed roles. I hasten to add that that there were times for inter-personal engagement, afterwards. My point is that this change in dynamics, to the extent where local (i.e. Ugandan) visitors engage in such formal spectatorship reveals a shift in "traditional" cultural practice. Perhaps we, the African visitors present, have changed approaches so that we no longer appreciate – or, perhaps, worse, we no longer know – the role of joining a performance, even if briefly, as something of value, a currency, a validation of the spirit of entertainment.

The song and dance act, as it turns out, is a prelude to a community-based drama about health issues. The drama is also staged in the newly cleared open space. The clearing has been transformed by use of local drapery known as Kanga into a proscenium arch-like set, so that the "stage" is set apart from the "auditorium." Serving to separate performers from the audience.



7. *Hope North: “Curtain Raiser” performance of dance and song, before the staging of the main play; the curtains in the background represent the “Stage.” 2007.*

The “well-made” play, a dialogue drama, is staged without the aesthetics of dance, song or chant. That choice renders the play hard to follow for those of us who happen to be linguistically challenged for the day. The dialogue is in Luo, the language of this northern region, which is a good thing (culturally), even if the language unknown to a considerable number present. Still, between the stage decor of wall posters featuring the words “AIDS” and “HIV,” and the portrayals of afflicted characters, the message trickles through. It has to be said, though, that the production seems flat in comparison to those “welcome” and “farewell” song and dance performances that do wonders for the vitality of the location.

After sundown, residents and guests gather at a fireplace in the tradition of the African story-telling arena. I encounter six survivors of the war in *northern Uganda* (emphasis theirs). The six accept my request to draw away from the campfire for a bit, to let me hear their perspectives on a war in which they were caught up and compelled to fight. A profound silence

follows. A silence I cannot easily read. This could be an indication of a lack of trust, a form of suspicion. Mark you, I am a Ugandan, but within this setting I am an outsider, an ethnic alien in the northern region, with a name that positions me in southern Uganda [though I actually come from the East]. The regional tensions that lie in between the northern and southern areas of Uganda in particular cannot be overstated; this is something I shall try to unfold subsequently. Is this an emic/etic instance? James Letts explains that "emic" and "etic" are terms usually used in reference to linguistics – "emic" encompassing terms for conceptual categories used within a society/culture and "etic" encompassing terms and conceptual categories imported from outside to describe events within a "culture." He points out, however, that the terms have no "standard definitions that have won acceptance."³⁹ Richard Schechner refers to emic/etic terms more broadly in relation to culture, the "emic" event being "to experience a culture from the outside." Given this range of usage, I wonder if the silence happening can be the product of an emic/etic tension while the degree to which I am to be regarded as an ethnic and cultural outsider is being determined. Or perhaps this could be the result of what Laura Edmondson, wrestling with similar issues in another setting in the same region, figures as: "the ways in which narrative intersects with the politics of globalization,"⁴⁰ "For the Acholi people," she perceptively adds, "limited to the discourses of warfare and humanitarianism as means of entering the global market, narrative serves as one of the most crucial resources that they possess."⁴¹ Edmondson's observation haunts the pause: if the story is so vital, why rush into it? What if you mess up? Ultimately, however, whatever the silence indicates this is no case of "yeah, we are eagerly waiting to tell this tale." The moment of silence holds for as long as it must.

³⁹ J James Lett, *Emic/Etic Distinctions*, Professor James Lett's Faculty WebPage, <http://www.faculty.irsc.edu> (accessed 2010).

⁴⁰ Edmondson, "Marketing Trauma and and the Theatre of War," 452.

⁴¹ Ibid, 453.

Eventually, one young man recounts the toll the war has taken:

The war probably has been going on for twenty-one years now, almost twenty-one years. And due to that war, many people have been displaced from their village and now they are in camps, and in the camps there, people fall sick, and people are getting HIV/AIDS there, and other diseases; people are being killed by the rebels, and [by] so many bad activities done by the rebels during the war.⁴²

Another one told of further horrors:

Joseph Kony began abducting people. He was abducting mostly the young ones, since it is easy to brainwash their minds. As they were abducting people, they were also killing some children, as an example to the other ones that when you try to escape, we get you, and we do this to you. So they were killing people to make the rest afraid and to prevent them from trying to escape. This is what they were doing. And they were killing people in a different way, giving punishments like cutting off ears, nose, and mouths. They were doing all that because people don't want to co-operate, and don't want to go with them. So, when they get you, they ask you, do you want short sleeved or long sleeved? If you want long sleeved, they cut your hand here [wrist] and they leave the rest; if you want short sleeved, they cut your hand up to here [elbow], and you remain with nothing at all.⁴³

The cruelty and trauma in the North have been unfathomable. For leaders of the UPDF and the LRA, the end seems to justify even the most unconscionable means—war profiteering, child soldiers, girl sex slaves. It ought to be emphasized here that the hostilities are a twofold squeeze:

Over 1.7 million people have been displaced, the majority as a result of the government's counterinsurgency strategy that forced people into so-called "protected villages." Tens of thousands of people have been killed, raped, or abducted. The majority of the LRA force is made up of people abducted against their will, including significant numbers of children. Previous RLP (Refugee Law Project) research has demonstrated that, while people living in the North have deep-rooted grievances against the government, the LRA, led by Joseph Kony, is a poor expression of these, and enjoys little popular support amongst the civilian population.⁴⁴

Adam Branch, himself aware of the all too common occlusion of the peasants by focusing on elites in approaching the problem of war in the north asks two crucial questions:

⁴² Names Withheld. Interview with author. August 2007.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ As of October 2010, the situation in the North has stabilized, and the LRA is now apparently based in the Central African Republic and northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo. See, Ledio Cakaj, *This Is Our Land Now': Lord's Resistance Army Attacks In Bas Uele, Northeastern Congo*, Enough Project Organization/Publications, <http://www.enoughproject.org/publications> (accessed October 7, 2010).

“First, why has the Uganda Government been unwilling to end the war for nineteen years? Second, why has the LRA chosen to use extreme violence against the Acholi instead of trying to build popular support?”⁴⁵ Branch’s questions hit the point: the people caught in the conflict suffer “fire from both sides.” This is the reality that generates the need for creative response even as it overwhelms the machinery of representation and mocks the hoped for efficacy of such endeavors.

The past couple of years have provided some small glimmer of hope. The war in the North has paused, and the guns have gone silent. What remains is verbal warfare and machinations among politicians from the different regions – but at least this kind of war does not shed blood, rape women, or breed orphans in the literal sense. There are peace talks, though the signing of any peace agreement remains in doubt. In April, 2008, peace talks sponsored by Sudan and the United Nations foundered when, after prolonged negotiations, Joseph Kony backed away at the last minute. Kony’s spokesman claims the LRA chief will only sign the deal if the charges against him filed by the International Criminal Court are dropped, if his army is integrated within the UPDF, and if he gets to speak to Museveni about inclusion in the government. Museveni says that this is out of the question: basically yes to amnesty, no to power sharing. Ugandans know that we cannot yet afford to rest; that true peace, a lasting and just peace, is a dream that will require continued work.

For these children of war, the Hope North camp is their new home, new family. I cannot help feeling that I have lived through war, survived more than one, but I never had to be uprooted, I never had to be torn away from my family, my next of kin, and subjected to living in a camp. After all the recurrent wars of my life, I know where I am headed as I depart Hope North; I know I am headed back to Kampala city, and later on to the USA. What I do not know is what will happen to these young people for whom war, uninvited, interrupted everything that once constituted their “everyday life”. According to the evidence in the collective testimony accruing

⁴⁵Adam Branch, "Neither Peace Nor Justice: Political Violence and the Peasantry in Northern Uganda, 1986-1998," *African Studies Quarterly*, 2005: 1-2.

from the individual memories of the six young people, the scene at Hope North stands in stark contrast to the days of abduction, when they were compelled not only to witness but also to subject others to the deadly play of war, since refusal to do so would be to put themselves at risk. The cruelty and trauma in the North have been extra-ordinary.

In this moment, I am painfully aware that the deliberate, cruel, and intrinsically performative strategies designed to terrorize populations and stifle dissent challenge the efficacy of any response through “cultural performance.”⁴⁶ I become uneasy that the previous month, July, 2007, I had been to the National Theatre and had laughed out loud, watching a skillful comic performance. I had returned home from the USA to seek some answers to the rather tough, and, I often fear, insurmountable questions that prompted this writing, I found the National Theatre soldiering on with the business of mirroring Ugandan society to itself. And the man of the moment was one Kenneth Kimuli. He was, if I may say, the star of “Comedy Nite.” On Thursday nights, a cross-section of Kampala dwellers gather at the National Theatre premise to, in Uganda speak, “laugh a bit.”⁴⁷

“Comedy Nite” is a “theme night.”⁴⁸ Different performers come on do their thing, either individually, in pairs, or in whole groups, but they belong together; it is an ensemble thing. They operate like a theatre company, like a soccer team. They prepare the work together, rehearse together, and select what goes and what does not go together. The group is a collection of individuals working together for a definite aim: to make the audience laugh – even if sometimes they have to resort to old gags because the chosen joke is not working. Generally, this lot, the

⁴⁶ Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 71.

⁴⁷ Thursday night was “Comedy Nite,” under the company banner of Theatre Factory. And Monday Night was “Jam Session,” the free for all music session, at that point an internationally noted reverie night, shut down. Not long thereafter, Comedy Night suffered a major jolt when the group sensationally split into two. The splinter group named itself Fun Factory and presently stages its comedy across the road from where Theatre Factory operates, only doing so on a different night, which is Tuesday night. The split drew considerable rumors and media attention in Uganda.

⁴⁸ For example the theme for Monday night used to be “Jam Session,” musicians: beginners or professional, which had become popular enough to be listed in the tour travelogues.

“Theatre Factory,” is popular, and often acquits itself well. However, as is wont to happen in the case of Ugandan theatre companies (which present something akin to repertory theatre in the West), the audience, intentionally or not, is liable to choose favorites. Accordingly, the sheer announcement of Kimuli’s name drew cheers and a tangible sense of anticipation from the sizeable crowd gathered on the night. The cosmopolitan Kampala city society is present in large numbers: the corporate lot, university students, and civil servants, as well as a few expatriates and tourists, are all present in the audience wanting and willing Kimuli – and I suppose the other comedians – to crack them up. Enter Kimuli, speaking in English:

“My NGO Girlfriend”

A few days ago I met my former high school sweetheart. She had joined an NGO (Non Governmental Organization). Everything about NGO’s is abbreviated. YEAH (Young Empowered And Healthy) UNICEF, ILO, UNDP, the list is endless.

I asked her out for a date and behold, I received the shock of my life. She politely turned down my invitation using typical NGO language. She said, “I would have loved to but you see, I have to look for YAG’s to identify STG’s to M&E the BAM messages using the MARCH approach if we are to control HI 5” I successfully failed to understand what she was saying. I swallowed my pride and politely asked her what she actually meant with YAG’s and BAM’s.

“Oh dear, I’m sorry. What I was trying to say is I have to look for the Young Advisory Groups (YAG’s) to identify the Specific Target Groups (STG’s) to Monitor & Evaluate (M&E) the Be A Man (BAM) messages using Modeling And Reinforcement to Combat HIV (MARCH) approach if we are to control HIV (HI 5)”⁴⁹

Exit Kimuli, while the audience reels in rip-roaring laughter. The laughter is an affirmation, a validation of Kimuli’s sharp intellect, and a salutation of the comedian’s reaffirmation of self, of Uganda, of Africa, in the face of globalism. As it was with colonization, globalization is a force to be reckoned with for Africa, generally, and in this case for Uganda. But note how the play reveals the level at which NGO speak has infiltrated everyday life: globalization generates its own institutions and by-ways, only to end up inspiring satiric responses. Good intentions and financial opportunity have combined to generate the all- too-familiar grant writing jargon, but

⁴⁹ Unpublished script for the performance courtesy of the performer: Kenneth Kimuli.

what people want is an improved condition in this lifetime. The events of everyday life generate the possibilities for humor: the comedian's sexual desire cannot get past the acronyms, hardly a new phenomenon, since they are equally opaque to an ordinary citizen from the onset.⁵⁰ Thus, playing the smitten young man, Kimuli cannot understand why an age-old tale of what transpires when a man meets a woman he finds desirable turns into a case of visceral bodily being thwarted by mystifying jargon. In so far as performance is a way of processing "social drama," Kimuli's comedy shows an ordinary citizen's thinking about the frustrations of his own existence; it reveals what people know already, and are talking about among themselves, but talking in less clever and energizing ways.

On globalization, Mahmood Mamdani proffers that:

State crisis in Africa can be illuminated by Africa's experience with globalization. From this point of view, Africa has gone through several globalizations, starting from the original diaspora that led to the peopling of the world, to slavery, to colonialism, and to the current globalization whose post-Fordist waves are said to be dissolving the nation-state. My point is that the roots of state crisis in Africa lie not in the current globalization but in an earlier one: colonialism. The key problem with the talk about the "crisis of the state" in Africa is that it misses its colonial genealogy. In doing so, it misses the link between the current problems of African politics and the bifurcated nature of African states – a phenomenon forged in the colonial period.⁵¹

Mamdani's insights into the life span of globalization in Africa generally draw attention to the specifically bifurcated nature of the Ugandan nation-state.

Kimuli, who arguably represents a new generation of culturally and politically conscious performers on the stage in Uganda, effectively mines the language of globalization, the emergence of NGOs and of middle class interests, for aesthetic value. Yet, what does Kimuli's

⁵⁰ Acronyms go way back to the earliest encounters between Africa and Europe. Two examples are: CMS (Church Missionary Society, 1877) and IBEAC (Imperial British East African Company, late 1800s). Our primary school education consisted of questions like what is BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation). In global times, it was interesting in 2007 to note the ephemeral importance of the CHOGM (Common Wealth Head of Government Meeting) event when the function was held in Uganda, and the government of NRM (National Resistance Movement).

⁵¹ Mahmood Mamdani, "Congo: Preliminary Thoughts," *Social Text* 17, no. 3 (1999), 54.

performance have to do with the legacy of war? What relates a night of comedy to tragic issues of warfare?

Seemingly, this admirable comic performance in Kampala pays scant attention to the scenes of violence and suffering in war-torn Uganda. And yet, even as the National Theatre hosts the popular “Comedy Nite” show every Thursday, the evidence of that history is not far off. Bullet holes on the walls of the Uganda National Theatre – and on the walls of the opposite building, the Parliament of Uganda – mark recent past events related to war (events to be explored in further detail in Chapter 5). The bullet holes are symbols of certain intrinsic connections between the two venues: as leftover monuments of the colonial period, as post-colonial institutions for cultural and political interventions in the everyday lives of Ugandans, and as sites of witness, or warning, to the ominous political atmosphere of Ugandan society.

On any given Comedy Nite, an audience comprised of many sections of Ugandan society – but mostly of the corporate and professional class – shows up at the National Theatre to “laugh a bit.” However, comedy and tragedy like the laughter and tears that characterize theatre and performance practice in Uganda (as elsewhere) are never far apart. The laughter that abounds on this day, in July, 2007, in this part of Uganda, central Uganda, contrasts sharply with the scene in Hope North, in August, 2008, in another part of Uganda, in the war-torn North. The bullet holes in the theatre’s walls, however, mock the seeming separation and safety.

During the retelling of their ordeal, the boys at Hope North sound older than they should, like men plagued by the troubles of a war-torn country, and this stands in stark contrast to the youthful and joyous attributes exhibited during the song and dance moments of arrival and departure; or even to the somewhat halting and unpracticed delivery of the amateur AIDS awareness play we had witnessed. The moment of the interview had a surreal currency: there I was, once again face-to-face with the children of war.⁵² I was there, seated with them, well aware

⁵² The previous occasion being the 2002 encounter in Lira (See the Introduction chapter).

of the frequent denials and at times dismissal of the grim reality of the northern Uganda crisis.⁵³ I was there with knowledge of abuses to the northern region because they were the losers of the latest full-fledged civil war.

There are many questions to ponder: because the war in northern Uganda is not affecting me directly, am I outside of its grip? How can I resist being and becoming complicit to this pathological polarization of a people? The question at stake is not the Leninist, “What is to be done?” but rather the more difficult to fathom, “How did we, as Ugandans, arrive at this point?” How have Uganda’s rich and complex cultural legacy and its more recent performance activities – its song, dance, and theatre making – intersected with the violent post-colonial history of this recently formed nation state? The performances presented by the boys (and girls) to their visitors seemed strangely, almost surreally detached from their recent real-life roles as soldiers in a vicious war. Perhaps they don’t need Sam Okello’s play; they have their own stories to tell and to overcome. But what about the audience in Kampala? But the question is big: why has Okello not staged the play in Uganda? Does he think that such “cultural performances” are useless on home ground? Is he afraid that the South is not ready to hear of the sufferings in the North? Is he protecting his own safety as a cultural worker by saving his own plays for foreign audiences?

For me as a practicing playwright in a war-torn country, this raised again the issue of how performances made by and for Ugandans have reflected, commented upon, provided respite from, and sometimes been an integral part of a post-colonial history marked by the unrelenting waging of war? Answering that question will be the burden of the pages that follow.

⁵³ During interviews it was concerning how many otherwise responsible people (who will remain unnamed) said in different ways how the northerners deserved it.

CHAPTER 2: SONG OF UHURU

*I want to speak to you
For the candle of Uhuru
Has been blown out.*

- Okot p'Bitek.¹

UHURU, Kiswahili for Independence, some say for freedom, is the moment in Ugandan political history that connects colonial and post-colonial legacies. The advent of *Uhuru* is an essential moment in considering the legacy of war in Uganda, and events surrounding this moment – events that marked the official drawing to a close of the colonial era and the beginning of Uganda's life as an independent post-colonial country – are explored and exploited frequently in Ugandan drama and theatre and these events were themselves staged using highly theatrical means. The hope here is that tracking the ways in which performances and performative strategies have intersected with, influenced, and reflected upon these events will help provide a clearer understanding of the significance of this time. For just as the tragic undertones of Okello's *Forged in Fire* reflect one side of the legacy of war in Uganda, while the comic overtones of Kimuli's *My NGO Girlfriend* reveal another side of the same legacy in post-colonial Uganda, the interconnectedness of performance and war in Uganda is discernibly reflected in colonial-era drama and theatre and in drama and theatre after *Uhuru*; and legacies of dramatic and ritual performance traditions that existed prior to *Uhuru* shed light on the roles and actions of political actors in generating the legacy of war in Uganda. Key to this undertaking will be a focus on Milton Obote, especially his role in *Julius Caesar* and his reputation as an orator, and the FESTAC (Festival of Black & African Arts and Culture of 1977) play by Byron Kawadwa, *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko/Song of the Cockerel*.² Overall, how these events have been explored

¹ Okot p'Bitek, *Song of a Prisoner* (New York: Third Press, 1971), 99.

² Byron Kawadwa, *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko/Song of The Cockerel* (Kampala: Unpublished, 1971).

and exploited by Ugandan playwriting, theatre, and other performance practices calls for looking back to the moment of Independence, to *Uhuru*.

At midnight, October 9 1962, Uganda became politically independent from British rule:

The Union Jack was lowered as the black, yellow and red-striped flag of Uganda was raised at Kololo Hill (in Kampala, capital city of the new nation).

Apollo Milton Obote, 36, the first Prime minister of independent Uganda received the instruments of independence from the Duke of Kent, inheriting a country of mixed fortunes.³

Kabaka (King) Mutesa the Second (Mutesa II) of Buganda, the south central region of Uganda, was present at the historical moment. As the flag of the colonizer went down, and the flag of the colonized went up, Apollo Milton Obote became, in political terms, the first post-independence leader of Uganda with power over the newly formed nation-state, with Mutesa II having been installed largely as a figurehead as the first President. Also in attendance, standing right there at the flag raising point of action, was a certain Idi Amin Dada⁴; Amin was Obote's Commander in Chief of the army. The trio would prove to be key players in the initial stages of the making of a post-colonial Ugandan nation-state, primed to become a host for the legacy of war.⁵

Mutesa II was clad in a military, not a traditional kingly outfit, whereas Obote was in a variant of the Western-world suit (it could have been a "Kaunda" or "Nyerere" suit). Thus, one of

³ See, "Obote's First Term 1962-1971" in Fountain Publishers Ltd., *Uganda 30 Years: 1962-1992* (Kampala: Fountain, 1992), 34-42.

⁴ Idi Amin Dada will be the subject of the next chapter.

⁵ This happened by way of the colonial divide and rule structures of power/powerlessness for one thing. For another, consider Ugandan publisher James Tumusiime's 1990s taut insights in Fountain Publishers Ltd., *Uganda 30 Years: 1962 - 1992* (Kampala: Fountain, 1992), 4: Like most emergent nations of the time, Uganda's first independence government in 1962 was shaped by forces over which the new leaders had far less control than their colonial predecessors. These forces included ethnic cleavages, religious rivalries and anti-people armies.

But while many post-independence leaders in other countries moved quickly to tame these forces, in Uganda, the leaders became slaves of them and Ugandans have had to pay a high price for that.

The country which at independence boasted of the best developed road network, a high standard of living and reasonable medical and educational facilities in the region, had within the first 25 years the largest number of deposed presidents, over half a million politically related deaths, a devastated economy and brutalized population that is still haunted by the past and scared of the future.

the two appeared as a figure of war, the other as an “Afro-European (or Euroafrican).”⁶ Watching Obote raise the flag of independence did not sit well with Mutesa II. He felt a “twinge of foreboding.”⁷ However, his anxiety “had no precise form or cause,” as Mutesa II himself put it in retrospect, “It was more the sensing of an unfamiliar shift of emphasis, a gap between what was fitting and what was not.”⁸

“We cannot talk about independence,” opines Barrymore Bogues, “without thinking about colonialism. For immediately the question arises, independence from what?”⁹ But if talking about independence calls for thinking about colonialism, that thinking in turn calls for reflection about post-colonial times, with Independence as the hinge connecting colonial and post-colonial legacies. Thus, colonial, independence and post-colonial issues are conjoined realms of influence and reference in regard to power and powerlessness, resistance and warfare in Uganda, better reflected by looking back further still; after all, “life is lived forwards and understood backwards,” as an African proverb goes.

Winds of Change

IN THE BEGINNING, there was no Uganda. There were ethnic groups organized around dynasties and chiefdoms. Power was defined along lines of blood or deep-seated loyalty. Tales of the past reveal that territorial and inter-ethnic wars took place, but, overall, a kind of long-established order based on a balancing of the claims and needs of local centers of power

⁶See, Ngugi wa’Thiong’O, *Decolonising the Mind* (London: James Curry/Heinmann, 1986), Xii.

⁷Kabaka of Buganda, *Desecration Of My Kindom* (London: Contable and Co. Ltd., 1967), 27. Deemed an apologia by Hugh Dinwiddy, “The Search For Unity In Uganda: Early Days To 1966,” *African Affairs* (Oxford) 80, no. 321 (1981), Mutesa II’s memoirs (even if quite subjective are one of the few published documents by Ugandans on colonial, *Uhuru* and post-colonial crisis in Uganda.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Barrymore Bogues, was talking to Brown University students, Fall 2007, about “Violence and Genocide,” in relation to Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers* (2001).

prevailed.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century, “outsiders” began to arrive in significant numbers in two historical movements, one dubbed the “Arab Traders” (starting in the 1830s) and the other “The Coming of the White Man” (starting in the 1860s). The latter movement continued to unfold in two prongs—“European Explorers” and “Christian Missionaries”—and the missionaries also came in two waves: the Protestants (1877) and the Catholics (1878).

With this influx came monumental changes. As a history teacher who taught us in Mbale Secondary School for barely two weeks once remarked, “the white man came, handed Africans the *Bible* and said close your eyes and let’s pray. When we opened our eyes, the white man had our land, and we had the bible.” The social, political, and cultural infrastructure, which had hitherto been under local custodianship, shifted into foreign hands: leadership roles were usurped, land was grabbed, territories were redefined, and new ways of being were imposed. Communities that had been nations unto themselves were reduced to the status of “tribes” and compelled, by any means necessary, to become a single “protectorate” designed according to the colonizer’s own perspective. The ethnic groups were forcibly “united” to form the contours of the nation-state we call Uganda. The British ruled for 68 years (1894 – 1962). The colonial rulers not only forcibly united disparate groups, they also played upon social divisions, supporting one ethnic enclave or faction against another when it suited their interests.

And World War II came and went. And the “wind of change” blew into the Protectorate and the Kingdom structures and blew them apart.¹¹ And there was *Uhuru*.

¹⁰ See, “Preamble” in DRUM, “Uganda: The Bloodstained Pearl of Africa And its Struggle for Peace,” *From the pages of DRUM*, ed. JRA Bailey, comp. Adam Seftel (Bailey’s African Photo Archives Production, 1994), 1-7.

¹¹ Neither case is absolute, traditional Kingdom structures still operate (often for political gain), and neo-colonialism is a real and present aspect in the politics of power in Africa.

The Road to *Uhuru*

THE ADVENT of Independence is informed by the dramatic roles played by a trio of radically disparate characters—Kabaka Edward Mutesa II, Sir Andrew Cohen, and Dr. Milton Obote—who vied for power and legitimacy in the struggle to rule Uganda. Mutesa was the Kabaka (King) of Buganda, the second Kabaka of his name; Cohen was the penultimate Governor of the Protectorate, and Obote an emergent political leader politician hailing from Lango area, Lira town, northern Uganda. The three were at once protagonists and antagonists in the narrative of *Uhuru* events. Inevitably, their struggles were to be conducted through the cultural practices and institutions brought into prominence by the colonial era, and these included not only a nascent parliament and national radio, but also Makerere University, a National Theatre – officially named the Uganda National Cultural Center – and the pre-eminence of Shakespeare as a literary model and commentator on human affairs. Jan Kott, in the cleverly titled *Shakespeare our Contemporary* says, “Every historical period finds in [Shakespeare] what it is looking for and what it wants to see.”¹ Shakespeare (and other European writers) “came” to colonial Uganda, by way of Makerere University. It is worth pausing to consider what was looked for and what was seen by both British and Ugandan agents in the lead up to and in the aftermath of *Uhuru*.

Modeled after the University of London (like Ibadan University in Nigeria and Legon University in Ghana, West Africa), Makerere University was set up in 1926 to cover the East and Central African regions. Mutesa II and Obote were born in 1924 and 1925, respectively. Both ended up attending Makerere University, and thus the two belong to a generation born at the height of colonial rule and colonial subjectivity, of cultural domination and cultural rupture, of the carefully inculcated reverence for Shakespearean texts and the concomitant denigration and repression of indigenous performance traditions, with their reliance on song, dance and orature.

¹ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London: Methuen, 1965), 5.

Drawing upon the legendary capacity of Shakespeare's plays to retain their appeal within a wide range of cultural circumstances, the playwright's texts were used as the European standard of what is right, what is not, in regard to dramatic and theatrical practices and as object lessons in the imparting of cultural values. The Empire thrust its will upon colonies and Protectorates (different names for essentially the same thing) and then employed Shakespeare to indicate paths that must be taken.

Such imposition seems to have been commonplace in the colonial era, with Shakespeare's preeminence being indicative of a more general mode of operation. According to Rose Mbowa, "the English educational system utilized theatre performance as an effective tool for their 'civilising mission.' Drama in performance became an essential part of study of the canonic texts of the English Great Tradition, above all Shakespeare."² Margaret Macpherson in her account of the teaching of Shakespeare in Uganda writes of a time, 1946, "when the first women to come to Makerere [University] entered...."³ She states that, "young educated men and women tended to despise their own languages and cultures," because, "in their mission school days they had sometimes been discouraged from dancing traditional dances as primitive." The irony is not lost on her, "...although interested expatriates were examining traditional music and songs, and recording myths and legends, there was a subconscious feeling that such interest was beneath their dignity." So (a few within) the Makerere establishment did something about that by encouraging students to value their own inheritance, to sing their own songs as well as those of Gilbert and Sullivan (which were very popular), to learn about the customs and traditions of the

² Rose Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breiting, 206 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000).

³ See Margaret Macpherson, "Makerere: The Place of The Early Sunrise," in *Uganda: The Culutral Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breiting, 24 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000).

whole of East Africa (which then was considered to include Zanzibar and Central Africa) and to see the beauty of their own country side.⁴

Despite these noble intentions to reclaim the value of East African cultural traditions, the main focus of attention was still on British literature, and, particularly, on Shakespeare:

If the students were taking minor English they were encouraged to write, to try their voices in parliamentary speech, to act as editorial board of a newspaper. If they were taking major English they were required to study a play by Shakespeare in their first year. How better to study it than by learning to act it?⁵

And in that way, Shakespeare – alongside other European dramatists like T.S. Eliot and (ironically and less predictably) J.M. Synge – was taught as a model from which to make theatre. Scholars of African theatre and performance Mercy Mirembe Ntangaare and Eckhard Breitingner reflect: “‘Scenes from Shakespeare performed on parents’ day became a common experience for all Ugandan school graduates. The school and university curricula favoured the reading of English plays, Shakespeare in particular.’”⁶

Despite the contrarian efforts of Macpherson and others like the late David Cook, Shakespeare was a huge factor in the British colonization project, in the colonials’ attempts to degrade and repress native cultures. In a related vein Erin B. Mee, in her study of post-colonial Indian theatre, *Theatre of Roots*, reflects:

In the nineteenth century, the British introduced modern European theatre to these colonial cities in three ways: by touring productions to entertain their expatriate communities; by supporting productions of English plays staged by the expatriates themselves in newly erected British-style playhouses; and by teaching English drama in Indian universities, where Shakespeare was presented as the apex of British civilization. The spread of English drama was part of colonizing Indian culture; it was designed not only to shape artistic activity but to impose on Indians a way of understanding and operating in the world and to assert colonial cultural superiority.⁷

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mercy Ntangaare and Eckhard Breitingner, "Ugandan Drama in English," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingner, 224 (Kampala, 2000).

⁷ Erin B Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2008), 1.

By demonizing and marginalizing traditional ritual performances, and enforcing the adoption of European theatrical practices, the British sustained an assault on Ugandan ways of seeing, on Ugandan values: the imposition of Shakespeare as the very definition of theatre – and the assertion that no native performance genres of comparable worth existed – were weapons in this epistemological assault. The use of Shakespeare's texts as instruments of cultural hegemony was to have a lasting effect upon Ugandan history as well as its theatre in the post-*Uhuru* period, as shall become clear in the discussion of Milton Obote's career later in this chapter.

Meanwhile: in his 1969 memoir, Kabaka Mutesa II is unflattering about the attitude of the new Governor, Cohen: "Sir Andrew Cohen arrived with a host of ideas where to benefit Uganda, whether Uganda liked it or not. Where the country did not like it, it was the country that was going to be altered."⁸ Significantly, soon after arrival upon Ugandan soil or (depending on one's point of emphasis), the British Protectorate, one of the first things Governor Cohen does is go to the theatre: "He began, as he continued, in a whirl of energy. Arriving on January 17th 1952, he left again to attend a meeting in Nairobi on 22nd and returned on time to go to the theatre on the 26th."⁹ So, on the scene a decade before *Uhuru* is a new colonial Governor: an energetic man of action and, significantly, a theatre enthusiast. According to Mutesa II the Governor, "...was incessantly promising new jails, laying foundation stones..."¹⁰ In the annals of Ugandan history, one of the foundation stones he happens to have laid, in 1954, was that of the present day National Theatre.

⁸ Kabaka of Buganda, *Desecration Of My Kindom*, 114.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.



7. National Theatre: *School for Scandal*; *The Green Monster* (an adaptation of *Othello*); *Romance Queen* (by the Obsessions) are on show. Percussion Discussion (syncretic music group employing European/Western and African instruments at the same time), and *The Mira Nair East African Film project*, Maisha Film Lab, August 2008.

According to Macpherson, "Uganda had a National Theatre before anywhere else in Africa and before the UK by a very large number of years."¹¹ The National theatre is a colonial monument that has become not only a landmark for British influence, but also, somewhat paradoxically, a site of reflexive thought and action and of resistance, a place and space others and myself have been drawn to, and from which we have severally drawn.

The Ugandan National Theatre, in the capital Kampala is, then, the embodiment of both the British colonial project in Uganda and the native struggles for independence, peace, and justice. This monumental cultural landmark has been both a theatre of oppression and a theatre of

¹¹ Macpherson, "Makerere: The Place of The Early Sunrise," 30.

the oppressed;¹² it has been both a site of violence and injustice, and (at times) a force for justice and peace. The walls of the Theatre are scarred with bullet holes, as are the walls of the Parliament building it faces. The connection between these two venues is significant. The same architect, John Bogina, designed both buildings in the 1950s, a decade before independence. Both are reminders of Uganda's heritage of colonialism and of the post-colonial violence that has interrupted the everyday lives of Ugandans.

¹² I am using this term in a more general sense in relation to post-independence Ugandan theatre, while at the same time aware of its usage by the Brazilian director and theorist Augusto Boal. Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" similarly proceeds from a vision of theatre as a potential site of protest, rebellion, and reformation for oppressed populations.



8. *National Theatre, Uganda: Bullet Holes on the Walls, 2007. The bullet holes on the walls, however, were recently erased during renovations appended to the Commonwealth Head of Government Meeting (CHOGM) event (November 2007) and, by extension, the Queen of England, Elizabeth II's, visit.*

The British built (using funds from Asians and Ugandans as well) the National Theatre in the mid to late 1950s as part of the larger colonial project of Anglicizing African cultural life. Ugandan and Indian communities contributed funds. The project was a brainchild of Governor Cohen, and under him the cornerstone was laid in 1954, but it opened under the stewardship of Governor Crawford, 1959.¹³ In fact the British hogged the National Theatre stage until two years after independence, 1964, when a native Ugandan, Wycliff Kiyingi, the doyen of Ugandan theatre and radio drama,¹⁴ was finally able to stage at the coveted venue a play he had written in 1954, *Pio Mberenge Kamulali*. Seremba explains the significance of the untranslatable title well:

¹³ Kiyingi, the playwright, and Leonard Ondur (Resident Stage Manager, later Director) told me on separate occasions that the National Theatre institution was Governor Cohen's brainchild.

¹⁴ Macpherson, "Makerere: The Place of The Early Sunrise," 31; Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 213.

The eponymic protagonist, Mberenge, was an actual chief among the Baganda, who found himself profoundly torn between the monotheistic and monogamous demands of Christianity, on the one hand; and on the other: his 'pluralistic' marriage to his four wives; together with his allegiance to the Gods and customs of his people. Pio was his adopted/Christian name. *Kamulali* is also the Luganda word for pepper. So a combination of Mberenge – his indigenous self—and the newly acquired name, *Pio* is bound to result in a pepper-filled, burning mouth, a hot and lethal, uneasy, and chaotic result.¹⁵

Kiyingi's plays before then had been successfully staged at Mengo Cultural Center and broadcast on radio by commission.¹⁶ The playwright, according to Rose Mbowa, practices cultural activism and it is, "the general foregrounding of Ganda [Buganda, i.e. southern Uganda] culture, sometimes with distinct Ganda nationalist undertones, that positions Kiyingi in the debate about superordinate and subordinate cultures (Western/African and Nilotic/Bantu) in independent Uganda."¹⁷

This play was a tale of a man torn between African/Bugandan traditions and Western ideals. Mbowa says Kiyingi, "satirizes his main character as the [W]estern 'monkey-man,' totally oblivious to essential Ganda [Bugandan] traditions."¹⁸ Exiled Ugandan artist and scholar, George Seremba (whose own turbulent journey "to hell" and back owing to Uganda's warped political history will be the subject of chapter four), provides more details, summing up the play thus:

Mberenge is faced with an intricate dilemma. His embrace or conversion to Christianity brings with it a kind of censorship that turns his lifestyle into a schizophrenic duality and

¹⁵ George Bwanika Seremba, "Robert Serumaga And The Golden Age Of Uganda's Theatre: Slopsism, Activism, Innovation (1968-1978)," *PhD diss.*, (Dublin: University of Dublin Trinity College, 2007), 66.

¹⁶ Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 213; Cf. Seremba, "Robert Serumaga And The Golden Age Of Uganda's Theatre," 66.

¹⁷ Ibid, 214

"Ganda" refers to Baganda(n). Nilotic/Bantu = North/South politics of Uganda. Mbowa is referring to Western world as opposed to African world, rather than the western region of Uganda, though there are also centers of power in Uganda that have been determined along an East/West, rather than North/South regional divide. Until recently (1986 onwards) the western region had not been very powerful in Uganda; since then, with the rise to power of Museveni, the western Uganda region has become increasingly powerful.

¹⁸ Ibid, 215

hypocrisy. In the public eye he is a Christian. In the safe confines and closed doors of his homestead, Mberenge then ‘husbands’ his four wives, tends to the ancestral spirits and to the pantheon of indigenous gods. This is a lifestyle that is replete with conflict and the newly converted chief is deeply mired in it. It is also a conflict and reality that is as relevant today as it was in 1954 when Kiyingi’s play had its première.¹⁹

¹⁹ Seremba, “Robert Serumaga And The Golden Age Of Uganda's Theatre,” 29-30.



9. Wycliff Kiyingi, at Home, July 2008.

Until the production of Kiyingi's play, Ugandan theatre artists had no access to the National Theatre stage and had to struggle to find any space in which to exhibit and practice their own cultural forms. According to Macpherson, "the first really Ugandan groups were formed outside the University," adding that, "[the University] played its part in creating the necessary atmosphere within which a Ugandan form of theatre could grow." The National Theatre was conceived of originally by Cohen as a space where such growth could further encouraged and at its inception, the British declared that it would be a shared cultural space – equally accessible to the Asian, European, and native Ugandan inhabitants of the area. But this idea did not last long beyond the opening night.

On the opening night, European expatriates were represented by Sir Donald and Lady Wolfitt in scenes from Shakespeare. Asian drama [Indian] had mostly been in Asian language[s] but all those concerned with education in Uganda had become familiar with both Asian [Indian] music and dance. It was fitting, therefore, that the Asian community should be represented by Ram Gopal with a fine dance display. The Ugandan

contribution was the presentation on stage for the first time of the royal musicians of Buganda.²⁰

Ngugi wa'Thiong'O, a Kenyan who at the time was studying at Makerere University had presented *The Black Hermit* (set in Kenya) in 1962 to mark *Uhuru*.²¹ But that experience proved to be a troubled one. Ngugi's show came in on the back of a Shakespearean production. In 1961, writes Jessica Kaahwa, a group of American high school teachers visited Uganda, and:

Nat Frothingham, the group's leader and a Shakespeare buff, insisted on producing a play by Shakespeare. He produced *Macbeth* in an all-African setting, the first to attempt to produce a full-length play with students. In his all-student cast, Frothingham worked with both the Africans and Americans and proved that it was viable. Suddenly, following *Macbeth*, there was an upsurge of creative output at Makerere. Actors wanted more action and so the playwrights were more in demand than ever before in Uganda.²²

She continues with a great insight,

The following year, 1962, the students were anxious to act in another full-length play, and they asked Ngugi wa' Thiong'o to write them a play. He wrote *The Black Hermit*, a play that marked the beginning of his ideological writings. In *The Black Hermit* an educated man causes the suicide of his village wife as he tries to distance himself from that tribal bigotry that hampers national consciousness and unity. Makerere Students Dramatic Society performed the play that year at the National Theatre, but a conflict caused the group to abandon the performance. The conflict resulted in the dismissal of the director whom the colonial administration accused of trying to Africanise the National Theatre. On the eve of independence, when the whole nation was anticipating a transition of power, the National Theatre of Uganda was silenced.²³

Kaahwa is clear that the National Theatre was silenced for Ugandans, who in turn abandoned it, for they saw it as a leftover from the "colonial set up."²⁴

Rose Mbowe (1943-1999) has noted on more than one occasion that, "modern political repression of the artistic spirit has a long history going back to British rule."²⁵ Yet, despite the

²⁰ See, Macpherson, "Makerere: The Place of The Early Sunrise," 30-31. Also see, Mbowe, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 215.

²¹ Ngugi wa'Thiong'O, *The Black Hermit* (Nairobi: Heinemann African Writers Series, 1968).

²² Kaahwa, "Uganda Theatre: Paradigm Shifts," 91.

²³ Ibid, 91-92.

²⁴ Ibid.

National Theatre's origins as an institution of cultural exclusion and oppression, figures like Kiyingi "aimed at de-emphasizing expatriate colonial culture and bringing majority culture to the centre of the cultural scenery in Buganda."²⁶ However, it is significant that Mbowa uses the regional term, Buganda, rather than the national term, Uganda, in relation to this event. As will become apparent, the tension between national and regional interests will come to haunt the history of the National Theatre as a cultural center.

Following Kiyingi's precedent, the National Theatre has gone on to become a home and sanctuary for Ugandan artists and a forum for their visions of freedom or resistance to colonial repression and post-colonial mores. Indeed, since Kiyingi staged his first play in the coveted space, we artists often used the National Theatre to speak truth (often a coded truth) about the abuses of the government and to acknowledge and support the people's yearning for a better Uganda. Examples of such work include the early 1980s Lubwa p'Chong's, *The Minister's Wife*, and early 1990s Ashraf Simwogerere's, *Omuyaga Mu Makoola/Whirlwind in the Leaves*.²⁷ We have also addressed taboo topics such as sexual violence, reflecting honestly upon certain problematic patterns of behavior in our own communities. Examples include Bakayimbira Dramactor's 1993 popular HIV/AIDS drama, *Ndiwulira*, by Charles Senkubuge and my own 1994 play with Teamline on the then largely taboo subject of pedophilia (known in Uganda as defilement), *The Eleventh Commandment*.²⁸

²⁵ Rose Mbowa, "Theatre and Political Repression in Uganda," *Research in African Literatures* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1996), 87.

²⁶ Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 214.

²⁷ Ashraf Simwogerere, *Omuyaga Mu Makoola/Whirlwind in the Leaves*, directed by Omugave Ndugwa (unpublished, performed by Black Pearls Ltd, National Theatre, Kampala, 1991).

²⁸ Charles James Senkubuge, *Ndiwulira*, directed by Andrew Benon Kibuuka, unpublished, performed by Dramactors, Bakayimbira, National Theatre, Kampala, 1993; Charles Mulekwa, *The Eleventh Commandment*, directed by Rita Serukenya Nkemba, performed by Teamline, National Theatre, Kampala, 1994.

Still the regional, linguistic, and “ethnic” problems persist. In the final analysis, it is too simple to say either that the National Theatre has been a force for unity or a force for division in Uganda’s history. There have been times, as will become apparent, when the National Theatre itself has contributed to and been caught up in the tensions that underlie the civil strife of post-independence Uganda. What is most fascinating about it, though, and the reason I give it such prominence, is that apart from its symbolic outlook of Ugandan indebtedness to British ways, it has served as a barometer of Uganda’s changing culture and climate. Even when, in the early 1990s, government funding was systematically cut, the Theatre still found a way to carry on. To borrow from Mozambique’s cry in the face of difficulty as immortalized in song by South African singer and civil rights activist Miriam Makeba, “Mama Afrika,” *a luta continua*—the struggle continues.

In any case, the Theatre has tangibly and symbolically transformed from a vehicle for the imposition of European cultural forms into a vehicle for celebrating native Ugandan forms, from a site of violence and repression to a site of creative expression, truth-telling, and social action. Through all the tragic and frightening events of the post-colonial era—and there have been many—the National Theatre (a colonial monument) has more often than not been a place where native Ugandans could come to remember the dream they dreamed about a peaceful independence; though the bullet holes attest to the fact that it, too, has not gone unscathed by the legacy of war.

In the narrative to this point and in comments that follow, I engage a good deal with Shakespearean drama as a part of the colonial legacy still present in post-colonial society; but it also needs to be asserted that trends in Ugandan drama and theatre since *Uhuru* draw deeply from traditional approaches to performance, often embedded in ritual; the aim is to understand better, and to show how certain events from the end of the colonial era and the beginning of *Uhuru* inform post-colonial events, and how they have also been utilized by Ugandan playwrights. The projection is informed by the conflicts between Ugandan traditional practice and European modes

of performance and a celebration of the syncretism that resulted: a remembering of the movement from Ritual to Shakespeare and back.

Shakespearean Spell

BEFORE there was Shakespeare, there was Ritual. Of course, ritual abounds in Shakespearean dramas. For example, Hamlet initially broods over the loss of his father during the celebration of an inappropriate ritual of marriage; things come out in the open about the rot in the state of Denmark during another ritual, an interrupted one: the grave-digging scene and Ophelia's disastrous funeral. And when, in *Julius Caesar*, the conspirators are done ridding Rome of Caesar – a man grown too powerful – by killing him, they ritually wash their hands in his blood. Ritual is one of the ways Shakespeare mirrors society to itself; and it is one of the ways African people, through traditions of orature, song and dance, often propagated order in society: celebrating the living, the dead, and those unborn.

Considerable time has already been spent on the importance of Shakespearean texts within the theatrical education received by the generation of *Uhuru* and Shakespeare's influence, in particular, will reemerge as the story of theatre and society after *Uhuru* unfolds. It is now necessary, though, to look more closely at the traditional modes of performance that had dominated pre-colonial Ugandan cultures and which still competed for attention during Uganda's time as a "Protectorate" and after independence.

Of course, the reality is that many traditional Ugandan performance practices pre-date Shakespeare. These practices blend song, dance, and drama with proverbs, chants, and riddles, and usually take the form of rituals marking important rites of passage in the community, such as a bounty harvest, a marriage, a courtship, a circumcision, the birth of twins, or a death. Still practiced in some parts of the country, particularly in rural areas, these rituals are full-blown performances, with spectacle of surprising and impressive proportions. Their purpose is to entertain, excite or soothe audiences, to celebrate and to honor community members, and, in the

process, to reflect the society back to itself. The reception such a ritual performance receives from a specific community is directly related to the aesthetic quality of that performance. Just as in the world of Western theatre, the turnout to a performance depends greatly on the anticipated craftsmanship of the performers, and a performance might stand or flop depending on its quality.

In times past, these rituals were as varied as the many cultures that comprised pre-colonial Uganda, and they served – in addition to the functions mentioned above – the important function of nourishing the imaginations and the empathy of both performers and audiences. As in some Western theatre, ritual performances often involve “role reversals,” in which men dress like women, and women dress like men, chiefs play the parts of peasants, and peasants play chiefs. This practice helps people to develop empathy by literally putting them in each other’s “shoes.”

Though frowned upon and delegitimized today in urban areas of the country, these ancient rituals and entertainments taken together, constituted the original “national theatre,” before the colonial model. As Robert Serumaga – the father not the son, the playwright not the journalist – writes:

...[T]he practice of people getting together to watch the story teller act out his story, or to hear a musician like the famous Sekinomu of Uganda relate a tale of trenchant social criticism, dramatized in voice, movement and the music of his Ndingidi (tube fiddle), has been with us for centuries. And this is the true theatre of East Africa.²⁹

The late Rose Mbowa reinforces the point:

For a long time, Western critics held that Uganda and practically all the other African countries had no tradition in theatre before formal scripted theatre performed on a proscenium arch stage was introduced by colonial educators or missionaries. This is a valid remark only if one considers the urban bourgeois theatre form of the 18th and 19th centuries as the only valid form of theatre.³⁰

²⁹ Robert Serumaga and Janet Johnson, "Uganda's Experimental Theatre," *African Arts* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1970), 52-55. Also, Andrew Horn gives a detailed study of Serumaga's legacy in the essay, "Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga," in *The Performance Arts in Africa: A Reader*, ed. Frances Harding, 97-111 (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

³⁰ Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 204-205.

While it is now widely recognized that “The phenomena called either/all ‘drama,’ ‘theatre,’ or ‘performance’ occur among all the world’s peoples... as far back as history goes,”³¹ the British colonizers repressed and sought to eradicate these traditional African cultural forms. Colonial rulers decided what was staged (Shakespeare et al.) and what was not (native performances), and they paganized (read: demonized) many of the traditional practices, spreading as far as they could the judgment that European meant good and African translated into bad. The drum and the horn, for example, which had been used for centuries in native communities, were branded as “evil” and “the devil’s work” because the British were afraid of these instruments that could carry messages by sound over a long distance. The prospect of the colonized communicating without the supervision or comprehension of the colonizer was anathema. This cultural hegemony and degradation – which Kenyan author and scholar Ngugi wa’Thiong’O deems the “cultural Bomb”³² and Cameroonian filmmaker Jean Marie Teno regards as “cultural genocide”³³ – took a considerable toll on the identity and self-esteem of Africans generally and, in this case, Ugandans.

An incident that marked the struggles for power leading up to the moment of *Uhuru* shows that the British may have had good reason to fear the power inherent in traditional patterns of performance. In 1953, Kabaka Mutesa II and Governor Andrew Cohen were engaged in a feud. At the time, Mutesa II through whom, with whom, against whom and, over whom Governor Cohen ruled was the 35th Kabaka of Buganda, crowned in 1942, ten years before the arrival of Cohen. Unsurprisingly, the two men ended up strange bedfellows. In time, the colonial ruler and the Kabaka started to feud. The feud between the Kabaka and the Governor was no ordinary

³¹ Seremba, “Robert Serumaga And The Golden Age Of Uganda's Theatre,” 66.

³² Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (London: James Curry/Heinmann, 1986), 3.

³³ Jean Marie Teno, *Afrique, Je Te Plumera/Africa, I Will Fleece You*, Documentary DVD, directed by Jean Marie Teno, Carlifornia Newsreel/Les Films du Raphia, 1993.

squabble; it was a major political crisis.³⁴ The British wanted to establish an East African Federation, but the Baganda were against it (fearing to come under the control of white settler community as in Kenya and Rhodesia [Zimbabwe]), preferring the limited autonomy they had. Mutesa II opposed the proposal hence the head on conflict with Governor Cohen. The feud was also a play of power: on the day of the showdown, both men drew lines in the sand Governor Cohen declared, “If you don’t agree, you will have to go.” And Kabaka Mutesa retorted, “If anybody has to go, it will certainly be you.”³⁵ In the mini-battle of wills, the Kabaka lost to the Governor and, consequently, Mutesa II ended up being deported to Britain.

Varied responses followed the Kabaka’s exile: Mutesa’s fond sister, Princess Alice Zalwango (1914-53) is said to have died from shock; friendship with even the most sympathetic Europeans had to be suspended by Baganda who felt aggrieved; people who thought they had left behind their “tribal” life went back to wearing backcloth by way of protest; some men declined to shave until the Kabaka was returned home.

Another player, who would become known as Kiganira (“The Resister”), politically less powerful within the colonial set up, but nevertheless a stakeholder in the state of affairs, rose up and flung himself into the conflict. He took matters into his own hands, drawing upon traditional beliefs and adapting traditional performance strategies in a one-man protestation against the deportation of Kabaka Mutesa to Britain. My account regarding what follows is drawn from the reporting that appears in the pages of *Drum* magazine.³⁶

Despite being a son of prominent Catholic parents, Kiganira, otherwise known as Mathias Sewanyana, chose to lay aside the European outlook to life issues and turned to his heritage. He shed the Christian faith and proclaimed himself to be Kibuuka Kiganira Omumbale, a medium of

³⁴ Kabaka of Buganda, *Desecration Of My Kindom*, 122-128.

³⁵ Ibid, 121.

³⁶ All quotes cited from, "Uganda: The Bloodstained Pearl of Africa And its Struggle for Peace," *Drum*, ed. JRA Bailey, comp. Adam Seftel (Bailey's African Photo Archives Production, 1994), 14-15.

god of war in Buganda. His brother said the ghosts (ancestral sprits) that were originally at the call of his great grandfather, had now chosen Mathias Sewanyana; he was, in effect, not only the medium but also the reincarnation of the god of war.

Dreadlocked, backcloth clad, spear wielding, and talisman adorned, he climbed on the roofs of houses, onto trees, upon hills, and “coiled a snake round and round himself,” preaching and advocating the return of the Kabaka. He shouted he was in commune with the gods, and that the return of the Kabaka was only a matter of time. His crusade was a well-sustained quest at a moment of considerable tension.

