

# Evocation of the Dramatic in David Rubadiri's Poetry

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## Abstract

James David Rubadiri (1930-2018), poet, playwright, novelist, academic, diplomat, and political activist, is no stranger to many literary scholars in Africa and beyond. His popularity is not a result of his thespian skills—he acted Othello once—or skills in fiction writing (although he did try his hand at novel writing, producing *No Bride Price*), but mainly a result of his teaching and his skills in poetry. Although he is famous as a poet, his poetic harvest is rather minimal—his only collection, *An African Thunderstorm and Other Poems*, boasts only twenty-three poems. What the poems lack in numbers, they more than compensate for in the energy and beauty that they radiate, beauty that has seen most of them translated and anthologised around the world over the years. It is also this energy, the beauty of composition, and their tackling of relevant themes, which have made his poems the staple of many poetry classes in Africa and beyond. In this paper I analyse Rubadiri's poems that appear in the collection *An African Thunderstorm and Other Poems*. I argue that the success of Rubadiri's poetry is primarily based on his evocation of the dramatic, which is in turn reliant on his economic use of language, his descriptive skills, and his use of vivid and evocative images. These aspects do not only render the poetry enduring and memorable, but they also make the poems and the action in them spring to life, cementing the legacy of the poet as one of the accomplished poets of his generation in Africa. The discussion in this paper is divided into three parts. The first part examines how Rubadiri infuses a sense of the dramatic in poems that address issues of colonisation and blackness, the second part discusses how the poet evokes drama in poems about neo-colonialism and postcolonial disenchantment, and the final section shows how Rubadiri's use of imagery and

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diction in poems about African life and the environment give the poems a vividness, sense of immediacy and a dramatic quality.

## Introduction

James David Rubadiri (1930-2018), poet, playwright, novelist, academic, diplomat, and political activist, is no stranger to many literary scholars in Africa and beyond. His popularity is not a result of his thespian skills—he acted Othello once—or skills in fiction writing (although he did try his hand at novel writing, producing *No Bride Price*), but mainly a result of his teaching and his skills in poetry. But, although he is famous as a poet, his poetic harvest is rather minimal—his only collection, *An African Thunderstorm and Other Poems*, boasts only twenty-three poems. It took the persuasive efforts of Rubadiri's admirers, such as Jack Mapanje, for this modest collection to be published as the self-effacing writer was not keen to have the poems published as a collection. Writing about this in the introduction to the collection, Mapanje (2004) tells us: “it has taken many years for Rubadiri to accept the possibility of his poems being published in this manner; even our argument that in the end it is not the quantity of his poems but their quality that mattered did not wash” (Mapanje, 2004, p.4). The publication of the collection in 2004 was a good development for students and lovers of poetry in Malawi and in other parts of Africa who finally have an opportunity to access Rubadiri's poetry in one volume, poetry which for a long time was scattered in anthologies, journals and magazines around the world.

For many people, the name Rubadiri is evocative of four things, namely the dictatorial reign of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda in Malawi, poetry, higher education and diplomatic service. Rubadiri was one among many Malawians who fought against the federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland and for the independence of his country. When independence was won in 1964 Rubadiri was appointed Malawi's first ambassador to the United Nations. But when disagreements between Banda and his young ministers in Malawi escalated into the so-called 1964 Cabinet

Crisis, barely weeks after independence, and Banda fired six ministers, Rubadiri resigned from his position in the government in sympathy with his colleagues and followed them into exile. He was to be sent back to finish his job at the UN by the new government in Malawi after the fall of Banda in 1994.

Commenting on Rubadiri's renouncement of Banda following the Cabinet Crisis, Paul Theroux (1971) laments that Rubadiri's denunciation of Banda "was rather incautiously timed [because his] mother was still in Malawi and so were most of his personal effects, a large car and an enormous library of books" (Theroux, 1971, n.p). Theroux was to assist Rubadiri's mother, a woman he describes admiringly as "a tough old bird," escape from Malawi to Uganda. Dr Banda's young brigades were threatening to torch her house and beat her up because her son, in reaction to being called a stooge by Dr Banda, had "implied that Dr. Banda was a betrayer of the revolution and a lackey of the Portuguese" (n.p). Theroux was also to drive Rubadiri's car 2500 miles to Kampala, Uganda.

