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## Article

# Landscape and national memory in Steve Chimombo's *Napolo Poems*<sup>1</sup>

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Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda's 30-year rule reached heights of monstrosity by the time senility and natural death conquered his life presidency, enabling the long overdue multi-party democracy finally to come to Malawi in 1994. Littered with the dead bodies of some of his critics, and with others in prison and exile, Banda's rule created survival methods that maintained law and order but drove the people into fear. Censorship laws, the right of traditional courts to deal with complex cases such as treason, and the use of a notorious British-styled Special Branch security system crushed any criticism of his government, of close relatives or of himself. This repression deeply affected the free creation of literature and the arts. However, often through subtle means, these deep tensions in social and political life crept into the artistic output of this period. Steve Chimombo's *Napolo Poems*, first published in Malawi in 1987, is one such manifestation of artistic effort during a time of repression.

Nurtured as a writer in Malawi, England, Canada and America, Chimombo formed part of a Malawian creative writing movement which used literary methods that frequently outwitted Banda and his ever vigilant formal and informal censors (Kerr 1987). Jack Mapanje, James Gibbs, David Kerr, Leroy Vail and Landeg White all give accounts of how writers managed to beat censorship. Using oral forms, new metaphors from Malawi's indigenous languages, suggestive words, puns, and certain popular phrases, they managed to camouflage some of the critical literature for circulation without reprisal. Chimombo, working in the same vein of resistance, utilises a myth of a landslide snake called *Napolo* to write the long *Napolo Poems*. This paper looks at how the collection of poems stands as an analogue for suffering by Malawians under Banda, before investigating his

usage of myths and geographical features to paint Malawian national memory through landscape.

Consciously contemporarising the myth by fusing it with modern subject-matter, Chimombo brings in geographical features that help him to paint literary images of a national landscape that is victimised by those with destructive capacity and seeming invincibility like Napolo. But, perhaps the first question to ask is: what the narrative is behind *Napolo Poems*?

Up to the present day, Napolo is commonly known in Malawi as an underground mountain snake that causes landslides whenever it changes abode from a mountain to lower lands.<sup>2</sup> Napolo's ability to cause landslides and avalanches is known by most Malawians, whether through experience or as a narrative. Nobody really knows what this snake is. It is simply a myth through which Malawians try to understand the landslides that usually start in hills and mountains after heavy rains and then sweep everything away on the path to lower lands: an incident which traditional wisdom connects to the ancestors and the gods.

The Napolo myth's link to rain, mountains, flooding, valleys, and the spirit world reveals a number of things. Landslide disasters pre-suppose a combination of higher and lower lands, and heavy rains. And this type of landscape and water, apart from any good that it might offer, presages danger for the living during rainy seasons. The heavy rains saturate mountain soil, some parts of the mountain give way, uprooting trees and rolling stones down to the valley. Napolo as a myth encompasses a combination of the destructive landslide-floods, mountains and hills, and heavy rain.

A scan through *Napolo Poems* reveals the complex usage of myths that reflect the flora and fauna, together with geographical features of the land in which the poems are set. Highlighting the theme of apocalypse, Chimombo prods victims of Napolo to question the gods about the justice system they – the victims – are made to live under. And the poet's insistence in the opening remarks that the poem should be looked at as an oral myth makes an interesting point about the dangerous times in which he writes.<sup>3</sup>

Chimombo structures the poem by sub-dividing it into clusters to direct the reader to his poetic narrative and theme. In the first part, 'Napolo', the poem shows that Napolo has been there from time immemorial, and that even ancestors like M'bona and John Chilembwe knew about it. This was the time Mlauli the prophet was able to give a 'full' apocalyptic forewarning:

Mlauli's tomb roared:

*'Mphirimo! Mphirimo! Mphirimo!*

*Kudzabwera Napolo...*

(Up there in the hills!/Up there in the hills!/Up there in the hills!//

Beware! Napolo is coming soon.) (Chimombo 1994:2)