He drew freely upon the ways in which spiritual mediums would act in local rituals conducted within enclosed shrines, bringing this ritualistic behavior to a wider and more public audience with a showmanship that is commented upon in all accounts. People thronged to see him. They brought food and money, and some ended up staying as his followers. Europeans kept away, but had a clear view of the committed man’s effect from the city, as he took his cause to the “heights of Mutundwe hill.” Fear started to creep in for the British authorities and their sympathizers, owing to the ever-growing stream of people turning up and converting into worshippers of Kiganira. The more he railed and dramatized his protest, the more he got noticed; and the more he got noticed, the more tension and attention formed around his efforts. The tensions snapped when authorities were compelled to act. The authorities sent in the Kabaka’s police, now under control of the British, pushing the expected violence into gear. By the time Kiganira was forcibly brought down from the hill, the Chief of the Kabaka’s police had been killed in the fracas. Kiganira was thrown into jail for “organizing an unlawful assembly where murder was committed” but the authorities never figured who from the mob killed the Police

Chief. Kiganira earned a 20-year sentence for his troubles, “escaped by magic” in 1961, and was rearrested and released in 1968, not necessarily because of, but after *Uhuru*.³⁷

The importance of this tale for my enquiry is two-fold, and the first is laid out within the *Drum* article: “Some people believed he was the messiah, some thought him mad – anyway he was certainly a great showman!”³⁸ Kiganira’s exploits depended upon his capacity to convincingly enact the idea that the god of war had chosen to be reincarnated in his being, he won crowds because of his abilities to tap into pre-colonial belief systems by traditional means of oratory and performative display, even as he deployed these means in an untraditional setting. He took hold of an empty space (Mutundwe hill), and staged an anti-colonial establishment crusade by putting up a one-man show of resistance full of theatrical exploits: the sermons on the rooftops and treetops; the use of the snake as a symbol of power, and – since effective showmanship depends on a receptive spectatorship – the conviction he created among his followers that he was speaking truth to power.

Ancestors are a sacred affair, the link between the living and the dead. Praying to Kibuuka, god of war, to intervene is analogous to praying for whatever reason through a Christian Saint. The question is – and this is the second point – in the face of strife, in a time of subjugation, do you turn to ways of faith or being operative in Western/Christian/”modern” worldviews or to traditional African modes of belief and action? The Kiganira incident demonstrates this dilemma for the Baganda people. In the society laid bare by Cohen’s actions and Kiganara’s protests, “Two diametrically opposed religions have gained ground” but left bare the trappings of “double consciousness,” or identity crisis, that has affected Africa and continues to do so. Kiganira came from a Christian home, “his father was a first- class Catholic and a

³⁷ Ibid. The text prints the name of the god as Kibuka, which over time has come to hold, but Baganda would apply a double “u” and in a more exact transliteration Sewanyana would be spelled Ssewanyana.

³⁸ Ibid.

catechist at a village church.” But, in the face of real needs, real demands, real wants, real crisis, schism set in, providing the conditions for Kiganira’s rebellious use of traditional performance practices.

Over time, the Christian faith (along with Islam and other non-indigenous faiths: Mormonism, Jehovah Witness worship, Bahai, Rasftarianism, etc) have gained ground in Uganda; but,

During the 1953-55 crisis the people had a double mind over what powerful god would help speed up the Kabaka’s return. Some went to pray to the real [Christian] God, but others said He was letting them down and they should pray to their ancient gods instead.³⁹

Kiganira would emerge again in 1972, when, “he with a group of followers made an insistent appeal to the Ministry of Culture and Community Development to revive the Kiganda [Buganda] traditional religion as one of the recognized religions in the country.”⁴⁰ The writer of the account expresses surprise on behalf of the people of Kampala, but just as *The Nativity* or the *Passion of the Christ* or *The Prodigal Son* are dramatic renditions of aspects of the Christian faith, Kiganira not only had faith in his Ganda (Buganda) religion, but also understood the power of costuming, theatricality and dramatic means in winning converts.

My purpose in the preceding discussion of the Kiganira episode has been to illustrate one instance of the use of a traditional performance mode by an indigenous “performance” to register an anti-colonial protest. To return now to the post-independence moment, Ugandan artists have frequently used traditional performance forms. The theatre artists who, since independence, have introduced traditional Ugandan forms and themes onto the national stage have actively sought to counteract the colonial project of demonization and erasure, and to amplify Ugandan voices. They have used Shakespearean or other European modes to a great extent, but have applied

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Rev. Canon Y.K Bamunoba, "Death in African Life," *Second World Black and Arts Festival (Lagos, Nigeria 15 January-12 February 1977): Symposium on Black Civilization and Education*, prod. Working Document Written at the request of Unesco (Kampala: UNESCO, January 28, 1977), 5-7.

African traditions at the center. Like Kiganira, they have operated by digging into the past to challenge and provide a corrective for conditions in the present, yet unlike Kiganira who did so up in the trees and upon hilltops with a god's authority, they have done this without pretensions to divinity and in the Master's House, on stages built to house, honor, and privilege the Western theatrical heritage. In many cases, by placing African wisdom, African proverbs, African song, and African folklore at the heart of their productions – even those performed on a Western style stage – these artists took the Western framework of the proscenium arch and filled it with African content and forms. At the National Theatre, Kiyingi led the way as the first Ugandan to stage a play there; it was left to others, though, to fully develop these syncretic tendencies.

Two figures whose efforts were of great importance in developing this syncretic approach were the late Okot p'Bitek and the late Byron Kawadwa. Okot was the first Ugandan Director of the National Theatre (1966 - 1968). There is some irony in his first exposure to theatre. According to Jessica Kaahwa, "early records reveal that the first [Ugandan] playwright, a graduate of Makerere University, Lacito Okechi, wrote a play in 1946, *The Conversion of a Heathen House into a Christian Home*. It was performed by students at the Sir Samuel Baker School, where Okot p'Bitek – who would in future become a dramatic poet – was a student."⁴¹ Moreover, from his father, Jebedayo Opii Bitek, he learnt "a lot of stories and style of telling stories" and from his mother, Cerina Lawino Lacwaa, he learnt "a great deal about poetry, song, and dance."⁴² Okot set in place a poetic/dramatic style cycle portraying and lamenting the impasse between ordinary citizens and intellectuals, rulers and subjects, the powerful and powerless in colonial and postcolonial Uganda.⁴³

⁴¹ Kaahwa, "Ugandan Theatre: Paradigm Shifts," 89.

⁴² Cliff Lubwa P'Chong, "Okot p'Bitek: The Cultural Matrix of the Acholi in his Writings, in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*," Ed. Eckhard Breitinger (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2000), 83.

⁴³ These include: *Song of Lawino* (Nairobi: East African Pub. House, 1966); *Song of Ocol* (Nairobi: East African Pub. House, 1970); *Song of Malaya* (Nairobi: East African Pub. House, 1971); *Song of a Prisoner* (New York, NY: Third Press, 1971); and the incomplete, *Song of a Soldier*. Okot wrote

Okot's *Song of Prisoner*⁴⁴ is not a play, per se, but it is arguably dramatic in form and content. A staged reading, by Okot himself, at the National Theatre premises launched the "song." Two decades later, in the late 1980s to 1990s, Lubwa p'Chong took to adapting Okot's works for the stage. He adapted *Song of a Prisoner* into *The Reject of My Country*,⁴⁵ which was staged in many venues, including the State House in 1988 and National Theatre in 1992. And he was working on, *Do Not Uproot the Pumpkin*, based on Okot's "line in the sand," a proverb of his people, the Acholi:

The pumpkin in the old homestead
Must not be uprooted.⁴⁶

The crux of it is: "One should not destroy Acholi traditions and... ought to respect the clan, relatives, elders, ancestors, and their holy shrines... yet the rebels... (and) the army seem to target precisely these traditional values."⁴⁷ However, the "song," a vital and almost ever present element of Ugandan drama did not end up entirely muffled. Many Uganda plays are imbued with song (dance and drama). But given the political divisions, whose song is it, anyway? In Ugandan terms, is it an Acholi song or a Baganda song, a Luo song or a Bantu song, a northern song or a southern song?

After Okot, came Byron Kawadwa, who was designated the first Artistic Director (1973 - 1977), who, with a different regional identification and political agenda, would build upon Okot's

other books like, *Horn of My Love* (London: Heinemann, 1974); *Hare and Hornbill* (London: Heinemann, 1979); and, *Artist the Ruler* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), vii, 1.

⁴⁴ Okot p'Bitek, *Song of a Prisoner* (New York: Third Press, 1971). Okot p'Bitek, *Song of a Prisoner* (New York: Third Press, 1971).

⁴⁵ Cliff Lubwa p'Chong, *The Reject of my Country*, performed by Unpublished play Teamline, National Theatre, Kampala, 1992.

⁴⁶ A central theme of Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino* (Nairobi, NY: East African Publishing House, 1966).

⁴⁷ S Sverker Finnstrom, *Living With Bad Surroundings: War, History, And Everyday Moments In Northern Uganda*, ed. Jo Ellen Fair, Leigh A. Payne Neil L. Whitehead (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008), 205.

linkage of “song” to “play.” A quoted dialogue between Serumaga and Okot shows that the two practitioners had envisioned a truly national, not just a regional theatre.⁴⁸ A drama based on African aesthetic principles would run in repertory alongside one modeled on European principles, or a ritual-based performance in tandem with a proscenium arch type of a drama. New African dramas would be developed in the villages and then come to the National Theatre; the institution would serve as a “workshop” for theatre and as a place to build the identity of Uganda as a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic nation state. Serumaga and Okot turned out to be half right and half wrong. The National Theatre became a coveted performance space and an aesthetic syncretism was encouraged by its work; the creation of a functioning, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual nation state is an incomplete project.

Kawadwa “emphasized the aspect of developing talent in the performing arts by introducing the School Drama Competition in 1957. The project lasted up to 1984 (I was a participant in 1983 and 1984) and then phased out. Music festivals, made up of music dance, and some drama still go on. In the drama project, schools could stage any play, an adopted or original script, from the Greek *Antigone* by Sophocles, to the French *The Doctor In Spite of Himself* by Moliere, to the Ugandan *Black Mamba* by John Ruganda. Other theater administrators after Kawadwa have moved into, fought for, and created space for free expression of ideas that matter to native Ugandans. The resulting interactions, sometimes conflicting and sometimes harmonious, have both contributed to and challenged a sense of national identity, creating, at its best, a laboratory which functions something like Homi Bhabha’s, “third space of enunciation which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process... [S]uch an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ntangaare and Breitingner, "Ugandan Drama in English," 224.

⁴⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 37.

Rethinking the colonial struggle and legacy that is still at the core of today's Ugandan identity, and observing the post-colonial impasse that generates "radical propagandist theater," it is inevitable to look back to the time of *Uhuru*. for, as Ntangaare and Breitingner note,

The writers of the 60s saw themselves as social commentators who could give a voice to the ordinary people, i.e. they intended to be 'committed artists,' committed to an open and democratic society while political realities moved into the opposite direction: The political leaders distanced themselves from the common man, became sensitive to the slightest form of criticism and engaged in high level intrigues, personal enrichment but also vengeance.⁵⁰

Thus, Wycliff Kiyingi and Byron Kawadwa were undoubtedly alert to the tensions between the State and the Stage. Kawadwa was embroiled in Kiyingi's socio-political radio dramas, for which both artistic allies served jail sentences: "on the very day Obote seized absolute power, an episode was aired on the radio of Wycliffe Kiyingi's series: *Wokulira/By the Time You Grow Up* (you will have seen a lot), which Obote found offensive. The cast, which included Byron Kawadwa, was immediately arrested."⁵¹ Moreover, Kawadwa was personally aware of the 1964 Nakulabye incident in which State troops used guns against civilians, one of whom was his own father: "only two years before that, in 1964 – the year of the Nakulabye massacre – Kawadwa had lost his own father who was tragically one of the earliest victims of Obote."⁵²

Historians are in agreement that at the peak of the crisis, Prime Minister Obote sanctioned the State troops. Some, like Mulira, have gone so far as to suggest that this is the incident that sparked off the "politics of the gun" in post-*Uhuru* Uganda, arguing that the politics of the gun in Uganda is a legacy originating with Obote. This is only so if prior gun related incidents in Ugandan affairs are ignored, or if Ugandan political history starts with the 1964 incident or the 1966 crisis. For there is a connection between the Nakulabye incident, and an

⁵⁰ Ntangaare and Breitingner, "Ugandan Drama in English," 226-227.

⁵¹ Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 213. I have to note, however, from my interview with Kiyingi, this is a claim he does not recall happening.

⁵² Seremba, "Robert Serumaga And The Golden Age Of Uganda's Theatre" (Dublin, 2007), 76.

earlier incident at Bugangaizi Market where it is reported that the Kabaka shot eight Banyoro (people of Bunyoro) in a market in Ndaiga. Placing the issue of a “politics of the gun” squarely on Obote holds water only if the Bugangaizi incident involving Mutesa II is deemed either apolitical, or the people who were shot are considered inconsequential. In both cases, agents of the State shot Ugandan civilians. The practice of gunning down Ugandan citizens by State agents took hold, and has been sustained well past Mutesa II, Obote, Amin, Okello and Obote II into the time of Museveni, from mid 1980s into the new millennium.⁵³

Hence, rather than easily bring down the problem to one word: “Obote,” or, worse, the place and ethnic group he comes from, it is perhaps more productive to recognize the given consequential point in history as the moment of “breach” in Ugandan post-colonial politics *a la* Victor Turner and Richard Schechner’s depiction of “social dramas.” Briefly, Turner describes a pattern of “breach-crisis-redressive action-outcome,” whereby some happening creates a division in society, an event plays into that division so as to provoke a crisis, the crisis causes a need for redress, and thereafter there is either reintegration or schism, as the case maybe. Schechner then proceeded to draw

out a connection between the “social drama” – dramatic events taking place in society–and “aesthetic drama” – the reflection of those (or similar) events on the stage. In an “infinity loop” these patterns and actions projected as “aesthetic drama” can return to haunt further social actions in a never-ending loop of reflection and reflexion. As has been already indicated in the previous chapter, there are problems with the neat distinction between “social dramas” and “aesthetic

⁵³ The problem neither starts nor ends with Obote, and stretches backwards beyond Mutesa II. Limiting it to any one political actor is tending to a partial, uncritical, and shortsighted view of Ugandan political history. The use of gunfire to dictate political direction is rampant in postcolonial times but goes back to colonial times. While Uganda gained independence without a fully-fledged act of war, Ugandan regions of the West, East and North were colonized by the gunfire and warfare: the British and Buganda vs. Kabalega of Bunyoro; the 1920 Christian wars between the Anglicans and the Catholics in Buganda; the 1910 massacre of colonial resistance in Bugisu; all the way back to the 1877 incident in Lira. In all these disputes, political in nature, gunfire was at play. The facts do not free Obote or Mutesa II or all the other rulers, fighters and “liberators” of responsibility, but the problem of gunfire in Ugandan political history hardly begins and ends with Apollo Milton Obote. It is a legacy of colonialism (pre-colonial

dramas” as interacting but separate entities in ritual and in highly charged political situations, and these problems will be pointed out again in chapter four. For the moment, though, I wish to apply this framework while returning to the role that Shakespearean production had in shaping the relational sense between “social” and “aesthetic” drama issues for the *Uhuru* generation. After, I will focus on one of the foundational plays of the post-colonial Ugandan stage.

Key to such an undertaking will be a consideration of the career of Apollo Milton Obote, the man at the center of action on Independence Day, his role in a production of *Julius Caesar*, and his reputation as an orator. In juxtaposition will be the Ugandan entry to the second Festival of Black & African Arts and Culture of 1977 (FESTAC), *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko*/Song of the Cockerel, by Byron Kawadwa.

warfare was of a different nature – for one thing there was no Uganda, for another the weapons were different). Tellingly, Uganda’s first colonial ruler was a military figure: Captain Lugard.



10. *Second Festac event.*

The former play grabbed the imagination of the Ugandan intelligentsia while the latter proved to be a costly play for the playwright. Eerily, whereas in postcolonial Uganda, outstanding playwright Byron Kawadwa's "aesthetic drama" about the usurpation of power resulted into a tragic "social drama" when he was brutally killed by State figures, the "social drama" associated with the advent of *Uhuru* are manifest in Shakespearean drama. That is particularly true of *Julius Caesar* in relation to Milton Obote before he is first toppled in 1971. The connections reverberate in Ugandan society long thereafter: the conspiracy plots beneath the struggle for power; the role of rhetoric in moving masses; the characteristics of civil war; the seers "ides of March" warning, and more, play out on the Ugandan political arena. The Shakespearean comparisons do not end with the parallels of Obote's manipulations of power to those in *Julius Caesar*. After Obote came

Amin, whose actions inspired a sold-out production of *Macbeth* in England by Max Stafford Clark and Out of Joint Theatre Company, thus widening the loop, But this is a matter for the next chapter. Here, it is best to focus on the Shakespeare-*Julius Caesar*-Obote linkage and Kawadwa's 1977 play, *Song of the Cockerel*.

The Play Is the Thing

LEADING up to and immediately after the *Uhuru* of 1962, local theatrical production (apart from the much maligned traditional genres of performance) was still figuring ways to adapt "European dramatic forms to their own satirical or political purposes."⁵⁴ That is not to say local cultural production was at a standstill, rather it is to underline the incessant factors of hegemony and subjugation that inform cultural interaction between people, cultures and nations.

Ultimately, cultures in the global mix form anew. The outcome is dictated neither by the hegemonic power, nor by the previously subjugated population, but emerges as a fusion of cultural influences.

The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space—a third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences... Hybrid hyphenisations emphasize the incommensurable elements as the basis of cultural identities.⁵⁵

The process of colonization was dependent on "performative" means for its operation, and for creating degraded and dependent identities for peoples who once controlled their own destinies; and the creation of a cultural hierarchy with Shakespeare's legacy placed at the top, was a part of this process.

For this discussion, Obote, who has often been criticized by his detractors for re-establishing the British colonial power structure under the rhetoric of Independence, became well

⁵⁴ Anonymous, "African Theatre," *Msn.Encarta, Online Encyclopedia*, 2008, <http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia> (accessed 2007).

⁵⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 218.

known for playing a role in a colonial era production of Shakespeare's play while attending Makerere University, modeled after English Universities. Obote, ironically, first encounters the challenges of political leadership in the performance of a colonial project involving the performance of a British "classic" informed by the themes of suspicion, conspiracy, violence, political unrest, corruption, civil strife and warfare.

Obote rose from obscurity to a position of fame and power on the Ugandan political scene on two notable accounts: first, a remarkable letter to the editor decrying regional imbalance and a lack of planning for integration and power sharing as *Uhuru* approached, arguing that,

I shall be highly delighted if you would allow me space . . . to express the feelings of young enlightened "Semi-Hamites" and Nilotes about some of the aims of the Congress. Not long ago Mr Fenner Brockway, MP, came to Uganda and concentrated his activities in and around Kampala. He returned to England and gave his version of the "Unification of all Tribes in Uganda" His version is a direct negation of the established traditions of the Semi-Hamites and Norsemen [Nilotes] and ... we are worried about it. It will therefore be of great interest to us if the Uganda National Congress will point out exactly what they mean by the "Unification of all Tribes of Uganda" Cooperation with the government is also recommended but we Semi-Hamites and Norsemen of Uganda feel that the Congress [in] aiming at "Self-Government in Uganda," is hastening and therefore leaving us behind because of our present inability to aim so high ... it must be pointed out to the Congress here and now that with us, the question of questions lies in education and rapid development of African Local Governments ... The height of folly [on the Congress's part] is the apparent omission...of a definite aim to the slogan of immediate Local Self-Government in Uganda.⁵⁶

Second, as important to his image and persona of consummate orator and manipulator of people and events, was the reputation earned while taking on a role in the politically charged Shakespearean play, *Julius Caesar*; many people among the Ugandan intelligentsia relate Obote's rise to State power, rightly or wrongly, to his role in this play.

Between the two happenings, it is the *Julius Caesar* factor that resounds in the memory of many Ugandans of the pre-Independence generation. The fact he played a part in the production was and is often bandied about in theatrical forums and workshop sessions; theatre

⁵⁶ Milton Obote, *Uganda Herald*, April 24, 1952. Quoted in Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1992), 12; cf., Hugh Dinwiddie, "The Search For Unity In Uganda: Early Days To 1966," *African Affairs* (Oxford) 80, no. 321 (1981): 503.

and literary practitioners know and say at every opportunity that Obote had been in the play. Both Independence and post-Independence generations of theatre artists, literary figures, and cultural players talk about his brilliance as an actor in it. Yet, strangely, it remains uncertain what part he actually played. They often answer “not sure, but I am telling you he was in the play.” Sometimes, when pressed they will assert that he played Marc Antony – a reasonable assumption given Obote’s reputation for oratory and manipulative cunning.

Ali Mazrui, a leading East African scholar of colonial and postcolonial issues, reveals the following telling detail, showing how deeply Obote himself identified with the cultural heritage of early modern England, and how Obote’s ambition was fused with that identification:

Among the Pan-Ugandan nationalists was Apollo Obote, who adopted the additional name of “Milton” out of admiration for John Milton, the author of *Paradise Lost*. Obote was inspired by Satan’s indelible line in Milton’s poem: “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.”⁵⁷

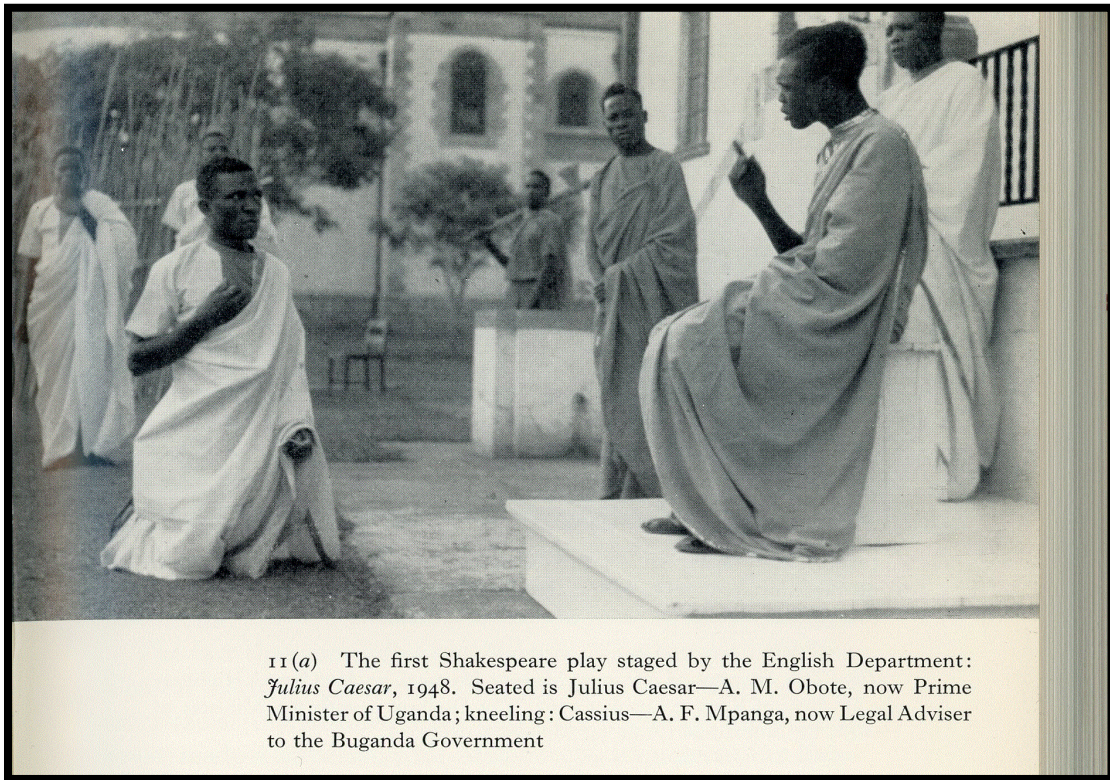
The admiration for early modern English culture also comes through in an obituary in *The Guardian* which has it that, “Milton Apollo Obote was once quoted as saying: ‘I’d rather have Milton’s brains than Apollo’s good looks.’”⁵⁸ What is in a name? Obote was a man of many parts: He was Apollo (Greek god), Milton (English Poet), and he was Cassius, Caesar, and Antony all rolled into one. Mazrui’s revelation and the quote in *The Guardian* make it clear that Obote was a keen student of English literature, who understood how to work within the “intersection of European education and colonial power,”⁵⁹ and perhaps, too, how his own fate and destiny were to be marked by this legacy.

⁶⁵ Ali Mazrui, “Intellectuals and Change in East Africa,” *ZIRPP*, September 6, 2009, <http://zirppo.wordpress.com/2009/09/06> (accessed 2011).

⁵⁸ Julian Marshall, “Obituary: Milton Obote,” *The Guardian* (London: Guardian.co.uk, October 12, 2005), 36.

⁵⁹ Loren Kruger, “Acting Africa,” in *The Performance Arts in Africa: a reader*, ed. Frances Harding, 75 (London: Routledge, 2002).

In any case, Obote's performance echoes within Ugandan society, the related uncertainties notwithstanding. Thankfully, Margaret Macpherson's records disabuse us of what role Obote played; he played Caesar, not Antony (or Cassius) though the parallels between Antony's calculated use of oratory and Obote's have bound the two together in myth and memory.



11. *I am Caesar.*

This image of Obote as Caesar can be found in Macpherson's 1964 memoir about Makerere University, *They Built for the Future*.⁶⁰ To judge by the picture, the production, staged in 1948, took place outdoors. The play was "performed for the general public and several thousand school

⁶⁰ See, Plate 11 (a) in Margaret Macpherson, *They Built for the Future* (London: Cambridge, 1964).

children and teacher trainees.”⁶¹ That could be one reason Obote’s participation in it was not forgotten: its then unprecedented accessibility to the public. Taking place in 1948, this form of theatre was still new to the public and, hence, all the more memorable. As a student learning the ways of British culture, Obote was evidently already involved in the politics of independence. Macpherson writes of, “A young man called Apollo Milton Obote” who “formed a political society and obtained permission to ‘demonstrate’ on Makerere [campus], but not in the city. This produced a spate of choleric letters in the local press.” She proceeds to point out rather casually that, “Obote incidentally took the title part in the English Department’s production of *Julius Caesar*.”⁶²

Given how often reference to Obote’s brief stint as a Shakespearean actor arises within Ugandan theatre and literary circles, the simple fact of this participation in a student production of a colonial play has taken on a sort of mythical status. The often expressed belief that Obote’s role in Shakespeare’s play is what made him the great and moving speaker he was at once praises and limits Obote’s oratorical acumen. If Obote was as good as Shakespeare’s Mark Antony, what a compelling, powerful and moving speaker he was. However, this commonly expressed observation privileges the rhetorical and political skills of British culture, quintessentially exemplified by Shakespeare, over Obote’s own Lango culture with its own traditions of orature. Putting aside oratorical traditions and skills prized within Lango (Luo) culture, donning a part – even the wrong part so it seems – in the Shakespearean drama ushered Obote onto the Ugandan stage, and into the collective psyche of the Ugandan political arena.

The widely held assumption that Obote played the part of Mark Antony is as intriguing as it is inaccurate, considering Obote’s remarkable political career. He is the one to whom the British Empire handed the instruments of power, come *Uhuru*. He went on to become two-time

⁶¹ Macpherson, “Makerere: The Place of The Early Sunrise,” 25.

⁶² Ibid, 27.

President: 1967-1971 and 1980-1985. In the first term of his leadership and second term of his rule, people often went on about his oratorical abilities: “The man can speak!” And when he did speak people listened glued to their radios or overflowed the public arenas. But, in the end, Obote played Caesar, after all. He gets away with his life, and comes back to try again, but no amount of skill at rhetoric spared him the two coups he suffered at the hands of less articulate men: Idi Amin (1971) and Tito Okello (1985). These men of war simply applied military might. He ends up thrown out by the very barrel of the gun he used to exile Mutesa II and ascend to the Presidency, just as the chief conspirators die by the very swords they used to kill Caesar.

When coming to power, first Caesar, then Brutus, then Antony seem to be what Rome needs, just as Obote was able to successfully (for a time) present himself as the person Uganda needed at *Uhuru*. But the passage of time soon shows how the person who champions change or freedom or *Uhuru* from a repressive and unjust system may take on the very attributes that he is railing against in the name of freedom, justice, and change. Corruption, it seems, is the ever-present companion of war. I am thinking here of not just the question of greed and gold—a vice that incites discord between Cassius and Brutus⁶³ and impinged on Amin and Obote⁶⁴ – but rather the corruption of a person. The age-old slippage between intent and outcome emerges: new rulers all too quickly turn into part of a recurring set of problems as they seek to consolidate power. Jan Kott has famously noted this pattern as already built into Shakespeare’s own sense of history, and it is, finally, this tragic pattern that makes Obote’s popular association with *Julius Caesar* so historically resonant. Change in leaders is inevitable, as Kott remarks, “But all of them –good and bad, brave and cowardly, vile and noble, naïve and cynical–tread on the steps that are always the same.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Act 4, Scene 2.

⁶⁴ Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 35-36.

⁶⁵ Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 10 .

Obote learned the lessons of *Julius Caesar* well enough to engineer a takeover of governmental power by means of war, and to foment and justify the crisis through rhetorical manipulation. Tools of subjugation can be tools of resistance and become tools of manipulation. It is as though what Obote did was to employ the lessons of political machinations and demagoguery in *Julius Caesar* in order to run the political affairs of Uganda. Practically, he employed a culture that does not conform to his own, to conduct his political ambitions, and machinations. He borrows ironies, rhetoric, plots, and strategies from a famed but fictional dramatic setting as tools with which to hold onto control.

Effectively, he invested in a Shakespearean stage drama, and theatricality, as a “how to” manual for holding onto power with all too similar results. Making this causal link possibly overstates intent, but the resonance between the events of “social dramas” that Obote participated in with those of the “aesthetic drama” so important to his education and reputation are undeniable. To get power he acts out reverence for the Kabaka; he kneels before him, thus seeming to pay homage to the supremacy of Buganda, but upon the declaration of independence he is the one who gets to raise the flag at *Uhuru*, while the Kabaka looks on with ambivalence. Obote then deposes the Kabaka, with Idi Amin Dada as his general and protégé: a most unlikely Brutus in the making, content, for the moment, to play a supernumerary role.

“For Shakespeare,” observes Kott, “power has names, eyes, mouth and hands. It is a relentless struggle of living people who sit together at one table.”⁶⁶ Relatedly, Mutibwa equates the back and forth wrangle for power as, “no more than a repetition in the 1960s of that between Buganda and Governor Cohen Sir Andrew Cohen in the early 1950s.”⁶⁷ He adds that, “Obote’s difficulties in the 1960s were the same as Cohen’s in the 1950s – i.e. how to bring home to

⁶⁶ Ibid, 7.

⁶⁷ Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 38.

Buganda the needs of a united and independent Uganda.”⁶⁸ A concerned Ugandan, Amon B. Mbekiza, in a letter to the editor, quotes “no less an authority than a Muganda political history professor,” who put it that, “both men were not fools... they were [like Caesar] ambitious... each sought ways of taking advantage of the other and it was a question of who would strike first...”⁶⁹ The kingdom “passed a resolution asking the central government to move away from the “soil” of Buganda, which Obote described as “rebellion against the authority and oneness of Uganda.”⁷⁰ On those grounds Obote finally pounced, sanctioning an attack on the Buganda Palace at Mengo. The *Lukiiko* (Parliament) of Buganda had asked Uganda to remove its government from Bugandan soil. In his submission to parliament, Obote said, I want to remind every honourable member in this House that we do not sit here because of the positions of our fathers or mothers, or because of the positions of our grandfathers or great-grandfathers. (Hear, hear!). I want to make this absolutely clear to the African states who have been approached, particularly to our neighbours.⁷¹

Once he had won Ugandan power Obote resisted unbridled European power, sometimes in dramatic manner. The first example is a longish part of a story worth retelling for two reasons: the list of historical characters mentioned, and for some insight into reflections on Obote immediately after he had wrested power from Mutesa II. Jenkins Kiwanuka recalls:

Before I attended the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference (now CHOGM) in London in 1965, I had never seen or heard Apollo Milton Obote (then Prime Minister of Uganda) quarrelling with foreigners, his own ministers or officials. I had also never physically met Ian Smith, the then Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), who now lives uneasily in South Africa but who, in 1965, would swear from morning to sunset that the black people of Southern Rhodesia would never achieve political power in his lifetime. I had never even heard of Mugabe, now President of

⁶⁸ Ibid, .

⁶⁹ See, "It Was Mutesa!" in *The New Vision* (Kampala: Vision Group, May 26, 2008).

⁷⁰ See, "Obote Orders Attack On Kabaka Mutesa II," in *The New Vision* (Kampala: Vision Group, May 26, 2008).

⁷¹ Ibid.

Zimbabwe. The man of the moment out there was Joshua Nkomo. You can therefore imagine my surprise when soon after our arrival at London's Heathrow Airport from Uganda, Obote lost his temper. We were seated in what passed for a V.I.P. lounge when a man in a blue uniform, a security officer we were later told, entered the room and whispered to the Prime Minister. "What?" Obote asked angrily. The man repeated the whisper, and thereafter Obote's eyes scanned the room, starting with Commonwealth Office Minister who had come to receive us, and resting on Sam Odaka, the foreign minister. "Odaka", he called out, "when Prime Minister Wilson (Harold) comes to Uganda, search his luggage. When the British Foreign Secretary comes to Entebbe, search his luggage. Search the luggage of all ministers and British officials from now on." It was after the prime minister stopped giving his orders that we realised what had happened. The uniformed man had demanded to search the luggage of our delegation, and of all people, he had chosen to approach the big man himself. Obote was visibly vexed, and so was the British minister who, too, was taken unawares by the man's intrusion. In typically British style, the minister took the man aside and apparently gave him a rapping. He then tip-toed from the room and disappeared among Heathrow's crowds.⁷²

On another occasion, Obote set out for the Commonwealth Head of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Singapore to oppose Britain's Arms deal with South Africa, threatening (with Nyerere and Kaunda) that Uganda, Tanzania, and Zambia would withdraw from CHOGM. The British Prime Minister, reportedly retorted, "I wonder how many of you will be allowed to return to your own countries from this conference",⁷³

Despite this passionate defense of the dignity of his new country, though, he was unable to avoid the corrupting influences of holding power or, like Caesar, an eventual fall from influence and grace. To the extent that European literature, drama, and fictional characters were deployed as tools in the colonization process, these same tools conversely served as inspiration in the anti-colonial quest.⁷⁴ It almost seems that Obote understood Julius Caesar so well that rather than be confined to one role he played all of the different parts at different times. He embodies the brilliance of Caesar on the political arena, the ruthlessness of Cassius in the face of fear and

⁷² See, Jenkins Kiwanuka, "When Obote fumed at the 1965 London CHOGM," *Daily Monitor* (Kampala: Monitor Publication, September 2007).

⁷³ Pat Hutton and Jonathan Bloch, "The Making Of Idi Amin," *New African*, February 2001: 4.

⁷⁴ Chinua Achebe, for example, famously used WB Yeats Poem "The Second Coming" in his masterful *Things Fall Apart* (1958), a novel that captures the African dilemma at the advent of colonialism.

enmity, the nobility of Brutus in *Matters of State* (the first not second time round!), the tenacity of Antony in moving masses, and, arguably, the insights of Shakespeare (or at least the historian in Shakespeare as revealed by Kott) in regard to the struggle for power, which would translate as a struggle for the throne in Elizabethan times, and for the State House in post-colonial Africa.⁷⁵ For while oratory is a gift, a tradition of his Lango origins, the African nation-state is a colonial project, borne of rulers from the homeland of Shakespeare.

This issue, the bonding of Shakespeare and Obote in the imagination, as (mis)interpreted by the intelligentsia in Ugandan society, and especially among those of Obote's (and *Uhuru's*) generation, displays the remarkable person Obote was, seen through people's conceptions of Obote's character in relationship to the characters and situations in the play. In Ugandan political history, the play *Julius Caesar* is seen as a useful tool, not just for learning English language and culture, but also for exploring one of the postcolonial nation-state's foremost players' troubling and troubled role in State rule, and, indeed, misrule. For example, Yoweri Museveni, Obote's later antagonist and Uganda's current leader, says of Tennyson, Yeats and Shakespeare that "Although this kind of education was irrelevant, it was useful since all societies are basically the same," adding that, "the stories were interesting and we could see later how they applied when we learned more about society."⁷⁶ On the Ugandan political scene, the Museveni vs. Obote crisis arguably plays out like the Cassius vs. Caesar conflict.⁷⁷ Thus Museveni may have a point about the "basic sameness" of societies and, hence, the "universality" of Shakespeare. Interestingly, Museveni himself appears in a 1964 picture of the *Julius Caesar* cast at Ntare School.

⁷⁵ Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 4-5.

⁷⁶ Yoweri Museveni, *Sowing The Mustard Seed: The Struggle For Freedom and Democracy in Uganda*, ed. Elizabeth Kanyogonya and Kevin Shillington (London : Macmillan, 1997), 13-14.

⁷⁷ Cassius gets his way, Caesar falls, but civil war crisis engulfs Roman society.



2.1 The cast of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Ntare Senior Secondary School, 1964. The author is second from the right in the front row

12. Museveni in the cast of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, one and half decades after Obote appeared in the play.

With Shakespeare's play in mind (I, too, was schooled and schooled others in his work), I am also reminded of "the masses." Brutus argues the Romans into agreeing with him; Antony argues them into going to war. In the ever-changing song of post-colonial Ugandan rule, after every government falls, Ugandans are like the Roman citizens shouting, "Revenge! About! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay! Let not a traitor live!"⁷⁸

And we have indeed done so, hence the recurrence of warfare. Revenge acts are an undeniable trait and recurrent aspect of Ugandan political history.⁷⁹ The fate of Cinna the poet is a common sight in a civil war ridden country. He runs into his fellow countrymen, answers their

⁷⁸ William Shakespeare, "Julius Caesar," *Sourcebooks* (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks MediaFusion, 2006), Act III, Scene 2.

⁷⁹ Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda, 1986-97* (*Eastern African Studies*) (Kampala: Fountain, 1999), 23.

unruly questions, at first poetically, but changes tact when it hits him that mere mention of his name is riling; he pleads earnestly that though he is indeed named Cinna, he is a poet, and not the Cinna who was one of the conspirators (who killed Caesar); but his fate is sealed. The way one irate Roman citizen sees it, "Its no matter. His name is Cinna. Pluck but his name out of his heart and turn him going."⁸⁰

Dramatically, what befalls Cinna happens off stage, but effectively, the sheer idea of it makes the skin crawl, especially among those who have experienced similar scenes of random retribution. And for whom do the people kill the "Cinnas" of this world? The next Caesar; what is at work here is, Kott suggests, "the mechanism of the human heart, and the mechanism of power; there is fear, flattery and the 'system.'"⁸¹ Given such a scenario, repeated at every regime change since *Uhuru*, it is inevitable that the influence of the state of war pervades Ugandan performance practices, and in particular, Ugandan playwriting and theatrical production.

Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko / Song of the Cockerel

IN 2007, the outstanding comedian Kimuli (who figures prominently in the previous chapter), wrote me an email about the state of playwriting, which read in part:

I tried to count how many playwrights in Uganda, whose works have impacted upcoming writers and they are just a handful. Looking back at some of the plays that have been performed at the National Theatre, few of them live in the memories of those who watched them. I wonder what happens to the rest. Could it be that the storylines that are complex or half [-] baked, or the audiences inability to understand the plot? *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko* is one of the oldest plays that has had an impact on all generations.⁸²

Kimuli's communication points out some challenges faced by theatre practitioners in Uganda: playwriting is in trouble not only due to a lack of publishing, but also due to a poor reading culture and, frequently, the lack of a sense of direction. Regardless, Byron Kawadwa's 1970s play

⁸⁰ Shakespeare, "Julius Caesar," Act 3, Scene 3.

⁸¹ Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 13-14.

⁸² Kimuli, Kenneth. Personal communication. E-mail to the author, 2 March 2007.

stands out. The play is very much a landmark in Ugandan drama, theatre and playwriting trends.

Why is this the case, and perhaps more concretely, what is the play about?

The play begins with: “*Wankoko* (The Cockerel), crowing out in an engaging piece of exposition his self-belief and his take on things, in song:

Wankoko, erinya lyange nze Wankoko/Cockerel, my name is Cockerel
Omulumu omunene sagala/I want no big job
Bwe guba nga gulimu enkayana/If it is driven by conflict.

Having sought and arrived at the center of ambition, Wankoko, Cock of the walk, denies being ambitious. Wankoko does not arrive on stage alone; he has a sidekick, Nkwale (which means Quail). The choice to name the two characters after birds of the same type (both of the pheasant breed), points to two prominent figures of that time (Obote and Amin) who came to the center of power from northern Uganda.

Wankoko and Nkwale physically operate from off-stage at the start; they come in search of work, any work at all according to Wankoko’s plea. When the stage lights come up, revealing Palace dwellers carrying flame trees, Wankoko and Nkwale, rank outsiders, peep onto and then squeeze into the Palace proceedings. The two aliens come from a place called Buddu (a fictional place name also meaning poverty), and upon arrival pledge allegiance to the Kabaka. As people dance “Amagunju,” a Baganda war dance, the lights gradually reveal the presence of aliens amongst the Palace people, namely Wankoko and Nkwale. The Palace guards start to backbite “*Ba kyakubbali*/the outsiders.”⁸³

The strategy of analogy and displacement, of making the familiar strange so that it can be seen more clearly, is employed in the play’s very title. First is the inter-textual aspect: *Song of the Cockerel* echoes the “song school”⁸⁴ approach Okot p’Bitek established. There was a

⁸³ Byron Kawadwa, *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko/Song of The Cockerel*, 1-5.

⁸⁴ See, Okot p’Bitek, *Artist The Ruler*, 8.

widespread knowledge of *Song of Lawino*⁸⁵ especially, as it had made literary impact (locally and internationally) and was being taught in schools. Thus the witting or unwitting allusion of “Song of Cock” to that strand of social awareness. And, possibly, Okot (himself a teacher of Religion) drew his inspiration from the “Song of Songs” in the Bible. The work of either one is clearly steeped in the culture of his origins.

Arguably, Okot, an Acholi, and a poet from northern Uganda, inspires Kawadwa, a Muganda, and a dramatist from Southern part of Uganda. As cultural productions, *Song of a Prisoner* and *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko/Song of the Cockerel* come out in the same year (1971). However, Okot had already developed a “song school” form of cultural efficacy that goes back to the morn of independence. In any case, if an inter-textual discourse can mitigate, “the debate about superordinate and subordinate cultures (and perhaps politics) of Western/African or Nilotic/Bantu in independent Uganda,” then perhaps an inter-ethnic nation-state is a possible project, years off. But there is certainly a conversation going on here between Kawadwa and Okot, and between the North and South about Uganda. Another more remote allusion may be to the Biblical tale of the cockcrow, underlining Peter’s denial of Jesus. As in medieval Europe, Christian churches in Africa, through early converts, employed theatre for “the teaching of the Gospel in an oral society,” with the outside performances attracting “spectators independent of denomination or creed.”⁸⁶ Music teacher Mbabi Katana used Christian music to write and compose the opera *Para Sayuni (Zion)* in 1950; while in 1971, Kawadwa and Serukenya employed traditional song and dance to compose *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko*. The main idea suggested in the title, though, is that the cockerel scratches the ground for food always and only towards itself (although I know the cockerel to be capable of scratching for the hen, and mother hen for the chicks). So if Wankoko is Obote, then his rhetoric of nationalism is no more than self-

⁸⁵ Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1966).

⁸⁶ Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 208-211.

centered and self-serving blather, and a raw deal for Buganda as a region and the Baganda as a people. While it is hard to say if Brecht was a conscious influence on Kawadwa and/or other Ugandan playwrights of this period (this certainly was the case in the 1980s and 1990s for Rose Mbowwa and others), two things are clear: one, the play is a fusion of Western world and African tradition performance modes; and two, the “alienation effect” that sets off the resonance with Ugandan history is as unmistakable as Brecht’s portrayal of Hitler and his associates as Cicero thugs in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.⁸⁷

Some African performers: Ugandans Robert Serumaga and Rose Mbowwa, Kenyan Ngugi wa’Thiong’O, plus Nigerians Michael JC Echeruo and Ossie Enekwe, have in various ways argued about drama and theatricality being an inherent rather than a necessarily Greek or European-driven undertaking.⁸⁸ Whatever influences play into it, the Wankoko’s “song” is a clever piece of exposition using an even cleverer form of estrangement. Wankoko hardly endears himself, especially to the Baganda audience, with his blatant, even callous promise to be self-serving in his deeds. Buddu, their place of origin, is a double-barreled gun: it is a place name for a far off part of the vast Buganda kingdom, with some linguistic oddities about it; and it also signifies “poverty” in Luganda. This implies that the two aliens, Wankoko and Nkwale come from a far off, less privileged place. The two outsiders are here now, in the midst of the wealthier part, on the other side of the Kingdom. Given Ugandan political history, the pair of characters are, arguably, “*Ba kyakubali*,” which refers to those who do not belong; a pointed issue of the play is a reference to Obote and Amin, arriving from the less privileged northern region, into the more advantaged south-central region, only to take over the political scene. The play does not address the analogy directly, and the action is situated historically in pre-colonial times: “Suuna who

⁸⁷ Bertolt Brecht, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (New York: Arcade, 2001).

⁸⁸ I have already cited Serumaga and Mbowwa to that effect earlier in the chapter. See also, Ngugi wa’Thiong’O, “The Language of African Theatre,” in *Decolonising the Mind*, 36 (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986).; Frances Harding, “Introduction,” in *The Performance Arts in Africa: a reader*, ed. Frances Harding, 7 (London : Routledge, 2000).

figures in the play as the crown prince came to the throne in 1830s” notes Mbowa “and was succeeded by Mutesa I in 1857.”⁸⁹ Still, the playwright sets afire *Uhuru* issues by presenting Wankoko as the new face of politics, coming from without, who when he arrives finds internal rivalries for power. The playwright cleverly takes care to make sure that the audience sees the alien characters join the festive Bugandan stage area, so as to underscore their identity as those, who come in from without. Kawadwa uses this mix of the familiar and the mythological to create an “estrangement” of the all too familiar political references, as, like Brecht, he aims to have the audience, Baganda especially, engage with the play at a critical rather than emotional level.

Towards that end of the *Amagunju* war dance, Wankoko and Nkwale make their entrance. The Palace dwellers say they do not know who the two are or why they are here, and are rather mystified that they are Prince Suuna’s friends; they quiz them accordingly, but Wankoko proves to be witty enough to hold his own against the inquisitors, even winning them over with his quick tongue. Soon, Wankoko and Nkwale, being the aliens that they are in this society, begin blundering; they engage in idle conversation instead of work; they are quick to feud with the Palace guards when challenged; and they sing subversive songs with impunity. After a while, Wankoko is apprehended, tied up, and taken off. The people follow chanting “*Bamukwate* / Arrest Him.”⁹⁰

While the singing, dancing, and banter are all native to Ugandan performance, the stagecraft itself is Western: the transformations of the lighting, the energy, the visual elements, are all scripted aspects of the dramatic action. Deliberately, and in a clever manner, the playwright emphasizes the point of the politics of intrusion through the ensuing dialogue and interaction between the characters. The moment of inquisition casts a shadow of doubt upon, not only on the motives of Wankoko’s “friendship” with the Bugandan royalty, but also brings into

⁸⁹ Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 219.

⁹⁰ Kawadwa, *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko*/Song of The Cockerel, 10-11.

question the character of Prince Suuna himself. In the “social drama” off the stage, Obote was presented before Mutesa II as a must-meet brilliant fellow. Mutesa II obliged, and despite his later doubts struck up a “friendship” with Obote.⁹¹

In the play, Kawadwa employs proverbs and adages of the Baganda people to reflect or to play on the days of tragedy in the Palace when power was at stake, “but also to highlight difference,” If the drama, through its use of specific Baganda traditions and values, reads not just as a “traditional and folkloric pose” but also as, “as a direct assertion of Bugandan identity and a statement against Obote's ethnic politics,”⁹² then, unwittingly, the problem of ethnicity comes across as a double-edged sword, since Wankoko can hold his own, and his interrogation moves closer and closer to a scene of anarchy. The questions are a veiled form of animosity, vested in suspicion. But either because of his knack for coming out on top, his guiding ambition, or his innate gift for speech, Wankoko comes out of this quizzing without being scratched. But it is only a matter of time until fate catches up with him.

Amidst more dancing and singing, “*Bakatuggyeeko*/We are rid of him,” Wankoko is brought before Prince Suuna to be charged with numerous offences, the main one being that he trod upon norms and customs of the Palace (Buganda). But the guards and the people are mystified when the Prince declares, “Let my man be.” The people do not approve, but among the Baganda, Royalty is law, ordinary people do not contest the Royal word, so they carry on. Rather strangely, or is it revelatory instead, Prince Suuna says to Wankoko that it looks unlikely that he (Wankoko) will be a fond figure in this Palace, but that is good, for then there will be no issue of familiarity. Wankoko professes that he wants none of this. Prince Suuna offers Wankoko a job outside the Palace parameters (i.e. the rest of Uganda) as a go-between; he accepts eagerly, proclaiming he is quite up to the task. Wankoko then delivers a message from Prince Suuna to

⁹¹ Kabaka of Buganda, *Desecration Of My Kindom*, 159-160.

⁹² Hugh Dinwiddy, “The Search For Unity In Uganda,” 509.

Barungi, the beautiful Princes from Toro, in the form of a love song intimating, “*Oli Omu/Only You.*” Barungi, is interested in the Prince as depicted by the return song in her Kitoro language, “*Chaali Suuna/Dear Suuna*” which Wankoko in turn has to sing for the Prince. Here the message is clear:

Kugonza munno, munno, munno, munno/I love you so, so, so, so
Kugonza munno, munno/I love you so, so
Njagala oj'ndebe mwattu/I want you to come see me please
Njagala oj'ndebe /I want you to come see me...

But when Wankoko proposes that Prince Suuna meet Barungi in person, the shy Baganda Prince is gripped with trepidation and literally darts off, leaving Wankoko mouth agape with bemusement. The line when Prince Suuna runs off, petrified at the prospect of facing the object of his desire is striking: *Gukole, obuyinza mbukuwadde/Do the job, I grant you the powers.* A moment later Prince Suuna gathers some courage, but faced with Barungi, he talks irrelevancies: he prattles on about flies and how risky the times are because of diseases they might cause. He keeps saying nothing of interest, let alone purpose, until Barungi has to go. hilariously, he excuses himself to Wankoko, claiming that had she not left in a hurry, he would have unleashed his loaded words.⁹³

What is clear here is that the “Song” is an abusive reference to the character of Wankoko, who, it has been established, represents Obote, as well to the easily duped Prince Suuna. Suuna’s trust in Wankoko backfires, and only serves to build an aura of importance and mystery around Wankoko,

By dramatizing a coded critique of friendship between Mutesa II and Obote, which sprung up suddenly in the late 50s and died as quickly in the early 60s (haunting Mutesa II, Obote, Buganda and Uganda long thereafter), the playwright castigates Prince Suuna for suddenly turning Wankoko into his best friend, and for entrusting tasks he should be handling by himself to Wankoko, who carries out the task at hand, but does so for his own benefit. From winning over

⁹³ Kawadwa, *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko/Song of The Cockerel*, 10-17.

the masses, to wooing the beautiful Princess Barungi from Toro (another region of the “Kingdom”), Wankoko’s method is to work by turn every situation to his own ends, a strategy he directly reveals to the audience in Brechtian fashion as in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, or Shakespearean fashion as in *Richard III*, or in the African story-telling tradition of (at times) addressing the audience directly. He succeeds for a while with the masses, who are presented as fickle, but ultimately fails with Barungi as she proves to be level-headed and steadfast in her affection for the feckless Prince.

As already stated, and as shall be shown progressively, on the political front Ugandan masses are like Shakespeare’s Roman crowds: fickle; ever moved by “talks about national aims and common efforts and sacrifices,” but not realizing that such talk is really uttered to gain “personal enrichment.”⁹⁴ However, if as Mbowa puts it, “Wankoko’s courting the Toro Princess Barungi reminds the audience of Obote’s tactical marriage to Miria Kalule, the daughter of one of the most influential Buganda Chiefs,”⁹⁵ then off-stage Obote got his prize, and in marital (not political) terms of reference, the two lived happily ever after, till death did them part in 2006. Again, the Ugandan masses dwelt on the ethnic differences and clashes between the origins of Obote and Ms. Kalule, and paid little mind to the high cost of the wedding, at the public’s cost. Reportedly the event cost 8,500 British pounds of the Ugandan taxpayer’s money;⁹⁶ however, historically, much of the anti-Obote sentiment ignored such an irregularity, but crusaded instead against where he came from: the often-maligned and dispraised northern region of the country.

Going back to Kawadwa’s play, when Barungi, the much-admired girl, shows up for her message, it is clear immediately this is something the Prince ought to have done himself, an important point he would have communicated personally had he possessed the courage to be here

⁹⁴ Mbowa, “Luganda Theatre and its Audience,” 220.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Highlighted in Fountain Publishers Ltd., *Uganda 30 Years: 1962 - 1992* (Kampala: Fountain, 1992), 7.

in person in the first place. Instead, at the slightest chance of the possibility of fulfilling his desires, he darts off. The idea and more so the sight of a man running from a woman who he loves and who is willing to love him is comic, especially given the patriarchal set-up of Ugandan society in the 1970s, before women were accorded more agency in gendered behavior.