Rubadiri, who was formerly head teacher at Dedza Secondary School and Principal of Soche Hill College before his diplomatic job, was to live in exile for the next thirty years, an experience he immortalised in his poem "Yet another Song." He spent his exile years teaching in universities in Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria and Botswana. One of his teaching subjects was poetry, a literary genre in which he also excelled as a writer. He holds the reputation of being one of the most anthologised African poets, and the grand honour of being referred to as the father of East African and Malawian poetry (Mwagiru 2018; Mapanje 2004).

In 2002 Rubadiri, then Vice Chancellor of the University of Malawi, was assigned a course, Studies in African Poetry, in the Department of English at Chancellor College and I became his student. Although it was in the twilight years of his teaching career, as students we were able to appreciate his sense of humour and passion for poetry that other students had enjoyed elsewhere in Africa before (see Mapanje 2004). However, the administrative work that came with the position of Vice Chancellor proved too demanding for Rubadiri and we only had a couple of lectures with him before he handed the course over to someone else. But by

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then he had assigned us the task of placing categories of versification into *poetry* and *worse* as an attempt towards quality judgement. I return to this point later.

This paper is not a biography of Rubadiri but an appreciation of his poetry. Although he did not write much, what the poems lack in numbers, they more than compensate for in the energy and beauty that they radiate, beauty that has seen most of them translated and anthologised around the world. It is also this energy and their tackling of relevant themes, which have made his poems the staple of many poetry classes in Africa and beyond. Hall (1992) rightly observes that energy in a poem “comes from the efficiency with which the poet uses language; poems are made of words used efficiently” (Hall, 1992, p.15). Rubadiri knows how to use words efficiently. This paper focuses on Rubadiri’s poems that appear in the collection *An African Thunderstorm and Other Poems*. I examine the poet’s evocation of the dramatic in his poetry using a three-pronged approach; first by examining poems that deal with colonisation and blackness, then those that talk about neo-colonialism and postcolonial disillusionment, and concluding with poems about African life and the environment. I argue that the success of Rubadiri’s poetry is primarily based on his evocation of the dramatic, which is in turn reliant on his economic use of language, his descriptive skills, and his use of vivid and evocative images. These aspects of style invigorate the poems, making the action in them spring to life and rendering the poetry enduring and memorable. Rubadiri’s thematic concerns are generally similar to those of many African writers of his time, including poets such as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and Okot p’Bitek and novelists such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe, and Ayi Kwei Armah (Obiechina 1990; Ngara 1990; Egudu 1978; Ngugi 1969). Themes tackled by these writers include colonialism, cultural dislocation, racism, neo-colonialism and postcolonial disillusionment, among others. Talking about the theme of colonisation, for example, Egudu (1978) rightly observes that “[t]he African poets who have handled colonialism as their subject are to that extent concerned with what had been, with a past that was overwhelming in itself and still remains overwhelming in its undesirable intrusion into the present” (Egudu, 1978, p.8). This holds true for Rubadiri as a poet. However, it is Rubadiri’s poetic skills, that is,

his evocation of the dramatic through his sensory descriptions, figurative language, precise wording and careful organisation, which bring the themes to life and elicit the readers' emotional response to them.

In my analysis of the poems I exploit the notion of style, which according to Zhukovska (2010) is the "main notion of stylistics" (Zhukovska, 2010, p.16). For Zhukovska (2010) the concept of style "is used in many senses that it has become a breeding ground for ambiguity" (p.16). In my use of the term I draw from Zhukovska's (2010) view that "style denotes the collective characteristics of writing, diction or any artistic expression and the way of presenting things, depending upon the general outlook proper to a person, a literary school, a trend, a period or a genre" (p.17). My focus is on the sense of the dramatic in the poetry, on the action and excitement, which emerge through Rubadiri's use of language, his word choice and use of artistic expression that make his poetry easily recognizable. I also attempt value judgment as Rubadiri himself taught us to do, by assessing the "poetryness" of his works.

