

Reading protest and myth in Malawian literature: 1964–1990s



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Following Malawi's attainment of independence from the British rule in 1964, its citizens endured more than three decades of highly autocratic rule under Dr Hastings Banda. Remarkably, this period also exemplified the flowering of Malawian literature, a literature in which a new generation of writers demonstrated their intense engagement with politics in their work by taking a swipe at Dr Banda's tyrannical rule. Using postcolonial theory as a lens for cultural analysis, this article examines the work of selected Malawian writers whose main focus was to pinpoint how Malawi had found itself in the grip of the kind of political malaise that left its populace in a state of great despair and hopelessness. To that end, the article examines literary works by Malawian writers, notably Legson Kayira, Frank Chipasula, Felix Mnthali, Jack Mapanje and Steve Chimombo, in order to demonstrate the ambivalence of cultural identity rendered visible in these works through the personal fears, anxieties and frustrations of living in an era of such repressive politics and political heavy-handedness. Thus the writers of this particular generation produced the kind of texts which reflected and gave voice to the pain, unease and the malaise attendant on this postcolonial state, and the concomitant identity crises such pain brings about in a people. The argument of the article is that, for Malawi, the unfortunate state of politics engendered a cultural identity that was confusing and confused at best, and this found expression in the works being examined.

Protes en mite in die Malawiese literatuur: 1964–1990s. Na Malawi se onafhanklikheidswording van Britse heerskappy in 1964, moes sy burgers meer as drie dekades lank die uiters outokratiese regering van Dr Hastings Banda verduur. Merkwaardig genoeg was dié tydperk ook 'n bloeitydperk in die Malawiese letterkunde, 'n letterkunde waarin 'n nuwe generasie skrywers getoon hoe intens hulle betrokke was by die politiek deur 'n paar dwarsklappe na Dr Banda se tirannieke bewind uit te deel. Deur postkoloniale teorie as 'n lens vir kultuurontleding te gebruik, ondersoek hierdie artikel die werk van geselekteerde Malawiese skrywers wie se hoofokus dit was om aan te toon dat Malawi vasgevang was in die greep van die tipe politiek wat die bevolking in die uiterste wanhoop en moedeloosheid en gedompel het. Daarom ondersoek die skrywer literêre werke deur Malawiese skrywers soos Legson Kayira, Frank Chipasula, Felix Mnthali, Jack Mapanje en Steve Chimombo ten einde die ambivalensie van kulturele identiteit te demonstreer wat sigbaar word in die betrokke werke oor die persoonlike vrese, angste en frustrasies in dié tydperk van onderdrukkende politiek en politieke hardhandigheid. Die skrywers van hierdie spesifieke generasie het dus tekste gelewer wat die pyn, ongemak en 'malaise' in hierdie postkoloniale staat weerspieël het, asook die dienooreenkomstige identiteitskrisis wat soveel pyn vir die mense tot gevolg gehad het. Die argument van hierdie artikel is dat die betreuenswaardige politieke toestand in Malawi 'n kulturele identiteit tot stand gebring het wat verwarrend en verward was, en dat dit uitdrukking gevind het in die werke wat ondersoek word.

Introduction

Julie Mullaney points out that:

Literatures in the immediate post-independence period set about the task of documenting the varied legacies of colonialism, mapping the coordinates of postcolonial African identities and debating the kinds of cultural values that could and should determine African futures. (2010:16)

This is true for most African writers (from various countries) who emerged after their countries attained independence, notably Chinua Achebe whose influential text *Things fall apart* grapples with the parameters of African identity in the aftermath of colonial domination. But crucially for

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our purposes in this article, Mullaney's observation is particularly pertinent to Malawian writers who must have realised with a sense of considerable consternation and trepidation that the country's dream of real independence (with its related freedoms) was doomed from the start. Thus the years between 1964 and the early 1990s must be regarded as a period of furious creativity in which these writers produced texts that were an unapologetic critique of the Banda era. The works that emerged can best be described as a storm of protest against Banda's stultifying narcissism, a leadership style that was characterised and rendered visible by a particular, lopsided vision of politics and culture which plays up cultural homogeneity, brinkmanship and related forms of exclusions. In other words, Dr Banda arrogated to himself the authority to define what constituted Malawian democracy and, by extension, cultural identity. Hence, all competing voices were stifled in favour of a monolithic notion of belonging to a postcolonial Malawian identity. In so doing, Banda was virtually replicating the Manichean ideology (of self and other, you and me, and so forth) that had been established by colonialism, and which the writers would have to contend with. For these writers, culture cannot be pinned down but is always subject to and constructed through a negotiation of difference.

