

J. Humanities. (Zomba), 23, 2013/2014

Cosmic tragedy in Steve Chimombo's *The Python*

Bright Molande

Hitherto, much of the attention on Steve Chimombo's writing has gone to *The Rainmaker* and especially *Napolo Poems* while the author's vision and concerns have been changing largely unnoticed. The criticism has often oscillated from his use of oral tradition to his socio-political concerns and challenges. This essay explores the problem of tragedy in Chimombo's epic called *Python! Python!*

The poet argues that there is "an extra dimension to the transformation of a somewhat difficult plot [of *The Python*] into a tragedy." This authorial statement creates the impression that tragedy is "an extra dimension" coming towards the end of the plot of *The Python*. Then, the writer poses a rhetorical question that may court the reader into reading the epic hero as a tragic hero while his murderer is the villain: "How tragic is the hero who reveals to you all the ways in which you kill him?" (Chimombo 1992: vii, xii). The question has an implicit assumption that Mbona, who gives up his life to a murderer in a self-sacrificing act, is the tragic hero and the reader is being courted into teasing out how the protagonist plays the tragic hero. I argue that it is instead the intended villain who plays the tragic hero in *The Python*, thereby problematising Chimombo's conception of tragedy.

Chris Baldick defines epic as "a long narrative poem celebrating great deeds of one or more legendary heroes, in a grand ceremonious style. The hero, usually protected by or even descended from gods, performs superhuman exploits in battle or marvellous voyages, saving or founding a nation" (Baldick 1990: 70). Thus, an epic is a celebratory narrative revolving around a man of an elevated social standing whose service to society stands out in the memory or tradition of a people. As Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz (1960: 59) add, the action "concerns a hero" who is "a man of stature and significance." The significance is premised on serving a collective cause like "saving or founding a nation" as Baldick observes. Similarly, tragedy has from Greek times "portrayed the fate of famous men and women – legends such as Oedipus and Medea – in elevated style and language" (Poole 2005: 1). For Aristotle (1967: 24, 44), both epic and

tragedy agree as “an imitation of persons who are better than average” or “of people who are to be taken seriously.” Aristotle’s yardstick of a tragic character is the moral standing of the person rather than a position of power or material status. The Aristotelian emphasis on action (plot) as the essence of tragedy more than character allows for a slave to be a tragic character in as far as he is “a good person” whose action and calamity will resonate with the fear and pity of the spectators (See Aristotle 1967: 24, 43). Shakespearean tragedy also centralises the social importance of the tragic character since, according to A.C. Bradley (1992: 10), a tragedy for Shakespeare is “a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate.” One difference is that whereas tragedy mourns the important people in their suffering and destruction, epic transcends the suffering and death to celebrate or resurrect the hero and his virtues.

Metaphysical tragedy

Chimombo’s conception of tragedy as the great suffering of man is rooted in the world of Napolo found in *Napolo Poems*. The poet crystallises this conception in what is reminiscent of Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Greek tragedy. In the middle of the quest for spiritual regeneration, the meaning of life and the futility that confounds him in the process, the narrator in “Derailment” laments the divorced place of man in the universe:

Indeed Leza has fled this land.

Only Mphambe reigns toying with man.... (Chimombo 1994: 23)

Leza and Mphambe are two antithetical gods which Chimombo has created out of a traditional cosmology as I later explain. The disillusioning discovery of a divine power that reigns in the universe, destroying and neglecting man to suffering is similar to Gloucester’s disillusionment with life in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Gloucester is overwhelmed by the excessive suffering of *King Lear* whom he glimpses naked in the cold rainstorm, recklessly abandoned to the brutal forces of nature. He concludes that man’s life is as insignificant as a worm to the gods who take pleasure in human suffering. He says, “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods, / They kill us for their sport” (Shakespeare 1958: IV.1). The idea of man being neglected to survive or grapple with destructive forces of nature symbolised by Napolo is a pervading theme in Chimombo’s *Napolo Poems*.