That said, in the case of political usurpation between Mutesa and Obote, many writers, such as politician/columnist, John Nagenda, artist/scholar, Rose Mbowa, and artist/scholar, George Seremba tend to concentrate on blaming Obote. Historian Phares Mutibwa and theatre artist Alex Mukulu try to not condemn Obote out of hand.⁹⁷ They strive to put a more complex view of the crosscurrents of power and interest that characterized this time. As serious a theatre practitioner as Kawadwa was, he knows that it serves little purpose to focus on one party without reflecting upon the other. Hence, despite the deep-seated Kiganda reverence for the Kabaka (Prince in this play), I think veiled though the playwright's take is, he is well aware that he must reflect upon not just Obote, but also Mutesa: his naiveté, his unwillingness to act and his choice that someone rather than himself undertake a position of leadership; or, since he was born in a long line of privilege, sustaining it. For with the simultaneous rise of Obote and Uganda, the dimensions and definition of power have changed.⁹⁸

Soon, in the play, power dynamics tilt: messages, orders, and information start coming to the people via Wankoko rather than Prince Suuna. Wankoko is smart enough, wily enough, it can

⁹⁷ See, Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1992), the historian gives a well-balanced take on Ugandan political history; Also in the 1992 play, see, (Mukulu, *Thirty Years Of Bananas*, Nairobi: Oxford, 1993, First staged October 1992, with an unprecedented six month run, by Alex Mukulu with Impact International, National Theatre, Kampala, Uganda) the theatre maker takes on former Ugandan rulers collectively, not just Milton Obote, sparing only the incumbent, Yoweri Museveni.

⁹⁸ Here is the historical sequence of events. Despite being Kabaka of Buganda, there is still contestation for Head of State role, which includes the rest of Uganda as mapped by the Protectorate. 1952, political parties are born. Mutesa II of KY (*Kabaka Yekka* / Only the King) and Obote of UPC (Uganda Peoples Conference) form an alliance against the formidable Ben Kiwanuka of DP (Democratic Party). In 1962, KY party sweeps the elections in Buganda (63 out of 65 seats), and UPC party wins 37 to DP's 27. On basis of the alliance, Obote forms a government, and Uganda receives *Uhuru* under him. In 1963, Mutesa became President, as ceremonial Head of State, and Obote as Prime Minister was the Executive Head of State.

be said, to do his bidding by hiding behind the Prince. He does not simply pounce, either; he sends out his henchman Nkwale to test the waters. Nkwale turns “king maker” and proclaims, “make him your voice, it will be like going to the Prince in person.” Wankoko, in a wily manner, takes advantage, turning heads and hearts; his oratorical power wins him massive favor, “It is you we want” people cry out. The hitherto unseen – or unrevealed – version of Wankoko comes to the fore. He sets a price for his leadership; he wants a cut of every citizen’s income. Somebody queries if this is not “*nguzi*”/bribery but Nkwale argues on Wankoko’s behalf that it is not corruption, but a token of gratitude. In the end, Wankoko asks, or rather compels people to elect him, then turns around and thanks them for their support. Wankoko teaches the chorus a song, which he says they ought to remember him by. The song, “*Omuntu Muntu /A person is a Person,*” carries a loaded message:

Ekiwuka kitambula ng’ekiwuka/An insect moves like an insect
N’omuntu atambula ng’omuntu/And a person walks like a person
Ebisolo bitambula ng’ebisolo/Animals walk like animals
N’ebinyonyi bitambual ng’ebinyonyi/And birds move like birds.

The scene ends with the Bakisimba dance, a mark of Buganda heritage.⁹⁹

The cowardice of the Prince – in a moment of self-reflection the character pleads shyness – wins him no favors, it only serves to undermine him. Wankoko is apparently emboldened by this weakness on the part of the Prince and uses it against him. The people are swayed and moved but, dramatically, doubt creeps in for a few, creating a debate about the desired type of leader (not leadership), which is agreed to be necessary. Wankoko swings into action by delving into a litany of wants, desires, needs and necessities, which ring well to the ears of the masses. He campaigns promising to banish days of poverty and misery, and to tackle education in order to lessen the peasantry. Wankoko is brilliant (Obote was also deemed so); even those opposed to him have to admit the fact, and do say so. The objections of the *mumbowa* (palace guard) prove to be no

⁹⁹ Kawadwa, *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko*/Song of The Cockerel, 19-25.

match for Wankoko's wit. A woman opposes and challenges him, but loses to his vibrant and desirable political promises of "tasty fruits," such good roads and above all, unity.

But the vices are not far off: as Wankoko's influence and power grow, so does his greed for more. The song Wankoko teaches the people is a clever and ironic turn on the part of the creators of the play, for they use the subject to make an otherwise sensitive point which, arguably, refers to the difference between Wankoko himself and the chorus. Coming from Wankoko, it is the "outsider" rather than the "insiders" emphasizing difference. Side by side, the song and the dance combine to create a subtle commentary on identity issues, but at the same time points to the factor of disunity that continues to plague Uganda. Another issue worth noting here is that of linguistic difference. In the run-up to *Uhuru*, Buganda resisted the formation of an East African Federation (hence the fall out between Mutesa II and Governor Cohen in 1953 – 1955). In 1963, Parliament rejected the use of Swahili as a national language. During Wankoko's forced election, he says to those not voting, "*Mukono juu*," which is a Swahili, not a Luganda phrase. It is a reference to the armed forces section of Ugandan society. Swahili was the *lingua franca* for the military, police and prison guards. Kawadwa already had experienced a Swahili speaking State machinery that was sometimes jailing dramatists, and other times mowing down dissenters with guns (as in the 1964 Nakulabye incident);¹⁰⁰ on top of that, he was writing after the 1966 crisis at Mengo Palace that ousted Mutesa II and consolidated Obote's first period of rule. Thus the phrase, "*Mukono juu/hands up*" sends reverberations of any or all of these troubling incidents.

Prince Suuna is still commissioning Wankoko to pass on messages and presents to Princes Barungi. He even wants to know from him what present will delight Barungi. Wankoko advises him to simply think of a present that will delight her heart. When Prince Suuna tries to bring up his displeasure that Wankoko is becoming too close to the people, Wankoko changes the topic back to the gift for Barungi. Wankoko continues to handle the job of engaging the Toro

¹⁰⁰ The incident often erroneously quoted (in Ugandan circles) as the moment that set off gun rule in Ugandan political history.

Princess for Prince Suuna, but he changes tack: he chats her up, never letting her talk to the Prince. That is, he does the job asked of him, but he does it for himself. He delivers what gifts Suuna sends, but claims he is the one offering the presents. Wankoko is driven by greed: he wants Barungi for himself, and starts by telling her tales about Suuna insulting her. She is deeply hurt, but smells a rat when he makes sexual advances by prying into her status of virginity and makes references to Adam and Eve's fall in Biblical times. Barungi plays dumb and departs. Wankoko steps out to the audience and says he operates like a chicken, scratching towards the self, and hook or crook will get Barungi and love her to the last hair on her body. He has a plan: he goes to the King (Suuna's father) and tells him that Suuna is eyeing the throne. In a manner reflecting how ultimately every ruler works for the self, he acts swiftly by banishing Suuna out of the Palace, disowning him as a parent, vowing the throne shall not be subject to two Kings, and ordering the guards to burn down Suuna's hut. Wankoko seizes his opportunity: the Prince is out of the way and may the loving begin; but she does not oblige. She walks out on him, impervious to his embarrassed pleas to meet again soon. The ensuing song, which is the title song, "Wankoko," re-emphasizes the theme of selfishness on the part of rulers in the quest for power at the advent of *Uhuru*.¹⁰¹

If the subject matter of this political drama is vested in surrogation, whereby given characters embody certain historical agents or represent certain regions, and if Suuna equates to Mutesa II, Wankoko to Obote and Barungi to Toro, then Wankoko and Barungi can be seen as the rest of the nation-state (outside of Buganda) before whom Suuna is not prepared enough (to fend off Wankoko's power play), and too shy or cowardly (in regard to Barungi), while Wankoko proves to be proactive. In terms of ambition, Suuna is coy, whereas Wankoko is ruthless. Wankoko is again depicted as being able to out-think the Prince: effectively, he turns Suuna's message into personal rather than the commissioned ones. However, blinded by his growing

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 25-34.

stature – he brags about it to Barungi – he resorts to smear and malice, turning King and Prince (father and son) against each other by telling tales about a usurpation plot by Suuna. The sheer thought, while the King still lives, is an abomination. The prince's father, gravely perturbed by this rumor is too rash in his action. But the heavy-handed and thoughtless response, his failure to have the presence of mind to verify whether his own son is indeed "treacherous" as reported by Wankoko, renders the situation, if only dramatically, too easy for Wankoko. Is this a commentary on the absolute power that Palace (read Buganda) rulers wielded? Is it a dramaturgical issue (a shortcoming) or is it simply a use of dramatic license? I need to divert attention here to Wole Soyinka's well-known play about colonialism, *Death and the King's Horseman*, to make a related point.¹⁰² In a number of discussions about the play, I found a tendency for certain readers to concentrate on the representation of Simon Pilkings the colonial figure, as the object of Soyinka's indictment. But they miss the playwright's indictment of the African Chief(s). Similarly, it would make for a weak play if Kawadwa were to hammer away at the regional or personality differences, without reflecting upon both sides of the conflict, no matter what his leanings in the matter. Obote's transgressions (that is, Wankoko's transgressions in the drama), must be seen in relation to Mutesa II's choices (Prince Suuna's in the play).¹⁰³

Nor is the play entirely cynical. Wankoko's unwanted advances on Barungi reveals the failing of many tyrants: not knowing when to stop. This is the flaw that leads to his undoing. Barungi does not suffer in silence; she does something about things that affect her, thus changing the way things are: in this case, righting wrongs. Forced out of his comfort zone and forbidden to return, and acting amidst nightmarish hallucinations by the *mumbowa*/guard, the hitherto naïve

¹⁰² Wole Soyinka, *Death and The King's Horseman*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: Norton, 1975).

¹⁰³ Detailed accounts of the issues at the heart of the struggle between Mutesa II and Obote are explored in: Kabaka of Buganda, *Desecration Of My Kindom*, 9-26 and 167-194; Fountain Publishers Ltd., *Uganda 30 Years*, 25-42; Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 13-64; Hugh Dinwiddy, "The Search For Unity In Uganda: Early Days To 1966," 501-518.

Suuna is faced with considerable adversity, but also with the chance for growth. Before this point, there is no evidence of Suuna relating to ordinary people: he uses Wankoko, is smitten by Barungi, and ends up expelled by his father the Kabaka. Beside him is one person, described in the play as a die-hard loyalist to the Prince. Even if he happens to be of a lower status, not much more than a guard, he stands by Prince Suuna in this moment of considerable adversity. Prince Suuna's dialogue is no longer lofty; it drops to banter about matters such as who between them snores and who does not. The newfound companion bears child-like fears, smokes but worries that the enemy will follow cigarette smoke, talks a lot, brags about his hunting exploits of the past, sleeps heavily, snores in the process, and wails for dear life when simply woken up to go find some firewood. Soon, as Suuna's song ends, Barungi breaks in slowly with her own song, seeking forgiveness from him. They meet again in great joy, but on top of that, they talk to each other for more or less the very first time. They both learn how they have been manipulated and played by Wankoko. Asked why he used to send Wankoko as messenger, Suuna tells Barungi that he thought him to be an honorable man. Suuna and Barungi engage in sweet nothings, and emote tearfully and she has to depart, with him imploring her not to reveal his hiding place. But she does, interceding on his behalf before the King, and making him have a change of heart.¹⁰⁴

The action goes back to the Palace in a leap that is hard to accept; the shift occurs suddenly, diluting the dramatic crisis into a happily-ever-after tale. The stage instructions state a hurried form of *dénouement*: Prince Suuna has been forgiven and returns with great respect. Celebrations are high, for Barungi has assured the king that Suuna was innocent all along. People sing and drum and wave tree branches. The tall guard and short guard escort Suuna in. His brief speech centers on the thin line between being humble and ending up being trodden upon, or being above others and treading upon them. The people prostrate themselves before the king, a deep-seated cultural practice of Buganda. The King says he made a bad decision based on

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 34-38.

misinformation, but the glory of the Prince will be restored and the perpetrator will be brought before all and be shamed. The cheering masses go crazy when a fallen and powerless Wankoko is brought out, tied up. They pounce on him and shred his clothes to pieces. They mock him in song. The Kabaka orders that the celebration proceed at Wankoko's expense. That is to say, the whole occasion is dedicated to slighting Wankoko. In a symbolic act of union, Barungi gives Suuna water to drink from a traditional calabash.¹⁰⁵

The banishment of Suuna into living under forest conditions is a powerfully dramatic scene reminiscent of Mutesa II's first exile (1953) due to the conflict with Governor Cohen, and echoing the second exile (1966) due to the one-day war between the Palace loyalists and the Uganda armed forces. Depicting exile as a form of wilderness, the scene works well because of the theatricality involved: it is a moment of great despair and loneliness and insecurity counter-balanced by humor and an ambience of varied sound effects to create uncertainty. The sound effects of wild creatures like frogs, crickets, birds, monkeys usually played back from pre-recorded material in Ugandan productions was made by human beings in the two productions of the play that I witnessed one in 1980s and one in the 1990s; it is one aspect of production that the different directors stuck to. In the 1980s production, the transformation of the world of the play from the Palace to the Forest (and back) worked like magic. It was a well-executed example of one of the developments of the European mode of theatre that was very appealing to us, and which many of us picked up for our own purposes. Seremba calls this sort of practice – this appropriation of what is valuable from another culture for use in another way – a negotiation.¹⁰⁶

In terms of dramatic action, the guard's actual function in the play is comic relief in an otherwise grim scene. Suuna appreciates not just this man, but also nature; the song he sings in that moment, "*Akabira Kange*," shows he has figured out that the environment is taking care of

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 38-40.

¹⁰⁶ Seremba, George. Personal communication, Providence, Brown University, Fall, 2010.

him, and he pledges to reciprocate and to deal accordingly with anybody who will cut down that forest. For a 1970's play, Kawadwa and Serukenya were ahead of their time as far as being environmentally conscious. *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko/Song of the Cockerel*, a long play, ends by pitting the *Bwola* dance from northern region (Obote's cradle land) against the *Bakisimba* dance from southern region (Mutesa II's cradle land). This ending is problematic given the dramatic tension and intent depicted; this option inevitably bears the "us" and "them" mentality, the bane of the postcolonial nation-state ushered in at *Uhuru*

If the year 1962 marks Independence Day, *Uhuru* is the hinge event between colonial and post-colonial legacies. Uganda is a bifurcated nation-state, under perpetual disunity. The leaders of the time, Mutesa II and Obote, belonged to a generation born at the height of colonial rule and colonial subjectivity, of cultural domination and cultural rupture, of Shakespearean reverence and oral tradition repression. The intertwining of politics and the performance arts in Uganda before and after *Uhuru* can be and is depicted by viewing Obote's political career as a kind of "social drama" that may be (and has been) understood in the dramaturgical terms of *Julius Caesar*. In juxtaposition, *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko / Song of Cockerel* serves as an "aesthetic drama" that draws upon and reflects "social dramas" unfolding in the public arena. The politics, history, and performances discussed above indicate that the advent of *Uhuru* did not bring stability or fundamental change: *Uhuru* drummed up the legacy of war.

Inevitably, theatre figures and playwrights and performers of the time: Okot, Kiyingi, Kawadwa, Serumaga, and Ruganda ended up consumed and pre-occupied by this state of affairs. One of them, Okot, did not mince words, "*Uhuru* had come and we were already beginning to abuse it. This time the trouble was being caused by Africans at the top."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Okot p'Bitek, quoted in Ernest Okello Ogwang, "Uganda Poetry: Trends and Features," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingner, 100 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000).

CHAPTER 3: FLIGHT AND EXILE

Actors are so fortunate. They can choose whether they will appear in tragedy or in comedy, whether they will suffer or make merry, laugh or shed tears. But in real life it is different. Most men and women are forced to perform parts for which they have no qualifications. Our Guildensterns play Hamlet for us, and our Hamlets have to jest like Prince Hal. The world is a stage, but the play is badly cast.

-Oscar Wilde.¹

A MAN called Amin grabbed power from Obote on 25th January 1971. As was true of the brief 1966 war, the 1971 war was quick and definitive. Obote may have commanded the first, but it is Amin who led both assaults: in 1966 on behalf of Obote, in 1971 on his own behalf. Buganda, the central region, the center of power in Uganda,² waxed lyrical about this particular turn of political events. Ugandan Historian Phares Mutibwa notes that several representatives of Buganda praised the coup, stating publicly what a “saving grace” it was taken to be. For example, a letter appeared in the *Uganda Argus* of 4/1/1971 expressing gratitude to Amin, offering “love” and “loyalty,” pledging obedience (to Amin’s government), castigating “the greed of one man (meaning Obote),” and denying Obote any *Uhuru* accolades.”³

From beyond Uganda, the European/Western popular media machinery was emitting tempered acknowledgements of the coup, why it had happened, and what it might mean for Uganda. Like many Baganda, “international capitalists mainly the British, the American, Israeli, German and Canadians” were happy to see Obote go.⁴ And in Amin they found a willing alternative. Thus, with the endorsements of Kenya, Britain, Israel, and the USA, Amin ruthlessly

¹ Oscar Wilde, “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime and other Stories,” *Internet Archive*, Pratt - University of Toronto (London: Methuen, 1887), 17.

² This is the case when it is regarded as the capital; but, regionally, the exercise of that power shifts depending on the ethnic origins of the sitting ruler (presently, for example, from western Uganda).

³ See, Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1992), 86-87.

⁴ Pat Hutton and Jonathan Bloch, “The Making of Idi Amin,” *World History Archives*, New African (February, 2001). <http://www.africasia.com/icpubs/na/feb01/cover2.htm>.

took hold of the reins of power in Uganda. The reign of Amin lasted eight years in total. “An eight-year period,” notes Ugandan researcher and thinker Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, “of economic ruin and state collapse.”⁵ The societal collapse impacted Ugandan theatre (and other modes of performance) as well,

Government repression and harassment of committed artists drove them out of the country, into silence or into production of slight and innocent farces, performed mostly in Luganda. The only contribution this kind of theatre made to Ugandan theatre was that they kept the gates of theatre open. But the genre entrenched itself with a certain sector of the theatre going audience and has thus remained the dominant genre of popular theatre in Uganda until today.⁶

Still, a man smart enough to position himself to be next in line for power has to be smart enough to present an image that people, locally and internationally, would like to see. In the honeymoon period, Amin denied being a politician or an ambitious man, saying he was only a professional soldier; next he addressed the nation in Luganda (it was struggle for him but it worked the magic among the Baganda), and the clincher was the return of Mutesa’s II body – the *Kabaka* had died in London in 1969 – for burial in Uganda. The Baganda forgot that it was their new President (admittedly under orders of Obote) who had led the attack on the Mengo Palace in 1966 crisis.

Victor Turner writes a telling essay, *Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting*, one focus of which is the daily posturing, or posturing on a daily basis, that different people do for different reasons, no matter what their designated role. The act, Turner states, “May be the essence of sincerity – the commitment of self to a line of ethical motives perhaps to achieve ‘inner truth’ – or it may be the essence of pretence – when one ‘plays a part’ in order to conceal or dissimulate.”⁷ Thus it was that upon taking power, Amin was seen to be genial and ever

⁵ Fredrick Golooba Mutebi, "Collapse, War And Reconstruction In Uganda: An Analytical Narrative On State-Making ," Development as State-Making, (Kampala: Makerere Institute of Social Research, Makerere University, 2008), 10.

⁶ Mercy Ntangaare and Eckhard Breitingner, "Ugandan Drama in English," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingner, 226-227 (Kampala: Fountain 2000).

⁷ Victor Turner, *From Ritual To Theatre: The Human Seriousness Of Play* (New York, NY: PAJ, 1982), 102.

smiling, which was a contrast to “Obote’s menacing look.”⁸ However, Shakespeare joins Turner in cautioning: “one can smile and smile and be a villain.”⁹ Before the world could catch onto the question, “What bloody man is that,”¹⁰ the body count was legion.

If beneath the shift in power from Obote to Amin nothing was as it seemed, and if the world was slow to realize that the rise of Amin unfurled immediate trouble, leading playwrights, John Ruganda and Robert Serumaga, caught on fairly soon that, “something is rotten” in the Republic of Uganda. Accordingly, by different means and strategies – improvisation, absurd theatre, symbolism, camouflage, oral tradition – both created performances to warn about Amin, even as the Western popular media as well as local singers “praised” him upon his rise, only to make an about turn in order to parody him upon his fall.

Reportedly, the coup was inspired by the Western world, or at least the putsch was propped up by a number of foreign “interests.” But that view, now widely held among Ugandans (though often denied by diplomats) is a moot issue. What remains is the haunting question: who was Amin? *A Dictionary of World History* sums up the bare outline of Amin’s history nicely:

Amin rose through the ranks of the army to become its commander. In 1971 he overthrew President OBOTE and seized power. His rule was characterized by the advancing of narrow tribal interests, the expulsion of non-Africans (most notably Ugandan Asians), and violence on a huge scale. He was overthrown with Tanzanian assistance in 1979 and went into exile in Saudi Arabia.¹¹

What this capsule history does not account for is the hold Amin’s character has had on the world’s imagination. Before taking up the obsessive fascination with Amin’s character, though, it may be useful to describe in greater detail his rise and fall.

⁸ Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 73.

⁹ *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5.

¹⁰ *Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene 2.

¹¹ *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, “Amin Dada, Idi.,” Encyclopedia.Com, 2004, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404700183.html> (accessed 2011 10-June).

The Rise of Amin

COUPS do not come from nowhere; however sudden, coups have a pre-history. The events of Amin's coup occurred due to three main factors. The first factor was a progressive animosity between himself and Obote. Amin and Obote's mutual antagonism started as a struggle over personal stakes, which then became a struggle over State power, which then incorporated a struggle over "ethnic" control. There is nothing new here. Such, in effect, have been the factors that have characterized Ugandan economic, social, cultural, political, and historical trends since the much-awaited return to self-rule.¹² A key moment in this history was the Common Wealth Head of Government Meeting (CHOGM) event in Singapore. Historians suggest in more than one analysis that had Obote not gone to that CHOGM function, the overthrow might not have been possible. It is likely that external interests were also involved. Britain, the USA, and Israel are often especially implicated. For Britain and the USA, the problem was Obote's leftist (socialist) stance. For Israel, the problem was Obote's withdrawal of support from the Southern Sudanese armed conflict against the Arab regime in Khartoum, support which had been extended in exchange for training of Uganda's army and police; Israel had been providing arms to the Southern Sudanese group.¹³ Moreover, the coup takes place when Africa is mired in the crucible of the Cold War; hence, Russia is also involved.¹⁴ The long list of external interests that have

¹² See, Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*; John S Saul, "The Unsteady State: Uganda, Obote and General Amin," *Review of African Political Economy* (Taylor and Francis Ltd) 3, no. 5 (April 1976), 12-38; Garth Glentworth and Ian Hancock, "Obote and Amin: Change and Continuity in Modern Uganda Politics," *African Affairs* (The Royal African Society) 72, no. 288 (1973): 237-255.

¹³ Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 73.

¹⁴ See, Gad Wilson Toko, *Intervention In Uganda: The Power Struggle And Soviet Involvement: Reflections Of A Ugandan Exile* (Pittsburgh, PA: University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1979), 35-89. Toko shows how Russia was uneasy about the coup, because Russian ties were with Obote; however the Russians easily shifted the same alliance to Amin. Toko was an exiled Ugandan Colonel. He staged a coup against Amin (April 1973), in vain. See also, Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey, *War in Uganda: The Legacy of Idi Amin* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Co, 1982), 8-27.

been cited as involved in this history is arresting; other countries include France, Kenya, Libya, Saudi Arabia and East German.¹⁵ But how does the story unfold?

As the 60s had come and gone and the 70s had arrived, the euphoria of *Uhuru* was simmering down. The country was barely a decade into *Uhuru*, but the second coup was already primed to take place; things were unstable at the helm of power. The two most powerful figures, namely Apollo Milton Obote and Idi Amin Dada, became embroiled in conflict informed by mutual suspicion that grew into irreparable hostilities leading to a total fall out.¹⁶ One man was the President of the Republic of Uganda; the other was the Commander of the Uganda armed forces. Obote understood well the powers vested in Presidency, had always wanted the power, and, when the time came, he had done everything he could to hold such power; Amin was well aware of the power vested in the barrel of the gun, often exploited it, and would do everything possible to exercise such power when the time came. The assault on Mengo Palace in 1966 – sanctioned by Obote and spearheaded by Amin – had brought them both to power; but while they had relied on each other's skills to reach their positions of power, in temperament and outlook they were quite dissimilar. Soon, they were toying and vying with each other for popularity within political and social realms of influence.¹⁷ Progressively, matters turned sour for the erstwhile friends. Another showdown at the highest level of power in the land was imminent. Amin and Obote were hunting each other.

For Ugandans, it was *déjà vu*: in both the conflict between Mutesa II and Obote that erupted in 1966 and the tensions between Amin and Obote that exploded in 1971, it was always a matter of who would strike first, or faster. In the former case, Obote struck first, in the latter case,

¹⁵ Avirgan and Honey, *War in Uganda*, 8-9.

¹⁶ For those unfamiliar with the matter, related insightful accounts include: Garth Glentworth and Ian Hancock, "Obote and Amin: Change and Continuity in Modern Uganda Politics," *African Affairs* (The Royal African Society), 1973: 58-124.

¹⁷ See, Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 71-77.

Amin struck faster. In both cases, the results came quickly and were definitive. In May 1966 Obote felled Mutesa II. On the 24th and 25th of January 1971 factions in the army that Obote, with Amin, had formed attacked one another. The Amin faction emerged victorious. Just as it was in the case of Obote against Mutesa II, Amin against Obote involved a spiraling state of antagonism, culminating in a brief showdown, with little resistance from the losing side.¹⁸ Just as Obote took hold of power from Mutesa II, forcing him to flee into exile in Britain, Amin usurped Obote as Head of State and Obote was forced to flee into exile in Tanzania.

With the rise of Amin, Uganda instantaneously became a “killing field.” As the deposed Obote (who had himself deposed Mutesa II) retrospectively chronicled the events in the 1990, *Notes on Concealment of Genocide in Uganda*,

In 1971, there was a military coup in Uganda. The International Media called Idi Amin, the leader of the coup, "a gentle and harmless giant" for about two years, when, in fact, Amin's reign of murder and terror began on the first day of the coup.¹⁹

It was a deadly case of the purging of one ethnic group by another: the elimination of the Lango and Acholi people (Northerners) by the Sudanic people (also northerners). Obote unwittingly set up the schism between the two groups – he positioned Amin, to advantage himself – and Amin quietly took advantage of the situation to position his people for an eventual strike. While Obote's method was characterized by the displacement of certain ethnic groups in favor of the ones he deemed closer to himself in the army, the Amin method was graver: extermination.²⁰ A similar difference in methods pertained to individuals felt to threaten Amin's Presidential power. According to Golooba-Mutebi, “Obote had detained political opponents without trial; Amin

¹⁸ See, Felix Ongom, *Diary of an Obedient Servant During Days of Misrule* (Kampala: JANyeko, 2000), 43-53.

¹⁹ A Milton Obote, *Notes on Concealment of Genocide in Uganda*, Political Opinion, Uganda Peoples Congress (Lusaka: Uganda People Congress, 1990), 1.

²⁰ See, Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 87-89; Avirgan and Honey, *War in Uganda*, 7.

simply murdered them.”²¹ The same ruthless approach was to become evident in the cultural arena as well. Obote claims that,

The international community and the Human Rights Organization took the cue from the media and, with the exception of Tanzania and Zambia, also saw nothing wrong with Amin's murder and terror. Amin's crimes were therefore effectively concealed for two years.²²

Granting that there is some truth in this assessment, then a disturbing but necessary question arises: was Amin a murderous genius, or was the world just blind and foolish?

After the initial brutal ethnic purge, several sections of Ugandan society faced trouble. Next came the falling out with erstwhile allies, then the expulsions, in sudden manner and quick succession of: the Israelis (April 1973), the Indians (September 1973), and the British (December 1973). After that, the guns soon turned to the next threat in Amin's estimation: the intelligentsia.²³ The clampdown was marked by a repression of all critical commentary. The ruling policy was simple enough: what happens in Uganda stays in Uganda. Neither direct challenges to authority, nor critiques that would reach the outside world would be tolerated. Think it out loud and be banished; publish it and perish. This unwritten but Draconian policy kicked into motion the flight and exile of a host of Ugandan artists and cultural commentators along with others of the professional class. Ex-Ugandan Peter Nazareth (now Professor at Iowa University) – himself a victim of this double-barreled compulsion–writes in *Waiting For Amin*,

Dramatists, like Byron Kawadwa, were killed for producing certain kinds of plays at the National Theatre which the regime did not like; people were killed simply for attending such performances. Many of the writers had to go into exile (for example, Okot p'Bitek, Richard Ntiru and John Ruganda) if they were not already studying abroad (like Okello Oculi). Some had to flee even further: Eneriko Seruma escaped to the United States from Kenya after shoot-outs involving Amin's men.²⁴

²¹ Golooba-Mutebi, "Collapse, War And Reconstruction In Uganda," 10.

²² A Milton Obote, *Notes on Concealment of Genocide in Uganda*, 1.

²³ See, Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 97-114; and Peter Nazareth, "Waiting for Amin," in *Writing of East and Central Africa*, ed. G D Killam, (Heinemann, 1984), 7-35.

²⁴ Nazareth, "Waiting for Amin," 8.

There is an allusion in Nazareth's title to Beckett's well-known stage play. Nazareth, however, is not simply evoking literary comparison. There is a key difference. In *Waiting for Godot*, despite the common perception that nothing happens, a subtle feeling of difference prevails by the end. The world of the play does not improve, but (in a good production) our enjoyment of it paradoxically has. In the social drama set in motion by Amin's repressive policies, a great deal happens, and, while reflecting upon these events we may or may not feel that the world is different, we certainly feel worse about it. Nazareth's intriguing viewpoint is,

[T]he problems of colonialism and neo-colonialism take the form in Ugandan literature of warning about and waiting for an Amin, and then protesting about his appearance and the corresponding disappearances his regime occasioned.²⁵

The former Ugandan's observation again stirs up the issue of the remarkable place of Amin in Western (and African) imaginaries and memory. The legacy of Amin has been and is bound to be one of the most notable features about Uganda for a very long time. A popular conversation between "been to" Ugandans (not an endearing reference for Ugandans who have travelled abroad) is how many times they (we) have had to answer a question about Idi Amin. John Nagenda, for example, recounts this familiar experience: "How often have I sat in a taxi around the world—in India, China, the US and Europe (especially in London)— and, upon saying I was from Uganda, heard the rejoinder: Amin!"²⁶

The question of Amin's personality alone has generated a fair amount of inspiration for satirical jokes, absurd theatre, tragic drama, novels, films, odes, and elegies. Amin's extraordinary, larger than life persona has given rise to many works on page and on stage as well as on screen – some inspired, others not so inspired. The Amin image looms in blockbuster movies like *Star wars* and *Team America*, but those are bit-part figments, floating signifiers. The list of cultural productions that have directly referenced Amin as a cultural artifact is considerable.

²⁵ Ibid, 9.

²⁶ John Nagenda, "Idi Amin, My Hero," *Prospect Magazine*, no. 130 (January 2007).

Since his rise and fall, at least three American actors have inundated the world with portrayals of Idi Amin Dada: 1977, Yaphet Kotto in *Raid on Entebbe*, the same year, Richard Pryor in NBC *Rebuttal* TV show (with Richard Pryor as Idi Amin), and Forest Whitaker in the 2006 British and American movie, filmed in Uganda and Scotland, *The Last King of Scotland*, directed by Kevin MacDonald, starring Forest Whitaker, James McAvoy and Kerry Washington.²⁷ His singular personality and reign of terror have intrigued film artists working on four continents and multiple countries: on location in Kenya, *Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* directed by Sharad Patel, starring Joseph Olita; in Uganda and USA, *Mississippi Masala*, directed by Mira Nair, starring Denzel Washington and Sarita Choudry; in India for the Bollywood film, *Charas*, directed by Ramanand Sagar, starring Dharmendra and Hema Malini.²⁸ This same singular person has provided the basis for numerous books, including (but not limited) to: *State of Blood*, by Henry Kyemba; *The General is Up*, by Peter Nazareth; *Abyssinian Chronicles*, by Moses Isegawa.²⁹ He has been the pivotal figure in four TV dramas: *Raid on Entebbe* by Irvin Kershner, *Victory at Entebbe* directed by Marvin J. Chomsky, *Operation Thunderbolt* directed by Menahem Golan, and *Blue/Orange* directed by Howard Davies.³⁰ He has been the “inspiration” for at least three original plays: *A Play of Giants*, by the Nigerian playwright and political activist Wole Soyinka, *Big Dada* by the South African playwright Brett Bailey, and *Blue/Orange* by British

²⁷ Kotto, Pryor and Whitaker are perhaps more famous for their depictions. However, two other actors played Amin at an international level. American, Julius Harris, played the Amin role in, *Victory at Entebbe*, directed by Marvin J Chomsky, 1976; and Jamaican actor, Mark Heath, did the part in *Operation Thunderbolt*, directed by Menahem Golan, 1977.

²⁸ Wade Huie, *The Rise and Fall of Ida Amin*, Movie, directed by Sharad Patel, Twin Continetal Films, 1981; Soonni Taraporevala, *Mississippi Masala*, Movie, directed by Mira Nair, MGM, 1992; Ramanand Sagar and Ved Rahi, *Charas*, Movie, directed by Ramanand Sagar, Sagar Art International, 1976.

²⁹ Henry Kyemba, *State of Blood* (Ace Books, 1977); Peter Nazareth, *The General is Up* (Toronto: Tsar, 1991); Moses Isegawa, *Abyssinian Chronicles* (Vintage , 2001).

³⁰ Barry Beckerman, *Raid on Entebbe*, directed by Irvin Kershner, 1977; Ernest Kinoy, *Victory at Entebbe*, directed by Marvin J Chomsky, 1976; Ken Globus , Menahem Golan and Clarke Reyn, *Operation Thunderbolt*, directed by Menahem Golan and Joe Penhall, *Blue/Orange*, TV, directed by Howard Davies, 2005.

playwright Joe Penhall,³¹ as well as the popular Max Stafford Clark “Out of Joint” 2004 version of *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare.

Arguably, the most captivating story told of and about Amin is the one he tells of himself, filmed by Barbet Schroeder in the 1974 documentary, *General Idi Amin Dada: A Self Portrait*.³² It is a compelling product no matter what viewpoint you start or end up with. Briefly, Barbet Schroeder coaxed General Amin into making his case to the world. Amin proceeds, landing right into the big trap: the product makes a clown of him. But what I am interested in is Amin’s battle of wits and will with Schroeder, whereby the former compels the latter to edit certain portions of the film by taking hostage some French citizens. Amin got his way in the short run, but the parts – firing squad footage – were reinstated. And I am also interested in the edited end-part of the video, deleting the narrator’s commentary – replaced by the euphemism, “lost” – and in the process underscoring the gulf between analysis and silence, representation and the filmmaker’s own point of view.

Uganda is a country of coups and counter-coups. The whole time Obote, whom some analysts argue was Amin’s mentor, was ambitiously working his way to the top, at times by political brilliance, at other times by recourse to military means (despite the fact he was a civilian on both occasions of his accession to power), Amin was in the picture.³³ At the time Amin seized the reins of State power, he held the rank of Major General in the “Uganda Armed Forces.” Before then, he had been a crucial and trusted henchman to Obote and commander of the army. The position alone suggests he had been an active player in Obote’s five-year occupancy of the

³¹ Wole Soyinka, *A Play of Giants* (London: Methuen, 1984); Brett Bailey, *Big Dada*, directed by Brett Bailey, performed by Third World Bunfight in Bite 2001, Barbican Pit, London, 2001; Joe Penhall, *Blue/Orange* (London: Methuen, 2000).

³² Barbet Schroeder, *General Idi Amin Dada A Self Portrait*, Documentary Film & DVD, directed by Barbet Schroeder, Le Figaro Films/Mara Films & TV Recontre, 1974.

³³ The incumbent President, General Yoweri Museveni, is sometimes a civilian, and other times an army man, as suits his needs.

State House. The importance of the Obote-Amin connection need not be overstated, but at the same time must be acknowledged. Implicitly and explicitly Obote bears a certain responsibility for the making of Amin. Avirgan and Honey state, “Obote was accused of an unforgivable crime – that of promoting Amin to lead the army, and thus position him to stage the coup.”³⁴ Telling his own life story, Obote himself admits,

I had been prime minister for only a few months when Governor Sir Walter Coutts asked me to go to State House. He told me the story of the murder of the Turkana [Kenyan pastoral people] by one Lt. Idi Amin. Sir Walter told me about the inquiries made by the King’s African Rifles (KAR) in Nairobi about these killings and the case against Idi Amin. He was found guilty and faced dismissal but Sir Walter sought my opinion. I advised that Amin be given a severe reprimand. I regret to say that part of Uganda’s suffering today can be traced to the opinion I gave Sir Walter. After I had given my advice, Sir Walter told me that an officer like Lt. Idi Amin was not fit to be in KAR. He said: “I warn you this officer could cause you trouble in future.”³⁵

Obote then attempts to deny having ordered Amin to attack Lubiri (the Buganda palace) in 1966. Politicians tend to be astute at denying backfiring actions/choices, but Obote’s denial is laughable and, dare I say, ought to be ignored. Amin’s expertise was in what Gillo Pontecorvo³⁶ refers to as “politically engendered violence,” and just as Amin had served a useful if violent and sometimes embarrassing function for the British, Obote kept and used him for the same purposes when occasion demanded.³⁷

³⁴ Avirgan and Honey, *War in Uganda*, 4.

³⁵ Victor Karamagi, “Milton Obote: Telling His Own Lifetime Story,” *Daily Monitor* (Newspaper, 24 October 2005).

³⁶ Pontecorvo is the Director of *The Battle of Algiers*: a 1966 movie depicting Algerian anti-colonial struggle against European power, in this case French.

³⁷ See, Pat Hutton and Jonathan Bloch, “The Making of Idi Amin,” *World History Archives*, New African (February 2001), <http://www.africasia.com/icpubs/na/feb01/cover2.htm>.

According to Amin was involved in helping the British quell the 1950s Turkana and Mau Mau (really nationalist) conflicts of colonial times. In postcolonial times, Amin invaded Congo for Gold, and led the 1966 Mengo attack under orders from Obote.

The first real rift between Obote and Amin seems to have occurred in relation to Amin's greed. 1965, Amin invaded and ransacked the Democratic Republic of Congo, (DRC) for Gold.³⁸ In those days, when the DRC was still Zaire, things did not go according to plan for Amin – a Uganda army General by occupation, a soldier of fortune by inclination: Daudi Ochieng, a member of Parliament, brought the matter before parliament, shaking the foundations of Amin and Obote's relationship. The fall-out had started. Obote tried to have Amin arrested for corruption, but Amin played his part well and outwitted Obote.

Exemplifying how political events and performance practices affect each other, the famous singer, Fred Masagazi, at the time with the Top Ten Band, composed a satirical song entitled, "Nze Nkola Zange Nawe Wekolere Zizo" ("Mind Your Own Business") that exploited the scandal. The song was clever and for a time served as an embarrassment for Amin. If performers tried to use their skills to mold opinions around events in the political sphere, though, the politicians also acted in ways that were highly performative. For instance, upon receipt of the instruments of power from the British rulers, Obote exercised performative means toward political aims – first kneeling before Mutesa II to earn his trust, and then explaining away the 1966 act of war against Mengo Palace by powerful and moving oratory. As should by now be clear, this interaction between performance and politics operates from both ends of the equation.³⁹ Just as politicians may use performance to gain or sustain power, performers are wont to weave political references into their performances, sometimes with an impact on the political sphere itself. I am most invested in those aspects of this phenomenon that inform the changing scene of

³⁸See, Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 35. And that was only the beginning of Uganda's meddling in the affairs of DRC, a nation hostage to warfare. Circa late 1990s, Uganda (alongside Rwanda) would invade the DRC and end up being sued in the International Court of Justice for plunder; it was ordered to pay \$10b in reparations.

³⁹ Once in power, and the fall out with the nations that had played "kingmaker" with him was in motion, Amin made the British bow to him by staging a crucial meeting in a location where the entrance to the venue was so low, in a way that made this necessary. Four Britons carried Amin into an official reception in 1975 on a makeshift throne. Soon thereafter he declared to an enthused audience, that he was the conqueror of the British Empire, hence one of his many titles, CBE.

theatre and performance in Uganda, bending that scene in accord with a warped political history. The overriding concern of my project is the state of cultural production in post-colonial Uganda in the face of mounting repression both brought on by and contributing to a legacy of war and will now focus on these particular cultural producers working (or trying to work) in drama and theatre.

Stage Vs State

THE RISE of Amin stirred not just praise songs and media headlines, but also deeper repression. The legacy of Amin affected, practically changed, and massively shifted theatre and performance in Uganda almost as much as the advent of the colonial era did. Remember, repression against theatre and performance had been ever present, and rising incrementally through the times of colonial rule, through Obote, to Amin. Ngugi wa’Thiong’O, a well-known victim of repression and unspeakable violence in Kenya, proffers that, “The struggle between the arts and the state can best be seen in performance in general and in the battle over performance space in particular.”⁴⁰ On that count, owing to Amin’s phobia for intellectuals, many fled to different parts of the world. One of them was playwright and University Lecturer John Ruganda, who fled to neighboring Kenya, living there from 1973-82 (He later lived in Canada 1983-1989 and in South Africa 1989-2007.) While in Kenya, he taught at Nairobi University and worked with Ngugi Wa Mirii, who co-wrote the anti-imperialism play, *I Will Marry When I Want* with Ngugi wa’Thiong’O.⁴¹ Okot shared the Kenyan phase of exile with John Ruganda. Upon return to Uganda, Okot struggled to get a job at Makerere University, but died soon thereafter in 1982, under mysterious

⁴⁰ Ngugi wa’Thiong’O, “Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space,” *TDR* (1988-) (The MIT Press) Vol. 41, no. No. 3 (Autumn 1997), 11-30.

⁴¹ Ngugi wa’Thiong’O and Ngugi Wa Mirii, *I Will Marry When I Want* (Heinmann, 1982). Both playwrights and Prof. Micere Mugo got into trouble with Kenyan authorities over the Kamiirithu project in 1978, with Wa Mirii and Micere fleeing to Zimbabwe. Presently, Wa Thiong’o is based in the USA, Wa Mirii consorted with the Mugabe regime; he died in a car accident Zimbabwe, while Mugo teaches at Syracuse University, New York, USA.

circumstances. Whereas Okot took to exile because of Obote's discomfort with his sharp intellect and penchant to speak truth to power, Ruganda's flight into exile was owing to Amin's will to do away with intellectuals who were critical of his ways.

The problem, for the State, was that in this battle of wills, this vying for a voice about homeland issues, exiled or hounded intellectuals like Okot p'Bitek, Peter Nazareth, Okello Oculi and, in the specific area of theatre practice, Wycliff Kiyingi, Byron Kawadwa, Robert Serumaga, and John Ruganda continually operated as antennae of what was going on economically, socially, culturally, politically, and historically, whether in Uganda or elsewhere. Okot p'Bitek, in his last book, *Artist, the Ruler*, claims a long tradition of power for the African artist in this role:

The English poet Percy Bysshe Shelly (1792 – 1821) suggested that artists were the unacknowledged legislators. But in *Africa of tradition* [emphasis mine] they are fully acknowledged, admired and feared for their sharp tongues. Moral Science only arranges the elements that the artists have created. That is to say, the artist creates the central ideas around which other leaders, lawmakers, chiefs, judges, heads of clans, family heads, construct and sustain social institutions. But more, they also compose the festivals in which these ideas are celebrated.⁴²

Ngugi hails from Kenya, and Okot from Uganda; both tasted the wrath of the post-colonial regimes they dared to question. These men – Ngugi, still living; Okot, now dead – are but two of many such post-colonial East African theatre artists to find themselves punished for exercising this traditional role. Nor was the persecution of those who “speak truth to power” strictly a monopoly of East Africa. Playwright Ken Sarowiwa⁴³ was murdered in Nigeria, while in South Africa the apartheid regime leaned against Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona for their anti-apartheid stance. The life and death nature of this issue in post-colonial African States is reflected, amidst bewildering contradictions, in the manner of Okot's demise. In “A Biographical Sketch”, written on or before 1986, Lubwa p'Chong – Okot's protégé and also a

⁴² Okot p'Bitek, *Artist The Ruler* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), 36.

⁴³ Ken Sarowiwa's short story, "Africa Kills Her Sun," in *The Art of the Story: An International Anthology of Contemporary Short Stories*, ed. Daniel Halpern (Place: Penguin, 2000) has been adapted for the stage by Tanzanian poet and performer, Mrisho Mpoto, and is being developed by Sundance East Africa. The adaption received a staged reading at CUNY (City University of New York), 2011.

celebrated playwright and teacher in his own right (and one of my mentors) – states: “On 20th July, 1982, Okot p’Bitek died peacefully in his bed at his residence. At the time of his death, he had just finished, *Artist the Ruler*, two weeks previously.”⁴⁴ The case is mystifying because the same p’Chong, somewhere between that time and before 1997 (when he himself died after a long illness), not only writes but also emphasizes, in italics, something to the contrary:

Okot p’Bitek died at his Kololo Hill residence on Tuesday 20 July 1982 at 5.30 am. He had, for the previous two days or so, been complaining of a persistent headache for which he had received some medical treatment one day before he died.

Contrary to the common belief that Okot died of excessive drinking, the Mulago Hospital Medical death certificate clearly states the cause of Okot’s death was “hemorrhage caused by head injury on the right side of the head inflicted by some blunt object.”⁴⁵

The mystery remains; a signifier of a broken down system in which a person can die “peacefully in his own bed” from a “head injury...inflicted by some blunt object.”

Despite the abundance of Amin related/inspired cultural products, including the films and novels already cited, my own focus remains on drama, playwriting and theatre. Uganda under the rule of Amin – owing to the severe repression at work – shied away from the sort of theatre known for its catalytic capacity for change. Still, theatre-making arguably remained a subtly open window, a ventilator at least or, given the diminutive role it was reduced to, a keyhole through which to peer into the underbelly of Ugandan society. Amin emphatically unleashed a state of fear, violence, bloodshed, and murder against any form of unpopular viewpoint; but, while theatre mutated away from a “scenographic model for a social-metric process,”⁴⁶ it sustained – both wittingly and unwittingly – its revelatory ways.

⁴⁴ Lubwa p’Chong, “Okot p’Bitek: Foreword and Biographical Sketch,” in *Arts, The Ruler: Essays on Art Culture and Values*, 10 (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986).

⁴⁵ Cliff Lubwa p’Chong, “Okot p’Bitek: The cultural Matrix of the Acholi in his Writings,” in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingner, 95 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000).

⁴⁶ See, Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 184.

This work, however muted, did not come easy or without severe risk. When, quite early in his rule, Amin attacked and displaced the intelligentsia, writers of all stripes were among those persecuted. Many chose or were forced into exile. Nazareth recounts:

Many writers who had to go into exile faced too many problems to be able to continue writing in a normal way. Some published under pseudonyms. Eneriko Seruma has completed two novels, *Going Back to the Land* and *Savage Novice*, and one volume of short stories, which have not yet found a publisher. I completed a second novel, *The General is Up*, but was hesitant about publishing it: it is not yet published, except for some chapters which have appeared in journals. And how could one write of the subject? Okot p'Bitek was writing his *Song of a Soldier*, but was finding it too painful.⁴⁷

The flight and exile of so many leading fiction writers, poets, and playwrights left a yawning gap. A tug of war ensued with some people trying to widen this gap, others attempting to close it. This push and pull involved political actors, playwrights, and singers. In this story, the fate of Byron Kawadwa deserves particular attention.

Fate of a Playwright

BYRON KAWADWA was a key figure in musical theatre and Luganda-language opera in the 1960s and 1970s, until his life was brutally ended. Tales abound about what happened, so much so that it is hard to tell what is true and what is false; the only constant is that the man died. Many who knew him at the end still whisper tales while imploring that their names are not revealed. There are almost as many stories of the cause of Kawadwa's death as there are storytellers. One consistency is that he was picked up (some say grabbed by force) from the Artists Club, (now the Musicians Club) in broad daylight, at the National Theatre in 1977. Another is that he was found butchered. His gruesome remains were found in the boot of a car, hacked to pieces, limb by limb. The who and the why, between the what, vary from account to account: the most consistent version is that Idi Amin's hit men did the job because Amin's advisors told the Big Man that the play, *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko/Song of the Cockerel*, was about him, though some people blame it

⁴⁷ Nazareth, "Waiting for Amin," 8.

on professional (artistic) rivalry and jealousy; while other people doubt Amin sanctioned the murder, but dare not say anymore. I raise the different versions as a matter of record, but I think the presumption that Amin was responsible holds water.

The play is the thing, according to Shakespeare, with which to catch the conscience of the King.⁴⁸ In Kawadwa's play, *Oluymba Lwa Wankoko/Song of the Cockerel*, a character called Nkwale serves as Wankoko's side-kick; remember *Nkwale* (Quail) and *Wankoko* (Cockerel) belong to the pheasant family. In the action of the play, the two operate together, and a song in the play emphasizes the fact: "*Bajja Babiri/They Came in a Pair.*" Obote and Amin come to national prominence together, from the same area of origin, seeking opportunity; both hail from the North of Uganda – even though they were "ethnically" different and Amin was later to curry favor with the South (for a while) – and they rose in the ranks of power together. In that perspective, Amin perceivably, became upset by that inference. But playwright Wycliffe Kiyingi says that Kawadwa, upon return from the 1977 Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture in Lagos, Nigeria, talked openly about meeting and spending time with Ugandan exiles: perceived enemies of State.⁴⁹ History reveals just how paranoid and afraid of intellectuals Amin was, and Kawadwa was known both by his associations with others and by his own accomplishments as one of the intellectuals that bore watching.⁵⁰ Soyinka dedicates, *A Play of Giants*,⁵¹ a satiric treatment of three of Africa's most notorious dictators, to Byron Kawadwa, stating, "he was

⁴⁸ *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene II.

⁴⁹ Interview with the author, Kampala, Uganda, July 18th 2007.

⁵⁰ Rose Mbowe, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitinger, 218 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000) writes that, "Wole Soyinka suggested in the Read lecture that Byron Kawadwa and his colleague Dan Kintu lacked "the facility of a Robert Serumaga, who did manipulate Idi Amin for as long as he could..."

⁵¹ Wole Soyinka, *A Play of Giants*, (London: Methuen, 1984).

representative of the many thousands whose contribution to the nation of the birth was brutally cut short by Idi Amin...⁵²

Certain claims place witnesses at the National Theatre when Kawadwa was picked up. They recount that gun-wielding men who claimed to be State agents came looking for him. He was tipped off and advised to run away but refused, and was, instead, taken forcibly. It is claimed that some people threw bottles in protest, but none of that could save Kawadwa. Kawadwa was murdered, whether by agents of the State because Amin felt personally attacked by Kawadwa's portrayal of the clownish sidekick, or (far less likely), as the victim of a personal vendetta in the pervasive violence that Amin instigated. If Kawadwa was the first martyr of performance in Amin's Uganda, he was certainly not the last. It bears stating again that under Obote punishment endured by cultural critics such as Kiyingi was detention; under Amin, there was always the threat of death. And, still, Obote bred Amin.⁵³

Regardless of the immediate reasons for his death, Kawadwa's gruesome murder had a chilling effect on dramatic and theatrical production in Uganda. The survival instinct of theatre practitioners kicked into gear. From then on, in the place of political plays like *Oluyimbwa Lwa Wankoko/Song of the Cockerel*, or songs like *N'ekolera Zange/Mind Your Business*, there was Fear. In the place of historical plays like *Olugendo Lwe Goologosa/Journey to Golgotha* and *Omwana W'Omuntu/Son of Man*, there was a cultural vacuum that was eventually filled by tepid entertainments that offered mirth without criticism and dramatic situations devoid of historical context. These, also, were aspects of the legacy of war.

⁵² See, Wole Soyinka, "On the Heroes of our Time: some personal notes," in *A Play of Giants*, v-x (London: Methuen, 1984), specifically viii.

⁵³ Cf, Avirgan and Honey, *War in Uganda*, 4; Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 71-76; Glentworth and Hancock, "Obote and Amin: Change and Continuity in Modern Uganda Politics," 237-255.