While Kayira (1974) registers his protest by writing an overtly political satire entitled *The detainee*, and Chipasula (2004) lays into Banda's repressive regime in *The nature of our fear*, Mnthali (1982), Mapanje (1981) and Chimombo (1987) mask their poetry in myth in order to circumvent the might of the notorious Malawi's Censorship Board and the wrath of Banda's cheerleading and sycophantic henchmen. While these writers convey a range of themes in their texts including community and relationships, their work places great emphasis on what one could call the birth crisis of postcolonial African identities, particularly that of the newly independent Malawi. In other words, while dealing with issues of universal nature, these three writers concern themselves with the gross realities of modern Malawi, painting a picture of a hopelessly conflicted society where everything cultural is susceptible to the politics of the day.

In this article I appropriate Homi Bhabha's unique version of postcolonial theory which emphasises the margins or what he terms the in-between spaces. The force of Bhabha's version is the notion of ambivalence, which he sees as being at the core of cultural identity – the fact that cultural production is always active and vibrant where it is most ambivalent, equivocal, ambiguous and paradoxical. In short, Bhabha's version underscores the fluid and indeterminate (rather than constitutive) and, therefore, provisional nature of meaning, truth and identity. It is my argument that the texts by the above writers lends itself to the postcolonial reading that Bhabha advocates, precisely because of the use of ambivalence by the writers such Mnthali, Mapanje and Chimombo to conceal the political purpose their works serve. Considering the extent to which these three poets employed myth in their poetic works, Bhabha's version of postcolonial theory comes in handy because of its affinities with the basic tenets of myth

which, as Richter puts it, 'is non-rational, indeterminate, and uncertain in the nature of its ultimate claims' (1975:23). As masks for truths, myths offer allegorical interpretations of society. In other words, truth lies hidden behind mythical representations of reality.

In his influential text entitled *The location of culture* (1991), Homi Bhabha, drawing on Roland Barthes's and Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about writerly, and hence open-ended nature of texts, posits that the concept of textual analysis be grounded in an interstitial zone which he terms the hybrid moment or better known as hybridity. According to Bhabha's idea of the hybrid moment, any cultural text is not overdetermined or totalising, but rather a multiplicity or plurality. In short, for Bhabha, cultural texts are connotative rather than denotative, shifting and heterogeneous, rather than objective. The force of Bhabha's position is that cultural identities are more productive when they are most ambivalent. He characterises this space of enunciation as follows:

If you seek simply the sententious and the exegetical, you will not grasp the hybrid moment outside the sentence – not quite experience, not yet concept; part dream, part analysis; neither signifier nor signified. This intermediate space between theory and practice disrupts the disciplinary semiological demand to enumerate all the languages within earshot. (2004:260)

Since the composition of the text is performative, as opposed to constative, the reading process privileges the language and a plethora of signifieds, as opposed to the author.