There is every possibility that Chimombo had Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in mind at the time of conceiving the relationship between Leza and Mphambe above. Both works are read as tragedies. Tess is executed, symbolically sacrificed to some heathen god and his brutally indifferent justice system which the society fulfils. That done, the narrator concludes, "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess" (Hardy 1998: 397). Tess captures her final resignation to fate in such statements as "What must come will come", "It is as it should be", and "I am ready" (Hardy 1998: n.p). This resignation depicts her as a powerless and finite human succumbing to suffer whatever fate or divine authority dictates. The aspect of tragedy which Chimombo shares with Thomas Hardy's reflection on Greek tragedy is what Victor Ehrenberg describes as the tragedy of being human. In Ehrenberg's reference to its presence in Sophocles, this is

the tragedy of man, of the very fact of a human being. Man is a toy in the hands of superhuman forces. It is the god's rule over man that is called 'fate', and man's reaction against it, which makes human life great as well as tragic. (Ehrenberg qtd. in Weinreb n.d: 273)

In *The Python*, the principle of fate is particularly played by Mphambe and ancestral spirits who dictate the plot of life as they please. They do so without being accountable to man who suffers as a consequence of their actions and decisions. It is these two forces that variously regulate a series of causes and precipitate the ruin of the deposed rainmaker and prophet. Mphambe has set the society on a course to destruction by bringing drought which Mlauli is destined to end by virtue of his position as a rainmaker. Although Chief Lundu later thinks the ancestral spirits have brought the drought "as a warning", there is consensus that it is the work of the guardian supernatural forces. The ancestral spirits themselves have a hand in the situation by rejecting Mlauli in a manner in which they toy around with his life. They withhold any revelations to the prophet and he cannot prophesy what is to come. The ancestral spirits have instead installed Mbona in their mysterious ways leaving Mlauli to contend with his fate in the dark.

Unaware that rules of the game had changed and the ground beneath his feet had shifted, "Mlauli led the rain song / and danced the old steps" (Chimombo 1992: 5). His rain dance is effectively out of tune with the mysterious forces.

Mlauli is a well-meaning prophet and Python Priest (the rainmaker) who leads the rain-calling dance to save his society from the drought. But he fails to bring rain beyond his comprehension for the first time in his long career. The failure brings humiliation. Mlauli is, however, too proud to concede humiliation and accept a new generation taking over his office. He is further prompted by his wife to fight an ill-judged war by pursuing to kill Mbona who is now the new legitimate rainmaker and prophet of the people. This action sets Mlauli on a collision course with the ancestral spirits who guard his enemy. What pains him most at this moment is the suspicion that the ancestral spirits have betrayed him after a long period of serving them and his society faithfully. He is tortured and kept guessing his crime as the superhuman forces are not obliged to be accountable to man and explain what is happening:

Fatigue shook Mlauli's legs.
Bitterly he read the skies again
and knew fear and humiliation:
What, will the clouds not form?
What kind of betrayal is this?
Had he not observed all the rituals?
Or had he annoyed the ancestral spirits
that, unbending, they would not save
their children in their time of need?

He quivered inwardly with self-doubt,
bleeding at the anguish of failure.
How many droughts had he staved off
in his people's living memory? (Chimombo 1992: 8)

Despite his faithful service and doing everything humanly possible to save his society, Mlauli cannot get any sympathy in his failure either from the society or the ancestral spirits. Chimombo presents man as an individual component of the universe whose personal fate does not count much since both members of the society and the superhuman authorities concerned only with the collective destiny of the people. Man is a cog in the universe and what matters most is his fulfilment of divine will and his service to society. The individual life is always to be sacrificed for the communal existence. As Chimombo's "Four Ways of Dying" reinforces this theme, the society faces a crisis when individuals opt for survival rather than dying as a sacrifice for maintenance of humankind as

a whole. The elders are later very quick to slight Mlauli's suffering in their anxiety to find a replacement as they selfishly move on to confront questions of collective survival. They say, "Rain must fall. We need rain / in our parched gardens and souls," while ironically betraying their own spiritual drought in their indifference to the suffering of an individual.