Days of Mirth

WHETHER KAWADWA was murdered because the depiction of Nkwale, Wankoko's sidekick in the *Song of the Cockerel*, was too close to comfort for Amin, who once was as close to Wankoko as Amin was to Obote, or because he was deemed more generally hostile and dangerous because he had talked to Amin's enemies, or because of jealousy within the theatre circles, or even because of a personal vendetta, it was Amin who laid the ground-work for the event and who took advantage of the terror it instilled. The truth of the matter may never come to the surface, but the silencing of Kawadwa's voice – be it by agents of the State or due to personal rivalries – sent a very clear message: those who exhibited bravery through writing, staging, or by criticism in other media were now under threat. Once in power, Amin maintained a controlling grip on what was going on; his aim was to rule Uganda for an entire lifetime. Mutibwa notes that, "In the issue of *Voice of Uganda* of 8 August, 1975 a letter to the editor was published, with six signatures, suggesting that Field Marshal Amin should become Life President. And so it was proclaimed."¹ Hence, by 1975, Amin had consolidated his power. Any threat to that power, real or imaginary, especially by members of the intelligentsia, would be met with menace and deadly force. To counter the intelligentsia, Amin virtually took away the space to think or, should these efforts fail, to depict thought. According to Mbowa,

Not only were stayee [those who stayed] intellectuals gagged by fear, but the struggle for economic survival left no time for creative work. Above all, intellectuals could not operate in the atmosphere of escapist and purely commercial theater that set in as a result of Amin's Economic War in 1972.²

Effectively, theatre and performance practitioners kicked into gear a survival instinct, resorting to light amusement, which in practice came to mean singling out "the troublesome woman" as the

¹ Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 111.

² Rose Mbowa, "Theatre and Political Respression in Uganda," *Research in African Literatures* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 93.

bane of a man's life. These trends in theatre would carry over well into the 1980s, and during this time, theatrical activity actually flourished, however insubstantial and ultimately self-abasing the fare Mbowa portrays the scenario accurately:

These new practitioners soon realized that they could supplement their living through theater as there was a regular and uncritical audience for whom anything that produced laughter and gave relief was good theater. The number of theater groups rose steadily from 20 in 1970 to 80 in 1977, 131 in 1980, and 250 in 1985. Cinema halls, bars, nightclubs, and church halls were converted into performance places to meet the demand. These conditions produced numerous domestic and social farces and musicals that satisfied the artists' commercial demands and those of the laughter-and-entertainment-seeking audience. The musical attained distinct significance in 1978 with dramatizations of the songs of Uganda's leading pop music group of the day, Jimmy Katumba with the Ebonies. It also inspired outdoor performances on beaches and in stadiums to accommodate larger numbers. These plays, treating "light" issues, were set in bars, lodges, and streets; prostitution, corruption, and drunkenness proved suitable subjects for farce. The characters were types-giddy youngsters, easily fooled girls and women, playboys and sugar daddies, tax defaulters, and rural dwellers—all set amidst cunning city types.³

A South African journalist writes about how Alex Mukulu,

...[S]urvived two of Uganda's most brutal dictators, Idi Amin and Milton Obote, by compromising his art. "We could not address serious issues because we feared to die. Anything that was critical of the government could lead to your disappearance. "So [for a time] he wrote about domestic issues like love, marriage, infidelity, stupid plays..."⁴

In terms of regional balance, Buganda dominated the theatre. Thus, the desire once set in motion by Serumaga and Okot for a national, not merely regional theatre dwindled. The other regions were represented mainly by school drama activity, during the National Schools Drama Competition, or the National Music Festival at Secondary and Primary school levels. The positive side to this pattern was that talented young people were given a chance to develop performance skills: the school dramas could be original, usually contemporary plays, such as, *Omutaputa/The Interpreter* in which a confusion between languages – English and Luganda – was the source of

³ Ibid ,94.

⁴ Johnson Angella, "Not The Peoples Playwright" (Mail & Guardian, On-line, September 19, 1997).

conflict and carried with it its own means of facile resolution.⁵ They could be traditionally inspired, as in the dramatization of the Kiganda legend of Kintu and Nambi, dramatized as, *Kintu*, by Erisa Kironde in 1959, in which, “Gulu, who presides over heaven interferes with the lives of earth-born humans like a colonial master.”⁶ They could be dramatizations of foreign and historical texts, from *Antigone* (Sophocles) to *The Devil’s Disciple* (Bernard Shaw) to *The Merchant of Venice* (William Shakespeare) or *Kongi’s Harvest* (Wole Soyinka).⁷ On occasion, once a year, upcountry groups were allowed a week or at most two on the stage of the National Theatre.⁸

Unable to tell the Emperor that he was naked, theatre and performance practitioners resorted to taking their frustrations out on women. Although Amin’s reign proved short-lived, this tendency to blame “the woman” when the problem lay elsewhere started under Amin, but continued into the post-Amin days. Performances became about: bow-legged, ugly women (in country music of the 70s like, “*Oluwala Olunyunyuni*”/ *A Fleecing Girl*, or in the 90s like, “*Kawala Ka Kinyozi*/ *A Barber’s Daughter*,” and in pop songs like “*Prossie*”/ Short for Proscovia, contained multiple attacks on such women, the songs were admittedly “balanced” by praise for other women who were not like the subject of ridicule). In popular drama, women came under various forms of attack: cruel stepmothers (*Agaali Amakula/What Once Was Glorious*), or (*Mukaazi Muka Sebbo/The Woman Father Married*); loose women shuffling men like a pack of

⁵ Play seen in performance, Author, Unknounwn. *Omutaputa / The Interpreter*, directed by Wycliff Ssentamu (unpublished, performed by Mityana Secondary School, National Theatre, Kampala, 1995).

⁶ Ntangaare and Breitingner, “Ugandan Drama in English,” 230.

⁷ Erisa Kironde, *Kintu* (unpublished, performed by English Department, Makerere, National Theatre, Kampala, 1959); Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Declan Donnellan (Ottawa: Oberan Press, 1999); George Bernard Shaw, *The Devil’s Disciple* (London: A. Constable & Co, 1906); William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Sir A. Quiller-Couch and J. D. Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 1926); Wole Soyinka, *Kongi’s Harvest*, Three Crowns Books (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁸ For a while this had a lot to do with capacity, meaning there were too many groups and not enough weeks in a year, or quota, however the seasons were set. Kampala alone had 400 groups at one time, with the other regions totaling about 200 groups altogether. (See, Kaahwa, “Uganda Theatre: Paradigm Shifts,” 105.) Hence, space at the National Theatre was a premium issue.

cards in (*Omwana Wani/Whose Child Is It, Anyway*); women as snobs, (*Nabiwata/[Waste Banana Peelings* – title was the name of the principal character); women this, and women the other.⁹ In terms of historical background, instead of playing out Ngugi's enactment of power, whereby the State and the performer lock horns and face off to the bitter end, this recourse to laughter and to the displacement of frustration and hostility onto women constituted, in retrospect, an enactment of powerlessness. "The woman" was not the problem; playwrights were simply, "kicking the cat" to use an English metaphor, or to use a Ugandan one, "being cheated in the market, but instead quarreling with the road."

As an indirect response to State-inspired repression, Uganda theatre took other turns towards self-abasement, producing plays about the neighbor with a big butt, and big belly (stuffed) but with a small brain (enacted). Farcical in form, these shows, inspired by the *Kapere/Oluka/Ekanya* character of yester-years were common at school concerts, and in community centers. The genre moved onto the main stage, entrenched itself, deeply, and is a part of Ugandan theatre practice to this day.

But why comedy amidst a state of affairs marked by extreme violence? How could audiences laugh so much during such a sad time in Ugandan history? Cultural icon, Stephen Rwangyezi – I do not know if he did so in jest or in earnest – once said he would beat up an audience member for showing such poor taste in humor. David Cook, however, proffers a sobering insight, that the laughter does not necessarily represent a "dramatic failure in

⁹ The Songs were often played on Radio, and the listed plays were the popular plays of the mid 1980s to early 1990s. The plays, unpublished performances, were staged in various theatre halls spread across towns and townships in Eastern, Central, Western and Southern regions of Uganda. As Bretinger notes in his informative essay, "Divergent Trends in Contemporary African Theatre," in *New Theatre in Francophone and Anglophone Africa.*, ed. Anne Fuchs, 3-6 (Amsterdam/Atlanta, 1999) , the theatre halls are important theatre spaces. I note upon hindsight the marginalization of the northern region, given that there was no war over there then. The listed unpublished performances culminated into National Theatre productions, except: *Omwana Wani / Whose Child Is it Anyway?* I watched the whole lot; as a matter of fact, I acted in *Omwana Wa Ani / Whose Child Is It Anyway*, during my theatre practice days with Linda Group, upcountry in Mbale town.

communication.”¹⁰ He takes that, “...[S]uch laughter is more akin to a mild form of hysteria than to ribaldry...”¹¹ Cook proceeds to caution against attaching, “[W]estern or [W]esternised significance to laughter when a popular audience is responding to an intense dramatic situation. In terms of dramatic emotional response, such laughter may indeed be as appropriate as tears.”¹² While he is discussing the reaction to intensity in dramatic situations, the remark may be expanded to cover an “hysterical” reaction to the intense “social drama” that Uganda faced during Amin’s rule.

This time period, this season of theatre in the days of Amin, was not that distant from the times when African ritual and other traditional performance modes had come into contact with European theatrical modes and new approaches to performance were formed. These earlier developments ranged from adapting Ugandan tales using the practices of Western theatre (40s, 50s, 60s, 70s), to using Biblical tales (60s, 70s), to experimenting with social movements like Makerere Travelling Theatre (50s and 60s), and would continue with absurdist, agit-prop, and the well made plays (in the 70s, 80s, and 90s), often synchronized with African values. One of these early traditions proved particularly important to the self-abasement of Ugandan theatre in the days of Amin. The Travelling Theatre was the successor to the theatrical activities of the Social Welfare Departments efforts in the mid-40s that employed the theatre in a didactic fashion, developing plays about planting cotton, paying taxes, not drinking away the salary. This kind of play rotated around a laughable figure, created with regional considerations in mind. He was referred to as Poor *Oluka* in the north, *Ekanya* in the east, *Katoto* in the west and Poor *Kapere* in south. Whatever the social aims of these plays, the character presented a stereotypical and clownish portrayal of Ugandan workers and peasants.

¹⁰ David Cook, "The Makerere Free Travelling Theatre: An Experimental Model," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breiting, 46-47 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Theatre practitioners and thinkers Ngugi of Kenya and Mbowa of Uganda have both written about this aspect of theatre, shared by the two countries. Ngugi, rightly, deems the character unflattering; he insists the figure was and is a slight on the African sense of self-worth.¹³ Mbowa insightfully looks beyond the colonial aim. She notes how Ugandans have time and again used the figure beneficially.¹⁴ If, as Mbowa suggests, the character inspired Christopher Mukiibi – an effortlessly funny stage actor – Mukiibi himself, over a long, successful career, certainly became a multiplier seed, and the persona developed has had a huge impact on the Ugandan stage, becoming particularly important in these days of comic irrelevancy and self-abasement. When the boot of Amin, or of Amin's men, or of mere thugs who exploited the mood of the country stepped down hard, pressing mortal terror into the populace, theatre and performance practitioners who did not flee, who could not flee, were better off targeting laughter, not seriousness in their theatre activities. The alternatives were flight and exile on the one hand, or perishing on the other.

Code of Silence

BEFORE KAWADWA was forever silenced in 1977, playwrights such as Robert Serumaga and John Ruganda had wrestled with the Amin regime in its infancy. Initially, they concerned themselves with a wide range of post-colonial issues, not just with Amin's ascendancy, and then he turned himself into the issue of issues, and they confronted that well. Ruganda took to exile as soon as he could, while Serumaga narrowly escaped in the dark of the night. Serumaga and Ruganda were also, let it be said, Ugandan pioneers of experimentation with a Western-inspired "theatre of the absurd" a trend from which, as a none too friendly critic remarked, "the local audiences fled and thus contributed to the temporary eclipse of drama in English inside

¹³ Ngugi wa'Thiong'O, "The Language of African Theatre," in *Decolonising the Mind*, 36 (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), 38.

¹⁴ Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 211-222.

Uganda.”¹⁵ In their hands, though, the techniques of the “theatre of the absurd” acquired a more pointed and political goal than is usually ascribed to their European counterparts.

Robert Serumaga (1939-1980) was, in fact, an outstanding playwright with an outstanding body of work including: *A Play*, *The Elephants*, *Majangwa*, and *Renga Moi*.¹⁶ His bold and ambitious theatre practice, on both the local and international scenes, has been considerably explored.¹⁷ And, given the amount of scholarship on him, I will focus on one particular event during his attempts to both grapple with and survive Amin’s reign of terror—his confrontation with “Aminism.” At the peak of his theatre career, the massive exodus of intellectual and artists – accelerated by the killing of dramatist Kawadwa and his colleague, radio producer Dan Kintu, as well as a prominent actor named Male – spelled the death of “serious” scripts. Even before the three men perished in the late ‘70s, Serumaga whose “whole ... theatrical career fell within repressive eras” undertook his own “ceaseless search for ‘safe’ forms of communication.”¹⁸ Thus, with a sharp sense of socio-political unrest, he came up with,

[A] wordless drama, *Amayirikiti* (1974). The play takes its name from the shrubs used as dumping grounds for dead dogs, for human life was snuffed out as callously as killing a dog. In the production, dangling bodies in black tunics were spread out on a vertical scaffold and the stage floor, with a coffin in their midst depicting the numerous murders and dumping grounds in dungeons, forests, rivers, and lakes. The only character that rises to speak out is the dumb coffin-maker, symbolizing [a] people's speech suppressed out of fear of death. Fascinated by the spectacle, Amin invited the company to perform what he

¹⁵ Ntangaare and Breitingner, "Ugandan Drama in English," 226-227.

¹⁶ Robert Serumaga, *The Elephant, Majangwa and A Play* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974); Robert Serumaga, *Renga Moi* (Unpublished, 1972).

¹⁷ This is the case with: Andrew Horn, "Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga," in *The Performance Arts in Africa: A Reader*, ed. Frances Harding, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 97-116; and Serumaga’s son, Robert Kalundi Serumaga, “A Shrine for My Father,” March, 2010. <http://www.ashrineformyfather.com>. Additional and useful observations have been made by Mbowa, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 205, 218-223; Ntangaare and Breitingner, "Ugandan Drama in English," 224-249 ; Jessica Kaahwa, "Uganda Theatre: Paradigm Shifts," *SATJ* 18 (2004) 86-111; and George Bwanika Seremba, "Robert Serumaga And The Golden Age Of Uganda's Theatre: Slopsism, Activism, Innovation (1968-1978), full or short form" PhD diss., (Dublin: University of Dublin Trinity College, 2007).

¹⁸ Mbowa, “Theatre and Political Respression in Uganda,” 91.

interpreted as "beautiful gymnastics" before a meeting of the Organization of African Unity heads of state in 1975.¹⁹

¹⁹ Mbowe, "Luganda Theatre and its Audience," 232.

The 45 minutes drama moved audiences into awe and tears.²⁰ Lecturer and director Jessica Kaahwa notes how the playwright, “by means of improvisation integrated art forms of poetry, song, dance and symbolism” in order to, in the words of Soyinka, “disseminate dangerous sentiments under the watchful eye of the oppressor.”²¹ Thus, the silent production, performed before his very eyes, outwitted Amin, exposing him before a delegation of other African Heads of State; Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia wept on seeing people being bundled up and thrown into the boot of vehicles. Realizing from the reaction that he had been duped and humiliated, Amin was furious. Following a tip-off, the playwright had to flee that very night, crossing the border into Kenya with his group members. Amin’s forces came after them two hours later, just before dawn, and they just barely escaped with their lives.²²

Improvisation had enabled Serumaga to temporarily avoid censorship and bought him time to save his life. And improvisation became an important mode of theatre making, generating far more productions than scripts for the period. While I note that Ntangaare and Breitinger bemoan the improvisation method,²³ I beg to differ: in my experience, improvisation worked well for us at Linda dramatic society in Mbale, and just as well for the Kigezi Kinimba Actors from Kabale. When employed by a cohesive and well-knit group of committed artists, the method can produce wonders. But that is a lengthy matter, for which I have neither time nor space here. The issue at hand is that as repression grew and scripts became more and more subject to censorship whenever they touched on social criticism, improvisation often took precedence over the script.

Ugandan society itself was changing dramatically. In a flash, education became disparaged, even dangerous; running a *Duka* (equivalent of convenience store) became better than

²⁰ Horn, "Individualism and Community in the Theatre of Serumaga," 111.

²¹ Kaahwa, "Uganda Theatre: Paradigm Shifts," *SATJ* 18 (2004): 100.

²² See, Horn, "The Theatre of Serumaga," 97-111.

²³ Ntangaare and Breitinger, "Ugandan Drama in English," 229.

holding many posts in the civil service sector. To enroll in Makerere University was to invite the challenge, “*nasoma wa; onsinga chi?*” meaning, “I am unschooled but you got nothing on me.” And it was true. Those with the money to pay for theatrical shows were another lot now, often with different sensibilities. In these circumstances, many performers opted to “give the people what they want”; there was something threatening hanging in the air that stifled most thought-provoking performances. Ugandans were becoming painfully aware that Bishops, Ministers, Justices, and Institutional Heads were in grave danger. In song and drama circles, prominent players had fled the scene in fear; Kawadwa and Dan Kintu were soon dead; the former boyfriend of Sarah Kyolaba (the woman who would be Idi Amin Dada’s fourth wife) – a musician who had composed and recorded a song warning an intruder to steer clear of their relationship – in short order vanished, never to be seen again. As the social order careened out of control, script-writing frequently gave way to improvisation. While improvisation could be “light-hearted” and comic, for a socially conscious, whistle-blowing dramatist such as Serumaga, the lack of a written text or documentation of his plays presented the opportunity to avoid (for a brief while) arming State agents with incriminating evidence.

Citizen’s Burden

JOHN RUGANDA (1941-2007) was another reputable playwright on the Ugandan scene; Kenyan playwright Francis Imbuga has written about the several plays he published.²⁴ In much of his work, Ruganda comes across as the voice of the voiceless. His plays satirize the oppressive and greedy tendencies of political regimes that work against the interests of the common person. It is evident in his plays that Ruganda understood well that, at least in the Uganda of his day:

Politics really was about tribe and religion, though it never ceased to be about the petty bourgeoisie as well! Moreover, as the energies released by this kind of competition burst out, it became apparent that the petty bourgeoisie in Uganda was not strong enough as a

²⁴ Francis Davis Imbuga, “John Ruganda, the Playwright,” in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitinger, 250 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000).

class to transcend the fragmentation which it had itself invoked. Indeed, the failure of the petty bourgeoisie to act effectively as a class defined the failure of conventional 'nation-building' in Uganda.²⁵

This point of view is most evident in his popular and often-produced play: *The Burdens*²⁶ – written and produced a year after Amin took power. The play is about a family of four in which everybody is a burden. Erstwhile Minister Wamala has just been released from jail – for the crime of plotting a failed coup – and is drowning himself in alcohol in order to hide from the burdens of his family. His wife Tinka, who quit the nunnery for Wamala, is weighed down and stressed by the ever-growing problems in the home. The 15-year old Kaija is wrestling with teenage moods and desiring his own bed, facing bullies at school, and witnessing daily fights between his parents. Nine-year old Nankya is bedridden by a terrible but curable cough. Wamala, a former petty bourgeois fallen from grace in political circles, is incapable of getting out of the stupor caused by the loss of his former “grandeur,” and spews idea upon idea about how he is going to sort out things; but all this talk is nothing but self-delusion. In the end, the mounting frustrations in the home snap irreparably. The playwright’s message is clear: be it *Uhuru* or post-*Uhuru*, no amount of affable promises or brilliant ideas will produce anything without due action, with results that are tangible for the people.

The implicit social criticism is clear: Ruganda is nailing the post-independence leaders for the folly of promising bridges where there is no water. Having said that, I do not think there was a total failure to take action by Uganda’s rulers and elites; rather, these actions were all too often misdirected, occasioning far more problems – both inside and outside of the new country – than they solved. I say this in regard to Obote and Amin, who were admittedly both faced with intractable dilemmas and operating under the proverbial sword of Damocles. Both men had to reckon with the incessant demands of coup plotters (like themselves), or the petty bourgeoisie, or

²⁵ John S Saul, "The Unsteady State: Uganda, Obote and General Amin," *Review of African Politics and Economics (ROAPE)* 3, no. 5 (1976): 29.

²⁶ John Ruganda, *The Burdens* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1972).

religious groups, or political parties, or ethnic interests; and that was only at home. From beyond Ugandan borders there were the attempts at racial hegemony, imperialist interests, cold war issues, the need for foreign aid, and condescending attitudes to contend with.

Societies create the conditions that give rise to artists, and artists create works that both reflects upon and, potentially at least, helps to shape societies. The two entities are intertwined. Ruganda himself, burdened by exile and traversing Kenya, Canada, and South Africa before returning home at the eve of his lifetime, may, in exile, have lived an improved life, materially, but was deprived of the opportunity to fully participate in this process. In effect, the forcing of intellectuals to flee into exile at pain of death was also a silencing of the people, and of critique itself. At home, it was impossible to talk; abroad, the talk often seemed useless, mainly serving to underscore the impotence of progressive Ugandan intellectuals. The concerns Serumaga and Ruganda raised while in exile were pertinent: they framed issues and questions that societies that have developed progressively have debated amongst themselves over the years. In a society steeped in chaos and characterized by the brutal suppression of dissent, however, both men had to flee from their cradle land and in doing so found their ability to affect public discourse and political action severely circumscribed.

Still, in exile, Serumaga took to active political activity, while Ruganda sustained his involvement in drama and theatre. Serumaga was seriously considered for President when Amin fell, and served as Minister of Commerce soon after the fall of Amin, but he was to die in 1980, still in Kenya, under mysterious circumstances widely ascribed to foul play. Ruganda retired from lecturing at North University in South Africa in January of 2007 and returned to Uganda on the 27th of February 2007. He attended FEMRITE (a women writers' organization) week of activities in July, where he joked that: "I have come to the end of my journey. I have come home

for good...”²⁷ On the 9th of December, the obituary stated, “one of Uganda’s most acclaimed playwrights passed away. John Ruganda lost a protracted battle to cancer of the throat at Hope Ward, Kampala International Hospital (IHK).”²⁸

The Bane of Exile and *The Floods*

“YOU don’t know about exile until you face it, and then you know,” expressed Chanjerai Hove during the, "Freedom to Write," panel discussion of worldwide freedom of expression issues.²⁹ Witnessing exiled poet from Malawi, Jack Mapanje, exiled fiction writer from Somali, Nurudeen Farah, and exiled journalist and fiction writer from Zimbabwe, Chanjerai think aloud about exile, the very idea of exile leaves a bad taste. And yet, for all of its pain and disadvantage, a life in exile may spark off even more critical thinking and commitment to societal change. Exile irks the banished and undercuts their immediate efficacy, but it does not necessarily mute them. Exile displaces, but does not root out national concerns. On the contrary, exile can illuminate the afflicted party’s national issues as never before. Exile is not only and simply the bane of the evicted; the powers that be can find it more difficult to control the podium of the exiled, from that podium national actions and priorities may still be questioned, the home nation’s “ugly mug” can be exposed, and protestations, agitations, criticisms, analyses, and forbidden thoughts can still be launched. If Serumaga was ultimately killed away from his homeland, Ruganda is the crier whose drum is muffled by displacement, but who drums on, regardless. John Ruganda’s career and life

²⁷ Stephen Ssenkaaba, “Ruganda, The Passing Of A Literary Giant,” *The New Vision* (Newspaper, 18 December 2007).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Panelist: Chanjerai Hove, speaking at the “Under the Tongue: A Festival of Literature from Africa,” Brown University, Joukowsky Forum, Watson Institute, Tuesday, April 15, 2008 3:30PM. Other panelists at the event were: Nurudin Farah (Somalia), Jack Mapanje (Malawi) and Pierre Mujomba (Congo). Larry Siems, Director of the Freedom to Write Program, PEN American Center, was the moderator.

shift when he is exiled to Kenya; but from Kenya and within Kenya, Ruganda still took issue with events in Amin's Uganda. As a result, he wrote (among other plays), *The Floods*.³⁰

And so, at the height of Amin's repression, an exiled Ugandan playwright, John Ruganda, confronted the most notorious regime of post-colonial Africa. The playwright was barely coming into adulthood, barely twenty-two when Uganda shifted from colonial to post-colonial rule in 1962. He was affiliated with the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre at Makerere University and was that group's principle organizer in 1966 – the year Mutesa, Obote, and Amin shed the blood of others to gain control of power over that most challenging colonial legacy: the Nation-State. Blood would be let again, between Obote and Amin, in 1971. This time, Amin out-muscled Obote, taking control over the State, and, as it turned out, over who lives and who dies. By this time, Ruganda had reached the ripe-old age of thirty and could not remain impervious to the mire of State affairs. By 1972, he had written *The Burdens*, showing that he was well aware of the burdens cast upon the ordinary citizen by the fecklessness and useless rhetoric of politicians and government agents. The play was a grand success. According to Peter Nazareth, "Ruganda was seen at his brilliant best"³¹ with this play. By 1973, however, Ruganda, alert to the despondency that was drowning Uganda and to his own immediate danger, sought safe haven in Nairobi, Kenya, where, besides teaching drama and theatre arts at Nairobi University, he wrote *The Floods*. Ruganda's instincts to flee were proven right when in 1978 the State's censorship board prohibited a restaging of *The Burdens*.³²

Kenyan playwright and social critic, Ngugi wa'Thiong'O, himself a seasoned combatant in the struggles of artists and intellectuals versus State power, points out that performance, after

³⁰ Imbuga, "John Ruganda, the Playwright," 252-254, details Ruganda's playlist. Elsewhere, but in the same publication, David Cook, "The Makerere Free Travelling Theatre: An Experimental Model," 41 and 50, spells out Ruganda's contribution to theatre in the East African region.

³¹ Nazareth, "Waiting for Amin," 15.

³² See, Mbowa, "Theatre and Political Repression in Uganda," 87-97

all, came before the existence of the State.³³ However, “with the emergence of the state, the artist and the state become not only rivals in articulating the laws, moral or formal, that regulate life in society, but also rivals in determining the manner and circumstances of their delivery.”³⁴

As Ngugi argues, this is a centuries old problem that goes back to the days of Plato, whereby the Greek philosopher lays down the law: if poets want to compete with the State for a voice on the issues surrounding “daily life” then they should be denied the space, and be banished. Ngugi puts it succinctly: “The war between art and the state is really a struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state-in short, enactments of power.”³⁵

In the larger framework, the problem is not unique to Uganda. From Ancient Greece, to Russia in the early 20th Century, or from Kenya to Uganda in colonial and post-colonial times, the “enactments of power,” the fight for the forum to give voice and shape to the state of affairs before the citizenry is informed by certain constraints. “The state has its areas of performance; so has the artist. While the state performs power, the power of the artist is solely in the performance,” observes Ngugi. Judging from examples such as Meyerhold versus Stalin in Russia, Ngugi versus Kenyatta and Moi in Kenya, and Kawadwa versus Amin in Uganda, the problem at times boils over, and tends to produce heavy-handed measures by the State. The State, it appears, operates whimsically. I say “whimsical” because, for example, in Kenya, the State razed Kamiriithu – a people’s initiative – to the ground, replacing it with a polytechnic college.³⁶ It goes without saying that if locating the polytechnic was the issue, it could have been built in another location, and Kamiriithu would have two projects for social development. In

³³ Ngugi, "Enactments of Power," 11.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 12

³⁶ Ngugi, "The Language of African Theatre," 61.

Uganda, they hunted intellectuals, compelling them to flee to foreign lands, while those who dared to stay lived in dread and, often, debased their art.

Ruganda had written the “offensive” play, *The Burdens*, before Amin took power. This means, if the matter goes down to simply being about voicing criticism of the Head of State, the subject was Amin’s predecessor, Obote, not Amin himself. Similarly Kawadwa’s life was brutally ended on account of Amin, but he also had written the offending play about Obote. As Kott notes about Shakespeare’s histories, in the transfer of power, power tends to replicate itself: granted, change happens, but all too often with that same change “there is only a leap into the abyss.”³⁷ It is an old tale. The personnel may change, “but all of them,” Kott insists, “good and bad, brave and cowardly, naïve and cynical tread on the steps that are always the same.” As Mbowa writes: “Modern political repression of the artistic spirit has a long history in Uganda going back to British rule.”³⁸ It has also been sustained and even intensified thereafter in post-colonial times: “The second and third phases of repression of artistic freedom occurred in the post-colonial period from 1967 to 1985.”³⁹

While the question as to whether there has been a fourth phase, starting 1986, is a matter for another chapter, genealogically, over the years dealt with so far, the effect has been incremental: repression against performance has been enacted first under the colonial era and throughout Obote’s times in office and the Amin period, always, it seems, at an increased intensity. Again, if colonial rule was bound to take hold of (and regulate) the space for local cultural performance, Obote’s rule was wont to detain cultural producers, while Amin’s rule placed cultural figures it found to be “difficult” under threat of death; hence, flight and exile.

³⁷ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London: Methuen, 1965), 10.

³⁸ Mbowa, “Theatre and Political Repression in Uganda,” 87

³⁹ *Ibid*, 88

While flight results from an impulse for survival, exile can be a site for resistance to political repression; *The Floods* is such an act of resistance. Though hardly autobiographical, this play is a flight and exile play not only in regards to the location of the playwright, but also in the sense of what takes place in the dramatic action itself. At the play's opening, people are in a tumultuous flight to an unknown destination.⁴⁰ At the audience's first encounter with Nankya, the protagonist, she is in a self-imposed exile, albeit within her homeland. She is in exile in that she is hiding from a very dangerous State operative.⁴¹ *The Floods* is an important story. It is a playwright's reaction against the favorable story the Western world was telling about Amin's rise to power,⁴² as well as against the "all is well" act Amin was playing out. As a playwright, despite or because of exile, Ruganda understood the stakes of silence, he understood the rupture of the motherland; and so he kept an ear to the ground, and came up with this play.

Written in 1973, Ruganda's play is now frequently used as a high school text in English literature classes in East and Central Africa. The fruition of a play, however, is a staged production. Ruganda's play remained unproduced and in limbo until 1979, in Kenya, and until early 1990s in Uganda, when it was finally produced at the National Theatre, well after the fall of Amin. The first production (1979) was at the French Cultural Center, Nairobi, Kenya and the next a re-presentation of that production at the Festival of Small and Experimental Scenes, Yugoslavia – a country on the verge of its own bloodbaths.⁴³ The play was produced in Kenya at the eve of the fall of Amin—from March 1st 1979, and in Yugoslavia from March 18th 1979—he fell on, April 11th 1979.

⁴⁰ John Ruganda, "The Floods," *Black Drama* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2011), 3.

⁴¹ Ibid, 23

⁴² Many nations lent Amin support to stay in power according to: Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 84; Avirgan and Honey, *War in Uganda*, 8-27; Hutton and Bloch, "The Making of Idi Amin," 2001; and Mahmood Mamdani, "Introduction," in *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1984), 1-2.

⁴³ See, Nazareth, "Waiting for Amin," 8; See also production details of, *The Floods*, (Electronic Edition by Alexander Street Press, L.L.C., 2011) on *Black Drama* Database.

“By which time” Nazareth observes “the brutalities and murders of the Amin regime had filled Uganda with blood.”⁴⁴ I am unable to account for why the play was never given life on the stage, in Kenya or elsewhere, until Amin was overthrown. What is clear to me is how the world shut Uganda out, leaving us to face the problem, only to open the floodgates of moral outrage after his fall. I witnessed Alex Mukulu (who will be the focal point of chapter five) deal with this very question at the National Theatre in two ways. The first was via a song, “We Want Amin Out of Arabia,” lamenting the legacy Amin left behind, as well as the former dictator’s plush situation while in exile in Saudi Arabia. The refrain demanded, “*We want Amin out of Arabia, to come and face the law.*” The other time was via dialogue in the play, *Wounds of Africa*, in which one of the performers, Chandiru, tearful, put the question, “[D]id the allied forces have the weapons that hit Saddam when Amin was killing us?”⁴⁵

The plot of *The Floods* unfolds in three “waves” for scenes. The first wave sets off on an Island in Lake Victoria. Doom and gloom hang over the Island. Floods are expected to ravage the Island, in three hours time. The threat of the floods ticks like a time bomb throughout the scene. The fleeing people are panic-stricken but have no prayer. The state of emergency brings into contact disparate characters: the Headman, who is following State orders to ensure people get aboard the boat, but who remains clueless as to why; Kyeyune, once the best fishermen on the island, presently mortified by the sheer sight of fish; two young children with no accompanying adults; and Bwogo, a pistol wielding State agent. Bwogo is looking for “a certain young lady” in particular.⁴⁶ The ensuing uneasy dialogue shows how the aftermath of warfare generates abusive

⁴⁴Nazareth, “Waiting for Amin,” 15

⁴⁵Alex Mukulu, *Wounds of Africa*, directed by Alex Mukulu (unpublished, performed by Concern International, National Theatre, Kampala, 1990).

Mukulu composes songs and plays. In the stated song, Proscovia Chandiru sang the solo part supported by a chorus of actors. The same performer, Chandiru, is the one who also delivered the potent line regarding, “allied forces, Saddam and Amin.”

⁴⁶Ruganda, *The Floods*, 19.

conversations that do not spare even the Head of State: the characters talk about guns bulging under jackets, corpses dumped in the waters, and make references to the Head of State as an ogre. Although the order from above is to board the boat, somehow Kyeyune's has a premonition against boarding. And when he mentions the woman who told him about the floods from a radio announcement, Bwogo seems to be peculiarly interested. Bwogo heads to the house Kyeyune said the woman is in, while Kyeyune heads toward the boat.

In keeping with the title for the play, and with the thematic suggestion it bears, the idea of "waves" for scenic representation is a novel thought, and a productive one. In wave one, the impending disaster due to the floods is used to gain immediate attention; in the middle, the floods are spectacularly embodied by human beings, so the audience gets to see, not only hear, about the danger; and at the end of the play the threat of the floods which have hitherto afflicted "lesser beings" encroaches upon a figure of power. Each wave of *The Floods* depicts the haunting ghosts of times in recent history when it would have been befitting to say: "Something is rotten in the state of Uganda." To narrate that state of affairs, Ruganda plunges the audience at once into a wave of chaos:

*Intermittent growls of thunder and flashes of lightning. The sky is dark with clouds of rain. Offstage: shouts, cries and all manner of noise from stampeding men, women and children – the last batch that is fleeing the island.*⁴⁷

The scene is awash with panic. The afflicted have no prayer:

KYHEYUNE: We are not strong enough to battle with the floods, let alone the flashes, son. This is clearly a bad omen: the rains on our backs, the flashes on our foreheads and now the floods...⁴⁸

The overall effect is to create a scene of utter anarchy, during which hidden atrocities can be exposed, and in which civility is lost and, instead, hostility (often unwarranted), is rife between the citizens.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 7.

HEADMAN (*threateningly*) You will force me to drag you to the boat.

KYHEYUNE You try it, young man. Just you try it.

HEADMAN You are a bloody nuisance.

KYHEYUNE You dare do it.

HEADMAN(*moving towards Kyeyune*) I said MOVE TO THE BOAT!

(Kyeyune throws the net over the Headman's head and pulls. Headman is entangled, collapses down in a heap.)

KYHEYUNE I may be old, young fellow, but I still know a trick or two.

(The Headman is trying to disentangle himself but Kyeyune keeps pulling his victim around the stage. After some time, he releases the Headman.)

KYHEYUNE I told you to leave me alone. I make no demands on anyone. I expect neither commands nor demands from you. I carry my own destiny in my own palms.⁴⁹

The scene also introduces us to important characters in the play, especially Kyeyune (the keeper of the flame tree, making him a symbol of hope) and Bwogo, the State agent as well as the antagonist in the drama. However, it has to be said, apart from establishing tension and denoting urgency, it is hard to discern more from the scene; this is only the first wave, and the play unfolds in three. To narrate his story, Ruganda locates the play on an “Island in Lake Victoria,”⁵⁰ which clearly stands in for Uganda. Geographically, Lake Victoria spreads to three East African Nations: Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. The site of action though, is discernibly the Republic of Uganda, given East African political history, and also the use of Kiganda character names. While there is hope yet – with Nankya (Kiganda for “Dawn”) indicating hope on more than one level – in terms of dramatic action, there is little difference between the narrative arc of the play and that of events taking place in Ugandan society in the 1970s.

The action shifts from the “outside” to “inside,” rendering the scene of the next “wave” oddly claustrophobic. Nankya “has marooned herself in here,” inside a house under squalid

⁴⁹ Ibid, 15-16

⁵⁰ Ibid, 3

conditions.⁵¹ She is the protagonist, the woman whom Bwogo was asking after at the end of the previous scene. The state of besiegement may have changed location, but still it prevails. The setting depicts remarkable wretchedness, though at least she can afford a radio – one that is announcing bad news. She is both vexed and relieved when Bwogo knocks on the door. She lets him in but holds a stance of silence against his initial chitchat. He manages to coax her into talking. The two of them, it seems, share a past. Bwogo tries to charm her on account of “the good old days” involving “the moon at night.”⁵² But Nankya, who is a Marxist and feminist, is more concerned by the state of the nation. Bwogo’s skeletons are exposed: he has the blood of fellow citizens on his hands, which explains why Nankya finds him repulsive. Inevitably they engage in a fight.

Kyeyune, bearer of the flame tree, now comes into the house unexpectedly. Bwogo draws a pistol and fires at him. Nankya laments, “You’ve killed an innocent man – again.”⁵³ Kyeyune is, more prosaically, the housekeeper, recently appointed in place of another who was taken away by the State Research Bureau (SRB), never to be seen again. He has just witnessed a massacre on board the boat that people were being urged to board at the beginning of the play. Bwogo blames it on the “The accursed work of the guerrillas.”⁵⁴ The action turns into a play within a play, heightening the mayhem that is engulfing more or less everybody. Amidst intermittent shooting, and against Kyeyune’s pleas, a paranoid Bwogo, fearing for himself, goes out to face the enemy. Here, the audience hears a paradoxical announcement made via the radio:

I repeat this. . . . must evacuate immediately due to expected floods in three hours' time from now. The Republican Navy will come to rescue stranded inhabitants after it has

⁵¹ Ibid, 23

⁵² Ibid, 24

⁵³ Ibid, 51

⁵⁴ Ibid, 57

escorted the Benevolent Father of the Republic who is leading a big Peace Keeping Delegation to . . .’

*(Nankya turns off the knob disgustedly . . . but is shaken by the news...)*⁵⁵

Nankya’s reaction is understandable. The issue of leaders staging “peace processions” internationally while unleashing repression, terror, and violence upon the populace is both reprehensible and all too familiar. The travesty is that often times, sometimes for long periods, the people feel they can do little or nothing about this state of affairs.

... Men, women and their children scared stiff of the floods. Women thumbing their rosary beads; men gazing at the waves impotently...⁵⁶

The radio in the scene is a significant prop. There was a time, in the pre-internet and pre-cell phone age, when the radio was a citizen’s best possession – a time when all else was “out of stock,” and only attainable by crooked means. People were kept in tune with reality via the radio; local news was often doctored, but our grandmother, for example, used to say, “but radio *Ugirimani* (Germany) said...” or “radio South Africa said...,” or “radio *Ungereza* (English) said”; that was a time when battery cells were a very special gift indeed. Radio is one link to the outside world that the State could not bring to a halt.

The very first line Bwogo says to Nankya contains a reference to God, “Thank God, you are here, Nankya.”⁵⁷ What is going on here reflects something that quite frequently goes on in Ugandan society before, during, and after a coup, or even a full-fledged war. “God” hangs on the lips of most citizens. But there is more to it, thematically. Now, to the themes and subject matter I have mentioned, add political misdirection and insecurity of the citizenry. Uganda’s abiding concern here seems to be with a wave of terror unleashed by the powers that be. And the powers that be here seem to function not merely like mortals, but also as God himself. Allusions to the

⁵⁵ Ibid, 23

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Biblical story of Noah's Ark are suggested in the very title of the play and are laced through Bwogo's dialogue:

(quick look at her; no response)

Did you hear the lunch-time news?

(no response; Bwogo like God but half mockingly)

"I do bring a flood of waters to destroy all flesh, for flesh has corrupted man's way upon the earth." Should have thought the Old Man was joking. But no! He did actually bring the flood upon the earth.

(his mood slightly more serious now)

Did you listen to the weather report, Nankya?

(Silence. Bwogo removes his coat and places it on the table.)

I met them: men, women and their children. Herded together like beasts in Noah's ark.⁵⁸

From the onset, this is a thoroughly unpleasant encounter. The very air here is "absolutely unbreathable. It's stale and stinks of rotten fish and human corpses, and the mucky litter"⁵⁹. Nankya is "partly living and partly dead" the stage direction says, and when she is finally provoked into responding to Bwogo, "*For the first time she is showing signs of life.*"⁶⁰ The days are far-gone when she and the intruder here present, "scanned dawns and dusks in mutual embraces"⁶¹ and in so doing finding a state of "inner harmony." Instead, the lady is besieged in a room that is "...indifferent, like an open coffin."⁶² Bwogo is clearly unwelcome, but he asserts a right to be in her space; relying on the past encounters between them, and he tries to charm her on

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 24

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

account of “the good old days.”⁶³ But it is impossible to be romantic under such circumstances; the conversation tends to derail into deathly stuff,

Doesn't the flood frighten you, Nankya? Doesn't it? I saw those dotards and the women...their faces wrought with fright. They know what havoc the floods have caused on this island. And the lake too. . .this lake harbours its own unfathomable secrets. As the mainlanders say: “He who eats well is always insatiable.” This lake can't complain, though. It has been the tomb of many men. And you, too, know it. Lorryfuls of wailing civilians, driven to their deaths, over the cliff, at the point of bayonets. The crocodiles have never been more thankful. That's what the foreign papers say. . . Lorryfuls.⁶⁴

Nankya and Bwogo are presented as being as different as can be. For instance no matter what he is saying, she is more concerned by the wanton “ [w]asting [of] the tax-payer's money on useless expeditions. A slight sign of unrest, and he trots to the neighbouring countries....”⁶⁵ Is this attunement to national waste on the part of Nankya a comment about men and women in the face of post-*Uhuru* misrule? Would Africa have done better if the women had not been so marginalized? Ruganda does well to bring the antagonist and protagonist together, but in the process he draws the audience into an intellectual debate and banter that slows down the course of the drama. Still, revelations of political consequence on a local and international scale arise out of this exchange: Nankya is Marxist and a feminist. She reportedly does not want to, “bandy words with agents of imperialism and exploitation, CIA assassins.”⁶⁶ Whether it adds up or not, their argument brings to mind the cold war troubles of that time as they spilled into Africa. Real and imaginary Marxist or capitalist fears aside, the state of the nation is described in gloomy terms:

Graduates grovelling in dustbins in search of sustenance; the Civil Service sore about MPs' salary hikes; temples tainted with martyred blood and, above all, uncertainty and

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 25.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 26.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 31.

death. Death stalking the streets like thousands of soldiers on the beat. The situation is real bad.⁶⁷

What is worse for Nankya, a big part of that problem is right in front of her at this very moment. Bwogo, the man she is with, the man with whom she once shared intimacy, that man proves to be not just a State agent, but he also uses his position to kill at a whim. In the play, the impulse to kill is revealed as a sinister presence: chilling in its graphic description, relived in the dialogue like a slow-motion scene on screen. I am not suggesting the play was written for a medium other than the stage. I am only making an analogy to underline how the roles of Ugandans in the face of the legacy of war – as both victims and as perpetrators – are revealed, by pointing out the cinematic quality in which everyday sites can be venues for violence and terror.

NANKYA An innocent man. Killed for no reason. At *The International*. His cries for help unheeded by one and all.

BWOGO No, that wouldn't work.

NANKYA He was drunk.

BWOGO Too long a distance.

NANKYA Drunk and trying to be friendly.

BWOGO And familiar. Very familiar.

NANKYA Just asked for a simple dance. "Do you mind if I dance with your lady?" he asked you. "Go right ahead, young man," you told him. He danced extremely well, as if he knew that *that* would be his last dance.

BWOGO He had no business being familiar with you.

NANKYA I saw no harm in a simple dance. And, besides, you were busy negotiating business deals.

BWOGO Familiarity breeds . . .

NANKYA Death.

BWOGO Contempt.

NANKYA Death. At least for him.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

BWOGO You're deliberately provoking me, Nankya.

NANKYA In a way I feel guilty because of him. I don't know about you.

BWOGO Let's get out of here.

NANKYA You killed him.

BWOGO The floods are coming . . .

NANKYA Pushed him down the staircase all the way from the fifteenth floor of *The International Hotel*. That was hard all right. Hard and remorseless.

BWOGO Time is running out on us, Nankya.

NANKYA Kicked him and shoveled him down the staircase with their military boots. Your boys did. For a mere two thousand shillings. What callosity!

BWOGO Drop that jazz, Nankya. I'm not impressed in the least.

NANKYA Two thousand shillings and a man goes tumbling down the stairs to his death. His brains splotted all over the staircase. 'Most wanted criminal killed as he was trying to escape.' That's what the papers said.

BWOGO (*involuntarily wanting to beat her up, but checks himself*) Stop it, I said.

NANKYA Most wanted criminal! My God!!

BWOGO (*slaps her hard*) STOP IT! (*quick drink...silence*).⁶⁸

The violence is transferred from memory to the immediate present: it is, quite literally, right in her face. Bwogo's own violent nature, though, also stands in for the violence we Ugandans unleashed upon one another, for Bwogo is an islander, just like the man he pushed to his end, just like the woman he has just hit so hard in order to gain silence. The situation reeks of "mere anarchy": Bwogo killed that man because he could; he abuses Kyeyune at will because he can; and he slaps Nankya without a thought because he can. Moreover, an audience member in Uganda (had there been any) would fully understand that these things were happening all the time

⁶⁸ Ibid, 44-45.

at everyday sites like homes, or the International or the Imperial⁶⁹ – sites that ordinary citizens often desire, are employed within. or walk by while going about their “daily life” tasks, such as looking for milk for the children. But to empathize with and respond to such needs is a bridge too far for their post-colonial leaders (read rulers) who habitually wreak havoc, keeping themselves and their families at a safe distance.

The third wave is the finale. The theme of God (established in the previous two waves) is sustained. Every sound from without scares Kyeyune and Nankya near to death. Bwogo is missing in action, and Nankya and Kyeyune are unsure, a little anxious, about what has happened to him since he exited in the previous scene, saying he would soon be back. Every sound from without petrifies them. It is a debasing moment in which Kyeyune believes with every sinew in him that, “the end is near”⁷⁰. But what is on Nankya’s mind? In one word, Bwogo; in more than one word, Nankya mulls over the man’s disturbing history⁷¹. Kyeyune cannot pray enough for divine intervention. It emerges that in her affair with Bwogo, Nankya had flirted with danger knowingly. She was aware that he was with the dreaded SRB.⁷² Both characters are haunted by their pasts, even though their experiences in that past differ.⁷³ What has passed is terrifying, but what causes yet more apprehension is what is yet to come.

It dawns on Nankya why Bwogo really went out: to check on his venture, project massacre. Bwogo returns, in a hostile mood. In total disregard of Kyeyune’s fears, and amidst

⁶⁹ The “International” Hotel is the present day “Sheraton” Hotel, which used to be the “Apollo” Hotel in Obote’s time i.e. late 1960s (his name was Apollo Milton Obote). The hotel was once again renamed “Apollo” during Obote’s second reign (Dec.1981- Jun. 1985); another such site was Nile Mansions, now the Serena Hotel, fit for the Queen of England when she came for the 2007 CHOGM event in Uganda.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 78.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, 79.

⁷³ Ibid, 80.

gunfire, he orders Kyeyune to go and get him clean water from the boat.⁷⁴ A disturbing revelation emerges, emphasizing Bwogo's sinister nature: to obtain control over one person – Nankya, of all people – he would engineer the death of many.⁷⁵ The standoff between Nankya and Bwogo heightens. They resort to demeaning each other: he tells her what his boss thinks of her; she tells him what she thinks of his boss, and neither thought is decent.⁷⁶ Apparently, Nankya and Bwogo did not just meet in this house, or at some fancy hotel or party, they go back a long way, all the way to childhood. Life parted them, but they met by accident in their adult life.⁷⁷ As was the fate of the father of the fisherman in the first wave, taken never to be seen again⁷⁸ and of Kyambadde, Nankya's housekeeper that Kyeyune replaced, who had been picked up by the SRB never to return,⁷⁹ two soldiers come to take away Bwogo. This they do, regardless of the fact that he is the chief of the SRB. The play ends on that somber if deserved note.

In wave three, the Kyeyunes of this world, forlorn of hope, the ones who have been “shot down by the arrows of *Uhuru*,”⁸⁰ the broken branches of a tree “torn down by the whirlwind of *Uhuru*,”⁸¹ resign matters to prayer.⁸² The man, currently operating as a housekeeper, (a low status job) and living on the past glory of having been a skilled fisherman, is an embodiment of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.⁸³ Prayer is his domain, “Invincible One, protect us from the self-

⁷⁴ Ibid, 91.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 122.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 55 .

⁷⁷ Ibid, 122.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 121.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 55.

⁸⁰ Okot p'Bitek, *Song of a Prisoner* (New York: Third Press, 1971), 114 .

⁸¹ Ibid, 120.

⁸² Ruganda, *The Floods*, 72.

⁸³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

proclaimed designers of our destinies.”⁸⁴ Facing these days of the damned with him, but higher up in the tier of despair is Nankya; her domain is memory.

KYHEYUNE From the Patron of the floods. Let's pray madam. The end is near.
(*Kyeyune kneels behind the table as if it were an altar and mumbles out prayers. Nankya, facing the audience, simply closes her eyes and narrates what is in her mind.*)

NANKYA Moses Bwogo by baptism. Bashir Bwogo by political expediency. Boarding schools all the way to Form Six. A brief spurt in the military academy at Sandhurst. Quit because the exercises were too rigorous. Several trials in schools of technology in Britain and eventually ends up in India. Commerce degree in Delhi. Five years of flopping and a sixth to fluke the B. Com. Under-Secretary in the ministry of commerce and accelerated promotions because he is Boss's cousin. That's him, all right. Out there. (*She opens her eyes.*) Mr. Bashir Bwogo. Kicking the sand and swinging his umbrella. Happy with himself. A smile plastered on his lips from ear to ear. Whistling away like a lark in love.

KYHEYUNE Invincible One, protect us from the self-proclaimed designers of our destinies.⁸⁵

Despite the different haunts of their lives, as citizens of the same rotten state, and at the depths of their victimhood, Nankya and Kyeyune find a common language: the language of war:

KYHEYUNE What corpse? The master's?

NANKYA No. Not Bwogo's. (*She can't explain. They are not at par in their experiences.*) Forget it.

KYHEYUNE But you talked of corpses.

NANKYA (*talking his language*) Yes, in the lake . . . SRB work . . . Okay? (*slight pause; she continues unravelling what is in her mind*) Bwogo has stopped now and turned back to gloat at the corpses in the lake. His mission accomplished.

KYHEYUNE (*understanding*) Corpses tumbling down from the lake. Yes, I saw them. Men, women and children.

NANKYA Murder in the lake. SRB work. (*imitating Kyeyune*) Tu-tu-tu-tu-tu...

KYHEYUNE (*reminiscent*) Men, women and children singing *Onward Christian Soldiers* and the boat whirling around in terror. Like a dog chasing its own tail. I saw it all with my own eyes.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ruganda, *The Floods*, 79.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 78-79

⁸⁶ Ibid, 80

In Aristotle's six aspects of tragedy, character takes second place in importance to action. As for Kyeyune, his character is one of resignation. While he uses his instincts to cling to life, he is incapable of meaningful action himself. If he is, as his name suggests, "seasonal," that season has become a bleak one. What happened to him? He was a fisherman, who became mortified when he started to catch not fish, but men.

...[T]he man with three nails, his limp body in my net. And I said to myself: 'If each time I cast my net only to catch men with nails drilled in their craniums, I might as well hang my nets. And I did.'⁸⁷

Kyeyune himself says about the incident, "That was quite sometime back."⁸⁸ Yet Kyeyune has stopped being Kyeyune. In war-torn countries the dead are victims; however, the living are liable to suffer victimhood, giving up their sense of self-esteem.⁸⁹

The struggles between the State and the masses are revealed in the ensuing call and response moment between Nankya and Kyeyune, arising out of the mounting fear that has gripped them.⁹⁰ Bwogo returns shouting, bossy, abusive, and rude enough for Kyeyune, who had been worried that Bwogo might have been "dead and netted," to wish that the SRB officer had in

⁸⁷ Ibid, 81.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ See, Sarah Rosenberg, "Victimhood," *Beyond Intractability*, ed. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder., July 2003, <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/victimhood/> (accessed 2011).