Bhabha was largely influenced and inspired by materialist formalist Mikhail Bakhtin, who posited the ideas of dialogism and heteroglossia, seeing them as being at the core of language, and hence discourse. While dialogism points to the double-voiced nature of language, heteroglossia explains the open-ended nature of narrative. Thus, as opposed to being a monologue, so Bakhtin contends, most narratives are multivoiced. Because dialogism is about contesting a particular narrative, it points to the notion of transgression. Similarly, Bhabha's idea of hybridity is about a resistance to monolithic discourse. As Bhabha puts it, hybridity is 'the moment of transgression in the splitting of the discursive present' (2004:277). In other words, the hybrid moment is an attempt to challenge the boundaries of discourse and thus negotiating a different form of cultural authority, which entails taking a positionality of resistance to the status quo. As Robert Young (1995:22) has argued, hybridisation or hybridity is a 'dialogical situation ... that reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority'. In short, hybridity makes apparent discourses of authority lose unilateral command on the meaning of cultural identity. It is in this light that the works being examined are read in terms of hybridity. Through Bhabha's disjunctive cultural hybridity, the Malawian writers see Dr Banda as a form of sublimity which should be challenged, and hence their works are an exercise in constructing counter-hegemony, of contesting hegemonic discourse.



In the fictional category, one supreme example of that silent protest literature finds eloquent expression in Kayira's *The detainee* – a piece of fiction which, published in 1974, when a great deal had happened to those who opposed the status quo, stands out as arguably the most biting satire against the stifling and objectionable rule of the time. As the story opens, the reader learns that the imaginary country is run by a ruthless tyrant named Sir Zaddock – an allusion to the president of the country at the time. Napolo, the main character of the novel – a villager with the artless naivety of a child – is on a journey to seek medical aid in a town far away from his village. On the way, as he waits for public transport, he befriends a teacher who tells him stories, one of which is that 'people disappear everyday and every fool knows it's the Young Brigades' (p.4) – a clear reference to a paramilitary group established by Sir Zaddock's government to stifle the opposition, as well as all forms of dissent to his tyrannical rule. But simplistic and gullible Napolo finds it hard to believe such stories, and so contradicts the teacher. In the meantime, a woman standing at a safe distance from these men warns: 'watch your tongue' (p. 4). More than Napolo's naivety, it is this forewarning that points to a postcolonial cultural identity that is confusing. In the main, the names of Sir Zaddock and the 'Young Brigades' are clear symbols of decadence and misrule in the Malawi of those days.

Little wonder then that, later on in the novel when Napolo reaches the first town, he discovers that he has been tricked into a notorious Snake Camp, thinking it a rest house. And he realises he is not free to leave. How and why this has happened to him in this way is beyond him. But eventually he flees from his captors and finds himself in a foreign country where he must now live life as an exile. By leaving Malawi, Napolo has decided to embrace the kind of agency Bhabha has described as 'relocation and reinscription' (2004:277), meaning a process in which one finds one's identity at odds with transcendent notions of cultural legitimacy that leaders such as Sir Zaddock would want their people to put up with.

Like Kayira's *The detainee*, Frank Chipasula's poem – 'The nature of our fear' (2004) – is a poignant portrayal of a postcolonial Malawi in the throes of identity crisis of gargantuan proportions. Thus the poem is a direct assault on Banda's tyrannical regime where the security network has left the populace in a state of paralysis due to fear. Chipasula paints a gloomy picture of a country where people 'do not sleep/keep their curtains open/they fear burglars may break into their dreams/they fear nightmares of monsters in their sleep' (p. 53). The most affecting part of the poem reads as follows: 'My people clap hands when they hear lies/My people sing and dance when whips crack their backs' (p. 53). Yet again, Chipasula's poem not only depicts a picture of an extraordinary personality cult that has been created around the Malawian leader but also pokes fun at the kind of hero-worshipping that permeates the entire society. By questioning the monolithic nature of discourse in the Malawi of the time, Chipasula's writing is that kind of engagement (with issues) which points to what Bhabha (2004:324) calls 'hybridity

(which) is heresy'. For a literary writer embracing such form of hybridity entails being 'ironic and insurgent' (Bhabha 2004:324), and Chipasula does it with exemplary skill.