Chimombo depicts a society in which one's service has a significant place in history more than his life. As such, the individual life becomes a sacrifice for society. This idea resonates with what Mazisi Kunene underlines as the core of the characterisation of the epic hero in his *Emperor Shaka the Great: a Zulu Epic*. He says the fundamental aspect of this epic is "the ethical system beyond the circumstances of the individual. Thus, individuals are heroes so long as they fulfil the role defined for them by society. If they become arrogant or disrespectful of elders (guardians of social order) they are mercilessly lampooned and demoted" (Kunene n.d.: xxix-xxx). The arrogance, disrespect or failure becomes a threat to the social order and the erstwhile hero must either be publicly humbled into their rightful place or even destroyed for the sake of the society. This logic of sacrifice is also illustrated by Brutus' assassination of Caesar for the sake of Roman values of liberty. As he puts it: "Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. Had you Caesar were living and die slaves, than that Caesar were dead to live free men?" (Shakespeare 1958. III.2) The reference to begging rain from "Makemvula, the mother of the rain" after the failure of the rain priest in *The Python* is an allusion to the practice of human sacrifice that would be made to bring rain and avert potential human extinction (Chimombo 1992: 10). Chimombo depicts the idea of human sacrifice more articulately in *The Rainmaker* where either "the mother of the rain" or Tsang'oma the official drummer may have to die as painfully as this:

KAMUNDI: [...] If no rain falls today, you will be taken there [at the gorge], bound hand and foot, blindfolded, and pushed into the hole. Chadza will hammer a stake from the top of your skull through your body until it appears at your bottom end.... (Chimombo 1978: 15)

The response of Tsang'oma, the sacrifice-to-be, evokes Chimombo's broader theme that individuals are ordained by fate to become the sacrifice of the whole society. He says, "I didn't volunteer to be a Tsang'oma....I am a reluctant heir to the custom" (Chimombo 1978: 15).

Mlauli was fated to be a rain priest by virtue of his line of birth. His office is part of a larger history and his failure in that office is a threat to the progression of history. Just as Kunene speaks of the world of Shaka, Mlauli's personal circumstances attract no sympathy from his society at all because he cannot afford to arrest or reverse the progress of human history. The satirists viciously lampoon him with "verses sang of the reverse / in the universe" (Chimombo 1992: 9). The oral chroniclers and poets lampoon Mlauli because they serve collective destiny rather than that of an individual.

Chimombo's oral poets and chroniclers here are, however, not the griots (courtly oral poets and chroniclers in West Africa) of *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali*. The griots in this epic breathe life into the deeds of men in their power as the makers of history. The narrator of the epic who is a griot says, "Griots are men of the spoken word, and by the spoken word we give life to the gestures of kings (Niane 1965: 63)." Both the kings and the griots are the makers of history. Chimombo's sense of history not what men make but the will of the superhuman forces, while the chroniclers' duty is to serve that will regardless of its undesirable consequences. This view is illustrated in the following stanza:

And the composers sang more songs,
songs of assassins, cut-throats, murderers,
menacing the air with spillages of blood.
"How can we sing blood-praising songs
on a day like this: We are versifiers of history." (Chimombo 1992:
25)

Thus, they see their duty as not making history but simply versifying it for it is already ordained by superhuman forces. These chroniclers know their place in the universe as agents of greater forces. Mlauli's failure to accept the end of his pre-ordained office is tantamount to a failure to know his place and role in the universe. His action is mirrored against the contrary understanding of his adversary, Mbona, who humbly accepts: "I am only a vessel through whom Chauta works, / at the will of Mulungu, the great spirit in the skies / and the spirit of our forefathers gone on earth" (Chimombo 1992: 33-34).¹ It is that working of Chauta (God) that is history within which individuals play roles and for which they can be sacrificed for its continuation.

It is in depicting Mlauli as an agent of a superhuman will that he becomes a toy of fate. His state of being finite and inability to comprehend the superhuman

forces at play lays the ground for his errors, crime and subsequent punishment. The ancestral spirits are toying around with the rainmaker by leaving him to act in the dark. They leave everyone ignorant of their act and it is only from the painful consequences that humans are forced to search for the causes. The revelation occurs even to the elders only after Mlauli's failure to bring rain:

Mlauli left the dancing arena
to wear the burden of his doom
in the bosom of his favourite wife,
and the elders pronounced sadly:
"The spirits of our fathers have abandoned Mlauli,
but on whose shoulders have they alighted?
Rain must fall. We need rain
in our parched gardens and souls." (Chimombo 1992: 9)

Rejected by the guardian spirits, humiliated and reviled by society, Mlauli seeks comfort in the hands of his wife who instead plays the tempter, motivating the rainmaker to commit crime.