After the warning, the main characters are both scared and angry. Mulanje and Zomba mountains, Nyika plateau, Shire, Lilongwe, Songwe rivers, and Lake Malawi, M'bona<sup>5</sup> and Chilembwe, the rebel religious leader, react to the impending danger, knowing what Napolo is capable of. The rain comes accompanied by disastrous landslides that devastate the land. Noteworthy in this combination of names for geographical features and legendary heroes is how man and nature are seen as being equally important. After the landslide, the narrator explores the ruins by walking up the gullies through which Napolo had passed, starting at Mulungusi river going through the Kaphirintiwa hills, central to Chewa myths of origin (Roscoe and Schofeleers 1985:17-25). And in seeing dead bodies all along the gaping gullies, the narrator comments on the irony that the gods created man, yet made sure that man dies. By sending a message of life with slow-walking chameleon, and that of death with fast-scuttling lizard, who arrives earlier than the chameleon, the gods ensure that man is doomed to die. The narrator then concludes that it is the gods' wish for Napolo to devastate the land.

The implication this kind of beginning has for the poem is that, apart from giving a historical context to the Napolo landslides and the effect it has had on the living, the poet means to rob the present Napolo of some of the unnecessary reverence it is given. The deaths, and the narrator's inspiration to go to Kaphirintiwa is a revolt against the gods who, traditionally, should not be questioned. Likewise, the historical journey that brings up names like M'bona and Chilembwe states not only that martyrdom by Napolo started long ago but also that the people's ancestors like M'bona and Chilembwe, though killed, still managed to challenge Napolo in their respective times. This exploration makes the present nation's fear of the Napolo phenomenon appear mere cowardice.

Following this cluster is a piece called 'Napologia' in which a debate on how to confront Napolo ensues between the youth and the old. Through the proverbs used, the old propose moderation and diplomacy, and the youth suggest direct confrontation:

The man advised: to see  
the teeth of Napolo is patience;  
wait until Napolo has gone

and ululate I am blessed.  
 The youth answered:  
 The goat that delayed  
 Got the lash on its behind; (1994:7)

But in the section, 'Sons of Napolo', the narrator realises that the people, in ritualistically asking for rain from the gods, received the rain accompanied by Napolo. Thus while the poet blames the mythical Napolo for the disasters, he also recognises the nation's agency in bringing about the disaster. In wanting to resolve the famine caused by no rain, the people consult the gods. Yet gods might have sent famine to the nation because of their anger. So in response to the nation's request for rain, the gods ironically send excessive rain to punish the people further with Napolo. This view partially balances responsibility for the devastation between Napolo and its victims. It suggests that even if Napolo is seen as monstrous, its coming was partly due to the insistent requests of the common people for rain.<sup>6</sup>

The second major part of the poem is called 'Beggar woman'. In her tattered clothes, infested with lice, it is clear that she is a metaphor for the nation in a fight with Napolo and its sons:

Single handed I have fought titanic battles in my rags,  
 nightly unleashed imprecations, fingers, and fingernails,...  
     Lean-bellied militants and revolutionaries,  
     the riot squad and iron-jawed warriors,  
     reading the Declaration of Lice rights:...  
 Surely they can find juicier conquests out there?...  
     the Toyotas, the Benzes, the Royces... (1994:13)

The nation, in spite of poverty, becomes a battle space between the militants or revolutionaries and the iron-jawed warriors. The mention of the 'Benzes' and 'Royces' raises firstly, the contrast in class between the rulers and the ruled who are ragged and poor like their mother, Beggar woman. Secondly, it refers to the underlying European semantics of modern revolutions coming from places where the abovementioned cars originate and that sometimes these kinds of revolution fall outside the comprehension of common people. Added to that, with the mention of Rolls Royces, the poet talks tongue in cheek, as the only ones present in Malawi belonged to Dr Banda.