Similarly, in *When sunset comes to Sapitwa* (Mnthali 1982), Felix Mnthali performs an act of hybridity which can also be described as a form of transgression or resistance to authority. In the poem Mnthali is able to disarticulate the authority of Dr Banda in a subtle but accomplished manner through, firstly, the idea of doom and gloom associated with the status quo and, secondly, the notion of the carnivalesque which foreshadows and clarifies the kind of transformation the current cultural system will have undergone. In this immensely evocative poem, the author draws on images from the natural world, as well as biblical ones, to portray and juxtapose two different worlds: one depicts the current situation, which is seemingly raw and uninviting; the other is a futuristic or hoped-for world which holds much promise. Although Mnthali's poetry deals with a range of issues, including 'friendship and community' (Roscoe & Msiska 1992:65), this article considers his concern with 'the overall plight of the nation in the modern world' (Roscoe & Msiska 1992:71). To that end, I concentrate on Bhabha's idea of ambivalence which finds expression in the poet's use of rich and resonant imagery and symbolism in the poem. For Bhabha the concept of ambivalence is at the core of colonial discourse and the reading of postcolonial texts. This is a reading 'outside the sentence' whereby the meaning is 'not quite experience, not yet concept; part dream; part analysis; neither signifier nor signified' (2004:260).

The title is particularly striking in that the first three words ('when' 'sunset' and 'comes') point to a time in the future. Consider, for example, the ambivalence located in the use of all three words: the word 'when' can mean 'at what time' 'while' or 'after'; the word 'sunset' literally meaning nightfall or twilight, symbolises the end of daylight and the beginning of darkness, while 'at the same time' gesturing towards the end of an era – and that is hinted at in the entire first stanza. The word 'comes', though in the present, is used as a marker of the future tense, suggesting that the persona looks forward to this time in the future. 'Sapitwa' is the summit of Mulanje mountain – the highest mountain in Malawi. This is obviously an allusion to Dr Banda himself. Thus the title 'When sunset comes to Sapitwa' brings out the idea of hope, and not doom and gloom as such, for the nation. The act of 'sunset coming to Sapitwa' suggests and points to either the removal or death of Dr Banda.

The tone of the first stanza is that of anguish and dejection about the current state of affairs, though this mood is replaced by the persona's expression of a more sanguine view of the future. In the first stanza, the persona likens the current situation to 'the twilight of creation', which foreshadows a scary and disturbing image of unrest or a revolution. The use of the rolling 'ball of fire' as it screeches in and out of fissures is evocative of disorder of epic proportions, and the poet's use of alliterative language (of 'faster and faster', 'creaking and crevices') accentuates the sense that things are not as



they should be. The floods created by this state of affairs are likened to 'Noah's ark' – a reference to the level of turmoil and anarchy attendant on Noah and his family before he survived the flood which God unleashed on the world full of sinful people. Notice the use of the word 'we', implying the kind collective responsibility involved. Again, notice how each of the words 'twilight', 'creation' and 'fire' carries more than one meaning to highlight various levels of ambiguity and ambivalence at work in the poem.

In the second stanza, the poem focuses on the future in which the line 'we ride on the crest of human culture', suggests the brutality of the contemporary one. The second stanza inaugurates a sea change in the poem's tone and action, drawing attention to Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque with its related ideas of wild displays, pageantry and performance. The notion suggests 'the destabilisation of social and discursive stratifications' (Castle 2007:115), and introduces the dialogic nature of discourse and its ambivalence. In *When sunset comes to Sapitwa*, the concept of the carnivalesque is rendered visible through expressions of total freedom, equality and the overturning and inversion of hierarchies in society, particularly towards the end of the poem. Thus the idea of the carnival – expressed by 'we ride on the crest of human culture', 'rippling flesh', 'moved by the tune of masalimo and the blowing horns', 'village whistles', 'hooting cars' and 'young men walk on stilts' – suggests a people's direct response to 'the spoken world beyond'. The word 'beyond' here gestures to the end of particular forms of hierarchies in society which impose strictures on individual freedom, and so this may well be a reference to the end of either the edifice of colonialism, or other forms of social structures such as dictatorship – an unsavoury reality the poet himself experienced.