Mlauli's wife represents an external human force that prompts Mlauli to commit his crime. The second factor is Mlauli's own ignorance and pride. This factor is a matter of his character and would be compared to a tragic flaw in Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. The third factor is that fate particularly played by a supernatural force who is Mphambe in the given context. This is the Mphambe who reigns and toys around with man after Leza has fled and abandoned man. I now turn to explain Mphambe's role before illustrating Mlauli's crime. I first examine the role of Mphambe in *The Python*.

A god that thunders

The role of Mphambe in *The Python* begins from his conflict with Leza who has abandoned man in *Napolo Poems* as quoted above. Both Leza and Mphambe are, according to J.W.M. Van Breguel, both vernacular concepts of God that date back to pre-colonial and pre-Judeo-Christian times. The concept of Leza carries the attributes of a nourishing, nursing, rearing, gentle, kind and patient God: "This name indicates the belief that God provides for man and that He is good for man." In contrast, Mphambe literally means "thunder" and, as a theological concept, the name carries the attributes of omnipotence and the destructive potential of God (Van Breugel 2001: 30). Contrary to tradition and his own earlier acceptance of a monotheistic worldview of "the High God" or

the “Great Spirit known in various manifestations” such as Leza and Mphambe, Chimombo splits and treats the two attributes as gods in their own rights. He invents a pantheon and defines Leza as a “god in rain” while Mphambe becomes the “god in lightning” (Chimombo 1992: xvi).² *Napolo Poems* presents Mphambe as a wrathful god and it is from this conception that the destructive god can be closely associated with Napolo. It is “in terror at Mphambe’s wrath” that “men, women, and children flee” in the poem called “Obituary” in *Napolo Poems* (1994: 17). Mphambe is the destructive god behind drought, which is the most tragic and worst feared situation as it portends the extinction of humanity in the agrarian society. It is within the natural link between Mphambe (thunder) and lightning that Chimombo imagines the wrathful god as the patron of fire capable of burning out the world of man.

The following scene from *Napolo Poems* displays the annihilating potential of Mphambe and paints a tragic state of man in which the persona hears “the lament of the living in the embrace of woe”. The persona has just experienced an epiphany with the god riding along lightning paths in the firmament but causing destruction with utter indifference:

I saw Mphambe riding the barbed arrows of lightning,
his flashing eyes beating jagged-flame ways in the firmament,
and each stride scorching the earth beneath him to cinders.

Listening to the lament of the living in the embrace of woe,
I heard the strain smothering the tattoo of the sacred drum.
(Chimombo 1994: 31)

The way Mphambe indifferently burns the earth to ash comes in the context of Chimombo’s belief that this is the god who is in charge of Man’s destiny since Leza, the providence of man, has fled the earth. The image of “the living in the embrace of woe” echoes the broader picture in the world of Napolo where humanity is trapped in the cycles of Napolo’s destruction. The image of man being “in the embrace of woe” indicates the state of great suffering of man also prevalent in *Napolo Poems*. Such suffering is what I describe as a cosmic or metaphysical tragedy. This tragedy relates to a superhumanly caused situation with consequences of excessive suffering for man. That is, the cause of the suffering is the cosmic order. In the case of Chimombo’s portrayed world, the good divine forces are constantly frustrated or usurped in their efforts to nurture humanity so that man is kept “in the embrace of woe”. For instance,

Mphambe and Leza are antithetical gods with the latter providing rain and life while Mphambe brings drought, thereby frustrating Providence. The “sacred drum” (called Mbiriwiri) which Mphambe strains and smothers above is the drum for rain calling. This drum is strained because it is being scorched and has been used too many times. The smothering of the sacred drum indicates that Mphambe the god is determined to frustrate man’s attempts to offer sacrifice and summon divine providence present in Chimombo’s other gods such as Leza and Chauta.

The Python epic opens with the suffering of a community but the cause of the suffering is a god. The first four stanzas present an imagery of aridity and a threat of impending human extinction. That imagery is penetrated with a human feeling of being abandoned to cruel nature and a longing for a foothold in the vast universe. The opening elicits the image of Mphambe burning the earth cinder as the poet suggests that the wrathful god is behind the drought. The opening is cast as follows:

Shimmering mirages
mutated into nothingness.
Pulsating heat waves
cavorted around the singing supplicants
into the pitiless sun,
dancing and sweating in the searing heat.