Life under the rule of Napolo is explored in an 'obituary' that follows: 'He was a blessing one never prays for – lightning coming uninvited' (1994:17). Despite the hardship that Napolo brings, the populace praise

him in song, and he sings his own breast-beating refrains as the only leader allowed; only his voice leads, orchestrated by the chorus of the whole nation in fear:

... We sang praise songs  
He alone fought the chidangwaleza  
that haunted the ancestral shrine.  
He alone drank the chilope from its veins.  
He alone shaved Changula's scales.  
  
He sang his own refrains:  
I know what broke the elephant's tusks  
at the foot of the dzaye fruit tree.  
I know what shriveled the feathers  
from the old pheasant's head. (1994:18)

The nation's part in its suppression by Napolo is hereby clearly indicated.

Through 'Four ways of dying', the poet, apart from showing how fear has engulfed the nation, also points to how different personalities survive Napolo's harsh rule. We see three different ways of survival: firstly, the crab personality crawls 'sideways, backwards, forwards, avoid/direct action on public matters'; secondly, the chameleon uses its ability to match colours with surroundings, and snakes out its tongue to scare off potential danger; and thirdly the mole digs deep into the earth to live in underground 'Utopias' and 'Edens', dying there unnoticed (1994:19). Fourthly, the Kalilombe's decision to confront issues is suicidal because she decides to face the problematic issues head on. Pregnant with impatient foetuses, she goes to the top of Nsolo tree, flings herself on to the granite rock of Kaphirintiwa and explodes to release various forms of life. Chimombo's usage of Kalilombe as a mother-figure is used as a device of social criticism: this image allows him to refer to the ability of this particular personality to give birth to ways of challenging the problematic status quo. The historical Kalilombe's death, as a martyr, suicidal as it looks, becomes a rallying call for the discontented to rise up.

While Chimombo seems to acknowledge how different personalities survive under oppression in 'Four ways of dying', he also gives a clear picture of the people who surrounded Kamuzu Banda during his rule. The crab refers to many who had given up on public political matters, and in their speech, the songs they sang, and the life they lived, they avoided confrontation with the system. But worse than these, the mole completely surrendered and minded his own business, concentrating on apolitical issues just to survive the repression.<sup>7</sup> The chameleon differs from the other

two. Camouflaging itself to suit every situation that comes, the core of its beliefs remained intact as it changed coats to readjust to the new. The mother Kalilombe character is however the most daring. Finally deciding to give voice to impatient voices that bother her from inside, she takes the suicidal journey, dying in the process, as she creates a niche for criticism.<sup>3</sup>

A satirical section, called 'In delirium', in which the narrator decides to travel to the top of the mountain, the gods' abode, to find out why Napolo causes 'a blockage' for the nation, is followed by 'Three songs'. In the first song, 'The wandering spirit', ghosts wander in darkness as they listen to old people's advice to their children about dangers that lurk in the night. The second song, 'The dead', has dead people coming back to visit the living who chase them back to their graves. The dead in question are ancestral legends, like M'bona and his mother Mangadzi. Hypnotising themselves in frenzied dances with the once-sacred drum, m'biriwiri which is on the verge of bursting, common people try momentarily to forget themselves and Napolo in the third song called 'The living' (1994:29-32). In the section 'Of promises and prophecy', the poet sees 'the ruling class' living in happiness, accompanied by hushed rumours of deaths and suppression of outspokenness, leading the narrator, like Jesus Christ, to desire their 'destruction' in order to 'rebuild' again: 'Shall I destroy the citadel/and rebuild it in three days...' (1994:35). As the narrator thinks of 'destroying' and 'rebuilding', the whole nation congregates as suppliants by 'Napolo's hole', to pray to the gods. Seeing his people begging the gods that Napolo should not be roused so that they can at least see the rise of the sun the following day for more prayers, the narrator takes it upon himself to return together with exiled spirits. But finally, with no Mlauli or any daring soul to issue a warning to the living, Napolo makes a life-destructive journey down to the lake yet again.