Discussing different conflict-ridden regions, nation-states and ethnicities quotes the definition of victimhood according to Joseph V. Montville as, "...a state of individual and collective ethnic mind that occurs when the traditional structures that provide an individual sense of security and self-worth through membership in a group are shattered by aggressive, violent political outsiders. Victimhood can be characterized by either an extreme or persistent sense of mortal vulnerability." I have long thought that way before I came across the succinct words of Montville about the issue. Montville's definition of victimhood refers to "violent political outsiders." Even then, it is the case that unity remains elusive in most of the so-called nation states of Africa: look at the 2007 election issue in Kenya, the 2010 election mood in Rwanda, and the 20-year war in northern Uganda. National disunity is one of the issues I was laboring in my 1999 drama, *A Time of Fire*; that on some level, deep down, the three characters are an embodiment of three nations in the face of warfare, or are liable to see things that way. I scrutinize the issue not to perpetuate the matter, but rather to look the problem in the face.

⁹⁰ Ruganda, *The Floods*, 83-85.

actuality met such an end.⁹¹ Nankya, on whom it has dawned why Bwogo went out, confronts Bwogo about his most recent exit and entry. He ducks about, but she is unrelenting. She wants him to know she understands that the trouble is coming from the State. And, as is clear, Kyeyune knows it too; but she is the one with the courage, and the will, to speak truth to power. Once Bwogo, with utter disrespect, bullies Kyeyune into going to get cold clean water for him, the tension mounts and the scene is set for the ultimate revelation. The alarm at the start, the uproar, the pandemonium warning about floods, was all an act, a ruse intended to set the stage for the death of Nankya at the “hands of rebels.” Lividly, she confronts Bwogo about it.⁹² It is the callousness of the plan that sends shudders through the body. And for what? For revenge. Bwogo wanted to get even with Nankya. And Revenge, Ruganda is metaphorically reminding us, is the bane of Ugandan political history.

When Bwogo, laden with “nasty memories to forget,”⁹³ asks a now incensed Nankya a question he should not have asked,

I don't understand you. I don't understand what happens to you. The moment you open that mouth of yours, it's brimstone and fire. An open volcano threatening to destroy the world entirely. What has the world done to you? Why are you so bitter?

She spills it out: the wretchedness informed by class struggle that has left the bitter taste of colonial class issues, and which has stayed on despite *Uhuru*. In so far as colonial discourse was about Masters; essentially where there is a Master, there is a Servant. As Ruganda makes it clear, that mind-set has been sustained in postcolonial times.

“Keep your distance, my child. We shouldn't annoy Master. Never get between the hammer and the anvil.” She always respected your father. You should have seen the amount of trouble she went through to please him. Absolutely nauseating. Up at six o'clock on the dot. Into the shower room while the cook and the shamba boy were still snoring off their previous day's exhaustion. Pink frock, checkered apron, pink head-gear and white canvas shoes. The amount of care she took to appear clean, despite the smoke

⁹¹ Ibid, 88

⁹² Ibid, 93

⁹³ Ibid, 95

and soot, was excruciatingly annoying. She would say, “Master hates slobbery servants, Master does.” And for all that fuss and fanfare, she got seventy shillings a month, two pounds of meat at Christmas, and seven of sugar at Easter. Master hates this, Master hates that and seventy shillings a month. . . . That word Master always hurt me. Especially when I grew up and got to know what it really meant. People in their respective pigeonholes. Defined and demarcated...⁹⁴

And that is Nankya’s back-story. Bwogo and herself are diametrically opposed characters; the rift goes back a long way. She is the daughter of a poor servant; he is the son of a rich master. She is bitter due to the yoke of subjectivity that has weighed on the masses in both colonial and post-colonial times; he simply cannot get it.

In spite of all the friction, personal and otherwise, despite the ideological gulf in between and their bitter history, Nankya and Bwogo reconcile. It is a surreal moment, and so it may be but a dream:

NANKYA ...Just one solid impregnable wall between us. In a way, it's a pity. Because you're not really that bad.

BWOGO (*elated and excited*) Please say that again, Beth . . . Please say it again. For my sake. Almost the only good thing you've said about me in weeks.

NANKYA (*smiling*) You are not all that bad, in some things.

BWOGO Oh, Nankya, darling. You are a marvel. We shall get bulldozers to demolish the wall. Pull it down completely so that we can then start from scratch...

(*she jumps into his arms.*)

BWOGO Welcome, Beth.

NANKYA I didn't do it.

BWOGO The bulldozer did it.

NANKYA It wasn't my fault. Now you'll say I planned it. Demolished the wall on purpose.

BWOGO It was the bulldozer.

NANKYA Are you sure, Bwogo? Are you sure?

BWOGO As sure as the wedding gown and the wedding bells.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 98

NANKYA And the bridesmaids.

BWOGO And confettis and streamers over us.

NANKYA I can't hear the wedding bells.

BWOGO Big reception at State House.

NANKYA Senate members among the distinguished guests.

BWOGO Yes, of course, the Senate members.

NANKYA Oh, Bwogo, you're just wonderful!

BWOGO You're fabulous!

*(As they embrace, Kyeyune enters. Embarrassed at the sight, he coughs. They disengage.)*⁹⁵

Ruganda seems to be implying that, in matters of State, the people in power and the intelligentsia can never really be quit of each other, no matter how hard they may try. Sharing a history, they inevitably reconnect; they reconnect, no matter how strongly opposed to each other they may appear to be. This improbable reconciliation is brought to an end with a jolt when soldiers come and ominously take Bwogo away.⁹⁶ In those days, when people were taken away in such a manner, it signified that the person removed was in grave danger.

What are the limitations of *The Floods*? On one hand, the play is an SOS to the world with a clear message, despite the rather abstract and allegorical nature of the dramaturgy: Uganda is falling apart: nobody knows why orders are being given, people are disappearing, there are people being harmed at the whim of the “powerful”; days of gun rule and extra-judicial killings are at hand. On the other hand, the drama at intervals bears the feel of a plodding and terrible story. In the third wave, Kyeyune engages in a long monologue, decrying colonial exploitation and post-colonial plunder in coded language that, stylistically, is rather dense and contrived. Reading it now, a lot is easily lost in translation. Whereas this style was a significant mode for

⁹⁵ Ibid, 140-141.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 142

theatre in repressive Uganda (or rather outside of it and looking back in), Mbowa points out that even then Ugandans who could get hold of the play felt that such playwrights were addressing an alien audience.

Consequently, the “theatre of the absurd” did not take root in Uganda, although it resurfaced at every turn of repression.⁹⁷ There is an awkward long flashback – a play within a play recounting the day Nankya and Bwogo met as adults. It is a technique that worked wonders in Ruganda’s own debut play, *The Burdens*, and in the South African play, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*,⁹⁸ but perhaps not all techniques apply to all plays. To be privy to a man’s dream about possibilities that seemed impossible in the South African play was heartrending; to know a man could talk and talk about an elusive grandeur that he was due to bring back into a God-forsaken household was engaging; however, envisioning a man who has been presented as thoroughly detestable try to be romantic without any form of transformation feels arbitrary and forced. The whereabouts of Kyeyune and what may be happening to him seems to me to be a more urgent issue. So what if the object of this dangerous man’s desire once could gyrate lasciviously? So what if he deemed her to be as beautiful as the “Queen of Sheba”? There are people dying on the outside, in real time. Perhaps the long stretch serves as relief in a dour tale of lots of bloodshed, gang rape, and wanton plunder. Still, Imbuga notes that Ruganda’s, “ambivalent dramatic style inspires a sense of universality and ensures communication of his messages while protecting the playwright from possible, unnecessary, but life-threatening censorship.”⁹⁹ Indeed, while an exile can use the relative freedom gained with displacement as a means of countering repression, exile also may encumber the efficacy of that expression. As already noted, *The Floods* did not get staged in Uganda until after the fall of Amin. The production at the National Theatre in the early 1990s, targeting students of literature, was underwhelming in the main. George Seremba suggests that

⁹⁷ Mbowa, “Theatre and Political Repression in Uganda,” 91

⁹⁸ Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead in Statements: Three Plays*, 1-44 (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1974).

because it was being staged after the fact of Amin's fall, could be one reason why the production turned out unfavorably. He adds that the play was a grand success in Kenya, when it was staged in 1979, but while Amin was still in power.¹⁰⁰ There was also a European tour, which Mbowa says Ruganda did as "his contribution to the mobilization of International opinion against Amin."¹⁰¹ Audiences in the former Yugoslavia, where it played, may well have seen similarities with their own unraveling situation.

Thematically, Ruganda's play is concerned with: despair, anarchy, violence, besiegement, complicity, relationships between the living and the dead, plus a what-goes-around-comes-around or those-who-live-by-the-sword-will-die-by-the-sword note at the end of the play. That despair consumed Ugandans under Amin is not in question; what is so striking, and difficult to explain or represent, is the extent of the anarchy that engulfed the population. How did an entire country submit its will, the sense of right and wrong, the dream for a second chance at prosperity now that colonial rule was gone, to one ruthless man?

Filmmaker Sembene Ousmane seemed to think our leaders suffered from a colonial hangover;¹⁰² Anani Dzidzienyo talks of neo-colonial, not post-colonial conditions;¹⁰³ in dramatic terms, Ruganda molds an irrepressible but thoroughly immoral character, Bwogo, to make the point that the one man, the unseen leader, did not, could not, and would not have created this situation alone. There were many like Bwogo: sometimes the boy next door or the girl next door, the aloof neighbor at the end of the road or the smiling neighbor seven houses away, the teacher or the banker. So, with next-door neighbors, or even colleagues at the office working for the

⁹⁹ Imbuga, "John Ruganda," 258 .

¹⁰⁰ Personal communication, Spring 2011.

¹⁰¹ Mbowa, "Theatre and Political Respression in Uganda," 93.

¹⁰² This is demonstrated sharply in Sembene Ousmane's 1975 movie, *Xala*, in which the African Leader has a European hovering over him in his every action and movement.

¹⁰³ Personal communication. Providence, Fall, 2005. Anani Dzidzienyo is an Africana Studies Professor at Brown University.

dreaded State Research Bureau (SRB), nobody was sure of anybody. Nagenda describes the abounding anarchy succinctly,

Ugandans have always been an easy, friendly people. But under Amin they lost their smiles. They were permanently scared, not knowing who would be forced to report on whom. Some of us lucky enough to be outside the country would return, on some errand or other, and it would be as if we walked among the living dead. Fear had put a veil between us and the people we knew. We were resented, or felt resented, because we had been lucky enough to get out, and could come and go...¹⁰⁴

To come to grips with the enormity of the situation, think *Macbeth*. Uganda was “death-infected,” to use a Jan Kott expression.¹⁰⁵ Ruganda’s play, like Shakespeare’s, is a nightmare drama. If, as Kott says, the philosophy is that history, as a mechanism of drama “fascinates by its very terror and inevitability,” whereas “nightmare paralyses and terrifies,”¹⁰⁶ then Ruganda’s play operates – or at least tries to operate – on both levels: as a history of the interaction between performance and war in Uganda and as a wakeup call from a bad dream Ugandan society was subject to for the whole nine years of Amin’s bloody tenure. Whether Ruganda used the Shakespearean tragedy as inspiration I do not know – with his Makerere education he certainly had a good knowledge of Shakespeare – but a further reading of Kott indicates just how Ruganda’s twentieth century play is analogous to Shakespeare’s, written at the dawn of the seventeenth century. In Ruganda’s play, Bwogo recalls:

Can you imagine? Three months back and the blood dots of the bedbugs we killed are still here! You said, ‘Don’t thumb them... the blood will stink!’ And I replied, ‘There’s water, Nankya. Sometimes water washes blood away.’¹⁰⁷

In another scene, an exasperated Nankya refers to more blood,

God, I’m tired of meeting blood everywhere I go.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ John Nagenda, “Idi Amin, My Hero,” *Prospect*, no. 130 (On-line: 14th January 2007).

¹⁰⁵ Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 68-78.

¹⁰⁶ Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 67.

¹⁰⁷ Ruganda, *The Floods*, 24.

And yet more blood:

The mainland is choking with it, the lake bubbling with it like a cauldron and the island is barricaded with blood.¹⁰⁹

Whereas in following Kott,

Says Macbeth:

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er. (III, 4)¹¹⁰

History in *Macbeth* is sticky and thick like a brew or blood. After a prologue with the three witches, the action proper begins with Duncan's words:

What bloody man is that? (I, 2)¹¹¹

Everyone in this play is steeped in blood; victims as well as murderers. The whole world is stained with blood. Says Duncan's son, Donalbain:

There's daggers in men's smiles: the near in blood,
The nearer bloody. (II, 3)¹¹²

Blood in *Macbeth* is not just a metaphor; it is real blood flowing out of murdered bodies. It leaves its stains on hands and faces, on daggers and swords.

Says Lady Macbeth:

A little water clears us of this deed:
How easy is it, then! (II, 2)¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 54.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 69.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

But this blood cannot be washed off hands, faces, or daggers. *Macbeth* begins and ends with slaughter. There is more and more blood, everyone walks in it; it floods the stage.¹¹⁴

In 2004, Max Stafford Clark relocated the Scottish play to an African scenario and conquered critics and audiences. I tried hard, but failed to get a ticket when the show toured the USA. My thoughts, hence, are informed by the lively critical exchanges between various critics.

The Ugandan dictator Idi Amin was obsessed with Scotland, even, with characteristic humility, offering himself to the country as king. The production also draws on the case of a white aid worker who married an African warlord and became known as Lady Macbeth; on the use of child soldiers in African conflicts; and on the phenomenon of Liberian fighters who went to civil war ritually attired in women's clothing.¹¹⁵

Part of the reason I wanted to see the play had to do with the Amin factor. I was, after all, a Ugandan who had grown up under his rule. I wanted to see how people from other parts of the world wrestle with, or, perhaps less demandingly, regard Amin. The other part had to do with the fear factor: a fear Michael Billington recognizes, and puts across well. "The danger of this approach is that it reinforces a stereotypical "heart of darkness" view of Africa."¹¹⁶

Billington raises a dogged reality about Western (and sometimes African) treatments of Africa;¹¹⁷ however, in Stafford's case, the concern is perhaps mitigated thus,

Each choice is rooted in fact: Danny Sapani's *Macbeth* is inspired by Idi Amin and his obsessions with witchcraft and, bizarrely, Scotland; Monica Dolan's *Lady Macbeth* is made credible by the story of Emma McCune, a British aid worker who married a

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Sam Marlowe, "Review of *Macbeth*," *The Times* (London, 2004 18 October 2004).

¹¹⁶ Michael Billington, "Macbeth," *The Guardian* (London, 23 September 2004).

¹¹⁷ This is a reality Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa'Thiong'O have all protested in several works, pointedly: Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* (1989) and Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (New York: Anchor, 2000); Wole Soyinka, *Death and The King's Horseman*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: Norton, 1975); , and Ngugi wa'Thiong'O, *Decolonising the Mind* (London: James Curry/Heinmann, 1986), respectively. The struggle is an on-going one. The trio is still in the fray of things. Befittingly, though, another generation of African thinkers has taken on the task: Olakunle George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003); Wainaina, "How To Write About Africa," (2005) and Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," (2009).

Sudanese warlord; the warriors' "armour" of pink wigs comes from the Liberian soldiers who believe this drag disguise imparts supernatural strength.¹¹⁸

Theatre is great when a transformation happens. And, arguably, for that to happen with a "classical" play, a resonance has to be found with contemporary experience.

This is not the Scottish Play. It's a Scots-Liberian, Caledonian-Ugandan drama. But no less truthful for that. Max Stafford-Clark's rousing take on Shakespeare's thriller sets Macbeth in an unstable African state, driven by feuding warlords, vulnerable to a despot. Twenty-first-century anarchy maps seamlessly onto 17th-century lawlessness.¹¹⁹

Back to Ruganda's themes, the sense of besiegement surrounding Ruganda's play evokes a certain mood and pulse of Ugandan society in the 1970s under the reign of Idi Amin. From the clueless people witnessed in wave one who board a boat because a State announcement says so, only to be announced dead in wave two; to Nankya in wave two, marooned in unbecoming conditions to keep away from a murderous lover; to Bwogo in wave three at the end of the play with nowhere to run, and nobody to turn to when the machinery he works for has his name next on the list. At that time, social and private spaces, groups and individuals, were hostage to some ominous force that seemed Omnipotent – God-like. And that was only 1973; there were still six more years of such fate in store. Whatever the failings of the play or the limitations of the project of writing unstageable plays in exile, the end of Ruganda's play is silently powerful and thought-provoking: the expulsions carried out against the Israelis, Indians, and British served to clear the way for the wanton execution of Ugandans themselves with little or no hope of intervention.

Ugandan intelligentsia (no wonder Amin dreaded the lot) have often raised the issue of our collective complicity in the matter of Uganda under Amin.¹²⁰ What Ruganda does with that issue, theatrically, is bold and haunting: his three main characters are guilty of unbecoming actions against fellow citizens, or in the world of the play, fellow islanders. The prayerful

¹¹⁸ Segal, Victoria, "In Place of War," *The Sunday Times* (London: 24 October 2004).

¹¹⁹ Clapp, Susannah. "No Spear Carrier? Macbeth Goes to Africa..." in *The Observer* (London: 16 October 2004).

¹²⁰ See, for example, Nazareth, "Waiting for Amin," 29-31.

Kyeyune fishes out a dead military man's body, but fearing for his own safety pushes it back in to feed the crocodiles. Nankya considers herself a product of contagious lawlessness and a victim of class prejudice, but hangs out with a callously lawless man for a lover as Bwogo's body count raises, incident by incident; and so, bound by a shared history, like the Macbeths they see dead bodies, imagine corpses, and converse in terms of carcasses.

During Amin's era, the forests spawned corpses and the waters spewed dead bodies, often hacked to pieces – Kawadwa's hacked up corpse being a prime example, but hardly the only one, of this practice. One of Amin's own wives, Kay, was also hacked to pieces. The play shows that Ruganda was attuned to the tragedy. To make his case, Ruganda locates his scenes by the waters, and places the house in a forest. He calls the play *The Floods*, drawing our attention to the waters. He locates the drama on an Island on lake Victoria, drawing us closer to the water. And then splashes a dramatic coup: from time to time in the narrative, the living encounter the dead. Be it on account of food,

...Then another day, months later, as I sat down licking my lips cutting through a tasty fish, what do you think happened? ...I found a human finger in the bowels of a fish? A human finger! I went out and threw up.¹²¹

In the imagination,

One caught a corpse of an army brigadier in his fishnet. I met him. Scatter-brained. Poor fellow. Has never recovered from the experience. Goes about talking to himself all the time. Sometimes talks to trees and buildings. Any object¹²²

Or during some rather abnormal conversations:

BWOGO You are definitely heading for trouble.

NANKYA For the lake, you mean? Stone around my neck and then . . . plop into the lake.

BWOGO They call it masochism. Cut it out.

NANKYA 'Body nowhere to be found. Case closed.'¹²³

¹²¹ Ruganda, *The Floods*, 16-17.

¹²² Ibid, 50.

Just as significantly, Ruganda employs religious symbols and motifs of, “mere anarchy,” reminiscent of the Amin era. For instance, he uses the allusion of the Biblical floods to portray the more or less inexplicable days of wrath unleashed upon all and sundry by wanton State agents and, by implication, the boss himself. Apparently aware that matters of faith were a major component of colonial and post-colonial power struggles,¹²⁴ Ruganda alludes to God’s wrath as exemplified in the time of Noah’s ark to torch up for the world to see the complicated days of wrath which most Ugandans witnessed, heard of, or suffered under the nine-year regime of Amin: a regime of mass murders and wanton kidnappings, attributed to unhinged State agents blasting a trail of terror and violence across the land that God forgot.¹²⁵

What is Ruganda’s attitude towards this neglectful but omnipresent Biblical God as operative (or non-operative) in Uganda? In the forgoing chapter, I pointed to the role of Christian missions in the colonial excursion in Africa. Paraphrasing the Genesis rendition of creation, I recalled the advent of *Uhuru*. Effectively, by the time *Uhuru* came to be, the Biblical God was firmly in place. It seemed He had come to stay. A few, like Kiganira, tried from time to time, in vain, to inspire a reversion to traditional belief system. Derek Walcott depicts with a profound insight in *The Muse of History*,¹²⁶ indicating how once a people yield crucial traditions for other cultural values, going back is more or less impossible. Walcott’s point is more complex, though:

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Saul, “The Unsteady State” 33; Avirgan and Honey, *War in Uganda*, 8, 32; Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 27-28.

¹²⁵ See, Doreen Boland, “Doreen Boland rscj, Province of Ireland - Scotland,” *rscjinternational*, Religious of Sacred Heart of Jesus, 2004, <http://www.rscjinternational.org/en/profiles/1071-doreen-boland-rscj.html> (accessed July 14, 2010).

Boland, an Irish Missionary states: When war broke out in Uganda, many people there said: “Uganda is the country God forgot.”

¹²⁶ Derek Walcott, “The Muse of History” in *What The Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux; 1998), 36-64.

“what was captured from the captor was his God.”¹²⁷ Hence the spate of Christian-based dramas in the first two decades after *Uhuru*. In keeping with, and in reaction to this trend, Ruganda extends to the Biblical wrath of God. So the LORD said,

I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth... Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth."¹²⁸

But God served notice, and provided a few safety measures before wreaking havoc in Noah's world. Not so in Ruganda's Uganda, where often “things fall apart” when “the centre cannot hold,” and then “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”¹²⁹ The Biblical “God” introduced by the missionaries has become a parody of Himself in Ruganda's play and Amin's Uganda.

The fall of Amin

BEFORE a decade was up from the time Amin won power, by the late 1970s, the very basic necessities of life were impossible to come by. I was only a child, and I may not have figured just how dystopic life was, but I noticed as things changed day by day. The experience remains vivid: there was no sugar, no salt, no soap, no beer, no soda, no cigarettes; all these things had to be smuggled. The streets were full of school dropouts selling said items, making money. There was no “normal” business. Education counted for little; only the *mafuti mingi* lot, seemed to be well to do. “*Mafuta Mingi*” is an intriguing term, revelatory of the times. The expression denotes the antithesis of the scarcity of oil; hence, those who had access to it, had access to a golden product.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 47.

¹²⁸ *The Bible*, (New International Version,) Genesis 6: 7, 11, 12 & 13.

¹²⁹ I am thinking here of Chinua Achebe seminal novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and its source of inspiration, *The Second Coming* (1920) by William Butler Yeats.

“*Mafuta*,” for cooking or for fuel (same word), signified money – a lot of it. In the social *lingua franca*, the names of people with means to money disappeared under “*Mafuta*.” They became collectively known as “*Mafuta*.” It was a common stage name in the many improvised stage dramas that mushroomed in that period.¹³⁰

As ever, the well-to-do group in Banana Republics operates like a Members Only club. Only a few are in, many are out. By this point, people wanted Amin to go, but lacked the means to take him out. But what goes up comes down, somehow. As the Baganda people say, the hawk flies high in the sky but does not feed on clouds; it has to come down to feed, and hence it can be trapped on the ground. Another Kiganda saying goes: “If you are bent on cutting something down but do not have an axe, do not despair; the wind may blow it down for you.” In 1978, Amin, looking for war in every direction, waged a war against Tanzania. On April 11th, 1979, he fell to a combined force of Tanzanian soldiers, *Jeshi La Wakombozi (JW)*/Army of Liberators, and to Ugandan exiles who had formed the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA).

After Amin’s fall and the debut of Ruganda’s play in Kenya and the former Yugoslavia, *The Floods* finally got produced at the National Theatre (early 1990s), in part because it seemed to the producers still topical and in part as a tribute to Ruganda’s commitment to an exposé of Amin.¹³¹ I think the failure of this production was due to two factors: (many) people’s fatigue in Uganda itself with the whole Amin matter and, ironically, Ruganda’s previous success with *The Burdens*, with its more readily accommodated aesthetic. Other performances critical of Amin after the fact met the same fate. Plays like *Omulembe Gwa Kijambiya/Reign of the Macthete* (*Kijambiya*, meaning machete, was a well-known euphemism for Amin) and *Sabasabala E Busabala/Traveler in the Land of Travels* (by Khalid Kapaapali and Kampala Golden Performers,

¹³⁰ See, Avirgan and Honey, *War in Uganda*, 5-8.

¹³¹ Mbowe, “Theatre and Political Respression in Uganda,” 10.

a popular group) did not find success either.¹³² Perhaps audiences now shunned the demise of Amin (or, for that matter, of Obote) as the subject for a stage drama because they already knew too much of the narrative being staged. Who would want to relive that experience?

Plays that, a bit later, were able to weave in references to the eras of Obote and Amin with considerable success did so in a more satiric and almost carnivalesque manner. One of these plays was *Sagaala Agalaamidde* (untranslatable because it is a drumbeat, a call to action) by Christopher Mukiibi, in which Kapapaali (he of the Golden Performers and the afore mentioned Traveler play) memorably played Obote. Another such play, *Thirty Years of Bananas* by Alex Mukulu, will be taken up in some detail in the next chapter.

In discussing “what Africa can teach us about modern life,” Mahmood Mamdani decries “the folly of silence.”¹³³ In that vein, Ruganda’s play does not shy from the “unspeakable violence”; on the contrary it lays it bare, and in so doing makes, to borrow another of Mamdani’s thoughts, “the unthinkable state of affairs thinkable.”¹³⁴ *The Floods* invites us, no matter how remotely so, to wake up to what is [was] going on, to experience the chaotic moments, to think about our inaction, to question our conscience. This may just have been a bridge too far for an audience that was just recovering from the real life events clearly mirrored in the play’s “absurdist” action. The play is certainly a useful historical record, as well as a remarkable statement on the power play issues between citizens and the State, a matter Ngugi has ably taken up in his engaging essay, *Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space*.

If, “performances have proven difficult for anthropologists trying to determine an ‘ethos’ or ‘worldview,’” as noted by John Emigh in a critique of Clifford Geertz in “Culture, Killings,

¹³² Khalid Bantubangi Kapapaali, *Sabasabala E Busabala* (unpublished, performed by Kampala Golden Performers, Ashok Cinema Hall, Mbale, 1987).

¹³³ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 7-8.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 8.

Mamdani’s statement is in direct reference to Genocide: “We may agree that genocidal violence cannot be understood as rational; yet, we need to understand it as thinkable.”

and Criticism in the Years of Living Dangerously: Bali and Baliology,”¹³⁵ the same argument is applicable to figures of State determined to hog space, at any cost. To account for why I think so, let me use Emigh’s words:

Performers play fast and loose with rules and expectations, often confronting, confounding, and slip-sliding around taboos. They tend to play between precedent and the unprecedented, the past and the present. Grounded in the familiar, performances seek out the novel, the extra-ordinary. They complicate as well as suggest structuralist dyads. Inescapably public, they insist on the primacy of the particular and the immediate.¹³⁶

Perhaps, then, Amin had reason to regard Kawadwa as a threat. For whether it was that particular playwright, grounded in the homeland, or another theatre figure fled into exile, or yet another cultural producer under threat, Amin’s rule did not go unchallenged. This explains, in part, the public executions that marked his reign as performance of power, deployed to suppress criticism. These executions are recorded in Yoweri Museveni’s treatise (as well as revision) of Ugandan Political History, *Sowing The Mustard Seed*.¹³⁷ The executions are also captured in the 1974 documentary “Self-Portrait” about Amin, featuring Amin himself.

The mass killings of 1971 in Uganda, the installation of his own group in power, the staged public executions following the attempt to regain power by Obote in 1972 all give evidence of Amin’s desperate clamping down. Ultimately, when the bell to settle accounts tolled, all his tough talk, all his dreaded State Research Bureau men, and all his dreams (in which God had promised him a Presidency for Life), could not save him from the fall on 11th April, 1979, and the ensuing ridicule and scorn. An array of instant satirical material based on Amin spawned the street vending trade. Jokes about Amin became the order of the day: that Amin challenged his long time foe the aging and frail Julius Nyerere to a boxing match, and lost. Or that Amin invaded Tanzania, saying if Nyerere was a woman, he would marry him (her?), and Tanzanian soldiers

¹³⁵ Emigh John, “Culture, Killings, and Criticism in the Years of Living Dangerously: Bali and Baliology” in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* (Cambridge University Press: 2008), 63.

¹³⁶ Ibid, (63)

¹³⁷ Museveni, Yoweri Kaguta, *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, (London, Macmillan, 1997), 59-101.

answered, saying they had come ahead to prepare the way for the marriage but the groom had taken off. Satirical Speeches attributed to Amin, which have been repeated so much they have become “Amin quotes,” hit daily life conversations. Writing about, “The man who has gone down in history as one of the most brutal leaders in post colonial Africa,” Ugandan researcher and analyst Timothy Kalyegira reported on the, ”euphoria in Uganda and beyond after [Amin] was overthrown” Kalyegira, who had long made a case for Amin in the newspapers had to admit, “Uganda united in joy at Amin’s exit.”¹³⁸

Amin was a showman to the end, using the state as a stage to inculcate a growing sense that it was useless or dangerous to do anything about the terrible state of the State. This performance of State power brought in its wake trivial comic shows (scripted and unscripted) that served to disengage from events and the displacement of feelings of powerlessness into plays ridiculing women. It also spawned attempts at resistance from a few brave writers attempting to expose the horror behind the show. With the fall of Amin, the Western world media vilified him, while Ugandan citizens danced with joy; songs about Amin turned from praise to mockery.

Arguably, the clincher was the song in Swahili that mocked Amin for cowardice and empty threats: *Saba Saba* (the name for a bomb). The song was inspired, timely, and witty. Yet I fear it gets lost in translation. Regardless, here are a couple of lines:

*Amin ali ambiya Nyerere /Amin told Nyerere
Ni ta kupiga tena ni ta kuwowa / I’ll beat you up, and marry you*

At every point of resistance the Tanzanian soldiers got to, the song says, Amin’s soldiers had fled. It is a hilarious song, which set society abuzz following the removal of Amin, for it was society’s time to laugh at Amin: his bullish ways, his cowardice, his bluffs, and his penchant for running away in the face of trouble were all captured in the song. Ironically, the number of people singing in jubilation at the rise and fall of Amin was equal. But no matter how the citizens

¹³⁸ Timothy Kalyegira, “Idi Amin Profile,” *Daily Monitor* (Newspaper, 14 April 2009).

jubilated and celebrated, Uganda's problems were far from over. Nor were the challenges for playwrights and performers attending to the legacy of Uganda's many wars.

CHAPTER 4: THE HUMAN STATE

"Come good rain, for none but I will bear my cross."

-George Seremba.¹

Text and Performance

EXILED Ugandan playwright, George Bwanika Seremba, bears his cross not to Golgotha, but onto the stage in Providence, a city of Rhode Island, USA, built on the tenets of "hope."² The cross is, figuratively, the story of his life in the form of a play, *Come Good Rain*.³ Seremba tells and enacts his story in fulfillment of his contract with the gods for "a new lease on life."⁴ The production is a journey into memory whereby Seremba, moving from the present to the past, immerses himself into the recall of his early life, his days of student activism at University level, leading into the passion of his youthful days and unfolding, in the process, a society trapped in an influx of life lived on the edge.

¹ George Bwanika Seremba, "Come Good Rain" (Winnipeg: Blizzard, 1993), 55.

² "Hope" is the much quoted official motto of the State of RI and Providence Plantations, chosen to commemorate the founding of Rhode Island as a colony by Roger Williams and his followers as "a lively experiment" in the separation of church and state, allowing for "freedom of conscience" and a doctrine of tolerance. It should be noted that despite these utopian ideals – and Williams' own considerable interest in and friendships with the Native American populations – Rhode Island figured prominently in North America's first War, pitting King Philip (Metacomet), the Wampanoags, and their allies against the colonists of Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

³ The play has been performed (and will continue to be performed, I presume) over several years in shifting locations. This account is in relation to the Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, USA, show of fall, September 17th 2010, produced by: Rites and Reason theatre, Africana Studies Department, Literary Arts Department, the International Writing Program (IWP) and the Department of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies (TAPS), marking, as Seremba himself pronounced during the talk back session, the 327th performance.

⁴ See, George Seremba, "Playwrights Note" in Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 9.



13. *George Seremba*

Presently a Canadian citizen, Seremba conceived the drama at a rather high personal price. December 10th, 1980 was a historic day for war-torn Ugandan society collectively, but a night of horror for George Seremba personally (though he had not yet taken this name and was still known as Bwanika). On that day, the recently “liberated” Republic of Uganda – set free from the specter of Amin – held Presidential elections, the first in a rather long time since *Uhuru*. That night, Seremba/ Bwanika – a young student activist, a “spokesperson of dissent” inclined to “speak truth to power” little mindful that these were apparently forbidden attributes – was shot

half a dozen times and left for dead. The happening was actually more elaborate than that: military figures, acting as agents of the State, clearly hunted him down, beat him up, tormented him, led him to an isolated place, and, shooting at will, sprayed gunfire intended to terminate his existence.

The happening, for Seremba, amounts to a very personal piece of the historical record:

SEREMBA: I did complete in March... But I was unable to attend the graduation ceremony because the. . . I think this is part of the story that is told in the play, *Come Good Rain*, and I know you are writing about the play, so some of the details are actually in the play, but I will try as much as possible maybe to give you some of the details that may not be in the play because probably they might throw more light on what is said in the play. And, so as you probably know 1980 was a tough time for many Ugandans, in fact it would have been probably since sometime in 1979. You know with the kind of. . . the genealogy of our leadership. So I would say that after – at Makerere, the Makerere that I knew was a very euphoric place in 1979 with the fall of Idi Amin. Then unfortunately things begun to change very quickly, so what would have been a time for celebration, quickly turned into a time for protest, a time that involved, among other things, people keeping a low profile because the witch-hunt in a sense was beginning.

Essentially it became a time for repression?

SEREMBA: Absolutely, and the kind of repression to certain people, and to certain people it was probably the opposite of that. Because the Makerere that I had known under Idi Amin was a Makerere that spoke with one voice. It was a Makerere that was obviously pitted against Idi Amin. I am sure there were some people that supported him, but it seemed to me that virtually the tide was one and it was one in its opposition to the brutality of Amin's regime.

That is a vital point.

SEREMBA: And that was part of the irony that later with the removal of Idi Amin and subsequently the removal of Professor Lule, I would say that that was the first time that the University that had spoken for so long with one voice now was increasingly divided and very highly polarized because as you know at the time Makerere was also the only institution of its kind in the country and so in many ways what was happening there was small compared to the National stage, but there was a lot of the national stage that was reflected at Makerere so that what happened at Makerere was reflection of what was going on in the country. When we were talking before you mentioned to me that for example those few in Mbale knew virtually nothing about the atrocities that were going on.

Yes.

SEREMBA: Right, so what I am trying to get at is that ultimately I would become the first person to actually be abducted from the University, to be interrogated, tortured, and

summarily sentenced to death. Because the Makerere I am talking about at this point was different from the one that was united against Idi Amin.⁵

Miraculously, he survived and lives to tell the tale in various forms via conversations, interviews, prose, screenplay, radio drama, and, quite productively, stage drama. I gather the prose version is a work in progress, while the screenplay is at the planning stages.⁶ My intent is to focus on the text and performance of the stage version of Seremba's ordeal, plus components of my interview with him about theatre, terror, repression, and disunity in Uganda to recollect and reflect upon the days when, with gross impunity, Ugandan State agents administered extra-judicial "punishment" of Ugandan citizens.

So far, in writing about the legacy of war in Uganda, I have dwelt a great deal on the actions of the rulers, but rulers are neither the only political actors nor the only agents of Ugandan political history. Indeed, agency is not a one-way street, insists Mahmood Mamdani, decrying the historiographic tendency to limit agency to one sector of society, to regard its operation as simply a top-down matter.⁷ Beyond that point, Olakunle George points out, among other things, that agency, as human endeavor to better a given set of circumstances, tends to be in motion and can be politically charged.⁸ These observations lead to a new set of questions: what do the other political actors who are not rulers – the masses that the rulers often refer to as "the people," the ones who do not have as much power – what is it that they want? What happens to this group of citizens in the face of recurrent bouts of crisis? And, on more personal terms, why does George Seremba celebrate 10th December 1980 with more gusto than he does his own birthday? *Come Good Rain*, a theatrical production which comments upon, counters, and becomes enmeshed in

⁵ Seremba, George. Interview with author. Digital recording. Providence, Brown University, Fall 2010.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton, 2001), 4.

⁸ See, Olakunle George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 10-11.

the regional conflicts and contestations of power in a post-colonial nation such as Uganda, brings these questions into sharp focus. Yet my focal point in this case is not so much Uganda, but Seremba himself. To appreciate *Come Good Rain*, it is important to explore not just the story of Uganda, but also the story of Seremba as revealed primarily through his play: a theatrical reenactment and reflection upon the violent occurrence of December 10th 1980. Seremba/Bwanika, politically active even as a University student, and for that reason living dangerously, had actually earlier left for Kenya in one piece before the election. But the hand of fate played its own game. He turned back on account of the election, and the need to secure his academic papers in order to secure better pay for his services while in exile. He was then subjected to not-so-subtle surveillance and was confronted by a pistol-wielding inquisitor demanding information about his previous whereabouts, but was saved by a hotel administrator who happened to have been a fellow student at Makerere University. He then travelled to Kampala:

SEREMBA: So that would be the same day – so that would be December 9th. And it would be December 10th that we then drive into Kampala. And December 10th was when all that the abduction and interrogation and the botched -

That was the election date!

SEREMBA: Yeah. Yeah.

You were abducted and interro. . . and. . .

SEREMBA: Interrogated and tortured -

On the Election Day!

SEREMBA: Absolutely.

Oh my God!

SEREMBA: There is one thing I should mention—there is a guy, and I have asked, I have never really heard about what happened to him whether he lived or died but I just remember that his name was Rwanika: R-w-a-n-i-k-a.⁹

⁹ Seremba, George. Interview with author. Digital recording. Providence, Brown University, Fall 2010.

The crisis is akin to a Greek drama at this point, with the gods pulling the strings: “Bwanika, meet Rwanika,” declare the gods. In fact, the two victims bear no relation. Both are just two citizens from different parts of the country facing the wrath of the State on an Election Day.

The shooting incident took place in *Namanve* forest, on the outskirts of Kampala city, the capital of Uganda. Earlier that fateful night, the G branch agents of State picked Seremba up at the University and, using gun butts and military boots, roughed him up. Then they led him to *Namanve* forest – via the dreaded Nile Mansions Hotel¹⁰ – in order to kill him, on the say so of the “Big Man.” But the twist in the tale is this: Seremba lives, it is the “Big Man” who is dead; he died in a helicopter explosion under mysterious circumstances.¹¹ “I get the last laugh,” said the playwright talking to *The Providence Journal*.¹²

The “Big Man” in question was David Oyite Ojok (1940-1983), at the time one of the most powerful men in Uganda.

¹⁰ Present day location of Serena Hotel; hotels are a site of torture, as mentioned in Ruganda’s play *The Floods* (chapter 3).

¹¹ Cf, Joseph Pinytek Ochieno, “Oyite-Ojok Remains Uganda’s Best Soldier,” *Daily Monitor*, April 2004 ; Timothy Kalyegira, “Who Killed Maj. Gen. Oyite Ojok,” *Daily Monitor* (Newspaper, 19 November 2006); Timothy Kalyegira, “What Killed Major-General David Oyite-Ojok?,” *The Uganda Record*, 77, Vol. 1, On-line, ed. Timothy Kalyegira (19 November 2010).

¹² See, Gray Channing, “Actor-playwright Relives His Torture in Come Good Rain at Brown,” *The Providence Journal* (Providence, September 16 2010).



14. Major General David Oyite Ojok

Major General Oyite Ojok was the army Chief of Staff and a crucial link in the UNLA (Uganda National Liberation Army) and TPDF (Tanzanian Peoples Defense Forces) combination that ousted Idi Amin on April 11th 1979. When Presidents Yusuf Lule and Godfrey Binaisa were opposed and deposed from power in quick succession between April 11th 1979 and May 1980, Major General Ojok was one of the key figures in the Military Commission (the list also includes Paul Muwanga, Yoweri Museveni, and Tito Okello) that ruled Uganda from May to December of 1980. That body of power arranged for elections to be held (on December 10th); it was on that very night that Seremba (still Bwanika) suffered his ordeal. Seremba survived the half dozen shots, but he emerged from this tragedy as a different person: he was wounded and remains scarred by the events. He abandoned his identity as George Bwanika and took on the family name, Seremba,¹³ for purposes of securing a new passport to avoid detection, and, perhaps also to

¹³ Africans used to have personal as opposed to family names; the family name is recent idea to do with European/Western world interaction.

mark his emergence as a changed person. Under this new name, he fled Uganda, for Canada via Kenya.¹⁴

A decade after the incident, while living in exile, Seremba turned the drama of George Bwanika, whose scarred body he shares, into a theatrical script. The drama is framed as a two-act play portraying one man's ruptured relationship with his homeland. The action opens with Seremba drawing from his memory bank to narrate and enact events from his childhood, his early days as a University student, and the near-fatal incident itself. As the drama unfolds, he reveals the political quagmire and torn social fabric of post-colonial Uganda, leading up to the dreadful day military men picked him up from Makerere University, took him into *Namanve* forest, and shot him. The shooting incident sparks off an intense quest for survival against ruthless odds, and suspicious questions from certain crucial figures, such as doctors and immigration officers, with Seremba telling lies at every turn in order to make it to safety. Seremba's zest for life increases by the moment, making the clock tick loudly during his bid to cross the borders of his homeland Uganda, into the indeterminacy of exile.

Act One

THE FIRST ACT establishes a solemn mood, a ritual-like mood: the stage instructions suggest ideas of "solitude," "invocation," and "ritual."¹⁵ At the behest of drums, the performer, Seremba himself, sings a haunting song from a folktale of the Baganda people as a way back onto the past; "he gets on his feet and plunges into his sea of memories with childish excitement and innocence,"¹⁶ thus leading into his story and, seen through the lens of his personal experience, a history of Uganda in the aftermath of *Uhuru*, through the rise and fall of Amin, to the return of

¹⁴ Seremba, George. Personal communication. Fall, 2010.

¹⁵ See, Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 15.

¹⁶ Ibid, 17.

Obote to power. The story is not always presented in chronological order. Having set forth the political background – effectively the overriding regional tensions and contestations of power within Ugandan society – Seremba transports the audience back in time to his primary school days, then to his youthful days at the University. The instigating incidents, as well as the crisis of the play, are to be narrated in the context of his school life. In an interview he expands on the narrative:

SEREMBA: I was born in Kampala, and I grew up in Jinja, across the Nile on the way to Mbale...

(Laughter, because Seremba makes a deliberate reference to Mbale, my birthplace).

SEREMBA: And I went to school in Kabojja- I first went to school in Entebbe, at Katabi, that is where I did my elementary school, and then I went to Mbale, my first year in primary school was done in Mbale and then I moved. I went to Kabojja, Mugwanya preparatory school, and then I went to Savio School and then [St. Henry's] Kitovu and then Caltec Academy and then Makerere University. So I would have gone to Makerere in... in 1977 and left in March 1980.¹⁷

Via memory, the action of the play goes back to infancy:

Strange how it all comes back. Yes with Mother at the centre. My sisters and I would form a semi-circle on the opposite side. We would start with a few proverbs, trade some puns and riddles.

Koyi Koyi! (in response.) Lya!

Question: I have a wife whose house has no door, Who am I?

Answer: An egg.

Koyi Koyi (in response.) Lya!

Question: *Gobo ne gobo?*

Answer: That's what the cow's hoof says to the rock.

We would get into little ditties, tongue twisters and song.

Question: *Kiiso kya mbuzi!*

Answer: Kabaka

Question: *Mbulira ensozi*

Answer: Mengo

At the climax of the evening Mother would always tell a story. Soon we too would try our luck centre stage. It was always a heady and enrapturing experience. But then, I must have been eight years or so when it happened.¹⁸

¹⁷ Seremba, George. Interview with author. Digital recording. Providence, Brown University, Fall 2010.

¹⁸ Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 18.

Further on, this gesture towards a time of personal innocence is marked by a children's fable:
(A school-bell rings.)

George (*to audience*): Having gone through an entire year, I felt immensely glad that at least I was no longer a newcomer. One Saturday afternoon I stood outside the classroom . . . I did not feel like "Batman and Robin," or taking a "French leave" to buy Coca Cola or Pepsi. What should I do, I said to myself? Mr. Mulindwa always told us that "an idle mind is a devil's workshop." I had to keep myself busy. So I sat down and looked at the sky. All of a sudden I saw a rainbow. Its trunk huge and long: full of colour, I instantly found myself on my feet, as if in conspiracy with a gentle creature beyond the horizon.

(He sings.)

*Enkuba etonya
 Omusana gwaka
 Engo ezala
 Ezalira ku lwazi*

*[The rain is falling
 The sun is shining
 The leopard is giving birth
 It's giving birth down on a rock]*

*(A school-bell rings. George is oblivious to it.)*¹⁹

Though unbeknown at that point, things arguably start coming to a boil when Seremba/Bwanika is yet a child, striving to cope with his informal and formal education. *Uhuru* has barely been achieved, but already political and ethnic tensions militate against the promise of better governance seemingly offered by the end of colonial rule and the possibilities of "self-rule." A series of coup announcements rock the lives of the citizens, compelling them to hang by the radio to keep abreast of State crises reflected by frequent gun-inspired take-overs: Mutesa II loses to Obote, who is toppled by Amin, who ends up overthrown by a combined force of Tanzanian soldiers and exiled Ugandans. Two succeeding Presidents (Yusuf Lule and Godfrey Binaisa) fail – or, perhaps more accurately, are foiled – and within a brief matter of time Obote is in position to, once again, win back power. These developments, dramatically truncated, in reality are crucial landmarks in Ugandan political history, very much shaped by the "barrel of the gun." Hence, despite the public denials of bloodshed broadcast at the time of every coup in regime after

¹⁹ Ibid, 22.

regime, gunfire claims the lives of many during erratic revenge acts, purging real and unreal enemies.²⁰ The cyclical nature of this history engulfs Seremba/Bwanika himself in 1980. Driven into activism by youthful energy, idealism, and an attachment to his Bugandan identity, he had become, however unwittingly, an “enemy of the state.”

Come Good Rain depicts well two aspects of post-colonial Uganda: the political upheavals and coups that informed the political history, and, perhaps more pointedly, the mood of the country in the capital city of Kampala and its surrounding area, at the time of Obote’s return. The play is located in Kampala, the center for power where all coups have been announced, and fallen regimes renounced. It is worth re-emphasizing here that, instead of subsiding, the north/south conflict was still going strong. The recurrent political machinations facilitated mounting heights of tension marked by dramatic radio announcements and sensational newspaper headlines. This or that army officer would be announced transferred to serve as an Ambassador in Algeria in the morning, only for another announcement to take place remanding the order in the afternoon. At times newspaper headlines like, “Bad News, Akena Adoko is Back,” hit the streets.²¹ Such happenings bred anxiety, fear and loathing among many of the citizens. The pressure mounted to a point where things imploded. In tandem with this implosion came a significant shift in the nation’s “daily life.” The “Pearl of Africa” soubriquet became “the blood-stained pearl of Africa.”²² Uganda thus remained troubled: often life was cheap and uncertainty

²⁰ See, for example, Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda, 1986-97* (Kampala: Fountain, 2004), 23; Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1992), 87-89; Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey, *War in Uganda: The Legacy of Idi Amin* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Co, 1982). 231-236.

²¹ Adoko Nekyon is said to have been in charge of the feared General Service Unit under the first Obote rule; whereas the headline is credited to Kakooza Mutale in *The Economy* (1979), a Ugandan magazine; Mutale himself has become figure of fear, come election times (“the more things change, the more they remain the same”).

²² Winston Churchill in the 1920’s supposedly referred to Uganda in the original phrase (the issue is contentious-some sources say he was echoing those who came before him like H. M. Stanley); the later

was rife; at dawn, dusk was uncertain, at dusk, dawn was uncertain.²³ Such is the scenario that engulfed Seremba, when he was still George Bwanika.

The troubling incident struck him when he was at University, where he lived the life of a typical student: fiery, active, and alive; dreaming to be an Achebe or an Okigbo (a novelist and a poet, respectively, and, by inclination and in practice, figures of resistance against oppression in other failed African states) and believing with youthful zest that affairs of State are affairs of all the State's citizens. But when the State machinery that had already crushed many "enemies" hunts and catches him, all that courage and conviction dissipates under feelings of betrayal, bemusement, confusion, and dread as he pleads for his life. Having just come back from neighboring Kenya to participate in the elections, on a day when the country is casting a vote of governance at the highest level in the land, he ends up forcibly hauled off the University campus, and plunked before the "big man" who apparently sanctioned his arrest. The worst is yet to come.

adaptation of the phrase is a 1990s subtitle of a collection of memoirs of Uganda from the pages of *Drum*, a formerly popular but now extinct East African magazine.

²³ I get the idea from the Luganda novel by Joseph Ndwula, *Nkeesa Lukya* (Kampala: UCWIA, 2004).

The title is a proverb inferring uncertainty about living through one day to the next, not easy to translate directly, except loosely, by way of interpretation. The Luganda novelist by his choice of title suggests life for Ugandans was as uncertain as the life of a drunkard's chicken, liable to be slaughtered at a whim, anytime, any given day. It is no exaggeration on Ndwula's part; what happened in those years, in the southern part of Uganda in the south-central region to be exact, was a hyper-bloody juggernaut of mass strife.

Act Two

THE SECOND ACT unfolds a blow-by-blow account of the ordeal that follows, viscerally showing the passion and trauma involved, starting with acts of dehumanization. Soon Seremba/Bwanika is before the “Big Man” but his pleas for dear life fall on deaf ears. He is whisked off, beaten, shot, and left for dead; but he survives, and is found the next day by a twelve year old boy sent by strangers to see if there are any survivors. The “strangers” are fellow civilians, who rescue him. That group of risk-takers hand him over to his family – both immediate and extended. He tells a string of lies to escape detection and to receive treatment. A Canadian priest and Tanzanian soldier help him to flee. Even with his name change and new passport, he is nearly refused entry into Kenya, but manages to pass the border into exile. The play ends with a toast to life. The action ends with an echo of the beginning, with a song of despair and a desire for redemption.

The violence directed towards Seremba is portrayed viscerally, and the pain and the angst depicted reflect Ugandan society in the 1980s. Theatrically steeped in a syncretic blending of Western and African modes of storytelling and enactment, and performed with evident autobiographical pain, the drama provides a keen, informative record of the plight of the ordinary citizen in 1980s Uganda, and especially so in the region of Buganda. Thus informed by a troubled political history, the play’s memorable unearthing of a certain phase of an “unhinged” Ugandan society (1980-86)²⁴ is deeply moving and disturbing. The staged action reflects and sheds light on the north/south problem in Uganda from the 1960s to early 1980s), just as *Forged in Fire* was later to do (spanning the 1980s into the 2000s). While *Forged in Fire* shows the problem from a northern point of view, *Come Good Rain* depicts the problem from a southern (Bugandan) viewpoint.

²⁴ Very much the case for this region, then, afterwards the momentum shifted to the north to last not only five years, but rather two solid decades. The guns are silent as I write this but the fact is glaring and worrisome: the children born into the chaos are now old enough to fight.

The juxtaposition is a matter of reflection, not of justification for pain inflicted by or on citizens of either of the warring regions. If what happens to Seremba is disturbing, it is more disturbing to think that, even after he escapes into exile, the state of affairs carries on for five more years. Moreover, when the turmoil ends, apparently it does so in one area, only to begin in another. The changes are of location and proportion: from south to north and from crisis to utter chaos, back and forth, repetitively. North or south, the disruption of lives is a recurrent problem, and both Seremba and the “children of war” in northern Uganda share in the affliction.

Faced with almost certain death at home, Seremba’s only option for survival is exile. So, like Ruganda (see chapter three), who was driven by the plight of exile to write *The Floods*, Seremba too bases himself in foreign lands to write *Come Good Rain* and has never performed the play in Uganda. There are two decades in-between the timeline of the creation of the two plays, *Floods* (1973) and *Come Good Rain* (1992), but the same problems linger: State terror and violence as an aftermath of war, rendering active the cliché, “the more things change, the more they remain the same.” The tales of the two exiled dramatists differ in the amount of physical pain endured, but not in substance. Ruganda looked at what was on the ground and dramatized the suffering of Ugandan society in the 1970s on a collective scale, while Seremba reacts to the violence of 1980s to stage the same problem from a personal angle. In either decade, and in either case, the problematic nature of the matter remains profound: an unhinged State enabling random violence and executions of Ugandan citizens, at any time, over anything. Ruganda’s drama is a fictional account informed by true horrors, while Seremba’s play is both a ritual of self-sacrifice and an example of documentary theatre recording events set off by an actual incident. A key attribute of the show is that audiences that come to the performances gather to watch a true story of one man’s grave tribulations that ended in a schism between himself and his homeland, Uganda, driving him into exile via Kenya, and finally to his current home away from home in Canada.