The scorching noon sun
beat bare backs and breasts
and the merciless dust
burnt like cinders skin,
soles, toes, and heels. (Chimombo 1992: 4)

The seriousness of the situation in its entailment of annihilation of the society makes it a tragedy in its own right. In a bid to emphasise the gravity of the situation, Chimombo presents it with hyperbole, using the images of the sun “scorching” and burning the people “like cinders”. The poet also presents nature as a merciless force bent on destroying man. This view is evident in the poet’s use of “the pitiless sun”, the scorching sun and “the merciless dust / burnt like cinders”. It is this “merciless dust” rather than normal air that the people inhale as it swirls “into open mouths, distended nostrils, panting chests”. They are a people facing collective death.

The society has to pray, sacrifice and dance in a ritual of rain-calling to avert the danger they face. Their song expresses the despair of a people feeling abandoned to merciless forces of the universe in which they seek divine anchorage. “*The shrine at Msinja / has no eaves: / Where shall I / seek refuge?*” This quest for refuge takes wide dimensions as the people fear being forsaken and whirling off into the vast universe. The setting of the quest is the entire universe as the people pray to grip God’s (Chauta) staff: “*Let me hold on tightly / to Chauta’s staff / lest I lose it.*” It is worthy noting that Chimombo has translated and used these rain-dance songs and prayers. As such, they reflect the cosmic outlook of the society he writes about. It is typical of this outlook to conceive the divine forces as being in a conflict. The following rain-calling prayer (a translation of a traditional prayer) in *The Rainmaker* articulates both the divine conflict and Mphambe as a cause of droughts.

KAMUNDI: Lord of our fathers.

ASSEMBLY: Pepa. {We beseech you}

KAMUNDI: You have fled from us, Namalenga [Creator].

ASSEMBLY: Pepa. {We beseech you}

KAMUNDI: Who is going to save your children from the wrath of Mphambe, oh, spirits of our forefathers, if you turn your backs on us.

ASSEMBLY: Pepa. {We beseech you}

KAMUNDI: The drought and the famine that has fallen on us is killing your children every day. (Chimombo 1978: 13)

This prayer depicts humanity as the Creator’s children who must be saved from the wrathful Mphambe. The complexity is that both divine forces are attributes of the same God and Chimombo maintains them as such in *The Rainmaker*, although he splits them as different gods later in *The Python*.³ Thus, Mphambe is the cause of drought and famine that is killing the children of the Creator.

A “villain” as a tragic hero

I will now focus on the characterisation of Mlauli in terms of the external and human factors that influence his error and crime within the stage set by supernatural forces. In this context, *The Python* appears to follow the assumption that “tragedy is bound up with questions of fate. Fate offers the tragic event a

cause and an explanation. It lends the action gravitas by linking it to larger, metaphysical forces” (Wallace 2007: 137). Mlauli’s action is linked to the god of lightning who triggers a situation to which *the Python* Priest reacts by committing a crime that offends the gods. Mphambe does not only cause the drought but also indifferently strikes dead Mlauli’s son with lightning:

Mphambe incinerated him where he stood.
He did not even utter a cindery whimper
as he crumpled outside his mother’s house.
Only the smell of the scorched flesh remained,
with bones and earth, where Mphambe had struck
and never glanced back to inspect the results. (Chimombo 1992: 21)

The lightning strikes in the same rain that his nephew and novice Mbona has managed to bring with worse humiliation to the deposed master. Although the pain he suffers is intense, Mlauli does not consider any action until his wife plays the prompter and tempter. The narrator’s explanation is that Mlauli’s son flouted Mbona’s warning that nobody should go outdoors during the rain. The death is, therefore, a punishment given to a disobedient child like the dissolved “Child of Clay” whom Chimombo re-tells from folklore in a children’s book of that title. Mlauli’s wife, however, projects an acerbic accusation on Mbona in her loud wailing, “He killed my son! / Mbona killed my son!” This accusation comes despite her ironical allusion to the folk story which reminds one that the death has come as punishment for disobedience, “Like the clay child, here my son lies / on his mother’s doorstep dissolving” (Chimombo 1992: 22).