Undoubtedly, Chimombo's collection *Napolo Poems* is nationalistic in perspective. He tries to consolidate a sense of national identity amongst all people victimised by Napolo. He does not simplify the issue, however. Thus his narrator, who questions Napolo and has the courage to inspect its shelter, is killed in the end. It is interesting to note, furthermore, that in the poem Dr Banda himself initially authors the nationalism, and Chimombo then uses it to criticise him. The strength of Chimombo's poem not only lies then in its relevance as regards the challenge to the status quo under Banda when very little, other than grumbling behind closed doors, took place, but also in his subversion of Banda's brand of nationalism to fight its original author.

As an extension of the above argument, I wish to turn to the role of landscape in the *Napolo Poems*. Isabel Hofmeyr discusses how landscape becomes a bank for oral memory:

Oral memory has a close mnemonic relationship with place and location, and in a variety of societies people often 'bank' information in the landscape... Aspects of the landscape can, for example, serve to separate bodies of stories into coherent units; a series of topographical features may store a temporal sequence of events in spatial order while the surrounding geography may have the effect of preserving the life of a story when it might otherwise have disappeared. (1993:160)

Hofmeyr's description relates to how people use names of landscape to piece together oral historical narratives. This explains very clearly how Chimombo uses myths and geographical features of Malawi to paint a landscape that silently fumes with socio-political tensions. But apart from creating his poem around the mythical snake, Chimombo also seasons the poem with gods of Chewa creation myths to express tormented anger towards the gods for forsaking the land. In so doing, he employs the myths, and geographical features to remind his people, who constantly fear reprisals for their outspokenness about the repressive situation they find themselves in, of the prevalent ills of Malawi. In a game of name-throwing in the poem, Chimombo mentions names such as Mphambe, Chiuta, Chauta, Leza, Nsinja, Kaphirintiwa, Kalilombe, Lizard, all of which are associated with the creation, life and death amongst the Chewa/Maravi people.

The names of these gods and supernatural powers in the creation myths, loosely translated, have strong references to landscape in the form of mountains, rain, wood, and cave. For example, Uta is a bow, and Chiuta translated as 'big' bow. The goddess Chauta translates as 'that which is possessed by the bow'. This big bow refers to both survival strategies in which the bow, accompanied by arrows becomes pertinent for food (hunting), and survival (defence). Implicit in this is a reference to forests, wild game, and enemies. But the big bow can also be a rainbow; and the rainbow comes with the rain, or can be seen at a waterfall of a big river when the sun shines. Rain helps the survival of the people on the land with its produce. Hence these gods are mostly associated with rain-making, and the food offered to the gods at rituals are maize flour, and beer from maize and sorghum or millet (Schofeleers 1992:58,61). Mphambe is thunder. The gods' wrath, expressed through thunder is connected to rain, which is at the centre of the social narrative of these people's survival. Changula, the big



cave-snake associated with whirlwinds (Chimombo 1994:177), has a strong reference to rocks and wind. So, by bringing in the creation myths, Chimombo mixes cognitive features of landscape, and the suffering of the people who occupy it, to challenge the blood-sucking gods who punish them with Napolo.

Besides specific points in the landscape, Chimombo also introduces geographical features of the country. Malawi is mostly mountainous, with many rivers and lakes. The spatial connection of Nyika plateau, Zomba and Mulanje mountains, Songwe, Shire, and Lilongwe rivers with Lake Malawi conveys important connective features of the landscape to underline narrative memories of 'one nation' for Napolo's victims, as they all react in unison:

Mulanje, Zomba, and Nyika fled their places,  
whimpered and hid their faces.  
Shire curled its course and bit its tail.  
Lilongwe reared its head but it was too frail.  
Songwe exploded and threw its seed  
into the lake where it caught typhoid. (1994:3)

The poet uses geographical features in the poem firstly to piece together the victimised nation as one entity. The whole nation suffers from the tendency to hero-worship Napolo. And the ruling Napolo himself sings his own praises as 'messiah' of the nation, and out of fear, the nation encourages this:

... We sang praise songs  
He alone fought the chidangwaleza  
That haunted the ancestral shrine.  
He alone drank the chilope from its veins.  
He alone shaved Changula's scales.  
  