There is a particular irony in the poet's use of textual ambiguity, and hence the introduction of ambivalence in this poem. The first difficulty the reader grapples with is trying to pinpoint the poem's idea of the signified, as prefigured in the title and the second stanza of the poem both of which gesture to a future of total freedom exemplified by the idea of carnival. Which future is the poet alluding to? For example, does the poet knowingly adopt a voice from an earlier period before Malawi gained her independence because the pain of colonialism still rankles? In which case, the word 'sunset' could be read as the end of colonial domination. Or does the poet adopt this voice to avoid the notorious Malawi Censorship Board? But then the reader realises that the poem was written after Malawi had gained her independence, but that the people never really achieved their freedom. The struggle for real freedom must lie ahead post-Banda, so that the 'young men' who 'walk on stilts' are able to walk taller and see the future over the prison walls, as well as other metaphoric walls that are encumbrances to the attainment of other freedoms. The third element of ambivalence may well be located in the goal of the carnivalesque immediacy which is realisable if all peoples of the world slough off all forms of tyranny. In reality this would entail the beginning of an order

that is so much characterised by the dialogic imagination that it is all but an Edenic idyll.

Penultimately, I look at 'So God became a chameleon', the fourth and last section of Jack Mapanje's poem entitled 'If Chiuta were man'. In the section, Mapanje presents the paradox of the Malawian postcolonial identity in which Dr Banda adopts the status of god-like sublimity. However, before offering a detailed appraisal of the poem, it is worth pointing out that it is the fourth piece of a four-part composition which comprises 'If Chiuta were man', 'The first fire', 'Man on Chiuta's ascension' and 'So God became a chameleon'. As far as all four pieces are concerned, Reuben Chirambo has observed that Mapanje 'has recourse to Malawian myths and history as sources of metaphors, euphemisms, and imagery to construct and conceal his criticism of the autocratic regime of Banda' (2013:266). In other words, what all four have in common is that they are a stinging satire on what it was like for an ordinary citizen to experience life in Malawi under Dr Banda's governance. For example, in 'If Chiuta were man', the poet suggests that, owing to God's unpredictable predisposition, it makes sense to 'drift and drift' through life 'until/We reach the promised Nsinja Forest and river of life'. Thus 'soft landing' underlines the need and importance for citizens to take all reasonable precautions to protect themselves from the wrath of Banda and his henchmen. Banda's cruelty finds expression in the second piece – 'The first fire' – in which the reader learns how 'Corrosive flames devour Nsinja Forest/Chiuta's abode belches and blazes'. This suggests how the body politic of Malawi (herein Nsinja Forest) finds itself in the grip of misrule by Dr Banda.

I now turn to the fourth piece for an in-depth analysis.

So God Became a Chameleon

A muezzin
With gelded tongue
Slunk in
Celibacy

A politician
Empiric
Muffling
Easy balls
Fearing fear

According to Bhabha, postcolonial reading is ineluctably 'catachrestic: reading between the lines, taking neither him at his word, nor me fully at mine' (2004:269). Such a reading of postcolonial texts entails that meaning is fluid and identity is always shifting. Further Bhabha writes:

In the postcolonial text, the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation where the image ... is confronted with its difference, its Other. This is neither the essence of Nature ... nor the leaden voice of 'ideological interpellation'. (2004:66)

Written in free verse, this section of the poem is pithy and epigrammatic, rich in imagery and resonant with meaning.



The title provides an arresting point of entry into the poem, particularly with regard to the poem's tone. Thus the question at the back of the reader's mind is: why would the poet juxtapose 'God', representing goodness, and 'chameleon', a creature of such ambivalent and dubious identity? It is quite evident that the poet feels significantly conflicted about the postcolonial identity of the postcolonial state he lives in where evil overshadows virtue or goodness. And the poet brings out the tone of the poem in the title, where the words 'God' and 'chameleon' suggest and highlight a mixture of conflicting emotions, ranging from revulsion, horror, contempt and outrage to certainly lack of respect for this particular 'God' who, by undergoing transformation, eventually demeans his status. In short, the poet's attitude to the subject is utterly negative, even ambivalent, given that two diametrically opposed ideas (of good and evil, represented by 'God' and 'chameleon'), get implicated in each other. The overall meaning of the poem can be described, variously, as follows: So God became a cheat; so an apparently good person transformed into a devil, a despot, and so forth.