It is after the loud accusation by his wife that Mlauli first appears as a dangerous man set for a fight:

He stalked round his grief-stricken wife
and the smoking remains of his son
like a lion that has spied its prey.
He snorted like a raging hippopotamus
coming up for gulfs of air and water. (Chimombo 1992: 22)

Legend has it that Mlauli loved his wife so well that he set out to murder Mbona to please her.⁴ Chimombo portrays the wife as the tempter. Mlauli’s wife here resembles Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* for prompting into evil a husband already tried by supernatural forces. As in the case of Macbeth, the

direct cue to murder first comes from the wife and Mlauli is left to contend with it just as Macbeth does. Although Macbeth hints at the possibility of murder in “his black and deep desires” to do what “the eye fears, when it is done, to see”, he is not resolved until he meets his wife who directly proposes the murder and persuades her husband to commit it (Shakespeare 1958 I.4). Similarly, Mlauli’s resemblance to “a lion that has spied its prey” hints at the possible revenge against Mbona whom he must stalk and strike. It is, however, the wife who articulately prescribes murder as the course of action:

As the scooped-up ashes awaited burial,
the favourite spoke again to Mlauli:

“He must die, too. Mbona must die.”

Mlauli quivered again inside:

“What? Kill my own kinsman?

He is my nephew, remember?” (Chimombo 1992: 21)

The fear of his soul and objection suggest Mlauli is not an evil man inclined to cold blooded murder. He struggles with his conscience upon the thought of murdering his kinsman regardless of the offence. Therefore, Mlauli might be the “villain” in the sense of being an antagonist to the epic hero in *The Python*. But Mlauli is not a “villain” in the sense of being a hell-bent criminal or incarnation of the devil. He is a man who has served his society as a noble prophet and rain priest but has now led into the error of believing that “The act will be forgiven when it is performed” just as he sends word to the spirits,

That mine is a clean cause.

My revenge is not a blood revenge for the two deaths.

Mine is a cleansing killing.... (Chimombo 1992: 77-78)

While Mlauli’s thinking coming as an excuse and rationalisation of his real motives of revenge and jealousy against Mbona, it is the drive for vengeance itself that takes precedence. Mlauli swears vengeance in a belief that he is performing a duty to his beloved wife and dead son. It is a motive that comes from the pursuit of his wife as opposed to arising from within Mlauli as an immanent evil in his character. Mlauli has a conscience to grapple with whereas the wife does not quarrel with any. The wife is from the outset more resolved on the murder than Mlauli.

The following dialogue presents Mlauli's awareness that he is being set to commit an evil that will affect the destiny of the whole society. It also indicates that even the jealousy is a motive infused by his wife by playing around with his mind and feelings.

Mlauli countered, "Mbona is more than a kinsman and a nephew now. He is the rainmaker, *the python* priest of all the Mang'anja from here to there." The wife urgent: "All the more reason to kill him before the poets start singing panegyrics that will resound forever through the valleys and over the hills....

How can you bear the humiliation of losing your place as a python priest and having your conqueror follow his victory home to kill your son too, all in the same rain, on the same day? You are finished as the great rainmaker. Are you finished as a man, too? (Chimombo 1992: 21)

The wife makes Mlauli's mind focus on three things which he cannot bear to imagine. Firstly, Mlauli is made to see Mbona as his conqueror who has gained double victory by defeating him as a rainmaker and killing his son. Mlauli proves a weak character as he neither questions the veracity of his wife's murder accusation nor the rationale of Mbona being his conqueror. Secondly, Mbona's fame will spread widely if he is left to leave. The logic Mlauli has to buy is that the more Mbona's fame flourishes, the more widely humiliated Mlauli will be. Notice that when Mlauli's thinks in terms of distance to imagine the spread of Mbona's social and religious significance, the wife plays with his mind to make him imagine Mbona's spreading glory that will humiliate him. She invokes the jealousy in the husband. Thirdly, Mlauli's wife mocks his sense of manhood by questioning, "Are you finished as a man, too?" This question echoes a number of times as Lady Macbeth mocks her husband's manhood (Shakespeare 1958: III.4).⁵ This question is the last stroke that prompts Mlauli into action.