According to Rubadiri, the attempt towards value judgement when reading poetry helps to clear misconceptions about the nature of poetry, it provides lessons to would-be poets on how to craft poetry, it sharpens or whets our appetite for poetry as we are able to penetrate the poem and understand its workings and it enables us to tell a poem from *verse* or *worse*. Poetry in Rubadiri's understanding is a piece of writing meant to express experience and communicate or create an emotional response through careful use of language, figures of speech, word choice and organisation that is not only meaningful but also rhythmical. *Worse* on the other hand is writing that considers versification as the end of poetry, while *verse* is versified work that falls between *worse* and *poetry*, showing positive attributes of *poetry* and negative attributes of *worse*. Like Rubadiri, Hall (1992) rightly observes that "[s]ome poems are better than others - and some verse is not poetry at all" (Hall, 1992, p.ix). He goes on to say that "[e]ven if judgments are always subject to reversal, even if there is no way we can be certain of being correct, evaluation lives at the centre of literary study" (p.ix). Commenting on the importance of value

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judgement, Hall (1992) notes that “[t]he struggle to name reasons for value – to evaluate works of art – is lifelong, and although we may never arrive at satisfactory explanations, the struggle makes the mind more sensitive, more receptive to the next work of literature it encounters” (p.ix).

The discussion that follows is in three parts. The first part provides a discussion of Rubadiri’s poems that address the themes of colonisation and blackness in relation to his style. I argue that Rubadiri’s descriptive abilities create a sense of the dramatic that renders his subject matter vivid and immediate. The second part is a discussion of Rubadiri’s evocation of the dramatic in poems where he engages with neo-colonialism and expresses postcolonial disenchantment. The last part of the paper turns to Rubadiri’s evocative description of African life and environment. I argue that Rubadiri’s masterful use of imagery and diction heightens the literariness of his works and gives the poems a vividness, sense of immediacy and a dramatic quality that propelled him to fame as a poet. His patience and care when crafting and organising his works raises the poems in his modest collection to the level of poetry.

### **The Drama of Colonialism and Cultural /Racial Consciousness**

David Rubadiri’s tendency to evoke drama in his poetry is observable in poems that deal with such familiar themes in African literature as colonisation, cultural dislocation and racial consciousness. As a poet who was writing during the period of decolonisation and for one who fought for independence in his country, it is not surprising that he deals with such themes. Further, as a highly educated African in his day, the sympathy Rubadiri had towards fellow blacks was to be expected. Such a universal vision was a trait of his time, a trait also typical of pioneer poets before him who called upon blacks to unite and fight racism. Rubadiri was not the first and only writer to tackle these themes in his writing. What sets him apart from the others is his handling of these, his style and poetic technique which give the poems a dramatic element and render them and the themes they carry vivid, memorable and enduring.

One of the poems where Rubadiri treats the theme of colonisation and evokes drama is the well-known “Stanley Meets Mutesa” (Rubadiri, 2004, pp.24-26). The poem is about the journey of Henry Morton Stanley, one of the European explorers of the interior of Africa, and his porters to Kabaka Mutesa I’s court in Uganda. Kabaka Mutesa I (Mutesa Walugembe Mukaabya) was King of the Buganda Kingdom in present day Uganda from 1856-1884. The explorer and journalist Henry Morton Stanley and his entourage arrived at Mutesa’s court in April 1875 (Vision Reporter, 2012; Goodwin, 1984). Rubadiri imagines the visit by Stanley at Mutesa’s court as the infiltration of colonialism into Africa, for as soon as the reed gate was closed behind Stanley, the west had been let in. In the poem, therefore, Rubadiri seems to say that the west came subtly into Africa and it was welcomed peaceably by the natives. This reminds one of Obierika’s words in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* about the white man coming into Umuofia peaceably with his religion and putting a knife at the things that held the people together, breaking them apart.