The tribulations Seremba suffered, as rendered in *Come Good Rain*, call for further explication. Given the stakes of the power contestations in Uganda of 1980,²⁵ the citizens who tried to live without fear or who did not needlessly cringe before the powers-that-be became “enemies of State.” The list included activist students, like George Bwanika. Seremba/Bwanika was politically active, no question. He had been to Nairobi and he had consorted there with Robert Serumaga. He had also helped Lameck Ntambi, a popular politician at the time, to escape Uganda.²⁶ He was wont to chant political slogans and he espoused African literary figures of dissent like Achebe and Okigbo. What is extreme is that his activism warranted a death sentence, as pronounced upon him by the “Big Man.” The incident occurs barely a year and half since the fall of Amin from power, but instead of getting better, things are getting worse in Uganda—and, this time, especially worse for the people living in Kampala, (a cosmopolitan city, but the Baganda are in the majority). “Liberation” (from Amin) is more or less devoid of peace and unity, just as it was at *Uhuru* (from colonial rule). In the 1980s “liberation” was such a buzzword, ringing about in dual form: UNLF, “Uganda National Liberation Front” and UNLA (Uganda National Liberation Army). “Liberation” was a fetishized idea; but in practice, the powers that be tended to proclaim the “liberation” of Uganda in public spheres, while pouncing upon “enemies,” proven and unproven, in private. Though a survivor, Seremba is a living example of those who

²⁵ For details see, Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey, *War in Uganda: The Legacy of Idi Amin* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Co, 1982) 197-236. Cf. Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1992) 125-202.. After the fall of Amin, there was a scramble for power: one region against another, one political party versus another. But the real power lay with figures of State who had real power over the army like (politician) Paulo Muwanga, (military men) Yoweri Museveni and Oyite Ojok. Given the scenario, one party’s activist was another party’s enemy. Due to the bickering for power, there was no functional State and yet (perhaps to appear to be better than Amin’s brutal era), there was some form of State on the horizon, which was due to be concretized following the December 10th Election. Everybody or every party wanted to win, and had plans to do so. Even if the benefit of hindsight shows the powerful figures named were ultimately in it on individual terms, at the time they played the game according to certain allegiances. For example, Muwanga and Oyite seemed pro Obote, but Ugandans now know either man would have taken the power in a snap; as for Museveni, well, he is the incumbent since 1986 and still counting.

²⁶ Seremba, George. Interview with author. Digital recording. Brown University, Fall, 2010. See also, Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 31.

fell victim. The implication is that if you can find one Seremba, you could find many more citizens who suffered as he did, only they have not been able to tell their stories or to relive their own pain as performance.

If the above account sums up the textual form of the play, what about the performance? How does the play work as a stage production? As Grotowski notes, there exists a marked difference between the one and the other: “The entire value of the text is already present as literature and we may read plays as ‘literature’...” while “theatre is an encounter...” where “the important thing is not the words, but what we do with these words, what gives life to the inanimate words of the text, what transforms them into ‘the word’.”²⁷

In this case, the common denominator between the text and performance is not only the subject matter, but also Seremba himself as author, performer, and suffering and surviving subject. As Artaud proposed for his *Theatre of Cruelty*, “illusion” is not so much the issue in depicting these excruciating events (this is neither a psychological drama nor *grand guignol*) but, rather, a ritualized, theatrical reenactment as an act of bravery, the creation of an event “where life itself is the question,”²⁸ and where the testing of life and the body containing that life *in extremis* is effectively the overall arc of the play in performance. The body of Seremba is a very important aspect of the theatrical “encounter” being created, both in and of itself, and as a metaphor pointing towards the traumas, memories, and reflections of others who have endured or perished from similar experiences. Having survived a deadly shooting incident, his body unambiguously bears the actual scars of that event, a revelation that unfolds as the drama unfurls. In embodying the violence he suffered and putting it to productive use as raw material for both a dramatic performance and a ritual of self-sacrifice and survival, Seremba is using theatre as an

²⁷ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards A Poor Theatre* (New York: Clarion Press,, 1968), 55-58.

²⁸ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* (Grove Press, 1958), 7-13.

“embodied memory,”²⁹ whereby the incident as well as the immediate aftermath, both now well in the past, echo in the present with great resonance for audiences with a global consciousness, whatever their specific knowledge of Ugandan history.

Effectively, the audience is invited to witness the present moment of performance – of enactment and of story-telling – and, on another level, the very same audience is plunged into the thick of reminiscence, wherein the narrative and action go back to infancy, not just of the writer/performer himself literally, but also of the nation state of Uganda figuratively – and, by extension, other individuals and post-colonial nation states suffering through civil strife.

If Seremba’s work can be related to the projects of Artaud and Grotowski, his performance, at least on the surface, is far more direct and, stylistically, less baroque. The performance begins in the present but the narration quickly moves to past events which contain, “certain concentrations of human experiences, representations, illusions, myths, and truths which are still actual for us today,”³⁰ lending perspective to and bringing to a close-up for the audience gathered the realities of tales of hard-to-fathom tyranny from faraway lands, human realities perhaps previously encountered via loosely related conversations, or possibly drawn from the international news media’s rare summaries and vignettes.

*The stage is dark. A flute plays a haunting melody that will become a recurring theme throughout the play. A solitary figure makes his way through the auditorium. He’s holding a candle and singing a song – or is it an invocation? Once on stage, almost ritualistically, he finds a convenient spot. . . He tells the story with the infectiousness of a seasoned raconteur.*³¹

²⁹ I borrow the expression “embodied memory” from Roberto Varea, peacbuilding activist, artist and scholar. Varea was speaking in reference to related situations in Argentina. See, Cindy Cohen, *Acting Together on The World Stage: Peacebuilding and Performance*, Documentary DVD, directed by Cindy Cohen and Allison Lund, Brandeis University, 2011.

³⁰ Grotowski, *Towards A Poor Theatre*, 55.

³¹ Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 15.

Beginnings are very important: the idea that something more than the ordinary is happening or about to happen is a very crucial part of spectatorship during a performance. In the blackout, character, writer, and performer – George (Bwanika) Seremba – belts out a song:

GEORGE (*singing*):

Abe'mbuutu
N'abe ngalabi
Banange munkubire ngenda
Mbaire yagenda nga alidda
Aligenda okudda
Nga luwedde okwaba
Mbaire yagenda nga alidda
Aligenda okudda
Nga luwedde ngenze.
 [Ceremonial drummers
 And long drum players
 My friends play me the drums.
 Come bid me goodbye.
 My father Mbaire went as though he would return.
 By the time he does it will be too late.
 My father Mbaire went as though he would return.
 By the time he does I will be long gone.]³²

Thus starts a very personal tale, reflecting collective suffering: a case of a terrorized citizenry, enacted from the point of view of one citizen.

By setting up ideas of “solitude” or “invocation” or images of a burning candle, the performer, Seremba himself – at the behest of the drums – sings a haunting song from a folktale of the Baganda people before the audience sets eyes upon him, and in so doing demands as well as draws attention. When he appears from off-stage, with a lit candle, and makes his way onto the stage, the audience is led into this personal re-enactment of history via a song in a language which many present (given the play’s production history) do not know, Luganda, and soon thereafter hears a language many present are likely to be able to follow, English. The audience that may or may not understand the haunting Luganda song at the start in terms of its explicit meaning (the mood, it seems to me, manages to transcend linguistic limitations) can presently do so via the

³² Ibid.

switch to a “global” language of the post-colonial world, and this switching is a preamble for further fusions and collisions of the cultures that unfold as the play progresses. For example,

(He brandishes and strokes his cane.)

Now, lateness. Some of you actually sauntered into class like little gazelles! From now on. . . late-corners eat bones. No more African time! Punctuality is a must. Punctuality is a what?

(Beat. The class responds.)

There are some of you who are still “speaking vernacular”! Save that for your grandmothers during the holidays. From now on you must speak English. Eat English, sleep English, and dream English. You must. . .

(A chorus of children’s voices is heard)

Good, Any questions? Wait a minute George Bwanika

(He gestures with his hand for George to come forward)

Your father tells me you might need extra help in mathematics. Make sure you report to the Staff Room after lunch. . . . Are you related to Brother Stefano Bwanika? Then I must watch you with extra care. The children of the religious are the worst behaved.

(He turns to the class.)

Very well then. Do you all remember the song we learned this morning? Look at it and take your friends through. Are we all ready? No sissies this time. One, two, three

(He sings.)

Hey diddle diddle.
The cat and the fiddle
The cow jumped over the moon
The little dog laughed To see such fun
The dish ran away with the spoon

*(A school-bell rings.)*³³

The approach, while simple enough in its story-telling, produces an instantaneous record of the colonial fusion of cultures (inevitably); and this linguistic and cultural synthesis sets off the melding of different worlds, rendering his narrative an effective tale on an international scale; what France Harding says to be an African as well as worldwide theatre trend of forging, “new

³³ Ibid, 22.

forms, new meanings, new performers, new audiences, finding interstices and the links between the familiar and the unfamiliar.”³⁴ But at the core, this is a Ugandan tale and, specifically, a tale of Buganda. This is the story that Seremba has to tell, given his identity and experience, at a personal level, and in certain ways it contrasts with the version of this same history that Kawadwa tells from the viewpoint of the collective Bugandan angst with *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko/Song of the Cockerel* (chapter two).

It is the early days yet of self-rule, and politically the hinges of *Uhuru* are just coming apart; the spirit of *Uhuru* is untidy, but not yet gone anarchic. Seremba sets off the action by retelling a folktale, and in so doing lays out a background for the conflict.

Nsimbi’egwire was a humble teen. She was the talk and pride of the village, not only because of her breathtakingly good looks, but also due to her remarkably good manners. This did not sit well with her stepmother. Her own daughter did not have any of these attributes. . . .³⁵

The story goes on that the stepmother hated the girl, treated her shabbily, but treated her own daughter in a grand manner, yet people still pointed to Nsimbi’egwire as the beautiful one. Enraged, the stepmother sets out to destroy Nsimbi’egwire with a vengeance, “She dragged the girl off into the wilderness,” and half buried her in an isolated area, counting on “dreaded tropical snakes and animals” to finish the job. She abandoned her “under the cover of darkness.” However, “condemned alive to a solitary death, Nsimbi’egwire waged a stubborn struggle to come out of her grave.” For days and nights she sang and sang, believing that, one day she would be heard.³⁶

This monologue, a folkloric story of envy and malice, despair and hope, is intended to establish the culture and values of Buganda. Sam Kasule, analyzing *The Drama of Cliff Lubwa*

³⁴ Frances Harding, "Introduction," in *The Performance Arts in Africa: a reader*, ed. Frances Harding, 17 (London : Routledge, 2000).

³⁵ Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 16.

³⁶ Ibid.

p'Chong, writes of “transforming [the] traditional story-telling genre into a theatrical mode.”³⁷

Similarly, Seremba turns a folktale of Buganda into a theatrical means of defining and celebrating his identity and his cultural heritage. It is to this end that he foregrounds a Buganda folkloric song, appropriated from a Kiganda legend, to emphasize the heritage of the Baganda people, effectively laying down firmly as background the aesthetics of the culture of Buganda. Whatever takes place thereafter – like a good deal of the history of colonial and postcolonial Uganda – happens within such a set up, whereby the collective heritage of Buganda is a prominent concern. This is done, however, without eclipsing the personal nature of Seremba’s ordeal, or its resonance with other peoples and other places outside of Uganda

As a celebration of Seremba’s origins and identity, this way of proceeding is an inspired choice. The sanctity of Buganda to the Baganda cannot be over emphasized. Moreover, we soon learn that Seremba himself hails from a Royal lineage among the Baganda.

FATHER: You should ask your grandmother to take you for a visit next time she goes to the king’s court. That’s her lineage. Your great- grandmother’s father was King of Buganda. Sekaba Kalema he was called, His daughter would later marry Semei Kakangulu. Your grandmother would be Kakungulu’s eldest daughter, she too would marry a famous man from across the Nile, Yekoniya Zirabamuzale. They would give birth to two beautiful daughters. Your Auntie Gladys and your mother.

GEORGE: (*To audience.*) We stopped the car. I edged closer, Finally touched and stroked the ancient wall. My ancestors were no longer just names. They began to throb in my bones. I could touch and feel the country as if it had flesh and blood. Unlike those lifeless maps of mountains, lakes and rivers that hung in the back of the classrooms at the local elementary school at home.³⁸

The folktale that precedes the reenactment of the ordeal is essentially an adage of jealousy and its futility. It is a subtle pointer to the north/south divide in Ugandan politics. Many Baganda feel that the rest of the country, the northerners especially, are jealous of them and that they have been punished for their superior culture. So the play at once reflects the loss of power of Buganda,

³⁷ Sam Kasule, "The Drama of Cliff Lubwa P'Chong" in *The Performing Arts in Africa: a reader*, ed. Frances Harding, 247 (2002).

³⁸ Ibid, 19.

while at the same time showing the will as well as belief that it is a matter of time before the glory is regained. I am wary of the perceptible undertone of “us against them,” in the legend. Whereas I understand and empathize with the “Buganda problem,” and am deeply moved by Seremba’s account of his own ordeal, I remain ambivalent about dealing with post-*Uhuru* crisis in post-colonial Uganda while privileging one region as uniquely victimized. As will become clear later, it is an issue that Seremba himself has wrestled with, and his sensitivity to this problem is one reason why, though now able to return, he has yet to perform the piece on Ugandan soil.

In the play’s narrative, Seremba has a happy childhood in a supportive and relatively privileged family, but the case is otherwise for his people, the Baganda, who are losing out as the political tug-of-war between the northern Uganda and the southern Uganda is going the other way.

ANNOUNCER: This is a special announcement. The recent “conflict” between the Government of Buganda and the Federal Government has finally been resolved. His Excellency, Dr. Milton Obote has now become the President of Uganda, None of the changes he has made can be questioned in a Court of Law. The old Federal Constitution as well as the monarchy is now null and void. Soon a new Republican Constitution will be in place. There will be a curfew and a state of emergency in Buganda until further notice. This is not a military coup.³⁹

Now, of course, it is a coup. The disclaimer is absurd – the 1966 crisis and governmental takeover, whatever the denials, constitutes a military coup. And despite Obote’s proclamation that, “I am the only African leader who is not scared of a military coup,”⁴⁰ another coup happens (against Obote) barely five years later.

(Martial music is heard. A voice comes on the radio.)

VOICE: This is a special announcement. My name is Captain Aswa. We the officers and men of the Uganda Armed Forces...⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid, 24.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 25. The statement is one of Obote’s often quoted remarks.

⁴¹ Ibid. 26.

This was Captain Aswa, announcing on behalf of Amin – he ended up being one of Amin’s many murdered victims–the overthrow of Obote in 1971.

GEORGE: We couldn’t wait. We all struggled for a place around the current affairs notice-board, Both the BBC and Voice of America confirmed it: A bloodless coup.⁴²

Once again, it was a bloody coup. “History,” argues Mwalimu Ali Mazrui, “can be wrong and it is sometimes necessary to revise it.”⁴³ As stated earlier, “bloodless coups” tend to be quite bloody, no matter what the official claims are. In this case, Amin purged the Luo (Obote’s ethnic group) and some loyal soldiers did put up a fight.⁴⁴ Of course the Baganda were ecstatic over the fall of Obote; Buganda (and the West) wanted anybody but Obote in power. So, at the time, the story got told otherwise; but blood was shed. It had been Amin who led the attack on behalf of Obote, and it was Amin who now ousted him. Amin harbored a murderous streak, which did not develop overnight or develop only at some later date, even if his well-known killings only became a matter of attention because they were outrageously out of hand.

(More martial music.)

VOICE: And there will be a curfew in Akokoro District. [Akokoro is Obote’s birthplace] From dawn to dusk.

GEORGE: *(To audience.)* “Dawn to dusk” could have been a slip of the tongue. After all, the man himself was choking with emotion. So were we. Down at the Kampala-Masaka Highway people had gathered; singing, dancing and drinking, they thronged both sides of the road. Motorists moved at a snail’s pace. Some dragging and dogging Dr. Obote’s effigy. Someone pulled me aside. A fellow student from Senior 2C.

STUDENT: It could be a hoax, you know.

GEORGE: What?

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ali Mazrui speaking at the, “Achebe Colloquium on Africa: Rwanda, Congo, and Nigeria,” (Providence: Brown University, 2010).

⁴⁴ See, Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, 87-89. See also, Felix Ongom, *Diary of an Obedient Servant During Days of Misrule* (Kampala: J.A. Nyeko, 2000), 54-75.

STUDENT: African presidents do it sometimes. Then arrest everybody that comes out to celebrate the fake coup.

GEORGE: So why are you here? I couldn't tell where he stood on this. But it was clear he hated military coups. At least for now, I remembered 1966, Obote's pillages, rapes, murders and could not help but join the celebration. Back at St. Henry's College it was standing room only in the tiny old hall Where we usually gathered for 'bull dances' on Sunday afternoons. The television was on. The gates of Luzira Maximum Security Prison were open. The five M.P.s, dubbed the "Bantu Five," were free at last. Rumour had it some of them would become Cabinet Ministers in a matter of hours. Thousands of other detainees were out too. The cameras were now focused on one man.

(More martial music.)

IDI AMIN: I, Idi Amin Dada, do solemnly swear. . . with that oath, Amin was in power. The story of Amin is a story unto itself.⁴⁵ The Amin name reverberates in Seremba's play because it was his fall that precipitated the ruthless 1980s power scramble that led to George's ordeal. In Seremba's narrative, the chaos unleashed now bears down on George. He was hanging out in a drinking joint located in the University, run by his friend John, a blind man, and John's wife, when it happens:

FIRST SOLDIER: Who here is George Bwanika?⁴⁶

The sight of a soldier in those days was the sight of trouble itself. He thinks of attempting some heroic act but:

[GEORGE] *(To audience; still glued to his seat.)* A second soldier walks in and I abandon the option. ⁴⁷

From that point he is inescapably pitted against the military arm of the State. To get him, they come in numbers, they come at nightfall, and they wield guns, plus a violent attitude. Instantaneously, his fate changes, he is no longer who he was; he is some enemy figure facing the barrel of the gun—more than one gun.

If Act One starts by laying forth background material, Act Two starts with action, plunging right away, at the top of the act, into the dehumanization of Seremba by his captors. It is a nightmarish scene, evoking a troubled political history of extra-judicial mistreatment of "State enemies".

⁴⁵ See Chapter three, for a listing of fictional, factual, and documentary material on Amin.

⁴⁶ Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 34.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 35.

(A few minutes later.)

FIRST SOLDIER: *(Thick north Ugandan accent.)* Sasa we lia kama mbugi.

(George bleats like a goat.)

Stop. Now you laugh.

(George laughs wildly.)

Stop. Now you cry like a cow.

(George ends up bellowing like a bull)

Stop. Now, bark like a dog.

(George barks.)

Now my. . . stop.

(George continues moan)

Stop!!

GEORGE: *(To audience.)* I stopped. So too did my hopes of striking a human chord. With me spread-eagled on the floor of one of the military vehicles, we made our way through the speed bumps and potholes that filled the streets. I was a doormat to their thick boots.⁴⁸

Then they took him before the “Big Man.” As earlier noted, Seremba was not the only victim that day; there was another civilian citizen, also subjected to torture.

SEREMBA: I found him on the balcony of Brigadier Oyite Ojok’s office, which was in room 211 in Nile Mansions Hotel [the same hotel of torture in *The Floods*], as it was known at the time. I was asked to shake hands with him, and we did, and then the soldiers said, “Oh, so you bandits know each other?” But he was in much worse shape than me, but I recall leaving him there and waving at him when I was ordered to get back into –

Had you been tortured by the time?

SEREMBA: Absolutely. But looking at him, I found, was more frightening. I think he had endured much more torture than I had, myself.

Were you tortured at Makerere?

SEREMBA: Yeah. Absolutely from the word go, yeah. As soon as I identified myself they started, you know, the gun-butts and the boots.

How many were they?

⁴⁸ Ibid, 39.

SEREMBA: Ah, it was a whole platoon really, but the ones who came in were just—only two soldiers came in. There was a guy who was in a UPC color T-shirt at the time, because I remember when they came they were all waiting of outside with a student who would be able to verify for them who I was. But that man, Rwanika, I don't know he probably – whether he lost his life that night, I just remember that I was able to ask him what his offence was? And he said that he had been – I think something to do with – he had something to do with the elections and he released provisional results for Kampala. And not long before that, Paulo Muwanga had announced that nobody should release results.⁴⁹

The image of George Bwanika Seremba before David Oyite Ojok evoked by Seremba's narration creates in the mind an arresting scene in which conflicting identities come face to face.

Based on my own experiences, I can imagine the palpable tension the scene portends: of the north-south anxieties embodied by the two characters, one from each region; one party extremely powerful, the other powerless; one party boosted by bodyguards, the other alone and outnumbered. Yet life's irony is that one man's oppressor is another man's liberator; one region's villain is another region's hero. For example, in the south, the name Oyite Ojok has been vilified and ridiculed in song; in the north the name has been celebrated, and rendered monumental.

⁴⁹ Seremba, George. Interview with author. Digital recording. Providence, Brown University, Fall 2010.



15. Road in Lira, Northern Uganda, named after the man who splits opinion in Uganda.

Such was the duality of the national figure Seremba was up against. Soon, and rather unceremoniously, they were face to face.

I asked Seremba what transpired, if he pleaded for leniency, and if so, how did his captor respond?

Did you meet Ojok eye to eye?

SEREMBA: Oh, absolutely. Everything that happened to me was in his office. I think I, you know, I guess it was a rare privilege. I had only seen the man on the television and the newspapers. And the irony was that for myself, growing up like most people during Idi Amin's time, we had a picture of Ojok as a genius –

Yes.

SEREMBA: As a military genius-

So here is my crucial question: if you remember, did he say take him away, or did he say – was he definite about what he wanted them to do?

SEREMBA: He spoke -

What did he say?

SEREMBA: What he said was in his language.

PAUSE

SEREMBA: Whatever he said – he switched – they completely switched languages – I am the one who spoke to him in English. You know, I tried . . . telling him some of my friends and relatives fought alongside you. And he was completely speechless. He didn't respond. . .

SEREMBA: Remember it was in his office that it was alleged that I had escaped from a prison in Uganda and I said that I had never been to a prison

These guys made it up?

SEREMBA: Yeah. And the guy said – one of them said, “anyway we have it on your file. You are supposed to be in prison anyway,” gesturing towards – in a corner where they had actual cabinets, files, and things. But when I was tortured again outside of his office, because his office was a twin office in the sense that you had a place where you entered, the little sort of reception area, then you went in to his actual, where he actually sat. So in the balcony of that mini-reception area is where I met that man who had been involved with the release of the results and I endured a lot more torture there. And the reason we went back to his office was because two youngish officers, I wasn't sure if they were Ugandans or Tanzanians had asked me, and had cautioned the other soldiers about taking drastic steps before getting enough evidence. And it was once they got annoyed at those officers, they took me back. And the conversation was I believe in Acholi or Langi.

In Luo...

SEREMBA: In Luo. Yes. So, I didn't know...

He was a Langi.

SEREMBA: Yeah, even though his name sounded kind of Acholi. I had just assumed he—and just recently Judith was saying something about the name, and that he was a Langi. And it was when went back to one of the jeeps, that is one of the soldiers said to the other one, in English, it seemed to me then, and I still think that one of those soldiers was from Eastern Uganda and did not speak. . . .

Luo.

SEREMBA: Yeah, that is when I heard the words distinctly, “He says kill.” So. . . so. . . and I guess we had left this guy behind, as well, in the car. So I guess when I say, “Oyite Ojok signed my death warrant,” that is what I mean.

Did – did –when you talked to him, he didn't answer you at all? Were you expecting to be before him?

SEREMBA: Because he had been expecting me, they said we have brought him, the man who had come to cause chaos, at Makerere.

So he essentially just wanted to look at you? Not—he never said a thing to you?

SEREMBA: But when they say to someone, “we have brought him.” So there was an appointment there.

Yeah – he wanted the evidence – I am just curious – not to talk you?

SEREMBA: I thought he would, as well. I thought that he would. I mean his eyes spoke volumes. He simply sat there the way you are seated. And when I tried to speak, he just—like that posture—that. . . he just looked. That's what he did—he just looked. And even when—there was one gesture when they were removing from the office—just a gesture—when they were taking me to the balcony for more torture. When we came back, at that point he spoke to his soldiers. . . not to me. I could even have been speaking a different language. But one that he didn't understand.⁵⁰

The silence is remarkable: Oyite Ojok – who as far as I know was good at English—is the embodiment of a voiceless State, which bears Seremba's existence in its silence. Before his perceived enemy, Ojok utters nothing – and when he does, he does so to his henchmen in a language that cuts out Seremba. Again, he reflects the State in Uganda, which faced with crisis, opts for language that cannot be understood by the concerned. The immediate aftermath of that critical encounter is a loaded scene in *Come Good Rain* worthy of an extended quote:

GEORGE: Excuse me, could you please not shoot me through the back? I would prefer to look at you while you shoot. *(Takes a few short backwards steps.)* Is this okay?

(Internal.) Goodbye Mum, I owe you an apology for overstaying this night on the campus. Goodbye Dad. . . Goodbye my lovely sisters, Abby, little Tony, every single one of you. Remember he loved you all and loved his country.

(To soldiers.) Please give me a minute or two to say my last words. Now that you have come to power through the ballot box and not the barrel of a gun, even if I had committed a treasonable offence you should at least have taken me to prison or a court of law, I know it's too late for me to live but whoever will continue to live in your country will find it hard to forgive, let alone forget. I am ready.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

(To audience.) So were they, except for the “noble savage.”

SECOND SOLDIER: No I’m not shooting, but you can use my gun.

GEORGE: *(Internal.)* Oh, Robert Serumaga, what would you have done? Give me strength to go through this.

(A gun goes off)

(To audience.) The first bullet had hit the right leg. I was down on my knees ... I actually squatted. Before I knew it the left arm was grazed.

The body now contorted as another got a bit of skin just above the forehead. But this time the body moved back and forth, never still and unwilling to give them a clean shot at the chest or the stomach.

(Yet another shot is let go.)

The next one found my right hand at an angle just over my heart.

(Bang.)

It felt big compared to the tiny needle-like sensations, as though it entered with a vengeance. Then another through the right thigh.

(A fifth shot is fired.)

There was a brief lull. Someone picked up “my friend’s” gun. It was a rocket-propelled grenade. There was a grin on his face as he put the gun over his shoulder. I stared at him in disbelief. Oh, God there goes the rest of the body.

*(The deafening sound of a small rocket-propelled grenade is heard.)*⁵¹

The scene is surreal: the bazooka “rocket-propelled grenade” is a high explosive anti-tank bomb but his shooters did not hesitate to strike at him with it, even when he was outnumbered, overpowered, and above all, unarmed. It is as if they are shooting him for fun.

A big bolt-like cluster of sharp little machetes had drilled through my thigh ... I was on my back, the feet were burning, there were a few flames and a pungent smell. I rolled backwards. I could see a little thicket and some undergrowth to my immediate left, a bit of a ditch as well.

(The familiar and by now comparatively tame sound of another bullet is heard.)

A solid bullet went through my left ankle as I rolled over.

⁵¹ Ibid, 45.

(An instantaneous barrage of bullets is heard.)

The AK 47s were now on rapid fire. There was lead all around me ... sort of like popcorn. The AK 47s were quite clearly on rapid fire.

*(Another stomach-churning barrage.)*⁵²

It is a powerful and dramatic moment in which, while the words situate the events in the past, Seremba uses his body to give immediacy to these events, making each remembered shot have a visceral presence.

I had landed in a shallow stream or marsh, I could smell the clay. Except for the head I had practically sunk. There was still one crucial bullet. The one I wouldn't see. The one that would end it all. The one that would enter through the back of my head.

*(Shooting ends as suddenly as it had begun.)*⁵³

The rain fell that night, and Seremba believes the mud covered his wounds and controlled the bleeding, hence the title.⁵⁴ The rain, as well as his fellow citizens, saved him. To render him safe and to enable him escape from Uganda, it took several persons. In performance, Seremba gives voice to: the twelve year old boy, the villagers of Namanve, the Canadian, the Tanzanian soldier and members of his own family, immediate as well as extended.

Seremba ends up in exile, but that is not the end of the matter. If one of the fundamental questions in drama is, "what does a character want?" Seremba, who is both actor and character, wants to relive the memory of home, of what could have been, and of what became of all that was there before. And, it is worth repeating, he wants to heal. A question arises: what does this "healing" consist of? As author and performer, and as a "Ugandan at heart," I gather from our conversations that he wishes to move beyond that moment, just as he wishes for his country to move beyond that moment. At the same time, the play (its production date predates our

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Seremba, George. Personal communication. Digital recording. Providence, Brown University, Fall, 2010.

conversation) gestures towards an unhealed psychic wound, one that can't heal until his country moves beyond internal strife. This is indicated by the fact that same solemn Luganda song opens and closes the play; the end of the play echoes the beginning of it.

Born in the 1950s, just before the advent of Uhuru (1962), Seremba got drawn to the power of performance via radio drama while still-a young boy.

I participated in the theatre in the schools, as most people would have. I would say that my first experience was ironically before the radio because as a child I was fascinated by the radio. There was a series called *Muto Nyo Okuffa/Too Young To Die*. I used to listen to this even though it was for adults, because I enjoyed it. But also because in the middle of Africa I knew virtually nothing about technology so I assumed that these voices were actually inside the radio somewhere. At some point I actually knew who had killed the woman who the drama was all about. So I wanted to help them, to tell them, because they had given me enough clues. I figured I would open the radio, and in there, not necessarily find these people, but be able to find a way to communicate to them. Because I assumed that there must be a way, since I hear them through the radio, there must be a way that I can use this radio to communicate them, the rest of the cast and tell them that I knew who the murderer was.⁵⁵

As he grew older, he spent the while with seasoned, respected, influential, and celebrated theatre and cultural practitioners and scholars like Rose Mbowa (duly eulogized by Jane Collin and Viv Gardner as "Mother Uganda" in *The Guardian* (Newspaper)).⁵⁶ In time, he took to the stage playing Baroka, the Lion of Ilujinle, in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*. He also played Brother Jero in Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*.⁵⁷ Such activity, coupled with his student activism, made him a figure of note in his social circles, and a person of concern to rather

⁵⁵ Seremba, George. Interview with author. Digital recording. Providence, Brown University, Fall 2010.

⁵⁶ See, Jane Collins and Viv Gardner, "Mother Uganda," *The Guardian*, 15 March 1999.

⁵⁷ Wole Soyinka, *The Lion and The Jewel* (Oxford University Press, 1966); Wole Soyinka, "The Trials of Brother Jero" (Ibadan: Mbari, 1963).

powerful State figures like David Oyite Ojok.⁵⁸ And then the psycho-dramatic dread came true for him: hell is other people.

Listening to Seremba, all he ever wanted was to be like his hero, Robert Serumaga. He admires him:

GEORGE: [. . .] In Nairobi I saw Robert Serumaga. The Ugandan playwright, actor and director turned freedom fighters was one of those that were exiled only ninety days after they overthrew Amin. Noble, humorous, generous almost to a fault. I remember asking him once: “How about another play?” He replies, “I’m in a play now, except that in this one the main characters must die.”⁵⁹

Later on he takes torture rather than name him in an inquest,

FIRST SOLDIER: Talk! Talk! Talk you bloody bandit! Do you deny that we have seen you in Nairobi? Do you deny that we have seen you in Nairobi with certain exiles? Talk. Talk. Name them.

GEORGE: (*To audience.*) I knew which name they wanted most, Robert Serumaga; the playwright, buried in a foreign land. Cause of death: dubious. Even in his death I couldn’t betray him. All I could say was ‘(*Mutters.*) ... let his soul rest in peace.’

I could have dropped a few names of prominent exiles who were still alive. Every silent response earned me another blow, the pain was more and more distant, I reduced my body to an empty husk. Now I was a little bird perched on a little branch witnessing perhaps what mankind enjoys most.⁶⁰

Another prominent theatre figure he could have mentioned would have been another of his mentors Rose Mbowa, with whom he spent a lot of time while she was working on the 1978 restaging of *The Burdens*, by John Ruganda, which was not to be. The intended production was banned:

SEREMBA: I asked Rose to let me be a stage manager or stagehand, or, you know, I would be there in any capacity. So I attended virtually all the rehearsals. And when they came to open, or close to opening we moved from the Main hall at Makerere to the National Theatre. And at that point I remember distinctly they had sold

⁵⁸ David Oyite Ojok has been eulogized by some Ugandans who believe that without him, it would have been harder to uproot Amin. But Ojok died before it was possible to hear his version of what happened in terms of actions in relation to Uganda, and to Ugandans.

⁵⁹ Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 31.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 41.

out what was to be a two-week run, because the play also happened to be a set book. And so we were all excited. On the evening before the actual opening, I remember we went to the theatre, Professor Macpherson, myself and Joanna Kamanyi stayed just around the National Theatre bar. And Rose and Fagil went up to Nakasero, it is short drive—to get the censorship certificate.

Is this where the UTV [Uganda Television] was?

SEREMBA: Yeah. Yeah. Unfortunately when they came back they were all grimaced so something was clearly wrong and when we asked, Rose and Fagil informed us that there was not going to be a performance, because they had declined to give them a license. At that point I remember asking, well why would they do that considering that the play was already on the syllabus and the students were allowed to study the play? They said that is a different thing, for people to read the play, but it is a very different thing for people to see the play.⁶¹

Like the workings of a fictional plot, the unexpected happened, rendering his dreams shattered. Living in exile, he is a man without a home. This loss ignites every performance. Each successive show is the umpteenth time he has to go into that place where the soldiers gun him down with intent to finish him off. Of course, other memories arise, but the shooting incident is the most impactful. It does not negate the other memories, but it is certainly the pivotal memory of his story as since performed. He is, thereafter, ripped apart from his homeland. Canada grants him a home, Ireland grants him a professional outlet, UK, USA or Israel grant him performance space; yet the spirit wonders and wanders such that, despite the freedom of the Diaspora, the spirit of remembrance and the call of home remains.

In writing and performing *Come Good Rain*, Seremba, keen on the power of “the word” in theatre, is also sharply aware of the trajectory of his actions, and the potential effect theatre as “encounter,” can have on people. This is something defined well by Kate Whoriskey in her introductory notes to the play, *Ruined*, by Lynn Nottage:

⁶¹ Seremba, George. Interview with author. Digital recording. Providence, Brown University, Fall 2010.

All of us who spend our lives in theater know that, at its core, this performing art is sacred. It has an incredible capacity for illuminating the unseen, reshaping history, bringing out empathy and providing social commentary.⁶²

And like *Ruined* – a contemporary drama on the subject of war and its aftermath in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a blighted country which happens to be Uganda's neighbor on the western border – Seremba's theatrical endeavor, *Come Good Rain*, serves to reflect upon the strained relationship between "Unsteady States"⁶³ and the human state of the citizens. In Seremba's case, the "unsteady State" is Uganda, hostage to recurrent crises, a matter put in perspective by John S. Saul as,

problems and possibilities present within Uganda from a much earlier period, problems which haunted General Amin's predecessor, Milton Obote, and problems which will not necessarily disappear with the passing of Amin himself.⁶⁴

It is a surreal cycle: in quick succession from the fall of Idi Amin, bit part successors Yusuf Lule and Godfrey Binaisa only whiled away the time for Milton Obote to return and succeed Amin. Regarding the continual political upheaval in this history, Ugandan historian Mutibwa, referencing the well-known Chinua Achebe account of African dilemma in the face of major changes, suggests that the 1971 Amin coup against Obote was a case of "things fall apart for Obote, and then for the rest of Uganda."⁶⁵ Despite or even because of the return of Obote (1980), Uganda was again, "no longer at ease." Indeed, "Uganda was already in deep political crisis" as Avirgan and Honey state, later adding that, "Kampala remained in an insecure state with the sound of gunfire heard every night and new bodies found on the street each dawn."⁶⁶

⁶² Lynn Nottage, *Ruined* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009). Quoted Kate Whoriskey's statement above is in the "Introduction," 5.

⁶³ John S. Saul, "The Unsteady State: Uganda, Obote and General Amin," *Review of African Politics and Economics* (ROAPE) 3, no. 5 (1976): 12-38.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 13.

⁶⁵ Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1992), 100.

⁶⁶ Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey, *War in Uganda: The Legacy of Idi Amin* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Co, 1982), 197-198.

Ritual Aspect

IF, according to Artaud, “theatre has been created as an outlet for our repression,”⁶⁷ whenever Seremba reenacts and retells his story, he has to relive the experience of his ordeal. The performance is at the same time a form of healing, whereby the very enactment reframes and, to an extent, purges the remembrance:

⁶⁷ Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, 9.

On a December night in 1980, student activist George Seremba was abducted by Ugandan soldiers and beaten, interrogated and taken to a forest where he was shot a half-dozen times and left for dead. But Friday he will hope to bring about a little healing, as Seremba acts out this harrowing story on stage.⁶⁸

To the extent that ritual and drama are distinct practices, though ones that can intersect, a core aspect of the structure of the play is precisely this intersection. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins note the translational qualities of ritual and drama within the meaning of, “activity that has a sense of ceremony, an actant, an audience.”⁶⁹ Ritual functions and theatrical framing merge in *Come Good Rain*. The aspect of self-sacrifice has already been stressed. Another type of ritual involved in Seremba’s performance is that of thanksgiving, to the gods, for sparing his life. This is a ritual function that accords well with Catherine Bell’s observation that, “. . . [P]eople make offerings to a god or gods with the practical and straightforward expectation of receiving something in return whether it be as concrete as harvest or long life [as in Seremba’s case] or as abstract as grace and redemption [this too is applicable].”⁷⁰

Ritual, here, is taken outside of its original context – religious obligation, rite of passage, or other established social function – and the techniques of ritual are redeployed in a “secular” manner, in the sense of Grotowski, that is, the non-religious sense, but still in “penetration” and “sacrifice” of the self.⁷¹ Seremba exploits what Gilbert and Tompkins say are the “transformational” and “translational” qualities of ritual and drama,⁷² and this pays off in several ways. He is able, without the risk of offence or compromising his skills as an actor, to set his own levels of the ritual event. He does this with admirable commitment, to the event, to memory, and

⁶⁸ Gray, Channing, "Actor-playwright relives his torture in *Come Good Rain* at Brown," *The Providence Journal*, September 2010: Theatre Section

⁶⁹ Gilbert Helen and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, (Routledge, 1996), 56.

⁷⁰ Catherine Bell, *Ritual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997/2009), 108.

⁷¹ Grotowski, *Towards A Poor Theatre*, 34

⁷² Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 56.

to the encounter with the audience. He renders a compelling performance that brings to mind Artaud's call for an actor "signaling through the flames."⁷³

And, speaking of flames, the burning candle he holds during the opening incantation is a more or less a universal symbol for peace (and for enlightenment). Amnesty International, an organ concerned with Human Rights issues and activity worldwide, bears for a logo the candle encircled with barbed wire:

⁷³ Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, 11.



16. *Amnesty International logo*

Amnesty International was so pleased by the symbolic use of the candle (and by the writing, I presume,) that, based on the unperformed script, it funded the initial performances.⁷⁴

Incidentally, the prominence of the candle has also illuminated another question – a metaphysical question. Given the traditional grounding of the play and its ritualistic nature, what force is behind the lit candle in places like the USA where safety measures in regard to fire come first and are strictly observed, militating against the use of a real candle, and real fire? In performances at CUNY and at Brown University, for example, the candle was an impression of a candle, a battery operated simulacrum, only symbolically flammable, and not one of fire in its true element. The battery is a man-made source of energy; thus the artificial candle was for me a distraction from the invocation of ritual as an interceding or fortifying force from the realm of God, or the gods. The substitution, made necessary by state fire codes, underscores the gap that still exists, even in *Come Good Rain*, between the “liminal” nature of the Buganda rituals invoked and what Victor Turner terms the “liminoid” nature of theatre.⁷⁵ And yet, this distinction between the “liminal” and “liminoid” is challenged by Seremba’s performance, which, at least for himself, and, to judge from reactions, for some others in the audience, becomes a secular ritual of healing and recuperation. It is fair to regard Seremba’s experience, whether as “social drama” or “aesthetic drama,” as a rite of passage. Seremba applies ritual as a representational function, not

⁷⁴ Seremba, George. Personal communication. Providence, Brown University, Fall 2010.

⁷⁵ See, Victor Turner, *From Ritual To Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, NY: PAJ, 1982), 20-60.

as a matter of simple entertainment. Seremba as performer sacrifices himself to render for the audience a dramatic enactment and retelling of life lived and survived in a war-torn country like Uganda. It is instructive how he uses specific incidents of his life to allow the audience a visceral experience of the human condition in post-colonial Uganda. And because he does this, both Seremba and the audience are cast into the heart of the matter: the loss of home, the need for exile. For when warfare drives a society into an abyss of violence, sometimes life in exile becomes the only way to survive.

Political History

AS CHRONICLED previously, Obote threw out Mutesa II, then Idi Amin toppled Obote, and under Amin elections were forbidden. On the surface, Amin's fall seemed to spell hope for Uganda, so too did the return of Obote⁷⁶; but unknown to the general public, in the thick of Ugandan forests, "troublesome" people were often summarily executed. Ruganda had earlier depicted such turmoil in *The Floods*, and it is Seremba's own very personal ordeal during a slightly later time that he recreates in, *Come Good Rain*. Seremba does this, however, without confusing the spirit of creativity with the conditions that cause the creativity in the first place. The play, however bloody and painful in its inspiration, is not a bare reflection of the "social drama" of a terrorized country; it is also a compelling "aesthetic drama" fusing Ugandan song, folklore, and percussion (live and recorded) with Western-world influences such as Shakespearean dialogue:

BROTHER STEPHEN: (*Vents his spleen. Quoting Shakespeare. Flourish of trumpets is heard.*)

"Oh judgement, thou art fled to brutish beasts,

⁷⁶ The Obote II reign ran against a protracted rebellion and finally was toppled by another coup. Once again, it was one of his "trusted" army generals, Tito Okello, by name. Okello ended up overwhelmed by the task of ruling Uganda, outwitted by Museveni regarding Peace Talks, and outfought by Museveni's guerilla army composed of men and women, plus children known as *Kadogo/s* (Swahili for Little Ones).

And men have lost their reason
 You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!

(Removes his glasses. Pulls out a handkerchief)

“Oh you hard hearts, you cruel men
 These dogs. These shameless, Godless, .beasts.”⁷⁷

As well as Welsh poetry (Dylan Thomas):

(George relights the candle with which he first entered.)

GEORGE: *(To audience.)* He opened a bottle of brandy. He places something on the turntable. A Welsh voice booms its way through the African night.

VOICE: “Do not go gentle into that good night,
 Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”⁷⁸

It is impossible to tell if the Shakespearean moment actually took place, but it is entirely credible. Seremba’s Uncle certainly belongs to the generation of Ugandans adept at quoting Shakespeare (and other Western world literary figures) in order to analyze Ugandan issues (a tendency that surfaces from time to time in my own analyses). Whether the moment did or did not occur as portrayed, what is material here is that the references to the English Bard and the Welsh poet productively serve to draw in Western-world audiences that may be far removed from African realities. The importance of theatre, be it African, British, or Greek, manifests itself well in Seremba’s performance. What he does with the whole “influences” question is to fuse different modes – all part of the post-colonial heritage – for a definite aim: to enact what happened to him the most engaging way possible. The audience is bound to feel an African mood, hear Shakespearean outrage, and imagine a Greek tragedy. I hasten to add: “mood” is not an African monopoly, nor “outrage” a British monopoly, nor “tragedy” a Greek monopoly.⁷⁹ The choices,

⁷⁷ Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 52.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 56.

⁷⁹ Wole Soyinka demonstrates the sacrificial nature of African “tragedy” in Wole Soyinka, *Death and The King's Horseman*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: Norton, 1975), as well as in the famous essay, “Morality and Aesthetics in the Ritual Archetype,” in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 1-36 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

carefully measured, meld the world of the play into an engaging *performance* that turns out to be, among other things, a powerful depiction of how individuals survive and cope with a society gone amok. This, then, is the basis for non-Ugandan identification with the action of the play. For Ugandans, the issues are more complicated, since the specific regional and ethnic narratives embedded within the play are part and parcel of the continuing North vs. South warfare, and could, potentially, come into play socially, with more problematic results. Even as the crux of the play pivots around the shooting incident, character, writer, and performer George Bwanika Seremba proves to be an intelligent theatre-maker, who by reflexively going over this experience has skillfully turned it into both fable and ritual. The dramatic presentation is ostensibly a one-man performance with one character playing thirty-one parts on stage. Seremba uses his own (former) name, because he is the one who survived the shooting. The other characters, to mention but three—his blind friend John, his Auntie Gladys, and his nemesis Major General Oyite Ojok — are not fictional either. By folding and unfolding the narrative’s time from the present to the past and back, Seremba renders a sense of immediacy to that narrative for the audience, priming them for background issues of the performer, of his homeland and of its political history, garnering empathy from non-African audiences removed from African reality, which is — no matter the degree of syncretism involved in fusing African tradition and Western mode theatre — ultimately the challenge of such a work when presented in exile. It is a challenge that is met with considerable success in the performances I have witnessed. When Seremba announced at the end of the talk back session of the Fall 2010 production at Brown University that, “This is the 327 production,” there was an empathetic applause. This seemed to signal a recognition that his plight may be the result of a Ugandan problem, but his case is not unique, and that such cases call for understanding and discourse at international levels.

Production History

AT A NATIONAL level, though, a challenge looms: Seremba himself has not done the play in Uganda. While international audiences receive some form of idea of what life is bound to be like under repressive African regimes, the playwright is caught up in a dilemma as to whether or not to perform his own play in his former homeland. He harbors a considerable doubt: he says he does not want to lend credence to the ruling regime's justification of the 1981 "bush war," does not want to support the current regime's claims to virtue and necessity: "and fellow citizens, that is why we went to the bush"¹ – something that could happen on account of his play. Briefly, when the bush battle of 1981-1986 happened, Seremba, like many Ugandan people, especially the Baganda, was understandably a proponent of resistance. Overtime he has changed his mind, bemused by the pitfalls of the revolution, and the euphoric claims of "fundamental change."² Now free, at least in theory, to return to Uganda, he has declined to stage the performance in Uganda while he ponders the ramifications of such a production, while at the same time he holds onto hope for the restoration of dignity for his people (in the South). To his credit, the great vision with which he crafts the tale and his willingness to bear the memory of the ordeal by reliving the horror at each show is balanced by an unwillingness to render the tale as something that can be used against others (in the North), to foment further war without responsibility for the resulting human cost.

There have, however, been a couple of surrogate productions: one at the National Theatre, by St. Henry's College Kitovu in mid 1990s, directed by Chris Baguma (a colleague and

¹ The ruling regime is NRM, which came in apparently set against the politics of regionalism and ethnicity, has over a two and a half decade period succumbed to the *Animal Farm* syndrome. NRM is heavily leaned to west of Uganda, and lately (despite the alliance in the 1980s to dislodge the north from State power) frequently collides with Buganda, which is central – both are in the south in terms of the colonial geographical boundaries.

² Seremba, George. Personal communication. Dartmouth College, Summer 2008 and Brown University, 2010.

friend). I was working at the National theatre at the time. Different characters played the 31 parts usually embodied by Seremba himself. “People will wonder where the rest of the characters are,” Baguma, the director of the show mused, in defense of his multiple casting choice. Effectively, the big cast – possible mainly because it was a college production, hence the availability and affordability of so many cast members – makes it a very different play, far less personal and less ritualistic. More recently, in 2006, a pair from the current crop of theatre and performance practitioners on the Ugandan scene, John Bosco Kyabaggu and Tony Mwangala, at the time University students of Music, Dance, and Drama (MDD), (like Seremba himself was when calamity befell him), staged the play.



17. Left: JB Kyabaggu and Right Tony Mwangala. The former is the director and the latter the actor of George Seremba's: *Come Good Rain* (performed 2007). The pair was at the "Rehearsal Tree" at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda.

The show makes for a plausible case of continuity: that is, a "People's Theatre" project (2000s), being a carryover from a similar form, "Theatre to the People," (vibrant in the 1980s and 90s), itself a carryover form of "Travelling Theatre," which was instituted (1964), at the dawn of *Uhuru*. The reference to *Uhuru* is not a flippant issue; it is rather profound matter. If post-colonial Uganda is anchored to the tides of *Uhuru*, it is an indictment of *Uhuru* and of post-

colonial Uganda that Seremba, a child of the *Uhuru* era, born and bred in Uganda, now hesitates to perform the play in Uganda.

Intrinsically, the dilemma to stage or not stage the play in Uganda makes for a curious, ironic, important, and political point concerning agency. On the African scene (as elsewhere), political problems condition matters of agency considerably. To borrow Olakunle George's phrasing, "The agent *becomes* and acts, only within a structure of predication and circumscription."³ In regards to Seremba, his own homeland ejected him under circumstances of dire misrule, and hence he pronounces himself unable to chance thoughtlessly fueling for others the very conditions that nearly killed him, and, ultimately, forced him out. The question, to be or not to be an agent of societal violence in the face of (perceived) misrule, bears yet another question: Is he simply being conscientious? Or are there other factors at work?

It seems to me that to know Seremba on personal terms is to know a man who is patriotic and at the same time fiercely critical of misrule in Uganda. Yet having witnessed his candidness at interviews and at the talk-back sessions after both the CUNY and Brown University shows, perhaps Seremba's absence works favorably for Uganda. (He can be more effective in exile; however, his absence also helps the "State.") He can speak truth to power from afar: his view of the current situation is that, instead of going away, the problem of power-hogging at any cost has only mutated into some new form. In practical and aesthetic terms, however, the fact that the play has not been done in Uganda by the author and performer himself is rendered even more important on account of his body being a vital component of the production. The grueling, physical reenactment of his case constitutes an act of healing on one hand, while on the other hand he becomes a sacrificial figure. And it is the body of Seremba – which bears serious scars inflicted at the hour of reckoning – that serves as the offering for purification. The 1990s Kitovu College production and the 2000s Makerere University performance, therefore, lacked that

³ George, *Relocating Agency*, 71.

element and dimension. Any other actor may perform *Come Good Rain*, but to lack Seremba's body, to change the nature of the play into a story played out through surrogation and illusion is, arguably, to lack the dimension of the "holy" vessel of the tragic tale. Still, these theatrical acts of surrogation do have some power. Even if Seremba does not do it in person, other Ugandans, whether for good or for ill, raise the issues confronted in his story, keeping his case alive, with all of its ethnic reverberations, as well as the more general, ongoing problem of State versus citizen on watch.

The aesthetics of *Come Good Rain* are shaped by "social dramas" on the ground in Uganda from the early *Uhuru* days. But, as noted in chapter one, the Turner and Schechner infinity loop model of "social" and "aesthetic" drama does not fully take into account social and political tensions that inform questions and decisions of agency. Nor does it account for the fact that in such situations the "aesthetic drama" becomes, for good or ill, an integral part of the developing "social drama." The loop works well as model for many performative situations, most situations, but African politics and repression compels conditions that militate against the implied smooth flow between social and aesthetic drama. The loop collapses.

Seremba's own hesitation is based on an understanding of this dynamic. There is, of course, also potential danger to Seremba himself, and to other family members as well. His own mother begged him:

MOTHER: God alone knows how many of us you'll ever meet if things change. You know the rest as you have yourself witnessed. I beseech you though, do us one favour, please do not write that story. Wait.⁴

Repression, explored in previous chapters, is a real problem in African relations between the State and its citizens in places like Uganda, ushering in potential self-censorship. In contrast, consider the case of Christopher Mukiibi, who has stated that his outrage time and again, goes as

⁴ Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 55.

far back as the incident of the 1966 crisis, which led to the attack on Mengo Palace, as reported by the lone Ugandan Theatre critic, Emmanuel Sejjengo:

“After Kawadwa was murdered for Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko, the secret service men searched for me and I had to flee to Kenya,” he [Mukiibi] narrates. But that was not the only trick in his survival kit. “I do not have a friend,” he affirms.

He does not trust anyone.

Mukiibi has been involved in all of the country’s major political struggles. He was in the Kabaka’s secret army when the then Prime Minister, Milton Obote, attacked and seized the Lubiiri (palace) in 1966.

“I was among the soldiers who escaped from the palace with the Kabaka,” he says.

During Idi Amin’s regime, he often claimed to take his group for performances abroad, only to return with armaments disguised as stage props and then supplied them to forces against the government.⁵

In both cases, Mukiibi’s aggressive activism, or Seremba’s caution and forbearance, the issues of agency pull apart and collapse the neat symmetry and divisions of the Turner/Schechner loop. Seremba’s case is but one revelation of atrocities all too common in *post-Uhuru* Ugandan history. Beyond being the vehicle for a graphic re-enactment of his own personal tragedy, the “cruel” use of Seremba’s body in the performance, this climbing “upon the stake in an act of self-sacrifice”⁶ constitutes a form of “defiance” against unacceptable instances of State power excess in the past and in the present. In itself, the performance of Seremba as all of those thirty one people in the character line-up transmits the collective betrayal, anxiety, fear, anguish, tears and trepidation of friends and foe, State and citizen, family and larger society; and it is a tale of “home and exile” as well. Conversely and ironically, feelings of joy, relief and humor are also sporadically depicted in the play. The show might be unbearable otherwise.