The taunting of the wife directly challenges Mlauli's most private place in the world and his sense of individual capacity to perform outside the public office

that has been taken away from him. Mlauli does not only set out to act because he loves his wife, but also because she makes him believe that his last and most private place in society is challenged, that is, his manhood. This yearning to defend his individual status runs counter to the society where the individual self does not count above one's office or social role. Just as the society only cares about Mlauli's performance as a rainmaker, the wife is concerned with Mlauli performing his duties as a husband and defender of the household. The wife does not care about the crime her husband is set to commit and its consequences on his soul [as an individual].

Apart from the [external] influence of his wife, Mlauli also has his own internal traits that contribute to his action. The characterisation of Mlauli shares some aspects of the Greek tragic hero, and Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The following argument is an examination of this aspect of characterisation.

Mlauli is totally blind to the fact that his office has been a social role designated by the powers that he cannot control. He is ignorant that his own life and those of others are a consequence of the will of superhuman forces. He eventually attempts to take charge of his life, misjudging that he will fight for it and his lost social place by fighting Mbona, who is only an agent of the superhuman powers. Mlauli, therefore, attempts to take charge of his fate with complete disregard of any powers in control of the social order including the elders and ancestral spirits. This disregard makes Mlauli manifest such wanton insolence called "hubris" associated with Greek tragic heroes. Cuddon (1998: 401-402) defines "hubris" as a "defect in the Greek tragic hero [that] leads him to ignore the warnings of the gods and to transgress their laws and commands. Eventually hubris brings about the downfall."

Just like Achebe's Okonkwo who neglects the old man's (Ezeudu's) warning not to partake in the killing of the ill-fated Ikemefuna only to offend the gods, Mlauli disregards Chief Lundu's warning:

Lundu discerned: "You make Mbona seem
several kinds of criminal:
Schemer, murderer, usurper.
Yet he is Chiuta's [God's] prophet, fulfilling the wishes
of his ancestral spirits. The drought was not
of his doing. The ancestral spirits

brought it upon us as a warning.” (Chimombo 1992: 31)

Mlauli sets out to fight the innocent Mbona who is only fulfilling his divinely appointed roles. This act is tantamount to waging war against Chiuta and the entire divine establishment that oversees the social order. Chief Lundu’s earlier warning indicates that Mlauli’s action is an attempt to disrupt a divine plan of succession as it is in the nature of the human society and progression of history for one generation to take over from another. He warns,

You should be rejoicing at the success
of your apprentice: He has proved that he was
well-trained, is now a full rainmaker.
Mbona has passed the last hurdle to full python.
You should not be plotting to kill your candidate,
who proved to be the most successful apprentice.

This is the wrong time to kill Mbona. (Chimombo 1992: 29)

Ironically, Mlauli ignores the implied fact he is himself a dispensable individual in the long history of his society and he himself came to the office upon being trained and succeeding a predecessor. Instead, his insolence and blindness to history make him believe that “No ainmaker has been greater than me” (Chimombo 1992: 75). He cannot reason that his predecessor trained him as part of a divine order of succession. He brags that “I train rainmakers. I can also kill them [...] when they pervert their office to selfish ends [...] I know how rainmakers die” (Chimombo 1992: 85).

The bragging reveals a Mlauli who seems to assume the position of the source and death of rainmakers. He implicitly usurps divine authorities who institute rainmakers and depose them through their will. Mlauli is blind to his role as an agent of divine authority or that he is a mere part of a social system. His self-elevation makes him say, “Anyone less than Mlauli is no match for his powers. / I taught him all magic under Kaphirintiwa. / I alone can bring him back to stand trial...” (Chimombo 1992: 77). His bragging also borders on claiming to be an authority of all knowledge and life itself. His exaggerated self-importance resembles the colonial master whom Chimombo satirises in “Obituary” for claiming to be all-knowing and in control of the destiny of natives (1994: 17-18). Mlauli’s bragging echoes the last stanza of “Obituary”, suggesting the poet extending the theme of excessive human pride and usurpation of fate into

The Python. Anthony Nazombe's analysis of "Obituary" presents the colonial master's statements and actions as constituting "a direct challenge to supernatural forces, to fate itself; he usurps the godhead. [...] This is unwarranted arrogance, an affront to the fountain of wisdom itself: hubris. It is like claiming to have discovered the secret of death and to have survived the experience" (Nazombe 1990: 9). A similar observation applies to Mlauli.