Mapanje's title section allows the reader to have a sense of what it was like to live in Malawi during the Banda years. In most Bantu folklore or mythology, tales about animals are told for both amusement and instruction. Mapanje's understanding and use of folklore demonstrates his knack for using irony and understatement to great effect. He manages to drive home his politically charged message by using the image of 'God' to symbolise goodness and that of 'chameleon' as representing evil. Using these images, he is able to mask his message from the notorious Malawi Censorship Board, and does so with consummate artistry. In particular, the poet's choice of the chameleon, an animal which is at once regarded with reverence and suspicion, precisely for being associated with man's failure to achieve immortality, prompts the reader to pause and wonder why God – often associated with admirable attributes, such as love, kindness – would sink so low and metamorphose into a sly and treacherous animal such as a chameleon.

In the first stanza, the poet introduces 'the muezzin with gelded tongue and slunk in celibacy'. The poet's choice of 'the muezzin' is striking considering that, as a crier who calls people to prayer in the Muslim religion, he is selected, based on his exceptional conduct. The term therefore suggests that the muezzin is God's representative or mouthpiece. That the muezzin's tongue is gelded seems utterly incongruous with his role as God's spokesperson, suggesting that the poet is here intentionally inverting the truth about the muezzin. This inversion of truth introduces the notion of hypocrisy about the muezzin, hence of ambivalence and paradox in the poem.

The second stanza provides the denouement of the poem as the fundamental nature of the ambivalence gets resolved. The muezzin, who must be the very essence of goodness has lost his spirituality ('gelded tongue') and turned into 'a politician empiric', an expression which conveys a sense that he is at once rational and practical, as well as being repressive and

despotic. Having ascended power, he is afraid of losing his position. The expressions 'muffing easy balls' and 'fearing fear' suggest that, having lost his credibility by choosing to become a chameleon, he has now become so imperious he is given to making egregious errors of political judgement (muffin easy balls) in order to remain in power.

Mapanje's vision of identity becomes transnational, particularly in the section entitled 'Assembling another voice' where he expresses his concern with the blacks suffering under apartheid. 'Steve Biko is dead' and 'Messages from Soweto' are but two poems which demonstrate Mapanje's wide-ranging vision of (African) cultural identity.

Finally, I examine Chimombo's Napolo poems in which he tries to grapple with unresolved dilemmas of living in a postcolonial state such as Malawi.

Napolo poems

The Apocalypse

Mlauli's tomb roared:

'Mphirimo! Mphirimo! Mphirimo!

Kudzabwera Napolo!

Mbona was checked in mid-leap,

Chilembwe turned over and went back to sleep.

Mulanje, Zomba, and Nyika fled their places
whimpered and hid their faces.

Shire curled round its course and bit its tail.

Lilongwe reared its head but it was frail.

Songwe exploded and threw its seed

Into the lake where it caught typhoid.

Yes, it rained.

Oh, how it? rained that time!

The parched throat of the earth drank it up,
swelled its stomach in pregnancy;

but it came so late, and with it came Napolo.

Napolo gnawed the womb of the earth,

the earth groaned and aborted, showing its teeth, its teeth
uprooted the trees on the banks,

the banks where birds sang around the python's flanks.

While manifestly rooted in tradition and local folklore, the meaning of the phenomenon called Napolo ranges over a variety of themes. On the face of it, Napolo is a cultural allusion to the process of memorialising a historical event when (in 1946) the serpent wrecked havoc in Zomba and its surrounding areas. But over and above this meaning, there is something singularly sinister about its other manifestation, notably a reference to three Malawian mountains (of Mulanje, Zomba and Nyika) which point to the locality of the situation Chimombo depicts, using local and familiar tradition and the kind of style that is unmistakably cryptic. Roscoe and Msiska (1992:12) have put it succinctly regarding Chimombo's attempts to locate a voice that would articulate and reflect his situation:

He needed material and mode that were plastic and malleable, readily figurative and symbolic, sufficiently stable to be swiftly understood, and yet unstable enough to be conveniently misconstrued. The Napolo phenomenon perfectly solved this dilemma, offering neat correlatives to realities bearing down on



his modern world. It enabled him to explore the manifold contradictions of modern Malawi through mythic material which, created by the people, was part of their inner landscape and which had provided a behavioural pattern, religious model, and moral criteria from the time immemorial ... And although the myth belongs essentially to the Chewa people of Central Region, Chimombo treats it in such a way that it achieves national significance.