A critical examination of the poem reveals how carefully it was crafted, showing economy of language, good use of imagery, controlled rhythm, parallelism, descriptive words and phrases, allusions, among other aspects of style. The first stanza, which is an opening to the story of the trip to the king’s court, seems to echo T.S. Eliot’s opening of “Journey of the Magi” (Roscoe, 1977, p.136; Gikandi, 2006, p.419; Patke, 2006, p.181) but it lays before us, not a wintry landscape, but a typically hot African scene. We read:

Such a time of it they had  
 The heat of the day  
 The chill of the night  
 And the mosquitoes that followed  
 Such was the time and  
 They bound for a kingdom (Rubadiri, 2004, p.24)

The opening here evokes oral narrative technique as it hooks the reader and creates anticipation for the story and drama that is to follow. The controlled rhythm of the lines gives us a sense of a poet in control of his craft while tactile images show

the challenges that lie ahead of the adventurers. These challenges become even more prominent in the second and third stanzas which serve to show the struggles and suffering of the black porters that accompany the white man. Here, Rubadiri's sympathies for fellow black Africans are clear. The poet's descriptive abilities, use of imagery and appropriate diction that lead to the creation of a dramatic scene for the reader are also clear when he writes:

The thin weary line of carriers  
 With tattered dirty rags to cover their backs  
 The battered bulky chests  
 That kept on falling off their shaven heads  
 Their tempers high and hot  
 The sun fierce and scorching  
 With it rose their spirits  
 With its fall their hopes  
 As each day sweated their bodies dry and  
 Flies clung in clumps on their sweat-scented backs  
 Such was the march  
 And the hot season just breaking (Rubadiri, 2004, p.24)

Here, Rubadiri does not only accomplish a clear description of events, but also paints the scene for his readers to witness what is going on. The word "weary" in the line "The thin weary line of carriers" refers not to the weariness of the line but the carriers themselves, while the word "thin" could refer to the thinness of the line as well as the carriers who are both weary and thin. Visual images dominate the stanza and these include the words "thin", "tattered" and "bulky." The poverty and appearance of the porters that the description evokes highlight their plight and suffering. The fact that the "bulky chests" constantly fall off the porters' "shaven heads" also highlights the pain they endure. It is not surprising that they get hot-tempered in the "fierce and scorching" sun. Rubadiri's imagery here invites us to see what is happening, to feel the heat from the blazing sun and to feel the porters' pain. In the stanza above Rubadiri also manages to indicate the length of the journey through reference to the rising and setting sun in the lines "With it rose their spirits/ With its fall their hopes" while the varied repetition in the construction of the lines helps to emphasise the porters' hopes and their



subsequent despondency. The heat and the flies that cling to their backs, described as “sweat-scented,” accentuate their misery which leads to death as the third stanza indicates. Parallelism in the first four lines of the third stanza enables us to appreciate the plight of humans and animals. In the stanza Rubadiri writes:

Each day a weary pony dropped  
 Left for the vultures on the plains  
 Each afternoon a human skeleton collapsed  
 Left for the Masai on the plains  
 But the march trudged on  
 Its khaki leader in front:  
 He the spirit that inspired  
 He the light of hope (Rubadiri, 2004, p.24)

The lines “But the march trudged on/ Its khaki leader in front” allow us to appreciate the action and drama; the laborious march of the fatigued travellers whose exhaustion and the hard conditions they endure are highlighted by the word “trudge.” The thinness of the porters hinted at in the second stanza is explicit in the third stanza as those who died on the way are described as human skeletons. The varied repetition in “each day” and “each afternoon” also shows that the journey was a long one. Further, the idea that the human skeletons that drop on the plains are left to the Masai can be read as an allusion to racist perceptions of Africans as cannibals. While the ponies are left for the vultures, the human skeletons are left for the Masai. Here Rubadiri deliberately echoes Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* where Africans are depicted as cannibals (Achebe 1988a). The reference to the khaki clad white man as “the light of hope” is again an evocation of the imperial vision of bringing light to Africa.

When we get to the fourth stanza we encounter the climax of the journey as the sight of the two rivers, the Nile and the Nyanza, fills the travellers with anticipation of reaching their destination. Evocative visual images help us see the vista which inspires the travellers to double their march. We are told that

The Nile and the Nyanza  
 Lay like two twins  
 Azure across the green countryside

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The march leapt on chanting  
Like young gazelles to a water hole (Rubadiri, 2004, p.25).