He sang his own refrains:  
I know what broke the elephant's tusks  
At the foot of the dzaye fruit tree.  
I know what shrivelled the feathers  
From the old pheasant's head. (1994:18)

The poet satirically laughs at the behaviour of the singers: both the victimised national population and the victimising praised leader, implicitly appealing for a revision of that type of behaviour because of what it breeds: tyranny. However, seeing that no satisfactory action is taken by the populace, the narrator, together with other exiled spirits, returns to the land; and disaster strikes. The narrator's audacious inspection of the space

in which Napolo resides leads to his death at the hands of zombies Napolo had created for its own protection.

So, by using memories of national landscape of this water-saturated land, Chimombo dares the nation to deal with the martyrdom it is experiencing because martyrdom by its nature is caused by the victims' agency, therefore avoidable. He pushes the Malawian nation to stand against Napolo, and be ready for anything, including death. And while the poet's memories about creation are those of the Chewa, he goes to the North, inhabited by the Tumbuka, Nkhonde, Senga people among others, and then goes way down to the Sena people in the southern tip, in an effort to bring about national consciousness for all victims of Napolo. Despite their ethnic differences, the poet urges people to question the gods (and Banda) for allowing deaths which are caused by passivity and their own cowardly praise singing. By mentioning the names of features spread across the nation, the poet paints a national landscape, going beyond the ethnic boundaries to embrace all groups within the boundaries of the land. While his main effort seems to bring victims of Napolo together as a nation to deal with the Napolo problem at hand, he most importantly, alongside creation myths, uses landscape and geographical features to summon national memory that paints a vista of a land in torment.

What this article has done is to look at how Chimombo uses myths and geographical features in the *Napolo Poems*, to paint a landscape violated by the Napolo landslide. Napolo, the mythical snake, has been equated to Banda's despotic rule used to hold the country hostage during his long tenure. The narrative in the poem reveals Chimombo's subversion of Banda's nationalism, while the analysis of myths and geographical features discloses how landscape is brought into the poem as a rallying point for consciousness to revolt against Banda's tyrannical authority. Yet while *Napolo Poems* succeeds as a portrait of a national landscape in distress, it fails to go beyond Malawian nationalist politics. It does not tease out some pragmatic tribal tensions and power-mongering by those close to Banda, the combination of which resulted in many cases of death, exile, banishment and imprisonment without trial.

## Notes

1. My thanks to Professor Isabel Hofmeyr for her helpful insights while I was preparing the paper. My conference attendance was funded by Wits University's Vice-Chancellor Research Fund.

2. The latest landslide eruption in Malawi was in 1991 on Phalombe hills next to Mulanje mountain.
3. In 1987, Chimombo's colleague, Jack Mapanje, was picked up by the Special Branch apparently for his book *Of Chameleons and Gods*, and the comments he made at a conference about censorship in Malawi.
4. In Chichewa, both a hill and a mountain are called 'phiri' (singular) and 'mapiri' (plural).
5. M'bona, a young rainmaker of the sixteenth century Chewa kingdom is believed to have been killed by the king's henchmen after he was seen to surpass the king in terms of possessing powers of rainmaking.
6. Kanyama Chiume, one of the founders of the Malawi Congress Party relates in his autobiography how they invited Dr Banda to come and help them with the struggle for liberation from the British colonialists.
7. Many businessmen concentrated on their businesses and avoided situations of conflict. Gifts of money that Banda's lieutenants forced them to give to Banda were given with a false smile.
8. The mother-chameleon character might have prophetically referred to Chakufwa Chihana who, in 1992 left in self imposed exile, to talk openly against Banda's rule. He was later tried, found guilty and thrown into prison.

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