Mlauli's pride sharply contradicts the advice he gives to Mbona when they catch up just before killing the latter. The advice is an ironical reminder that Mlauli, like any man, comes into the world hosted by superhuman powers. It points back to incisively criticise Mlauli himself for his lack of humility and submission to divine authority and its grand plan of the human society in which he was appointed to play a role. To the divine powers holding the universe, Mlauli is like an apprentice who has to learn the way of the gods. Thus, the following advice to Mbona indicates an ironical moment of self-discovery because it summarily reveals what Mlauli is not:

“...An apprentice is like a visitor.
He is humility, graciousness, politeness.
He does not boast to his hostess and hostess
how big his balls are. You are just an upstart,
pawning your conscience to be python priest,
and now you will pay for your two crimes.” (Chimombo 1992: 83)

The eventual irony is that the Mbona, whom he scorns in this stanza, turns out to be an old-aged guardian spirit of the kingdom who was reincarnated to live as an apprentice to Mlauli (Chimombo 1992: 86-87). It is therefore as though it is Mlauli who is an apprentice to the trade of priesthood since he is contending with his own ancestral spirit. Mbona is a guardian spirit of the kingdom who hosts Mlauli in the kingdom for a span of his life.

Notes

1. Both Chauta and Mulungu are attribute-based names of the same God according to tradition although Chimombo makes them different gods.
2. Compare with Steve Chimombo, *Napolo and the Python*, London: Heinemann, 1994, p.48; Chimombo, *Napolo and the Python*, London: Heinemann, 1994, p. xv.

3. The Glossary in *The Rainmaker* describes Namalenga as God the Creator which changes to “god the creator” in *The Python*. Mphambe is the “God in thunder and lightning” is later decapitalised to “god in lightning”. While at first it was the same God (capitalised) manifesting himself in different forms, Chimombo’s pantheon changes to draw different gods responsible for different roles.
4. Also see *Mtunda 8*, (Primary School Textbook)
5. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (“Are you a man?” (What, quite unmann’d in folly? Act 3, Scene 4:73)

References

- Aristotle. 1967. *Poetics*. Trans. Gerald F. Else (ed.). Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Baldick, C. 1990. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beckson, K. and Ganz, A. 1960. *A Reader’s Guide to Literary Terms: A Dictionary*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Bradley, A. C. 1992. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Third Edition. London: Macmillan.
- Chimombo, S. 1992. *Python! Python! An Epic of Mbona the Rainmaker*. Zomba: WASI Publications.
- Chimombo, S. 1994. *Napolo and the Python*. London: Heinemann.
- Chimombo, S. 1978. *The Rainmaker*. Limbe: Popular Publications.
- Chimombo, S. 1975. “Dramatic Experience in Malawian Folklore.” *Odi*.
- Cuddon, J. A. (1998). *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Revised Edition. London: Penguin.
- Hardy, T. 1998. *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. London: Penguin.
- Kunene, M. N.d. *Emperor Shaka the Great: A Zulu Epic*. London: Heinemann..
- Mtunda 8*, (Primary School Textbook)
- Nazombe, A. 1990. *The Haunting Wind: New Poetry from Malawi*. Blantyre: Dzuka.
- Niane, D. T. 1965. *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. Harlow, Essex: Longman.
- Poole, A. 2005. *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: OUP.

Cosmic tragedy in Steve Chimombo's The Python

- Shakespeare, W. 1958. *King Lear*. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. London: Spring Books.
- Shakespeare, W. 1958. *Julius Caesar*. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. London: Spring Books.
- Shakespeare, W. (1958). *Macbeth*. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. London: Spring Books
- Van Breugel, J. W. M. 2001. *Chewa Traditional Religion*. Blantyre: CLAIM.
- Wallace, J. 2007. *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weinreb, L. L. N.d. *Natural Law and Justice*. N.p. N.p.

Department of English
Chancellor college
P.O. Box 280
Zomba
Malawi

bright.molande@gmail.com