Clearly, the play depicts a personal story, and reflects a partial history of Uganda. The plot follows Uganda’s history in the aftermath of *Uhuru*, via the post-colonial crisis against which

⁵ Emmanuel Ssejjengo, “Mukiibi Gave Up Freedom Fighting For Theatre,” *The New Vision* (Newspaper, 8 March 2007).

⁶ Grotowski, *Towards A Poor Theatre*, 43.

Seremba's own life story unfolds. For certain audiences, though, the show both illuminates and transcends its immediate history, as indicated by the empathetic response the non-Ugandan audiences—Westerners and, especially, diasporic Africans – who have no stake in the specific North-South, ethnic-regional conflicts in Uganda. “African unity,” Frantz Fanon feared, would crumble into “regionalisms within the same national reality” due to being “obsessed with immediate interests” as well as the “incapability of building the nation on a solid, constructive, foundation.” He cautioned, in vain, nations like Uganda, “The national front that drove back colonialism falls apart and licks its wounds.”⁷ The wounds are a ticking time bomb, whereby, as a rule, “enormous wealth rubs shoulders with abject poverty, the armies and the police form the pillars of the regime; both of which, in accordance with another rule, are advised by foreign experts.”⁸ Given such common circumstances, the transnational appeal of *Come Good Rain* is not a mystery. For instance, during the talk back session at the Brown University show, an exiled journalist from Gabon – in flight from his Head of State – argued long and hard that this was his story, and that this was the story of Africa. The questionable generalization notwithstanding, the point is this: in Gabon as in Uganda, the life the citizenry leads is derailed by repression, terror, and violence. Thus the play serves as a more general evocation of post-colonial Africa (and for that matter other places, such as the former Yugoslavia, that are torn apart by regional conflicts). And the discernable empathy the performance generates highlights the value of the play as a dramatization of “the human state.”

Ironically, such “transcendence” – seeing past the particular to a more general human condition – may be more possible outside of Uganda than in it. Perhaps that dilemma would have to be made explicitly a part of the show if performed in Uganda – a confrontation of how to get beyond the cycle of hurt and vengeance, which breeds rebels, who bleed society. Such a fate, but

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 106.

⁸ Ibid, 117.

for Fanon's presentiment, is tough to fathom, but it tends to replicate itself over and over again under guise of "revolution." This is the subject of the next chapter, which deals with a more recent period carved out and curved by yet another war.

One problem is that once State power is changed by military means, that choice of action has a certain logic to it: the army becomes central to power. That is the logic Obote, Amin, then Obote again, as well as Okello and Yoweri Museveni (the current president of Uganda) applied to win power. That is the logic that has often turned into material for plays on the Uganda theatre scene: sometimes very successfully, at times unfruitful, and at other times in ways that have proved very costly. Kawadwa was picked up at the National Theatre and hacked to pieces, and Seremba was shot several times over, in a forest, on a National Presidential election day. So, when Seremba celebrates the December 10th 1980 Election Day with more gusto than he does his own birthday,⁹ he is not celebrating a country's landmark elections issue, but rather a very personal matter. The product, *Come Good Rain*, is a core example in the canon of this type of theatre. It is a play that responds to, and thus reflects, "the 1970s [and 80s] when a number of military and discriminatory regimes held power."¹⁰ And a play that has an appeal and a resonance that transcends its own particular time and place.

Come Good Rain chronologically, but also dramatically, keeps account of the recurrent military takeovers, including Obote's doomed second go at the reins of power,

AUNTIE: You have now become a seasoned patient . . . from time to time you may have to dress the wounds yourself. I hope they get to look at that arm again. Son, always remember to thank God and the rain. Without that and your will, this would be a different story. So remember to get down on those knees. Don't forget to say: "Come good rain. For none but I will bear my cross."

GEORGE: (*To audience.*) As we drove to the airport the next morning it was my mother's turn to bid me goodbye.

MOTHER: God alone knows how many of us you'll ever meet if things change. You

⁹ See, "Playwrights note" in Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 9.

¹⁰ Anonymous, "African Theatre," *Msn.Encarta, Online Encyclopedia*, (accessed 2007).

know the rest as you have yourself witnessed. I beseech you though, do us one favour, please do not write that story. Wait.

GEORGE: (*To audience.*) It is Sunday, December 28th. Obote the second was sworn in last night . . .¹¹

Obote, and his henchman, Ojok, enjoyed the power for a while, even though after a year or two each one was looking over his shoulder in case the other was waiting to stab him in the back. What about Seremba?

I am an actor and playwright as well as scholar based in Dublin Ireland at the moment. Otherwise I am as they say, a Ugandan who carries a Canadian passport. But I am still in many ways just as Ugandan as I was many years ago when I was spurned out of the country.¹²

For a man who identifies himself as Ugandan despite the ordeal, it was when he left Uganda, that the rain – a la Achebe – stopped beating him:¹³

GEORGE: (*To audience.*) If there was rain that night, I didn't hear it.¹⁴

That is not to say the rain does not beat in exile. In fact, Seremba admits to the double-edged nature of exile: how it can gnaw at the mind or strip one of decency and, paradoxically, prove to be ennobling and enriching in terms of forbearance.¹⁵ In the thereafter of Obote's return to power and Seremba's ejection from his homeland, there would be two more takeovers, bloody in manner, triggered by the personalities and personal ambitions of two men. A couple of months after the day of George Bwanika's near death, on 6th February 1981 to be exact,¹⁶ Museveni

¹¹ Seremba, *Come Good Rain*, 55.

¹² Seremba, George. Interview with Arielle Brown, *Eti! East Africa Speaks Conference*, Documentary DVD, directed by Arielle Brown, 2008.

¹³ In Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinmann, 1975) 43, Achebe asks, "where did the rain begin to beat us?" and Achebe once again refers to, "the rain beating us." In Chinua Achebe, "Nigeria's Promise, Africa's Hope," ed. OP-ED, *The New York Times*, January 2011.

¹⁴ Ibid, 57.

¹⁵ Seremba, George, Interview with author. Digital recording. Providence, Brown University, Fall 2010.

¹⁶ Uganda has 12 Public Holidays (a fluctuating matter according to regime changes); currently, 6th February is one of the given days.

famously went off into the bush to stage a war against the Obote II regime. The victor and the vanquished are well known in the annals of history via broad media coverage and ample scholarly and research documents. The question that remains is this: what would such an outcome mean for theatre and performance – at times the antennae of Ugandan crises, part of the watchdog sector of Ugandan affairs?

CHAPTER 5: REBELLION, RESISTANCE AND “REVOLUTION”

Robert Serumaga died of illness. He had at least the satisfaction of participating in the successful end to a repellent dictatorship. I do not know if, where he still alive today, he would consider Uganda truly liberated – that is a question which a Ugandan playwright will, I hope, be moved to tackle before long.

- Wole Soyinka.¹

¹ Wole Soyinka, “On the Heroes of our Time: some personal notes,” in *A Play of Giants*, (London: Methuen, 1984), x.

THE “BUSH WAR”² Yoweri Museveni sparked had a military and a political agenda to it – the military wing was known as the National Resistance Army (NRA)³; the political wing was known as National Resistance Movement (NRM).⁴ Along the way, it also developed its own grand fable, its own mythology. Twenty-seven men, so the tale goes, took to the bush in 1981 and rebelled against a rotten state of affairs (the twenty-seven, if this claim is taken, grew into a full-force army); their resistance, so they told the world, was a revolution. Whether or not the happening was indeed a revolution, and to what extent, is matter for a study of its own. In any case, it is the very idea of a mere twenty-seven people against a whole national army, however it pans out, that

² See, Bidandi Ssali, "Bidandi Ssali's Letter To President Museveni After 2011 Polls," *Daily Monitor* (Newspaper, March 1, 2011).

In the aftermath of the 2011 Presidential elections in Uganda (2.18.2011), Yoweri Museveni was declared the winner. Other aspirants, Olara Otunnu, Nobert Mao, Kiiza Besigye and Bidandi Ssali (the last two one-time Museveni's right hand men) disputed the result via the press. Seasoned political player, Jaberu Bidandi Ssali, one of the losing Presidential candidates, wrote an Open Letter to President Museveni in the Ugandan press which read in part:

I recalled a meeting you chaired as Chairman of the Uganda Patriotic Movement (UPM) at Kintu Musoke's residence in 1980 discussing the way forward for Uganda and UPM. This was after what we then termed sham election results announced by the military commission following an electoral exercise that had been characterised by vote falsification by the UPC leadership in control at the time.

The UPM Executive Committee discussed two options that is, going back to the people and build the UPM or going to the bush to take up arms to fight the Obote regime. In anticipation of what would be the cost in human life that had to be paid by Ugandans, the Executive Committee resolved for the former option to which some of us stuck.

You stormed out of the meeting declaring that you had taken the armed option. To date your decision is epitomised by a devastated Luweero Triangle scattered with monuments of human skulls, and a devastated northern region still wailing the massacre of more than one million Ugandans with more unaccounted for.

³ Not to be confused with the later (1990s) rebel army of Joseph Kony: Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

⁴ My primary focus is the aspect of war so I will concentrate on the NRA angle. Studies of NRM as a rather successful organ, especially so initially, exist. See, for example: Nelson Kasfir, "Guerrillas and Civilian Participation: the National Resistance Army in Uganda, 1981-86," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2 (June 2005), 271-296; Nelson Kasfir and Hippo Twebaze, "The Rise and Ebb of Uganda's No-Party Parliament" in Joel Barkan, editor, *Legislative Power In Emerging African Democracies* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009); Francis Davis Imbuga, "John Ruganda, the Playwright," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitinger, 256 (Kampala: Fountain, 2000).

makes for a catchy and idealistic story. By Museveni's own account, the attack on the Kabamba barracks February 6, 1981 is considered the start of hostilities:

The day before our planned attack about 30 volunteers assembled in Mathew Rukikaire's house in Makindye, a suburb of Kampala, and stayed there in hiding all day. Eventually the number grew to 34, but only 27 of us were armed.⁵

For five years, thereafter, the National Resistance Army (NRA) and Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) fought it out, costing many lives and piling up many skulls in the Luwero area, especially.⁶ The war spread out to other places, such as Masaka and Mbarara towns (the named places all being in the southern region of the country). At a certain point in the conflict, the country was practically split into two, with Museveni and the rebel NRA in charge of one part, and Obote and the State controlled UNLA holding onto the rest of the country.

⁵ Yoweri Museveni, *Sowing The Mustard Seed*, ed. by Elizabeth Kanyogonya and Kevin Shillington (London: Macmillan, 1997), 125.

⁶ The skulls became what Mahmood Mamdani calls "artifacts of political violence" in, *When Victims Become Killers* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton, 2001), 3. Often used to depict the horrors of the vanquished forces (UNLA), the skulls were later employed in the 2001 Presidential campaign ads (by the incumbent regime) to remind "the people" to vote wisely lest a slip back to such a past re-occurs.



18. Uganda: the 1980s split: Larger part = State rule; smaller part= rebel rule.

Those of us in the State-owned part of Uganda invariably coveted the fabled “greener grass” on the other side of the fence. The primary means used to support these imaginings was the importation of songs. Songs in Luganda and Kiswahili somehow crossed the boundaries of war (between the NRA controlled Uganda and UNLA controlled Uganda) serving to motivate would-be conscripts:

*Kibonge kya nini
Vijana wali hamiya msituni
Wali yenda Uko msituni
Ku piganiya democracy*

What is the big melee about?
The youth have migrated to the bush
They went to the bush
To fight for democracy

Or to inspire determination for the conscripted:

Solo: Wazalendo wali kuffa kwa mapambano

Chorus: *Ushindo wetu ni wa lazima*
 Solo: *Watu wetu wali kuffa kwa mapambano*
 Chorus: *Ushindi wetu ni wa lazima*

Our colleagues died in the battle
 Our victory is a must
 Our people died in the battle
 Our victory is a must⁷

Perhaps more significantly, rumors about life on “the other side” came across via stirring country music, recorded on cassette tapes and brought over by public transportation vehicle operators.

A popular country music group, “Kadongo Kamu Super Singers,” had travelled to Masaka town to stage a couple of performances, but had ended up on the other side, in the cut off part of Uganda. They took to singing about what life was like over there, in the frontline part of Uganda that now belonged to the “rebels” in government-speak, and to the “resistance” in guerilla-speak. One of the group leaders, Matiya Kakumirizi, recorded a song that had a particularly strong effect. The song, *Olugendo Lwe Masaka/The Journey To Masaka* became a talking point wherever two or three were gathered on this other side of the war, the State-controlled side. Discernable in its content was a sense of vengeance against “the enemy,” identified in the song as “Anyanya,” or “Abadokolo”). The former word relates to “ethnicity” (Amin’s ethnicity in this case); the latter signifies a place (the Dokolo area, a part of Luo land, the homeland of Obote). Both words, as applied in the song, are triggers for hostility, linking the current conflict to long-standing “ethnic,” linguistic, and geographic divisions that had only become worse since *Uhuru*.

Of course, it would have been impossible for all the national army troops to belong to these two areas. No matter. Name-calling, the impulse to abuse an enemy, and all their descendants, is a tool of war well dramatized, for example, in *The Overwhelming* by J. T. Rogers,

⁷ Both songs (and there were more) still occupy a good portion of, and hence come from the memory.

concerning the Rwanda Genocide of 1994.⁸ During the Bush War in Uganda, name-calling was used to devastating effect by Kakumirizi and others. *Olugendo Lwe Masaka/The Journey To Masaka* is protest music; it is explicit and political. The political ideas are expressed in narrative form, call and response, *okutontoma* (poetry recitation), as well as the remarkable onomatopoeic personification of gunshot sounds: “Tito-Tito, Toko-Toko, Lutwa! Kitgum!” It is based on real people, and a real place, that is: Tito Okello Lutwa, Colonel Gad Toko, and Kitgum a town in northern Uganda. Undoubtedly, the sympathy lies with the rebels, who are referenced as admirable human beings, unlike the government forces referenced with the prefix “bi” implying “things” or, worse, animals. In short, the government forces and the “ethnicities” and geographic areas associated with them (rightly or wrongly) are roundly condemned, underpinned, and dehumanized, leading to the conclusion of the chilling last line, “The only good Munyanya is a dead one.” In the spirit of vengeance, the expression is an echo and parody of that other equally unfortunate slogan, “A only good Muganda is a dead one.”

The above song shows how the responsible functioning of performance lies with individual performers, even as divisions are made, battle lines are drawn, and the victor mocks the vanquished. The creativity of art and artistry may serve to sustain hostilities, as easily as to end, transcend, or give respite from them. In these instances, the population remains bogged down by coups and counter-coups, accosting each other with vengeance and revenge, and having to pay the high costs of “them” and “us,” the fires of further disunity in this case having been stoked by performance.

Artistically, Kakumirizi resorted to Buganda cultural traditions to respond to social and political events. He used the traditional *kadongo kamu* (literally meaning “a single instrument”), though, overtime, many other instruments have come to be used in this sort of popular performance. The style, arguably the last lifeblood of a fast eroding and rapidly changing folkloric form of cultural expression, worked on the psyche and collective memories of those

⁸ J. T. Rogers, *The Overwhelming* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2006).

caught on the other side of the war zone – particularly Baganda in this situation – and influenced sympathies toward the combatants in the on- going battle.

Labels matter: the “rebellion” progressively became a much talked about “resistance,” promising a “revolution” in the running of State affairs. While sometimes drawing on regional distrust, contempt, and desire for vengeance, the moment also employed a unifying rhetoric. In the words of Museveni, a rebel leader at the time,

The National Resistance Movement is fighting for the aims of the whole country and not for the aims of sections of the country. Secondly, the National Resistance Movement is a democratic movement.⁹

The combination proved irresistible, though not without further confusion and fighting. In 1985, five years after Obote took back power, the pressure of a state of war mounted to a point where his own army, under pressure from the NRA and via a coup led by Tito Okello Lutwa and his brother, Bazillio Olara-Okello, overthrew him in June of that year.¹⁰

At the National Theatre, people went into a musical show featuring pop singer Peterson Tusubira Mutebi and his band, The Tames, under one Head of State, and came out under another; they went into the show under civilian rule, and came out subject to a military junta. Leonard Okware, light board operator and long-serving employee of the institution,¹¹ remembers that the National Theatre show that evening featured a combination of Luganda and English songs:

⁹ See, “Colonialism in Ten Minutes” (6:57-7:12), an excerpt from the film *Uganda Rising* (2006), directed by Jesse James Miller and Pete McCormack. The ten-minute version is a brief overview of the colonization aspect from the full version film, presented via a Ugandan point of view but effectively being representative of other African nation-states. The full version tackles the aftermath of colonialism/post-Independence, with emphasis on the tragedy of civil war between the northern and southern divisions of Uganda.

¹⁰ From July 27-29 1985, Bazilio Olara-Okello in the capacity of Chairman of the Military Commission, held power as Head of State. Tito Okello held power as President from July 29 1985 to January 26 1986.

¹¹ In, Alex Mukulu, *Thirty Years of Bananas*, directed by Alex Mukulu, performed by Impact International, National Theatre (Kampala, October 1992) and Charles James Senkubuge, *Ndiwulira*, directed by Andrew Benon Kibuuka, performed by Bakayimbira (National Theatre, Kampala, 1993), Okware is eulogized in both plays. The Chorus calls out Okware’s name from time to time in the banana

OKWARE: Now, around 11, I remember, 11 am in the morning because those days shows were starting at 10.00 AM, because of the insecurity, so around 11.00 AM, when Peterson was still performing on the stage of the National Theatre of Uganda, ah, security people, or army men came, all the way from the north, and they were a particular tribe, that was the Acholi tribe, who came under the leadership of Tito Okello, and that was when Tito Okello took over power from Milton Obote.

So what exactly happened at the National Theatre – you were running the. . . How, how did you know about this?

OKWARE: We were running the show, and one of the staff who worked in front, one person by the name of Abbey Kiberu, he was in the box office. So they were the first people to see the army men coming into the national theatre. And I think they thought it was Radio Uganda [National Radio, now UBC-Uganda Broadcasting Corporation], because Radio Uganda is next to the Cultural Centre [National theatre] so those people thought they were capturing Radio Uganda in fact, not National Theatre.

Ah so-

OKWARE: But they found us in a show and then we were told to stop whatever was happening. So the curtain went down, and that was the end of the play, and then they took over, the whole place.

Did they harass, beat anybody?

OKWARE: No they did not beat anybody, but they told us to move in one line, and you could go to places where – for instance for me I slept in Makindye because that was the direction, I had a relative there, I couldn't come to where I was staying.

Mm...

OKWARE: So we were told to follow one direction and not to look behind.

Ah . . . So and what happened to the auditorium – er to the audience?

OKWARE: Audience. We were the same with the audience. Audience and workers. One line, and hands up...

Had the show started?

OKWARE: The show was on, and it was towards interval, and I remember the song, when Peterson Mutebi was singing in Luganda and was saying, “*kirira, kirira, kirira*” (“down, down, down”) and that was the cue for the curtain to come down. That was when they stormed in [to] the theatre.

play, while in the HIV/AIDS drama, *Ndiwulira* (based on the adage of the stubborn nature of the corn-eating worm) muses over Ugandan youth who dreaded the guns and bombs at during the different war times but seem to have no fear for HIV/AIDS. Joy Matovu the composer and soloist of the theme song of the play lists Okware as one of the concerned Ugandans suffering sleepless nights over the problem.

Do you remember the title of the show?

OKWARE: It was musical. I don't remember the title . . . In those days there was curfew.

From what time?

OKWARE: From 6.00 PM.

So shows ran from what time to what time?

OKWARE: From 10.00 AM to around 1.00 PM.

Any thoughts

OKWARE: Ah, no, that is all...

Okay...

OKWARE: Now I also say that theatre is a place where if you are inside you cannot know what goes on outside, because I understand they were shootings but we could not hear anything.

And actually they are on the wall...

OKWARE: Yeah, but we could not hear anything – we only saw one of the staff coming and telling us, “please, please, stay where you are. . .” We thought something was wrong. . . and that was when we knew there was a coup, but we didn't know which person was taking over.¹²

The Okello junta was taking over. The faction won power only to be drawn into pretend Peace Talks – tagged “Peace Jokes” in Ugandan “popular memory”¹³ – and, consequently, end up toppled soon thereafter on 26th January 1986. Power shifted to the NRA and NRM, military and political organs of Yoweri Museveni, the current President of Uganda.

¹² Okware, Leonard. Interview with author. Kampala, January 24 2010. Leonard Okware (Stage Technician National Theatre) is a witness to the 1985 coup—the reason for the bullet holes on the walls of the National Theatre Building (see Chapter one).

¹³ In an on-line discussion, Mahmood Mamdani, "State Formation and Conflict," *Course number: U6800 Course title: Conceptual Foundations of International Politics School: School of International and Public Affairs Columbia University, Core Curriculum Program* (New York: Columbia University, October 22, 2007), speaks of: “academic history,” vs. “popular memory,” whereby the latter is the history of the man or woman on the street, on the local scene.

Upon swearing in, Museveni made a resounding proclamation: "This is a fundamental change, not a mere change of guards."¹⁴ Much of Uganda, fed-up with war, embraced the mood.¹⁵ Something new was in the air and a large part of Ugandan society felt transformed: the menacing roadblocks vanished; wails for help from unknown marauders in the night were quelled; the army, a previously fearsome part of Ugandan society, became less threatening to encounter in the day-to-day lives of civilians. Key to all of this touting of "fundamental change" was that the populace at large took welcomed the shift in power at the onset.¹⁶ And, since my focus is in the field of performance, I must recognize how the proclamation practically seemed to remove the repression that overshadowed performance practice in the times of both Amin and Obote. The space for creativity and innovation opened up for us (by this time I was actively involved in the fields of drama and theatre), and we promptly took to celebrating, rethinking, recollecting, reimagining, reshaping and even questioning our past, our present, and our future, as Ugandans.

¹⁴ In hindsight, the promise is now akin to a double-edged sword; it was resounding at the time, and, it can be said, it became haunting over time. But in 1986, a promise of a "fundamental change" from years of anomy was a welcome idea.

¹⁵ Cf. Mercy Ntangaare and Eckhard Breiting, "Ugandan Drama in English," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breiting 238 (Kampala, Fountain, 2000). This war fatigue was certainly the case in the southern part of Uganda. In the North uneasiness prevailed and soon the mutual suspicion between the victorious NRA (which later became Uganda Peoples Defense Forces) and the rebel groups that became overshadowed by the LRA, erupted into fully fledged warfare, with devastating effects. Scholars and authors like Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda, 1986-97* (Kampala: Fountain, 2004), Laura Edmondson, "Marketing Trauma and the Theatre of War in Northern Uganda," *Theatre Journal* (John Hopkins University Press) 57, no. 3 (October 2005): 451- 474; Adam Branch, "Neither Peace Nor Justice: Political Violence and the Peasantry in Northern Uganda, 1986-1998," *African Studies Quarterly* 8, no.2: (2005) [online] URL: <http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v8/v8i2a1.htm>; Els De Temmermann, *Aboke Girls: Children Abducted in Northern Uganda* (Kampala: Fountain, 2001); and Fredrick Golooba Mutebi, "Collapse, War And Reconstruction In Uganda: An Analytical Narrative On State-Making," *Development as State-Making*, Makerere Institute of Social Research, Makerere University (Kampala, 2008), have addressed some of the issues.

¹⁶ Even if the idea was not entirely hollow at the onset, over time it, like the National Theatre's walls, has arguably become full of holes. That observation is made only with the benefit of hindsight, I must add.

During the euphoric days of this change, once fear informed by repression¹⁷ under the rule of Amin (1971-79) and then under the return of Obote (1980-85), once these factors were relegated to the back of the social psyche with the seizing of power by rebel leader Museveni and his forces,¹⁸ performance practitioners embraced the new freedom with fervor.¹⁹ Performers in Kampala, as well as in Mbale, Lugazi and Mbarara towns took to creating work moved by (for better or worse) the latest mood covering the social outlook. Performances of resistance, outrage, and despair against despotism were replaced by performances of reconciliation, hope, and anticipation of better times.

Mother Uganda and Her Children

IN 1987, Rose Mbowa and Ngaali Ensemble working in tandem with the Music, Dance, and Drama (MDD) department of Makerere University produced a drama vested in the fourth stage of Turner's depiction of "social dramas": the reintegration²⁰ that comes after breach, crisis, and

¹⁷ Discussed in further details over the years by, Peter Nazareth, "Waiting for Amin: Two Decades of Ugandan Literature," in *Writing of East and Central Africa*, ed. G D Killam, 8 (Heinemann, 1984), Rose Mbowa, "Theatre and Political Respression in Uganda," *Research in African Literatures* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1996), 87; Eckhard Breitingner, "Introduction" in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingner, (Kampala: Fountain, 2000), Mercy Ntangaare and Eckhard Breitingner, "Ugandan Drama in English," in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, 226-227; and George Bwanika Seremba, "Robert Serumaga And The Golden Age Of Uganda's Theatre: Slopsism, Activism, Innovation (1968-1978)," *PhD diss.*, (Dublin: University of Dublin Trinity College, 2007).

¹⁸ It should be noted President Museveni is going on 30 years of Presidency, with a constitution he laid open, meaning he could contest again come 2016, at a time of unrest, uprisings, and violence over long term rule in places like: Ivory Coast, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Libya and Bahrain.

¹⁹ This shift in Ugandan theatre trends is noted in, *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: Vol.3, Africa* (2000); in the Eckhard Breitingner edited, *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape* (2000); and in the excellent Jessica A. Kaahwa analysis, *Ugandan Theatre: Paradigm Shifts* (2004).

²⁰ As opposed to schism, which is an alternative that befell other nations like Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1993, which is currently threatening Ivory Coast in the "who won the election of 2010" saga, and which is the live wire tension in Sudan, which has split into separate entities of North and South following the referendum outcome of January, 2011, a progression in which long-time Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, was very involved. See, Daniel K. Kalinaki, "Uganda: Museveni Finally Gets It Right - On South Sudan," *Daily Monitor* (Newspaper, 6 January 2011); Daniel K. Kalinaki, "Uganda: What Is Good For Sudan Should Be Good For Nation," *Daily Monitor* (Newspaper, 14 July 2011); Cf. Mercy Nalugo, "Sudan: Museveni Steps in Defuse Sudan Crisis ," *Daily Monitor* (Kampala: Monitor Publications, May 23,

redress.²¹ Echoing Bertolt Brecht's anti-war play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Mbowa called her ensemble play *Mother Uganda and Her Children*.²² However, where a woman and her three children are destroyed by a terrible war in the German play, in the Ugandan play you have a nation and its millions of children trying to pick up after several destructive wars. Mercy Ntangaare and Eckhard Breitinger describe *Mother Uganda and Her Children* as "a play of conscientisation,"²³ saying that Ugandans were at that point in history fatigued by war. They note the political connections of the play, but not the degree of political agency involved, whereby the government of the day commissioned the production in the first place – a point that comes to the fore when Joseph Walugembe, a cast member at the time, and presently National Theatre Director, recalls the project:

Good morning, Joseph.

WALUGEMBE: Good morning.

I am very curious about Mother Uganda, which I missed but thankfully is on record, and I wonder if you could give us a brief either history, or inspiration, of the project?

WALUGEMBE: The project comes at a time of—the advent of the National Resistance Movement in 1986. So, When the National Resistance Movement came into power, first they wanted to create an image beyond Uganda – inside and outside Uganda: what they were fighting for, the ten point program which they wanted to put in place for Ugandans and they established a Secretariat which was known as the National Resistance Movement Secretariat. Under this movement Secretariat, there were different departments, and there was a department for culture, and the Department of Culture was tasked, was assigned to work out a program of rebuilding Uganda. "Rebuild Uganda," that was the theme. If you are to rebuild Uganda, what would you – what message would you give out? How do you – what history would you give and what steps would you take, in order to rebuild Uganda? So by then, the gentleman is dead by the way, he was called Bakesigaki; he was the director. There was a lady, I don't know if she is still alive, I hope she is, called Byaruhanga – Byabarinda – something like that. She came to the

2011); Cf. John Njorog, "Museveni Plotting Change Of Sudan Government," *Daily Monitor* (Kampala: Monitor Publication, October 14, 2010).

²¹ Victor Turner, "Social Dramas in Brazilian Umbanda: The Dialectics of Meaning," in *Anthropology of Performance*, 34-35 (New York: PAJ, 1986).

²² Rose Mbowa, *Mother Uganda and Her Children*, directed by Rose Mbowa (unpublished, performed by Ngaali Ensemble, National Theatre, Kampala, Uganda, 1987).

²³ Ntangaare and Breitinger, "Ugandan Drama in English," 238.

Department of Music Dance and Drama. By that time I had completed my Diploma [in MDD] and I was teaching my students and the Head of Department was the late Associate Professor Rose Mbowa. And here we were, they came to us as a Department to work out a dramatic piece that would be taken around – that would be taken to London, to showcase what NRM was keeping as a message, “rebuild Uganda”; using the performing arts to give a message on the theme, “rebuild Uganda.” It was very interesting that this was a Department – Music, Dance and Drama – that never involved itself into politics and they were asked – we were asked to produce a program with a political dimension. So Rose, the late Rose – first of all we were wondering what exactly? Was it a straight drama? What would it be? They insisted that it has to be an interesting program, and it has to give [something] about Uganda’s culture. That was the beginning. So, we thought – we sat down – we had a dance section, we had a drama section, we had music section. So a few students a few us who were there joined hands with the late Rose Mbowa to work out the concept; and we worked out a concept that would bring out Ugandans’ culture. First of all to have a performance that would [be] non-verbal. That would not depend on the words, but deliver the message. Two: that would not go into the usual of say, “I am introducing a dance from Uganda... this is na, na, na (blah, blah)...” So, we worked a program to weave all these dances into a kind of a story, and there would be no narrator. So we thought about the characters. . . we thought there should be a central character that should be Mother Uganda. And we wanted to use a woman, because a woman creates peace. That is where we started from. And we said now how shall we costume the Mother? We shall costume her into the national colors of Uganda – to bring out Mother Uganda. Now we [thought] about other characters: the other key character we thought about was the troublemaker, Tabu Sana. It is a Swahili word; it means real trouble. And this character would actually cause action in the play, he would disrupt. And the play would revolve around Mother Uganda; go to Tabu Sana, and other characters. Then the other characters were the Ugandans. The Ugandans in their different tribes, their different nationalities, and the play emphasized nationalities.

Not tribes...

WALUGEMBE: Yes, it is nationalities. Now we begin getting items, which we already knew: folksongs, dances, and instrumentals so we begin selecting the music, we begin analyzing it, we begin analyzing the dances, we begin analyzing the *byebugo* (chants), and the meaning behind all this. In the end we selected items and we found that these could form a story. And there would be somebody to bridge the story either Mother Uganda, or Tabu Sana or another Ugandan. And, the idea was, to trace the history of Uganda. What has brought up the instability? And then create a situation; make proposals that would really... how do we deal with this instability? What is the cause of disunity, and how best can we co-exist as Ugandans, given that we are of different nationalities. That is the direction [that] the play took. And it took a positive ending where the troublemaker, Tabu Sana is assimilated into society, into a hardworking society, and appreciating other people’s values, other people’s existence. And the unifying factor is: Mother Uganda... That’s it.

*Okay, thank you very much.*²⁴

²⁴ Walugembe, Joseph. Interview with author. Digital recording. Kampala, National Theatre, January 13 2009.

What emerges here is that whereas the play aspired to be apolitical, it was in fact, and in foundation, a politically commissioned project. And the account underscores the role of performance in the 1980s struggles for change in Uganda and the positive, conscientiously constructive turn taken, or at least attempted, in many of these projects. Ironically (and significantly), though, the aim of the government was to take the play to London, and there was no attempt to stage it upcountry in Uganda. Still, *Mother Uganda and Her Children* was not alone in advertising a more hopeful turn of events. In 1988 Fagil Mandy's, *The Bush Trap*, a symbolic drama about the "Bush War" and the revolution of self and society thought to be underway was also quite popular. In the 1990s, Diplock Segawa, a pop musician sang of a *Fundamental Change* in politics, in government, in the army, and the civil service, imploring in the refrain, "Let it be now."²⁵

Plays inspired by and preoccupied with issues of tyranny, like *The Floods*, lost favor. Audiences seemed to want to keep away from factual dramas about the grim realities of years of misrule. This was not the first time that the public showed a desire to move on quickly from a time of repression. For example, after the fall of Amin, *Omulembe Gwa Kijambiya/Machete Era*, a play depicting the tyrannical dictator's alleged killing of one of his wives, Kay, plus the eating of the flesh of his victims, fared poorly.²⁶ (*Kijambiya*, by the way, was a popular euphemism for Amin). Kapapaali and Kampala Golden Performers staged *Sabasabala E Busabala (Chief Traveler in Travel Land)* by Khalidi Bantubangi, shortly after Obote's departure,²⁷ reliving and mocking Obote's first and second periods of rule. Even if the theme of the outsider (Obote) who comes in (to Buganda) to mess up things was an echo of Byron Kawadwa's popular but long

²⁵ Diplock Segawa, *Fundamental Change*, performed by The Wrens, Nile Hotel Gardens, Kampala, 1991.

²⁶ Unpublished play, seen in performance, Ashok Cinema Hall, Mbale, Uganda, 1980.

²⁷ This was soon after the fall of Obote's second regime (July 1985), and the overthrow of the Okello junta government and the entry of the Museveni regime (January 1986).

suppressed *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko/Song of the Cockerel*, the play did not fair well in terms of audience interest. Incidentally, Kapapaali, a southerner and a Muganda, bore an uncanny resemblance to Obote, despite his different geographic origin, thus putting in question the “ethnic” basis for regional stereotypes in Uganda.

Ironically, based solely on the number of productions, Ugandan theatrical practice had actually started to rise in popularity and was at its peak during the Amin era, despite – or perhaps because of – the repressive steps taken against freedom of expression. Uncannily, “Aminism” and “Oboteism,” the “euphemism for...institutionalized madness,”²⁸ kept the embers of theatre burning. So while the 1960s and 1970s may be deemed to be Uganda’s “Golden Age” of Theatre, as Rose Mbowa and George Seremba state,²⁹ the 1980s and 1990’s proved to be the most productive, by the measure of output. At one time, there were up to 402 registered theatre groups. 200 of them were based in Kampala, and 202 were upcountry. Theatre halls mushroomed, even as theatre was restricted to entertainments unthreatening to the State’s interests.

Eckhard Breitingger defines these theatre spaces as in line with the common trend that distinguishes “modern African theatre from the established and well-funded theatre of the West.”³⁰ These “converted, make-shift and temporary adapted halls or venues” are crucial theatre spaces in that they not only take the place of the “few purpose-built theatres, in which actors, directors and dramatists could experience with adequate stage and lighting,” but they also enable some of the theatrical productions to counteract “the running costs—and therefore the renting

²⁸ Kasule, Sam, “The Drama of Cliff Lubwa p’Chong,” (unpublished, 1989) p.52 quoted in *The Performance Arts in Africa: A Reader*, ed. Frances Harding, 251 (London, Routledge, 2002).

²⁹ See, Rose Mbowa, “Luganda Theatre and its Audience,” in *Uganda: The Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Breitingger, (Kampala: Fountain, 2000). Also, the idea is suggested in Seremba’s dissertation title: “Robert Serumaga And The Golden Age Of Uganda’s Theatre: Slopsism, Activism, Innovation (1968-1978),” 25.

³⁰ Eckhard Breitingger, “Divergent Trends in Contemporary African Theatre,” in *New Theatre in Francophone and Anglophone Africa.*, ed. Anne Fuchs (Amsterdam/Atlanta, 1999), 3.

costs” associated with staging productions at “National theatres in Kampala/Uganda, Lagos/Nigeria and Accra/Ghana”³¹ (and, let me add, Nairobi/Kenya). Eckhard adds to the list “University lecture theatres or school assembly hall or church community centers” and he observes well that “nearly every site can serve for a theatrical performance: a street corner, an empty plot, a school compound or the back-yard of a bar or a public drinking place.”³² This approach to theatrical endeavor in unfinanced circumstances propagates a self-sustaining theatrical and performance tradition on the one hand, and a heavy reliance on the audience (in terms of taste, or whims, or eagerness to turn-up) on the other hand. In Uganda, many were the theatre makers who caved in to audience preferences, and many were the debates, mostly informal, that practitioners engaged in regarding the merits and demerits of “giving the people what they want.”

What they wanted did not seem to encompass “political theatre.” When in 1992 we staged the previously popular, *The Reject of My Country* by Lubwa p’Chong (1988), an adaptation of the culturally important *Song of A Prisoner* by Okot p’Bitek at the National Theatre, few people turned up.³³ Some of those who did, expressed that they preferred plays that talked about other things, not just oppression. We stuck to our guns and in 1993 put up *The Madman*, also written by Lubwa p’Chong (1989).³⁴ The eponymous Madman spoke to skulls in search of his wife and was in love with a skeleton believing it to be the remains of his wife, while the overriding story is of an absolutely ruthless Chief whose ways drive the people mad, and into an uprising. The play is aesthetically rich. Ugandan scholar, Sam Kasule, notes the use of “folklore

³¹ Ibid, 3-4

³² Ibid, 4

³³ Cliff Lubwa p’Chong, *The Reject of my Country* (unpublished, performed by Teamline, National Theatre, Kampala, 1992).

³⁴ Cliff Lubwa p’Chong, *The Madman* (unpublished, performed by Teamline, National Theatre, Kampala, July 1993).

material from east, west, south, north and central Uganda to represent the various types of madness of time and place,” in an extensive analysis of the powerful play³⁵ In the process, he quotes some interesting excerpts from the unpublished script. For example, the madman’s cross-examination of a human skull, “his only companion and the symbol of death and terror in society.”³⁶

To whom did you belong? What was your sex? Place of birth? Age? Work? Tribe? Religion? Marital Status? How did you meet your end?³⁷

“The question about the ‘skull’s’ identity,” adds Kasule, “echoes the statement made by a former Ugandan Vice President to the effect that he should not be charged with the atrocities (in the ‘Luwero Triangle’) because the skulls in Luwero are unidentifiable.”³⁸ The audience voted with their feet; they trickled in, but on the whole, most theatergoers kept away. In one show somebody left during the Madman’s rendition of what befell him, but came backstage afterwards to tell us that those things are not easy to watch, and we need to realize whatever terrible things happened once are now by-gones; we should move on.

It would seem that by 1986, audiences in the southern, eastern and western regions – there were hardly any productions coming from the northern region, except perhaps during school festivals organized and heavily mediated by the Central Government’s Ministry of Education – had lost whatever taste for grim or tragic dramas they once had. Non-tragic plays like, *LIZ*, by Christopher Mukiibi, about work tensions in the corporate work-place and the woman who exposes the ongoing exploitation in the firm, were thriving. Comedies like *Kinsmen and Kinswomen* by Cliff Lubwa p’Chong about the pressures of the extended family drew many

³⁵ Sam Kasule, “*The Drama of Cliff Lubwa p’Chong*,” (unpublished, 1989) p.52 quoted in *The Performance Arts in Africa: A Reader*, Ed. by Frances Harding, (London, Routledge, 2002), 253.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

people. *Kadidi*, a radio drama about everyday life in quotidian terms fetched a massive following. *Kagyenda Bush/Gone Without A Reason*, by Lukanga Ibrahim, a play about family discord, had revelers whispering about the drama during Sunday church sermons, and pulled crowds into the National Theatre. *Obunkenke/Tension* by Wycliff Ssentamu, the hit play of the early 1990s, focused on issues of child sacrifice, corruption in the police force, and tentatively, the creeping growth of the Mafia system upon society.³⁹ While many of these plays do touch upon social issues, they tended to do so in facile, easily digestible ways, and stayed clear of confrontations with the State or the legacy of war that had so haunted Uganda since *Uhuru*.

Plays could be “political,” but such plays were responded to better (in terms of audience attendance) if they carried a hopeful message overall. In Alex Mukulu’s, *Guest of Honour*, “a story of ‘shamba boys’ and ‘shamba girls’ planning a welcoming party for returning Indians [two decades since the Amin expulsion], for instance, a hotly debated political issue,”⁴⁰ is dealt with as the theme song chimed the message, “Hope will be guest of honor.”⁴¹ The audience count became an especially crucial factor in play selection partly when the Government removed its subvention of fees for the National Theatre in 1992. Theatre funding, at the National Theatre and elsewhere, was now a matter for each performing group and individual theatre-maker to work out. Whereas some of us were upset about this progression of events, colleagues of ours argued that the withholding of subvention money had its good side: practitioners were free from government control as well as patronage. This development underlines one of the differences between major theatres in Europe and the US and places like Africa:

³⁹ Chrisopher Mukiibi, *LIZ*, performed by Theatrikos, National Theatre, Kampala, 1988; Cliff Lubwa p'Chong, *Kinsmen and Kinswomen*, performed by Nanga Players, Kyambogo College Hall, Kampala, 1988; Ibrahim Lukanga, *Kagyenda Busha/Gone Without a reason*, performed by Kigezi Kinimba, National Theatre, Kampala, 1995.

⁴⁰ Ntangaare and Breitingner, “Ugandan Drama in English,” 244.

⁴¹ Alex Mukulu, *The Guest of Honour* (unpublished, performed by Impact International, National Theatre, Kampala, 1994).

In Europe and US, actors and directors rely on gaining a basic income from theatre creative activities, which they then supplement with jobs . . . in most African countries, this rudimentary financial security does not exist for most of the theatre practitioners.⁴²

During this time, when the legacy of war in Uganda did come into the theatre, the promise of “fundamental change” momentarily ushered in Hope as a dramaturgical necessity. Patrick Mangeni wrote *Operation Mulungusi* (1990s) depicting the aftermath of the war (which ousted Amin) against Tanzania in 1978/79, and the creeping of HIV/AIDS upon society at about that time.

PASTOR: Mother have you also lost your will to fight?

MAMA: Where is hope when we lose the future in the struggle for survival

HOPE: Mother, right now our future is the awareness that we have lost in ways we could have possibly avoided; that knowledge itself is our strength, the beginning of hope for the future.

EJONI: (hopeless) The future in death?

HOPE: The future must live beyond us. Whether we die today or reach tomorrow, a positive attitude towards our life will benefit those to come, and in this way we will have lived our future.⁴³

Other produced plays like *Abajjiri* by Medi Sekulima (1987) and *Omutaputa/The Interpreter* (Anonymous, Omutaputa/The Interpreter 1996) were about the usurpation of power and the resultant rebellion of the masses which patriotically touted, even if not so directly, the “pro-people” method of rebellion by NRA – a system Museveni learned from the Mozambique experience.⁴⁴ In all cases, the people in the play were triumphant, and the warlords were the losers.

⁴² Eckhard Breiting, “Divergent Trends in Contemporary African Theatre,” 5.

⁴³ Patrick Mangeni wa'Ndeda, "Operation Mulungusi," in *Operation Mulungusi and The Prince*, 91 (Kampala: MK Publishers (U) Ltd., 2000).

⁴⁴ Museveni writes of his 1967 Frelimo (Front for the liberation of Mozambique) experience in his book, *Sowing the Mustard Seed* (1997). And his undergraduate thesis was informed by Fanon's Chapter on Violence in the *Wretched of the Earth*, and on Museveni's own Mozambican impressions.

But by and by, in the mid 1990s, the bloom was off the rose, and the hopes for a positive transformation of government and society started to fade. Tensions between regions and classes intensified rather than slackened. Plays became once more critical of the dynamics at work within Ugandan society. Christopher Mukiibi and a host of popular actors (including Kapapaali, the actor who had played as Obote) came up with *Sagaala Agaalamidde*, a reference to a siren-like drumbeat which is a call to arms.⁴⁵ The drumbeat used to call people to gather, and the title of this play had a similar effect.

Performing before a full house, the players boldly suggested that if Buganda, as a region, and the Baganda people wanted to regain their past glory they better stop despising service in the army; that, in fact, they would do well to get their children and grandchildren militarily trained. The final message of the play was unmistakable: “power lies in the barrel of the gun.”⁴⁶ Whether it was to calm tensions, or for polemic reasons, Alex Mukulu, responded with, *A Good Muganda Ease*. Mukulu’s play argued against the idea to pick up the gun, insisting that Buganda could and would regain its glory; but time, not war, was the answer. Mukulu, by his choice of title was playing on the politically charged phrase encountered earlier: though now turned to the other side of the conflict: “the only good Muganda is a dead one”⁴⁷ a phrase widely (though possibly not accurately) attributed to Obote.

⁴⁵ Christopher Mukiibi, *Sagaala Agaalamidde*, directed by Andrew Benon Kibuuka (unpublished, performed by An All Star Production, National Theatre, Kampala, 1994).

⁴⁶ This is a Mao Tse Tung dictum, which seems to be a truism of Ugandan political maneuvers.

⁴⁷ Ugandans at home, and abroad often debate (mostly via the Internet) this inflammatory phrase. For instance, Edward Mulindwa, a Ugandan in Canada, twice argued on the Ugandans at Heart forum that Obote’s words were distorted for malice and propaganda reasons. The facts remain elusive, but the phrase was a prominent issue in the 1994 play, by Christopher Mukiibi, *Sagaala Agaalamidde*, directed by Andrew Benon Kibuuka.

The play is based on the 1966 War at Mengo, Mutesa II’s Second Exile, and the aftermath (detailed in Chapter Two). One character played by Simwogerere Wankalubo lamented repeatedly, *Nalyoka agamba nti Omuganda Omulungi ye Muganda Omuffu!*/How dare he say a good Muganda is dead one!

In 1999, I wrote my own *A Time of Fire* about three men who run from a civil war, only to again be swept up in that war because they bring the war with them. American playwright, August Wilson's, *The Piano Lesson*, in part inspired the play:

BOY WILLIE: See now, I'll tell you something about me. I done strung along and strung along. Going this way and that. Whatever way would lead me to a peace. That is all I want. To be as easy with everything. But I wasn't born to that. I was born to a time of fire.⁴⁸

Basically, the American scenario stirred me to muse about the sort of time I was born to. And as in Ariel Dorfman's, *Death and the Maiden* – a play about war and repression in Chile in which a character is haunted by a song she heard in a time of war – I was incessantly musing about the NRA Bush War songs, especially *Moto Wa Waka* (designed to move people into embracing the rebellion, the resistance and the revolution *a la* Fanon's quotation of Sekou Toure in the *Wretched of The Earth*)⁴⁹:

Call: *O Moto Wa Waka*
 Response: *O Moto Wa Waka*
 Call: *Moto uli waka Katonga,*
 Response: *Wa Waka*
 Call: *Massaka,*
 Response: *Wa waka*

Call: *Kila Mali*
 Response: *Wa waka*

[Oh Fire blazes
 Oh, fire blazes

Fire Blazed around Katonga
 Blazed

Masaka
 Blazed

Every place
 Blazed]

⁴⁸ Charles Mulekwa, *A Time of Fire* (London: Nick Hern, 1999); August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 93.

⁴⁹ See, Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove, 2004), 145.

The song was intended to instill vigilance, but for me the question nagged: what about the ashes of such fire, often tagged to be, in the language of war, “collateral damage”? And so, in my drama I pitted three characters from different regions of the country, meeting by chance the same spot, during the war. “Ethnicity,” often reduced to tribalism in post-colonial times was, for me, at the center of my concerns. I had not yet encountered Ngugi’s argument that, “the study of African realities has for so long been seen in terms of tribes,” and that what is going on is actually a clash between “two mutually opposed forces in Africa. . . an imperialist tradition on one hand, and a resistance tradition on the other.”⁵⁰ Ngugi had not reckoned the potential metamorphosis of the resistance into imperialism. But he is right that there is a way in which the recurrence of war between regions, between the north and south, is not effectively broached if seen as conflict between “tribes”; in *Home and Exile*, Achebe holds that these are nations, disrupted by colonialism.⁵¹ Indeed, as Mamdani crucially points out, “African notions of ethnicity are much older than colonialism – much, much older – but the politicization of ethnicity at its heart was a colonial project.”⁵² The legacy of war in post-colonial Africa, then, has its roots in the nature and administration of colonial rule and the entities that were artificially created. Uganda’s first Colonial ruler, Captain Lugard, according to Okello Oculi was a ruthless military figure,⁵³ and military rule has sustained a grip on the Ugandans throughout much of the post-colonial, post-*Uhuru* time frame.

⁵⁰ Ngugi wa’Thiong’O, *Decolonising the Mind*, (New Hampshire, Heinemann, 1986), 1.

⁵¹ Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (New York: Anchor, 2000), 3-6.

⁵² See, Mahmood Mamdani, “State Formation and Conflict,” *Conceptual Foundations of International Policy*, Online Video, prod. School of International and Public Affairs (New York: Columbia University, 2007 22-October).

⁵³ See, Okello Oculi, “How Revolutionary Violence Entered Uganda’s Politics,” *Weekly Topic* (Newspaper, January 1992), 9 and 18.

Two theatre plays during the Museveni era that stand out for me and that stand in contrast to the general comments above are: *Thirty Years of Bananas* by Alex Mukulu (1992) and *Biro* by Ntare Mwine (2002), the former pouncing upon the “revolution” and questioning Uganda’s history and values, while the latter reflects upon life for a little known revolutionary after the “revolution.” In other words, the *Bananas* play takes stock of Independence, depicting the nakedness of the emperors and the “wasted years” for the citizens, while the *Biro* drama shows the after effects of war on the lives of lesser souls than the commanders and generals who wage the wars in post-colonial Uganda.

Thirty Years of Bananas

ALEX MUKULU grabbed with both hands the creative opportunities that opened up in 1986, when President Yoweri Museveni, after a disputed 1980 election and five years of bloodshed, came into power and promised increased freedom of expression. To his credit, Mukulu was not sitting around waiting for that day to come. He had been gripping the Ugandan imagination since the 1970s with his eccentric, bold, and revolutionary theatre work.

History has always been Mukulu’s terrain of inspiration. One of his 1970s plays, *Muzukulu Wa Kabangala/Kabanagala’s Grandson*, makes him one of the two theatre makers (along with Kiyingi), who took on the Ugandan/Indian issue before and after the incident of the expulsion of Uganda’s Indian population by Amin noted in chapter Three. A decade later, in 1982, *The Pageant* by Alex Mukulu illustrated the history of artistic repression in Uganda by dramatizing significant incidents that have taken place at the National Theatre: “the murder of Byron Kawadwa, the intimidation of artists, the police storming the stage, thus recalling a history of the repression of artistic freedom.”⁵⁴ In the subsequent plays like *Excuse Me Mzungu* (1993), *Seven Wonders of Uganda* (1995), and even uninspired and unsatisfying productions like *Diana*

⁵⁴ Ntaangare and Breitingner, “Ugandan Drama in English,” 241.

(1997) and *I Am Not Here Because I Want* (2003), Mukulu, a force, voice and theatre maker to reckon with, comments on historical events and the social and political climate. But it was in his impressive 1990 play, *Wounds of Africa*, that the chorus makes a tantalizing promise to the audience: “We shall no longer use hidden language, no longer call a spade a big spoon. From this day forward we shall call a spade a spade, and name names!” With these words, a ripple of excitement and anticipation ran through the audience, for they knew this was not an empty threat; they knew that Mukulu – no friend of the “ostrich syndrome” – was bold enough to lay bare the wounds afflicting Uganda by challenging its citizens to get their proverbial heads out of the sand.

Mukulu followed up on his proclamation of 1990 in 1992. That year, *Thirty Years of Bananas* (*Bananas* for short) hit the National Theatre stage. *Bananas* was Mukulu’s political history of Uganda, which was then celebrating its thirtieth year of independence. The play courageously spoke truth to power at a time when the waters of free speech were still being tested. And theatre, as noted above, though popular, was for the most part happy to satisfy what appeared to be the public’s desire for less political fare. Bucking this timidity, and in an act of non-violent resistance to the abuses of the post-colonial regimes, *Bananas* seemed to say, “The people see what’s going on—it is a shame, and they don’t accept it.”