This brings us to the second point – that Napolo leaves in its wake a world in ruins, thus calling attention to T.S. Eliot's famous poem, *The waste land*, in which its author uses a great deal of symbolism. It might be helpful to read Chimombo's 'The apocalypse' (1994) in juxtaposition with Eliot's *The waste land*. The poem begins with 'The apocalypse' – the first stage, which is about the destruction itself. What holds the poem together is as much its tone and drama as the rhetoric. Thus the reader learns how the poem switches from destruction, to description, to analysis, to reflection, and then back to the beginning.

When the tomb of the priest rumbles to announce Napolo's visitation, local heroes such as Mbona and Chilembwe are left disoriented. The symbolism intensifies as the main physical landmarks of the country (Mulanje, Zomba and Nyika) flee their places. This is followed by devastation of enormous proportions which leaves everything in the once peaceful land topsy-turvy – the poet here hinting at the cultural wasteland of Malawi of the Banda years. The rhyme scheme just emphasises the theme of the poem, which is destruction on a wide scale.

In a typically Eliot style, Chimombo then introduces various sections, introduced by a different noun class, though all sutured by the fact that they are running commentaries on the nature of Napolo, which is now, for conflicting realities, about the nation of Malawi. Of interest is the fact that the various pronouns are used to introduce a new tone and new characters, as well as developing the storyline to reveal other themes and ideas. Written in first person singular, for example, the storyline of 'The path' changes radically, with the persona now determined to get to the bottom of this devastation. He thus mounts Kapirinthiwa to seek enlightenment on the issue.

The section 'The messengers' is an intriguing one. While it seemingly carries on with the idea of trying to find some enlightenment on the subject, there is a disabling ambivalence as neither the lizard nor the chameleon makes it (on the journey) to deliver the message. As for 'the man in the loincloth' no one believes him. Then the persona in the part 'The message' changes yet again to the first person plural 'we'. What the reader learns is that that 'there is no message, only the aftermath of Napolonic upheaval' (Roscoe & Msiska 1992:14). The section 'Aftermath' sheds much light on the nature of Napolo. The 'boots' which 'crunch the gravel' and the 'muzzles of machine guns' which 'confronted the dawn' are evocative of the abortive nature of the postcolonial project in most countries where various forms of repression were the

order of the day. Further, the same reference connotes the pervasive nature of repression in the world. But crucially, Chimombo employs myth to mask an underlying message of fear and repression that engulfed his society for a long time.

Conclusion

In closing, the gist of my argument is that what all five Malawian writers have in common is their ability and integral awareness to represent a Malawian cultural identity (during the Banda years) as being deeply flawed and stillborn, defined as it is by a display of brutal repression and objectionable paternalism by the ruling elites for whom culture was seen as transparent and static category. Conveying their messages often with understated and unaffected elegance, these writers present the idea of culture as a dynamic and open-ended package that is always evolving and subject to change. Kayira's and Chipasula's work is generally explicit (Kayira uses fairly plain language of protest in his political satire – *The detainee* – and Chipasula's poetry is for the most part openly mutinous and radical). This is not surprising, considering that the two writers use genres that tend to lend themselves to such kind of overt representation. In contrast, Mnthali, Mapanje and Chimombo employ compellingly memorable and resonant images (with built-in ambivalence and ambiguity), and this gives their poetry a wider perspective in that it ranges over themes beyond the confines of the poets' immediate concerns, and thus reveals a reaching for not just a solid psychological outlook on national identity but global cultural identity as well.

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Competing interests

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