The inspired choice of the banana as the central metaphor of his play brought together a primary native crop with notions of emptiness, loss, and insanity. Mukulu explains:

‘Bananas’ is an American slang for crazy but we also have our own bananas, the ones we grow which scientifically are 90% water and I think 1% protein. There is a lot of nothingness in a banana and combined with the American slang, I try to explain the period from 1962 to 1992, which was really crazy because during that period Uganda was tiptoeing politically. Not that much has changed in terms of good governance today either.⁵⁵

Implicit in the metaphor of the banana, too, was a condemnation of post-colonial “modernity” and a validation of traditional Ugandan values. As Ntangaare and Breitingen explain,

⁵⁵ See, Moses Serugo, “Alex Mukulu On Restaging 30 Years of Bananas,” *Daily Monitor*, 22 December 2006. The statement was made when Mukulu restaged the production, briefly. The production was cut short on account of a fall out between the Artist and the National Theatre establishment.

“Traditional society appreciated this plant because every part – the leaves, the fibers, the roots, and of course, the fruits—was productively used. It was a symbol of the richness of the country. The modern leaders saw it as a symbol of backwardness, and they let the bananas rot, leaving the nation in the stench of rottenness.”⁵⁶ In 1992, *Bananas* took on and spoke freely about this stench with an arresting directness.

The show was an unprecedented success, drawing in hoards of viewers: Ugandan, Asian, and White audiences. Even President Museveni, personally still popular in those days, went to see the play. Phares M. Mutibwa notes the ambitious nature of the play:

In Alex Mukulu’s play, history is not only recorded and interpreted but is also transformed into a living reality that epitomizes the life of Ugandans during their first thirty years of independence. At the same time, Alex Mukulu represents the forces of a new ethos in Uganda’s theatrical and political life.⁵⁷

When the curtain first went up on *Bananas*, the story of a forsaken “banana republic” was put in motion. It is obvious, immediately, that this republic is Uganda. The stage and the performers are draped in black, yellow, and red – the colors of our flag – a glaring reminder that this production is not, like many previous plays, about some ambiguous or nameless country, but rather it is an indictment of *our* country, specifically. Mukulu plunges into the play with a politically charged song (employing both Luganda and English phrases) that provokes thought in terms of what Uganda has experienced since the return to self-rule.

CHORUS: Who planted the conspiracy between Mutesa and Obote
Who planted the disloyalty of Amin to Obote
Who planted what happened between Lule and Nyerere...⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ntangaare and Breitingner, “Ugandan Drama in English,” 241.

⁵⁷ See, the Foreword by Phares Mutibwa: *Thirty Years of Bananas*, Nairobi, Oxford University Press (1993), vi.

⁵⁸ Mukulu, *Thirty Years of Bananas*, 3.

The song ends thus:

CHORUS: I am in my father's courtyard
Talking about these bananas growing everywhere.⁵⁹

Immediately, we were set on a journey circling around the banana as artifact and metaphor – a journey, moreover, filled with social and philosophical challenges and ideas, as is Mukulu's custom.

CHORUS: What have I done "for God and my country" [this is the national motto] during the thirty years of my country's independence?⁶⁰

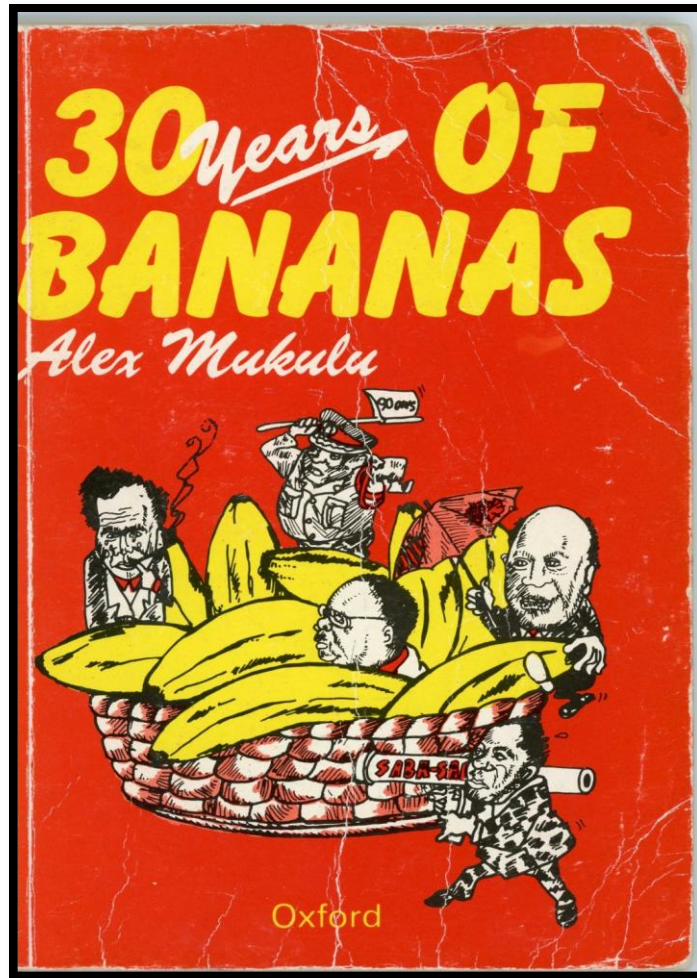
Mukulu's ambitiousness is rewarding in that even the exposition is engaging:

ZAAWEDDE: ...the period since 1962 [the Year of Independence] has, indeed, been nothing more nor less than bananas.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. 4.



19. *Thirty Years of Bananas: the book cover made from the poster of the play.*

I must confess, many of us watching had never contemplated the banana plant deeply or variably until the point when the play extols the banana and its multiple functions in ways primed to compel us to look with new eyes upon the crop we live with so closely, but so far had concentrated only on eating in staple fashion.

BIRUNGI: For purposes of general understanding and information, bananas are equatorial fruits that grow without much mechanized effort. The banana is useful as food for humans and animals and also as a source of liquor... The beaten-out pith of the banana stem, *ebinyirikisi*, is used for scrubbing bodies, both living and dead. The leaves are used as bathing basins, plates, decorations, wrappers, in cooking, trapping ants and, by some, as dancing costumes. They were also used as umbrellas in ancient times. Banana fibres are now in many a house, works and masterpieces of modern art.

KASULE: *Empumumpu*, the tip of the banana flower, is the toy cow of village kids, while the stalk of the banana leaf, *akazing'onyo* is used on them when they prove stubborn... Tonnes of water have been collected by way of *engogo ezo*.

CHANDIRU: Goats and cows are fond of banana leaves, too, and to locusts, banana leaves are the salad. To cut a long story short, we can now say that the people concerned have exploited the banana plant to a point of no complaint. Let's ask ourselves a question now: why was this utility-exploitation only applied to the banana plant? ... How come Ugandans seem to have been lost between 1962 and today, where everybody seems to be useless, as opposed to the banana plant whose every part has a profound function.⁶²

The play went on to explore the lives of the banana-eating people, along the way breaking every rule that theatre-going Ugandans – who had gotten used to Western-style realism – knew. The stage was set in a conventional proscenium arch, which while in the West has traditionally been viewed as an aid to illusion and, therefore, variants of “realism,” in Uganda is still new enough and “foreign” enough to be first and foremost a signifier of theatre itself. The proscenium “frames the action as ‘Theatre’ and consequently calls on us the spectators to read meanings into whatever we witness,”⁶³ but the story of the play moves forward through non-linear jumps rather than seamless connections.

As the play progresses, the audience hears from a number of storytellers; many of the stories are well-known (though refreshed) fables or myths. As a collection, they tell the nation's thirty-year history: the stories of the rulers and the ruled, the story of how independence turned out to be but a euphoric dream. The action of the play is located “where different groups of people gather: the marketplace, the National Museum, the football stadium. Each of these public places is endowed with a key image through which Mukulu conveys graphic insight into the mental history of his society...”⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid, 4-6.

⁶³ Richard Schechner, “Approaches” in *Performance Theory*, 1-19.

⁶⁴ Ntangaare and Breitingner, “Ugandan Drama in English,” 241.

When we were transported from the market place scene to the National Museum gallery scene, for instance, the stage was set with statuary busts – each dressed in the definitive attire and supplied with an exaggerated feature of one of Uganda’s former presidents. One bust, for example, had the large spectacles and large nostrils of Paul Muwanga, who bullied the entire nation into accepting the results of elections deemed invalid by the opposition, thereby bringing about the 1981-1986 war. Another bust wears the trademark wave of thick hair of Milton Obote, twice President and twice toppled. There is a bust (and thus an indictment) for each of the presidents since independence: Edward Mutesa II, Idi Amin, Yusuf Lule, Godfrey Binaisa, and Tito Okello were all there. Only Museveni, still in power, escaped caricature; he appears, at the end, in an appealing image rather than in gross form like those who came before him. Critically, the choice can be seen as evasion, but, theatrically, the action shows that he is still a President being watched rather than one already judged. The lesson might be that the quest for peace is not the same thing as undue confrontation; Museveni at the time was, generally, a President in good standing:

BIRUNGI: ...But there is one burst missing here, it is the burst of the current leader. I want to know why it is not here.

KALEEKEEZI: You want to know why Museveni’s bust is not here? Myfriend, we don’t display busts of people who are still being tested.⁶⁵

The spectacle of the busts was wonderfully grotesque, but Mukulu’s indictment was not reserved solely for the politicians and warmongers. The character of Kaleekeezi, the museum attendant played by Mukulu himself, is a buffoonish representation of the Ugandan people. Kaleekeezi, Mukulu says, is a version of “the fools we were.”⁶⁶ He works the system and thus is part of the problem. Because, as Mukulu says,

⁶⁵ Mukulu, *Thirty Years of Bananas*, 89.

⁶⁶ Mukulu, Alex. Interview with author. Tape recording. Kampala, Uganda, August 24, 2007.

We are the majority. There is only one man [ruler] up there. Or perhaps with his clique maybe 10,000 people... but the rest of us are the problem, how can we [allow these men to manipulate us]? Kaleekeezi is like, “Anybody can do anything!” For him, he doesn’t care! He is always ready for the next regime. It is like he doesn’t care anymore – he is even happy.⁶⁷

Through Kaleekeezi, Mukulu was incriminating ordinary Ugandans, the people who complacently cheered as old leaders were forced out and new, equally terrible leaders were ushered in, all while the country was looting itself to nothingness. Mukulu calls out the people’s complicity in the terrible presidencies, the coups and counter-coups, and the several wars, all of which have occurred since 1962.

Yet, for all his folly, Kaleekeezi is also much smarter than he lets on. Though he speaks Luganda with a heavy Rwandese accent, and so is characterized as an uneducated “house-boy” originally from Rwanda – making him both insider and outsider to Uganda’s history – Kaleekeezi understands what’s going on more than anyone else. He sees that these “heads of state” have caused enormous suffering. For example, Chandiru asks: “How come that Ugandans seem to have been lost somewhere between 1962 and now?”⁶⁸ Kaleekeezi’s view is that none of these rulers have ever listened to anybody. And, indeed, the busts on the stage were all missing those important facial features, the organs with which to hear the people.

The play goes into further detail about some of the tribulations of being in a “lost” country, ruled by earless men: Kasule, one of the characters laments, “When the guns sounded, I ran for my life. I ran for my country. I ran for my brothers. I ran for my sisters...”⁶⁹ and Bernaddette muses, “How long will I keep getting impressed at the entry of one president, and depressed at his exit?”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Mukulu, *Thirty Years of Bananas*, 5-6.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 25.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 35.

NAKKAZI: ... Incidents I remember and know at the same time are rare in my life. One of them was at my father's after party, when I saw General Idi Amin Dada for the first time.

CHORUS: If you don't mind, VC, DSO, MC, CBE!

Nakkazi recounts how she was excited as a young girl (in 1975, when Amin was Chairman of OAU, now AU)⁷¹ because, "I expected to see the conqueror of the British Empire with one of his many wives: Sarah, Madina, Kay Amin...."⁷² Much to her surprise, "The awaited lord arrived in charming style without company!"⁷³

NAKKAZI: As I was getting over the shock of not seeing him with any woman, girlfriend, concubine, or at least widow something was happening in me as I looked at him. There was strong sensuality in the eyes of the Life-President, which seemed to radiate sexual rays in the veins of the women who had now assembled themselves in strategic positions to lure the general whose weakness they knew like the back of their hands: SEX.⁷⁴

Amin's sexual mores are the stuff of legends, but nobody had ever confronted this on stage.

NAKKAZI: I could see him move towards one of the women...the woman he moved towards and grabbed was my auntie! All along, the idea 'Conqueror of the British Empire' was whirling in my mind like a strong wind. A conqueror was now dancing on target, squeezing and wooing my auntie. All the steps they took were like a gesture, a symbol of sex. I could have screamed. Instead, I closed my eyes and told the devil in the darkness that followed, "Don't lie to me anymore."

(Pause)

The image will never get out of my mind. For it revealed the truth to me. Amin was here for a woman. He wanted a woman. He had not come to the party. It was sex he was craving for.

(Pause)

Sex dictating to the dictator. Sex conquering the Conqueror!⁷⁵

By identifying and confronting – with cleverness and humor – some of the horrors with which Ugandans were living, *Bananas* helped people to articulate a role for themselves in building

⁷¹ OAU=Organization of African Unity; AU=African Union.

⁷² Mukulu, *Thirty Years of Bananas*, 20-21.

⁷³ Ibid, 21.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 21-22.

peace. In *Ugandan Drama in English*, Ntangaare and Breitinger⁷⁶ note that Mukulu's play directly engages the audience when it raises the question of individual responsibility and asks: "What have you done for your country?"⁷⁷ The play says to us as fellow Ugandans that we must wake up to the vicious cycle we are helping to perpetuate via "segregative and divisive political practices..."⁷⁸

[Ugandans have] to play as a team, and not as a band of individuals, tribes, religious and political parties at war."⁷⁹

And that we, as individuals, have to be aware of our role in the problems before us,

I also remember the day I got things for free for the first time. When Lule overthrew Amin, I looted ten pairs of shoes, eight dresses, five pairs of sandals and some perfume. I ran back home, put on the shoes and the dresses and perfumed myself. I felt like a rich person. I remember I was still young, like an egg that has been laid, when the breeze of looting blew over me. It hardened me; up to now, I want things for free!"⁸⁰

But the play points out in the beginning what may be useful to do in our quest for peace, suggesting collective responsibility is necessary,

When we are imbued with what most people call a team spirit, then we will know we have got ourselves a winning team."⁸¹

Mukulu goes to great pains to portray his people not as mere victims of colonial powers – or even post-colonial excess – but as those responsible for Uganda's troubles. He encourages people toward an attitude of responsibility rather than victimhood, toward a sense that despite the yoke

⁷⁶ Ntangaare and Breitinger, "Ugandan Drama in English," 224-249.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 242.

⁷⁹ Mukulu, 4; quoted in Ntangaare and Breitinger, "Ugandan Drama in English," 242.

⁸⁰ Mukulu, 44.

⁸¹ Ibid. 4.

of colonialism and the failures of post-colonialism, they can take an active role in shaping their own futures.⁸²

This message was perhaps particularly relevant and important given who was in the audience watching *Bananas*. The play was staged only at the National Theatre⁸³ – Mukulu only performs there – and was seen by “anyone who was anyone.” The tickets were expensive, however, even for a National Theatre performance. Mukulu hiked up the price, wittingly or unwittingly making the show accessible only to people who had resources – money, clout, or friends who could get them a seat. And everybody who had any resources at all fought to find a way in. It’s a shame that the play ended up being an upper-class phenomenon, because the thirty years of madness Mukulu wrote about certainly were not restricted to the upper class; the troubles of the country don’t care about class. On the other hand, the play’s message – that not only the rulers of the country, but also the *people* were responsible for the country’s suffering – was a particularly important message for the Ugandan elite to hear, as they may be more prone to apathy and complacency.

It is important to note, also, that while *Bananas* was exclusive in terms of social class, it was historic in its ability to draw into the National Theatre people from all of Uganda’s still-polarized ethnic communities – native Ugandan, Caucasian, and Indian. Artists had been trying to draw people from all three communities for a while, but it hadn’t worked. And then suddenly, with *Bananas*, everyone was somehow a stakeholder, whether they knew it or not. Everyone was

⁸² Of course, in taking responsibility for our present and future, we need not forget the ways in which colonialism wreaked havoc upon us in the past. It is worth noting that the Ugandan stage abounds with plays that question post-colonial abuses and excesses, but hardly ever with plays that deal with the ills of colonialism. While I have deepest respect for Mukulu’s choice to focus on the responsibility of African leaders and people, I think we would be remiss to ignore the colonial legacies which dehumanized native Africans, excluded them from public life, and pitted local ethnic groups against each other across the African continent.

⁸³ *30 Years of Bananas* was also performed in Vienna, Austria at the Theater Des Augenbkllicks. For some years, this institution had an interest in Ugandan theatre, particularly in the work of Alex Mukulu (they hosted several of his plays, including *Wounds of Africa* and *Guest of Honour*, before producing *Bananas*) and that of Stephen Rwangyezi, founder of the Ndere Troupe.

curious. They wanted to hear history played back to them, engagingly but critically, without constraints on freedom of speech. They wanted to discover that which they didn't know. Or that which they had previously known from hearsay or media reports – revealed now by the immediacy of theatre. They also wanted to see the spectacle; Mukulu is very good at making spectacle. The songs were incredible. The actors and actresses were beautiful. The choreography was excellent. This show became the social thing to do. Even though not everyone could afford to go, the show was all anyone talked about for a while. It ran for an unprecedented six months. Everyone wanted to see thirty years of independence staged as a two-hour show: Uganda's ruthless political history repackaged with buoyant energy and trenchant criticism as a recurrent struggle against going bananas.

Biro

Incidentally, 1992, the Year Mukulu shook the theatre scene (in Kampala) with, *Thirty Years of Bananas*, is the year Ntare Mwine landed “the lead role of Paul – a charming con man claiming to be Sidney Poitier's son – in John Guare's, *Six Degrees of Separation*, at the Doolittle Theatre [in New York].”⁸⁴ He was 25 years old, and had just graduated from New York University (NYU) with a Masters in Fine Arts (MFA). A decade afterwards, in 2002, the Ugandan-American artist – born in Hanover, New Hampshire (where Dartmouth College is located) because his parents had escaped political upheaval in Uganda – arrived at the National Theatre in Kampala from the USA with a script: *Biro*.⁸⁵

The script was a stage drama definable in part as what Alecky Blythe calls “verbatim theatre,” in part what Peter Cheeseman deems “documentary theatre,” in part what David Hare

⁸⁴ See, Janice Arkatov, “Ntare Mwine Is New Kid in the Spotlight in 'Six Degrees,’” *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1992; John Guare, *Six Degrees of Separation*, 1st Vintage Books ed edition (New York, NY: Vintage, 1990).

⁸⁵ Ntare Mwine, “Biro,” *Unpublished* (2003), 3.

calls “factual theatre,” and in part what Elyse Dodgeson describes as “personal testimony theatre.”⁸⁶ Dodgeson’s work, in particular, spread to Uganda in the 1990s, in what was a productive and well-sustained cultural exchange program between London’s Royal Court Theatre and Ugandan theatre practitioners (1994-2000), mostly funded by the British Council. In general, the listed forms differ in manner and yet are related by the nature of theatre itself: they all stress theatre’s ability to engage with society on a very intimate level as well as through mirror-like reflection and representation; they all are designed to facilitate theatre that reaches beyond conventional approaches, a theatre that is sometimes underestimated because it is based on real-life incidents and at times goes so far as to apply real life dialogue. Hare’s pithy observations highlight the functioning of such theatre:

...[W]hat we are witnessing is one of those moments at which theatre excels. Once again, the art form is looking outside itself—and more profitably than any other – trying to expose the way in which we all, as individuals, are not connected to the great events of history. Yes, *Electra* seems timely. But so does the idea of *Talking to Terrorists*... Why can’t we just admit that theatre using real people has become a fabulously rich and varied strand which, for many years, has been pumping red cells into the dramatic blood stream? And this kind of work does appear even more necessary and affecting at this particular time, doesn’t that tell us about the time as much as the work?⁸⁷

Noting only the apparent similarities without claiming any known influence of the listed theatre forms above, the script Ntare arrived with on the Ugandan scene was very much shaped in accordance with this sort of framework. He was looking to workshop the play in order to include local nuances, to hone it with a view to staging a fully-fledged production soon thereafter. To that end, he worked with four different theatre practitioners (Kaya Kagimu Mukasa, Eva Tumwesigye, Philip Luswata, and myself) separately, on different days, for a fortnight. Finally, the group gathered together for a staged reading of the play. Ntare returned to the USA and came back to Uganda after a year, ready to stage his one-man drama about life lived against the odds.

⁸⁶ See, Robin Soans, *Talking To Terrists* (London: Oberon Modern Plays, 2005), 101-113.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 113.

Physically, he had changed a great deal compared to the last time he was in Uganda. The remarkable weight loss (he shed thirty-five lbs/sixteen Kilos) was deliberate on his part,

When I was here last year, I took a picture with my aunt, and realised how healthy I was looking. But I was trying to portray a person who was under extreme stress, who is sick, has just been in prison, and an alcoholic, so I had to lose weight.⁸⁸

Those of us who had seen him previously were quite impressed with how different he looked, and how he very much looked the part called for by the script: an African individual in an American jail. The rehearsals for *Biro* soon took off and Ntare began to metamorphose into Biro. So who is Ntare the dramatist and performer, and who is Mwerindebiro (Biro) the man he embodies in the drama?

Mwine, 38, was born in the U.S. to Ugandan parents as his father studied at Dartmouth College. His parents separated when Mwine was 4, his father going on to work in international finance and development, including the World Bank in Washington, D.C., his mother teaching psychology at the University of Nairobi in Kenya (both have since moved back to Uganda).⁸⁹

Biro is said to be a distant relative of Ntare's who, apparently, has become his friend for life (though other sources say he is Ntare's uncle). However close the kinship, it is this individual from whom Ntare heard the stories of war that led to the compelling drama, *Biro*, which critics described in Kampala as a play that is "surely going to join the ranks of Uganda's major theatrical performances,"⁹⁰ in London as "strong addition to the margins of burgeoning documentary theatre genre,"⁹¹ and in New York as "an eloquent intimate solo piece."⁹² The play has gone on to have

⁸⁸ Kalungi Kabuye, "Ntare's Long Road To Biro," *Daily Monitor* (Newspaper, 17 January 2003).

⁸⁹ Scott Martell, "Ntare Mwine's Journey of Discovery," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 2005.

⁹⁰ Doreen Baingana, "Biro: Uganda's Story," *The Monitor*, 30th January 2003.

⁹¹ Gibbs, Jonathan, *Time Out, London*, 15th April 2003.

⁹² Margo Jefferson, "A Wry Outsider Determined to Endure, Against The Odds," *The New York Times*, 21st April 2004.

an impressive production history, significantly including performances in many other African locales:

Biro held its world premiere at Uganda's National Theatre in Kampala, Uganda on January 26th, 2003. The play subsequently premiered in London then in New York at The Joseph Papp Public Theater in the spring of 2004. On May 2, 2004, the BBC African Services broadcast a 30-minute version of the play throughout Africa. *Biro* was performed at the July 2004 African Union summit meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and at The Market Theatre in Johannesburg, South Africa in September 2004. The production premiered at Seattle's Empty Space Theater in April 2005 and at Kenya's National Theatre in May 2005. *Biro* premiered in Zimbabwe in July 2005.⁹³

Biro, after a short form of the name Mwerendebiro, meaning "beware of time" (because time has all the answers), is a play about a Ugandan citizen—a former child soldier afflicted with HIV/AIDS incarcerated in a jail in Texas, USA on immigration grounds. The tale, a biographical account, dramatizes *Biro*'s epic journey spanning four nations: from Uganda to Cuba and back, and thereafter via Canada to the USA. Growing up in war-torn Uganda, *Biro* opted to be a part of the armed rebellion of the February 1981 - January 1986 "Bush War." Despite his mother's protestations to the contrary, he got his way. Soon he was immersed in the ravages of war, endangering his family and, more personally, experiencing in his own sexual awakening, which also had consequences. While he set out to fight for a change in his country, in time he finds himself facing his own personal war against HIV/AIDS. The resulting social and family stigma drives an otherwise patriotic citizen away from home into exile. (For the record, he is not the only afflicted one; there were 32 others, out of 45 who were tested in Cuba, July 1986, but this is his story.)

The dramatic action details the events that led this compelling character into the current circumstance of not only being incarcerated in exile, but also willfully cutting himself off from his homeland. The action depicts how his dauntless will edges him on from a state of considerable hopelessness in his own homeland, and drives him towards other lands in search of deliverance. The play unfolds as a straightforward but engaging one-man drama about the life and

⁹³ Ntare Mwine, "*Biro*," (Unpublished, 2003), 3.

times of an irrepressible character striving for a cause early on in his life, and later on for survival at any cost, hence the incarceration he undergoes, rightly, on grounds of being an illegal alien. But for Biro, there is more to his case than his immigration status and he sets out to show as much, unfolding in the process a remarkable African story awash with issues of global concern: the legacy of war and its aftermath, HIV/AIDS and social stigma, the paradox of Home and Exile – issues which raise questions about the so-called “African Tragedy” and the much-coveted “American Dream.” These revelations unfold in a Texas jail but are in fact steeped in the background of a turbulent Ugandan political history.

Having engaged at some length with the issues surrounding homeland and exile in discussing *The Floods* (chapter three) and *Come Good Rain* (chapter four), I aim to focus here on the “African Tragedy” in juxtaposition to the “American Dream.” Neither concept bears a unitary definition. The “African Tragedy” encompasses all manner of difficulty on the continent attributable to the legacy of European colonialism – still going strong in post-colonial times – and hence is a widespread phenomenon, whereas the “American Dream” – the promise of hope for all – is a much-sought experience of many people and especially people from developing countries like Uganda. In this instance, I am referring to the general migration of African people to USA in search of better living standards and political freedom; the life and times of Biro as embodied and dramatized by Ntare provides a particular case, worthy of attention.

On page and on stage, the setting brings different worlds together: the main dramatic action unfolds in the USA, shifts to Uganda, and concludes back in the USA. Shaped with a well-built beginning, middle, and end, the play is deceptively simple but espouses complex and engaging issues with the aid of sound effects—mechanized doors, voice-overs, lullaby, chants—plus a backdrop on which images will be projected throughout the play.

As the drama begins, Biro is in jail in Texas, USA – rightly – on charges of illegal immigration. Clad in orange prison attire, and ushered into sight by the voice of a prison guard

punctuated by the sound of mechanized doors, Biro wants to plead his case: that there is more at stake than the perceived prison setting and orange jump suit suggest. In his plea to his lawyer and to the audience –which may or may not be one and the same thing – Biro does not mince words:

The main reason I came to the United States was for medicine
That was the primary goal along with taking care of my son
But accompanied with these I had also other expectations⁹⁴

The “expectations” pertain to “crossing the poverty line,” a goal impeded by a limited education. As far as he knows, out there, abroad, away from this “wasteland”⁹⁵ he was born to, lie places like London or, in this case, the USA, which seem to be “the sure way of getting out of the mess you are in.” Biro’s “mess” happens to be a significant problem: he is afflicted by a grave health condition, HIV/AIDS (at a time when, at least in Uganda, that spelled a death sentence: mid 1980s). So he wanders far away from his homeland in search of survival in places where medical help is available and change is a tangible possibility, as far as he can perceive:

These people when they come home from abroad
They have good-looking sneakers
They have jeans
And these were people who had very little before
Literally it’s like they went from shit to sugar⁹⁶

Biro wishes the same for himself, and hatches a plan:

When I get to the States I get my education
Monies from the branches of trees
I’ll get my treatment
And in two years having made enough cash I’ll go back home
Start a small business
Take care of my son
Eh
Little did I know⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid, 4. The dialogue for *Biro* is written without punctuations. All quotations are in the style of the printed text.

⁹⁵ The term is in line with Ngugi’s assertion in *Decolonising the Mind* (London: James Curry/Heinmann, 1986), that the erosion of “names, language and environment” breeds a wasteland many people tend to flee, and keep away from.

⁹⁶ Mwine, 4.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

But even in the USA trouble knows his whereabouts. He is a man who thrives in social conditions – at least he did so in Uganda – but in Texas he is sad, devoid of friends, and “crippled by loneliness” so deeply felt that even the *Cosby* or *Oprah* TV programs become a matter of routine hard for him to bear. Drink and despair consume him enough to render him a “devil’s workshop.” Uncontrolled drinking – Biro admits to being a habitual drinker – results in an ill-advised argument with the police, and a trip to jail, where the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) hold him for two years without trial.

[*Biro*] provides a glimpse into the lives of illegal immigrants as they try to find work, fraught with fear and genuinely vulnerable to others' whims. It's a harrowing depiction.⁹⁸

The night of Mike Tyson’s first fight after serving a jail term (1999), was the occasion on which Biro ended up jailed. His fellow revelers, one Donnell and a Mexican, clashed, “Donnell vanished into thin air,” and, when the police showed up, Biro was not sober enough to avoid landing in jail; he was charged with being “drunk and disorderly,” which unearthed the fact there was already warrant out for his arrest. He was guilty of having forged a social security number, “A state i.d. is what I needed to survive.” Effectively, Biro achieved his aim but not in the way he expected. He made it into America via many shady dealings, and kept going by the same means for as long as it took for the system to catch up with him, which is just what it did.

I am just worried that they will deport me to Uganda
And that is as good as a death sentence...⁹⁹

Despite the anomie experienced there, The USA, for Biro, represents a lifeline. Ideally, he moves from a war-torn place to, “the land of honey and milk,” says Biro himself; in other words, from the so-called “African Tragedy” to the coveted “American dream.” But in reality, Biro learns that: be it where he has been – a place he left because of the feeling of utter

⁹⁸ Steven Oxman, “*Biro*,” Legit Reviews, Regional, *Variety*, October 28, 2005.

⁹⁹ Mwine. 7.

hopelessness – or where he has arrived at – a place he came to in search of deliverance – he has become a target for social stigma and for exploitation in various ways owing to his HIV/AIDS status. Biro may have been a war combatant, but stricken with HIV/AIDS, his very worth is eroded at many levels of human interaction. The fate of the afflicted is pitiable in either country.

Notable, however, is Biro's own preference:

I would rather be here struggling to survive
I would rather go to hell for my son
I can do any job for him
I don't even mind going to the graveyard and digging ditches
But when you take even that graveyard away
As immigration has
Then I have nothing left¹⁰⁰

This candidness is unsurprising given the balance of daily life in Uganda vis a vis USA, but it is cause for thought and reflection. The unflinching privileging of jail and graveyard conditions that a former "freedom fighter" is reduced to in the USA over relative terms of freedom in Uganda is a serious indictment of post-colonial Uganda.

This wrenching moment leads into a vital aspect of Biro's eponymous play – the memory of life in Uganda, starting with Biro's self-recognition:

I was born in Uganda...
My father gave me the name Mwerindebiro
It means beware of time
Because time has all the answers¹⁰¹

The name, then, points to a proverb. In the African oral tradition, proverbs are a potent tool applicable for different purposes: to instruct, to rebuke, to caution, to enlighten, or in this case, to inspire. As Fanon argues, cultural consciousness for African nations can be continental in scope and if among the Igbo people, "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten,"¹⁰² then in

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Famous proverb in: Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, Modern Classics, 2001. (London: Penguin, 1958), 6.

accordance with Biro's naming rights it can also be said among Ugandans, as with other African people, proverbs are a means with which to confront life. The proverbs, Igbo (Nigerian) or Kinyankole (Ugandan) are emblematic of traditional African values of food and of communion, of caution and of resilience. Beyond the function of providing an African identity, the proverb embedded in Biro's full name – evoking the sands of time and the waves of change – serves multiple dramatic functions: as a title, as a crucial song line of the drama, as a means to transport the audience from one setting to another. That is to say, from the Western world's point of view to an African world viewpoint, from the first world to the third world, from the USA to Uganda, all along juxtaposing some paradoxical issues pertaining to the "African Tragedy" and the "American Dream." It is a double-edged dilemma, whereby to escape one place is to lose track of homeland values, and yet to embrace the other is to conform to the "wasteland" that exile can also be.¹⁰³

Notwithstanding the intuition Biro's father had in naming him, the life and times of Mwerendebiro amount to a tale filled with more questions than answers, even for the playwright: "I just wrote *Biro* to try and tell a compelling story. I didn't write it as a sermon. I don't have answers to the questions I posed."¹⁰⁴ One fairly answerable set of questions, though, concerns Biro's background; his back-story is of a sensitive young Ugandan, born into a family of "freedom fighters."¹⁰⁵ That is, a family history which spells witting embroilment in warfare. His family home was a rendezvous point for Anti-Government plotting sessions, which he often witnessed. Thus, aware of the oppression and repression Uganda was subject to for many years, but also driven by his willful nature – as well as the spirit of teenage rebellion – he joins a rebel

¹⁰³ In the essay, "Voices From The Frontier," *The Guardian*, July 2002. Wole Soyinka uses "wasteland" in opposite terms to Ngugi, by suggesting that "the new-found-land" that exile is could prove to be a "desolate place."

¹⁰⁴ Nicholas M White, *Biro, Arts and Sciences*, University of Virginia (A&S Magazine, On-line, 2005).

¹⁰⁵ See, Mwene, 7.

army (Museveni's NRA), making himself part of a war of resistance aimed to bring about a revolution. Upon enlisting for the "Bush War," he finds there are many others of his age group who are involved, some of whom die during training and raiding expeditions. Whereas it is not lost on him that he could easily have been one of the dead, he will not be shaken; he is fully convinced of the rightness of his cause.

His family's choice to militate against the Uganda of Idi Amin and Milton Obote has proved disastrous. His brother Rutogi has been captured and killed by Amin, and his brother Rushongoka has also been killed, presumably fighting for NRA against the UNLA. Still, Biro, who admits Amin was a "nightmare simple and pure," holds that Obote "created Amin and used him as his blunt instrument until it turned against him in 1971," and he claims that Obote killed twice as many people as Idi Amin. However, perhaps the more compelling grievance of all is displacement, a ground for dispossession: "My family scattered around the world as a result of these so-called leaders,"¹⁰⁶ remembers Biro. And the price his family paid for their lot in this history is indeed considerable:

My brothers and sisters at that time went into exile
Rushongoka and Rutogi* who started the movement were already in Dar es Salaam
Rutenda and Grace went to London
Betty Peace and Jackie were in Nairobi
Mujuni and Joy went to America
Everybody ran for their dear lives

I am the only child out of the thirteen of us who never sought refuge
Until now
I was just the baby in the family
My father was a teacher that time
And his wish was that I just continue school...¹⁰⁷

Biro's father's wishes, it turns out, were in vain, partly because Biro's own notions of being a "revolutionary" go back to his school days. He was a major player in a violent school riot,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 10.

and for his pains the police brought in to respond to the revolt against the school administration “slashed”¹⁰⁸ him.

The school said it would be closed indefinitely

They said they would mail us letters when it would re-open
Up to now I am still waiting for that mail
For me and my best friend Rukuuza
Our political awakening began at Kigezi High School
That’s where I first learned about standing up for one’s rights
It was the beginning of my coming of age
We had shut down the thieving institution¹⁰⁹

Biro and other “revolutionaries” are sent home, only to become largely idle in a place narrow on entertainment, sans clubs, sans movie theatres, sans television such that someone like Guma, the village hero, occupies the young people’s free time by initiating the likes of *Biro* into a fondness for drink, and to sexual awareness.

It is with barely two terms to complete his secondary school education that *Biro* opts to join the “Bush War” of 1981-1986. At 16 years of age, he lies to his mother that he will run an errand for her, but vanishes to join the NRA.

She had been given cows from some other village that she wanted me to retrieve
So I told her I’d go and fetch her cows
The following morning me and Rukuuza set off to join the army...¹¹⁰

The first NRA soldier he sees from head to toe is a “Kadogo, a kid of maybe ten or eleven carrying his SMG.”¹¹¹ *Biro* is psyched:

That was the biggest excitement
Eh if this kid can join the army why not me...¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 11.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 12.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² The psychology of the *Kadogo* phenomenon is worrisome. Effectively, the use of children by the NRA (not to be confused with the LRA) in the five-year war suggests two disturbing thoughts: that the LRA are not the only ones who are guilty of this anomaly, and that the NRA took State power riding on the back of minors – the living and the dead.

His mother, sick with worry, tracked him down, and tried to get him out of it:

BIRO: It was during this intelligence training that my mother found me
I was called in front of the army Commander Fred
It was the first and last time I ever saw him laugh...

FRED: Biro this is your mother
She has complained to Museveni
All of your family
Don't understand why you are in the army
And I have directives from Museveni that you go back home
With your mother

BIRO: What

FRED: Yeah go back home leave our gun

BIRO: I am not going back home

FRED: Talk to your mother about it
If I had my small gun I would have shot her in the foot
It was the first time I hated her to the bone.¹¹³

Time has eaten up her little boy. In his place stands a fighter, bent on being a part of the war,
whatever it takes, whatever the cost:

BIRO: Okay look here Mukyara
You're going to remove me from this army
But that's the beginning of your unhappiness
I'm going to terrorize you
Then I'll come back and join this same army

MUKYARA: But look here you're going to die like your brothers

BIRO: Don't meddle in my business.¹¹⁴

His commander intervened, and anyway his mother decided in the end that Biro might be safer
with the NRA.

Several training drills, politicization sessions, battles, and war songs later, the resistance
started to yield results: the NRA rebel forces earned Peace Talks negotiations. During the period

¹¹³ Mwine 2003, 20.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 21.

of cease-fire, the rebel soldiers resorted to sex romps in a chain-like manner partly because, one Edwin “was popular like hot cakes” and “He’d bring his girlfriend” and “The girlfriend would be accompanied by her girlfriends,” the ones the likes of Biro would poach. Even in such cases, rank prevailed:

The beautiful ones would be screwed by our commanders
 But when a commander would see a better one
 They would drop that one and it would go to the middle commanders
 By the time it came to us we were like hyenas eating at the tracks of a lion
 But nevertheless happy
 It was a cycle of screwing actually
 In hotels nightclubs dorm rooms... ¹¹⁵

Biro confesses to being only a minor player,

Me on my part
 I uh don’t think I uh participated in it as much
 But I still got it
 I think it was gonorrhea or chlamydia or something like that
 It burned and there was a little bit of puss
 Eh it was those std’s [STDs] that were popular
 Most of these commanders could hardly walk... ¹¹⁶

The STD was the precursor to the eventual fate of HIV/AIDS. The vivid images of Ugandan warlord figures, namely Milton Obote, Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni and, even Paul Kagame – the incumbent President of Rwanda and, intriguingly, at one time a soldier of the NRA in Uganda who drilled Biro and others on their way to Fidel Castro’s Cuba for training – who haunt the play. For example,

Two days later they said we were going for training abroad
 Rumors started
 Some were saying Libya because Libya at that time was training soldiers
 Others were like Cuba
 There were a total of seventy-two of us who were to go for training abroad
 The head of the entire group was Paul Kagame

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 22.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

... He later became President of Rwanda after the genocides
 Kagame doesn't drink he doesn't smoke he's just miserable
 He is going to die a sad man
 So there we are at the airport under Kagame's watch
 They handed us our passports
 That's when we saw the visa
 Havana, Cuba
 Wow
 Eh we had been studying about Cuba
 Its revolution
 Che Guevara and his philosophies
 Under capitalism
 Man is guided by a cold ordinance
 Which is usually beyond his comprehension
 Those of us from military intelligence were hyped
 We boarded a Uganda Airlines flight via London and Kagame briefed...
 Kagame: You are traveling
 If anyone asks you a lot of questions
 Don't say you're a soldier
 Say you're a soccer player that's it.¹¹⁷

The international intrigue is striking and revealing. In Cuba, where “everything is rationed, everything,” the specter of war in Africa, peopled by different groups, looms before Biro:

There were people from Sudan
 From Ethiopia
 From Angola.¹¹⁸

The image is a stark depiction of the legacy of war in African countries. Uganda is neither the “oddity” nor the “aberration”,¹¹⁹ war is a widely spread malaise on the continent. Men, women, and even children in countries neighboring each other: Congo and Rwanda, Uganda and Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea – countries as far apart as Namibia and Senegal, Angola and Liberia – have been maimed and killed in considerable numbers in the name of one revolution or another, often repetitive, always costly. The HIV/AIDS problem, prevalent in *Biro*, exemplifies one such cost.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 25.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 26.

¹¹⁹ Mamdani's terms, regarding the reversible roles of victims and killers during Genocide. Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton, 2001).

Apparently, Biro's battle of patriotism comes at a cost neither his country nor his family at large, and not even he, himself, or those who commandeered the war is prepared for, as is shown by Museveni's response to the grim news from Cuba; for by this point in time, Museveni, the resistance leader, has become President of Uganda:

How are you doing
 How are you doing
 Anyway look here boys you went for training
 And I am being blamed by Castro
Walisema eti nilisukuma wagonjwa
 That I deliberately sent sick people to a foreign mission
 You have all been returned and as you may be aware
 According to Cuban records you have all been diagnosed with HIV

HIV is the disease which causes AIDS and AIDS is incurable

And here you are
 But don't get alarmed...¹²⁰

As noted above, the play suggests thirty-two out of forty-five of the Ugandans sent to Cuba for training were afflicted; but President Museveni, who came to one of the shows, argued with the figures, saying the afflicted were eighteen not thirty-two, as well as with other issues portrayed in the drama:

Museveni said the play, acted by Ntare [Mwine], a US-based Ugandan actor, misquoted him in the episode when Biro and his comrades met the President after returning from Cuba.

In the play, Biro said Museveni told the dejected soldiers they had been dropped because they were HIV-positive and it was incurable.

"I did not tell these children that they were going to die. I remember telling them the disease had a long gestation period and that the medicine would be found soon," Museveni said. He urged Mwine to correct the errors.

Asked whether he would correct the errors an ecstatic Mwine said, "This is not a documentary. It is just drama."¹²¹

¹²⁰ Mwine, 28.

¹²¹ Solomon Muyita, "Museveni Watches 'Biro,' Praises Mwine," *The New Vision* (Newspaper, 23 January 2003).

Whatever the correct answer, the reality is a profound tragedy for Biro and his comrades: "I lost more friends as a result of AIDS than as a result of combat,"¹²² he recalls. Yet despite his "courage to live,"¹²³ Biro is himself guilty of adding to the problem, at times using condoms, but other times not (for a four year period). Ultimately, Biro may have been a war combatant, but stricken with HIV/AIDS his very worth is eroded at many levels of human interaction. Moreover, the social attitude to the predicament of an HIV/AIDS status proves to be intractable. His own siblings, when they look at him, see a dead man walking and proceed to treat him as such.

Maddened, but refusing to lie down and die, the irrepressible Biro decides to depart from his homeland. Desperate to survive, he leaves the country he fought for behind and with tenacity heads out to a place he believes will accord him some means to fight for that lifeline, rather than suffer at home under ignoble conditions. Hence, the USA is the place to be, even if the cost involves giving up his own identity to become "Moses Keita": an escapade that lands him in jail.

Ironically, the Texan jail in the USA sets the mood for a contrasting theme of the play; Biro wants to be free, and freedom is an ideal he will go to any length for, whether it means dropping out of school in Uganda to pick up a gun and join a guerilla war, or being a guinea pig for HIV/AIDS research drugs in the USA.

I arrived in America on February 14, 1998
 Valentines Day
 I knew that now I am here and I have made it
 Joy had already lined up some groundwork looking for doctors
 We met these people
 They drew my blood
 When they saw my viral load...
 Everybody who looked at it was amazed that I was still on my feet and walking
 They were like this man must be saved
 But it was like until I get my social security card I was not eligible for medicine
 Actually I don't know if it was that I was not eligible for medicine
 Because they asked me if I minded being researched on
 They didn't tell me directly like

¹²² Mwine, 30.

¹²³ Ibid, 31.

We're going to research on you that's the only way to give you medication
 But somehow they said...
 Researcher: You don't exactly qualify for this program
 But there are other ways to get you treatment
 There is a research going on
 They will not put you on a placebo
 We'll make sure that they give you the right medication...
 We just need your signature ...

I went for it...

They drew my blood my viral load they gave me medication
 Two months later I tested again
 My viral load had fallen so drastically
 They had never seen anybody improving like I was doing
 I know most people don't want to go on research
 I know some places they even pay you to go there
 But me I knew I was an illegal immigrant
 I had to cooperate as long as it would give me my treatment
 And apparently my immigration status did not prevent me from being put on federal
 funded AIDS research ...¹²⁴

But even such a deal cannot help him escape the pangs of jail:

I had many expectations when I came to the United States
 Two years in a Texas jail for a misdemeanor was not one of them
 Even though I am getting legitimate medicine here
 So far in my life this jail is the biggest nightmare I have gone through
 I will do anything to survive even if it means going to hell
 I'll do it to survive then move on...¹²⁵

Biro is the last of the 32 who were diagnosed HIV reactive in Cuba; the rest are dead. For that matter, he dreads possible deportation to Uganda. He fears he will die as his son, who has already seen other children's fathers die, looks on. If only HIV medicine were affordable, he argues, he would go home, but in Uganda,

Only the rich can afford the medicine now [2001]
 Everybody else is dying.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Ibid, 36.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 43.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

The picture is grim, even for a war survivor like Biro. The difference between the “African Tragedy” and the “American Dream,” however compromised, amounts to life and death. Afflicted as he is with HIV/AIDS, his case is terminal (remember, these events take place in the early times of the condition). What is really at stake is not even the sheer prolonging of life in dread of death. Biro is not afraid of death; he had enlisted into a rebel army to go to war, a game of death. He just does not want to simply die and in so doing subject his one and only child to possible utter hopelessness, despite the traditional African practice of social welfare. Globalism has eaten away at, and continues to eat away at that tradition and, anyway, Biro can witness for himself that his professional, social, and even his family networks have – consciously or subconsciously – written him off, treating him as if he were dead already with the only exceptions being his sister Joy in America (much to her husband’s chagrin), his sister Peace in Uganda, and his blind uncle. Consequently, his confidence in Ugandan society – something he valued so much that he risked his very life by going to war – is deeply eroded; it was in part this erosion that has compelled him to wander far away to this land of dubious “honey and milk.” But if Africa eats him alive, USA tries him to no end. If in Africa he faces near death situations repeatedly, in the USA, he faces ongoing uncertainty. Moving from Africa to the USA, he discovers he has jumped from the fire back to the frying pan; either place fries him.

For Biro, exile is at once a monolithic giant he cannot wrap his hands around and wrestle with successfully and also a form of claustrophobia that has left him more or less as helpless as the “African Tragedy” rendered him to be. The “African Tragedy” may well be behind him, but the “American Dream” is “a bridge too far.” He ends up incarcerated before he can grasp it. Under the circumstances, the most he can do is plea: “please help me.”¹²⁷ A yearning for liberty drove his epic journey from Uganda to the USA. The last image of the play: a close up of the Statue of Liberty.

¹²⁷ Scott Martelle, “Ntare Mwine’s Journey of Discovery,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 2005.

Post Production

BY taking on *Biro* (a true story of his relative, dead set on remaining anonymous), Ntare Mwine, who initially thought he was, “delving into a single African immigrant's struggle to out-swim the riptides of modern life: poverty and HIV/AIDS, war and human migration,” has found a way to chronicle and embody a continent’s plight. Moreover, there is an angle to Mwine’s project that is both philosophical and deeply personal:

I was born in the States partly as a result of insecurities in my parents' mother country... I've gone back to work with some of these artists, and I felt I was really seeing a reflection of myself. This is what I could have been.... It's been a remarkable journey.¹²⁸

And although the play is informed by warfare, even if it is a tale of a former rebel soldier and,

[A]lthough the Biro character enlists with the National Resistance Army – which General Museveni commanded in the early 1980s, and which eventually brought him to power – the author does not want the play to be seen as propaganda. "I didn't write this as a platform or vehicle for the NRA," he insists.¹²⁹

Following the success of the play, Non Government Organizations (NGOs) were so taken by it that they commissioned Mwine to conduct drama and theatre workshops for People With AIDs (PWA) countrywide. Eva Tumwesigye and I proceeded to work with him again. The experience led us to the west, to the east and to the north of the country. The theatre groups we worked with were composed of PWAs mainly, but not exclusively. Northern region groups complained that their problems had been incubated in and were now compounded by the ongoing presence of war, the full impact of which hardly reached us in the southern area Uganda at the time, or, if and when it so did, it did so by rumored reports, not always accurate, and sometimes invested with a mythical quality.¹³⁰ In carrying on the Biro production beyond the confines of the National Theatre, we had come up close to the grim reality other Ugandans were faced with: men,

¹²⁸ Ibid.

women, and children forcibly herded into camps and branded “Internally Displaced Persons” (IDPs). Simply put, this lot of Ugandans was subjected to grave living conditions due to war.

Like the conditions we were faced with while conducting theatre workshops next to IDP camps, the play is a true slice of life. And like *Come Good Rain* (examined in the previous chapter), it is not only about warfare, but also about the human condition as framed by the circumstances of war. In this sense, Ugandan warfare is but a trigger, a catalyst. Viewed from an African and international outlook, such dramas subtly delve into human dilemmas brought to light in the extreme circumstances of warfare, as well as exposing the specific dilemmas faced by Ugandans, caught up, as are others, in warfare that aims at the annihilation of one set of human beings by another. Thus, as the production record and reception suggests, *Biro* is the story of the African struggle and even the human struggle in the face of a legacy of war.

Biro the man is a relative of Mwine’s – perhaps a distant one – who has expressed gratitude to the playwright for truthfully telling his story. It is this individual from whom Mwine heard the stories of war and sexual mores in the NRA. He is a very real person, yet it seems to me that in Uganda’s social consciousness his very being has been subsumed by his condition; for while his story has served as torchlight with which to navigate the dark paths of war and HIV/AIDS related problems throughout the war ravaged sections of the country, I am struck by the fact that, other than the actor portraying him, nobody, no organization seems to have thought about Biro himself, the man in the tale, in terms of a possible homecoming.

After the opening night show at the Public Theatre, New York, Mwine, the author and actor, put a call through to this individual and told him of how well it had gone, and then handed me the phone to greet him. He was in Canada at the time, having gotten out of that Texas jail, and

¹²⁹ David White, “Revisiting Real-Life Nightmares,” *Financial Times*, (London World Reports – Uganda) April 15, 2003.

¹³⁰ The mythic aspects of the war in northern Uganda are well documented in Behrend’s Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda, 1986-97* (Kampala: Fountain, 2004).

had not seen the show himself (the first time he got to see the play, was to be the last time Mwine performed the play).¹³¹ The person I spoke to had a cheery and upbeat manner about him; he seemed in high spirits. I do not know, at this point, if he has been back home since. The idea, to bring him back home, was a project that was on Mwine's agenda since the initial stages of the production in Uganda.¹³² I asked him if and when he will come home? "One day," he said. The telephone conversation did not end on that note, but his reply pointed to neither a "yes," nor a "no." His response indicated either ambiguity or ambivalence, possibly both. Ultimately, the period of absence since his voluntary exile is fraught with implications of what Gbanabom Hallowell in *The Claustrophobia Of Exile: African Poets Writing In The "Wasteland"*: calls "irreparable loss for everyone concerned: the individual, the nation-state, and the Diaspora."¹³³

Biro went to exile, and whatever the difficulties encountered, he now prefers exile to home. Mwine, on the other hand, born in exile, returned to Uganda to write and perform a play that has now circulated throughout the world, particularly in other African countries. In writing about the ways in which war and theatrical performance have intersected in Uganda's post-colonial history, I had determined to maintain a focus on productions give at the National Theatre in Kampala; but, in writing, a striking fact emerges: many of the significant plays that mark this intersection were written, like this dissertation, by artists working away from Ugandan soil, living in exile or on extended visits. This is true of Okello, Ruganda, and Seremba, as well as Mwine's initial draft. Often, their work has found resonance in other countries and with other audiences – notably, but not exclusively, with other African audiences, in Africa or Diaspora abroad.

¹³¹ See, Joel Grothe, *UVA Actors Past and Present Collaborate at World AIDS Conference*, Online, Drama, University of Virginia (Charlottesville: Drama Department News, 2006).

Biro was also recently restaged at Bard College in New York, in February 2011.

¹³² Mwine, Ntare. Personal communication. Kampala, January 2002.

¹³³ Gbananon Hallowell, "The Claustrophobia Of Exile: African Poets Writing In The 'Wasteland'," *Sea Breeze*, 2005.

As noted briefly in the introduction, one of the results of this diasporic phenomenon is a fanning out of both effort and effect. This, clearly, does not solve the problems in Uganda or for Ugandans. The legacy of war continues (even if ignored at certain times and in certain regions, Uganda is a war-torn country); moreover, a country cannot go into exile from itself. The problems in Uganda will have to be solved by Ugandans, working in contact with the people most affected, first and foremost and then with global partners in respect to where they stand. If the soul of a nation is shaped by its culture, a nation's fate is finally shaped by its politics. What is also clear, though, is that theatre, drama, and other modes of performance have played significant roles in both shaping the consciousness and revealing the significance of this troubled and troubling history for Ugandans and, increasingly, for others who feel the resonance of these reflective and reflexive works in their own lives and histories.

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