The comparison of the marchers to young gazelles emphasises their excitement in the green and reassuring environment as opposed to the hot and dreary one they had just passed through. The exuberance of the travellers which heightens the drama of the journey and the climactic nature of this stanza is further highlighted when we hear that “Hearts beat faster/ Loads felt lighter/ As the cool water lapped their sore soft feet” and when at the king’s court all fear, pain and suffering are forgotten and instead stories of valour are shared.

The reception of the travellers at the king’s court is cautious but not violent. But here, too, evocation of drama defines Rubadiri’s poetic style: “The village looks on behind banana groves/ Children peer behind reed fences” while few old and wise elders silently nod, perhaps in trepidation, and the uncertain court is summoned to parley by “one rumbling drum roll”. The outcome of the parley is a warm welcome to the west through Stanley. The use of contrast helps us to see the dignity of the African king, his confidence, warm-heartedness and his stature, and the uncertainty of the thin, bearded, but tight-lipped and cunning white man. The king is tall and big while the white man is short and thin. The idea of grabbing the white man’s “lean hand” and whispering “*Mtu mwenye karibu*”/ White man you are welcome” both underlines the confidence and forthrightness of the king and heightens the dramatic nature of the encounter. Rubadiri highlights the momentousness of this welcome to the unsuspecting king and his people in the final couplet where we hear that when “The gate of polished reed closes behind them/ ...the west is let in.” Through this terse and simple line Rubadiri sums up what Patke (2006), calls “the fateful intrusion of Europe into Africa” (Patke, 2006, p.11) that is, the subtle encroachment into Africa of western culture and way of life. Although he is dealing with the emotive subject of colonialism, Rubadiri prefers “quiet lyricism” and the poem is “characterised by quiet distaste rather than strident fury” (Roscoe, 1977, p.136).

Rubadiri’s careful style, his economy of language, logical structure, vivid

imagery, repetition and descriptive phrases, do not only help us witness the drama of the journey and arrival, but also the plight of the travellers especially the porters, colonial attitudes towards blacks, the innocence of black people and the ingratitude and selfishness of the westerner who sees this as an opportunity to dominate and conquer. Besides its thematic relevance, the literariness of this poem, the craft that went into its writing, has contributed to making the poem “one of the most anthologized in collections of African poetry” (Gikandi, 2006; see also Nazareth, 1980, p.97).

Another poem that deals with the theme of colonisation and the consequent cultural dislocation in Africa is “The Tide that from the West Washes Africa to the Bone”. This three-stanza poem is about the dislocation of African culture following the colonial encounter. The western cultural encroachment into Africa is here referred to as a tide from the west. The fact that it is a tide with its associated current means that it is violent and rough enough to sweep away anything that stands in its way, and in this case that is the cultures of Africa, especially religions. Like “Stanley Meets Mutesa” discussed above, in “The Tide that from the West Washes Africa to the Bone” Rubadiri puts his artistic skills to good use, producing a poem that relies on sensory descriptions, figurative language, precise wording and careful organisation to enable us to imagine the tide. Rubadiri’s evocation of the ruthlessness of the tide reminds us of his love for powerful forces of nature, especially those associated with water, as metaphors for the advance of the west into Africa. In the first stanza of “The Tide that from the West Washes Africa to the Bone” we read:

The tide from the west  
Washes Africa to the bone  
Gurgles through my ribs  
And gathers the bones  
That clatter into clusters  
Rough and polished  
To fling them back destitute  
To the desolate river-bank (Rubadiri, 2004, p.20)

Rubadiri uses kinaesthetic, visual, aural, and tactile images in the stanza to underline

the actions and effects of the tide. These images help to create a sense of the dramatic which characterises most of Rubadiri's successful poems. Words like "gurgles", "gathers" and "fling" evoke movement and underline the activities and drama associated with the tide. "Gurgles" and "clatter" also enable us to hear the commotion while "clusters" and "desolate" make us see the devastation caused by the tide. Further, the words "rough" and "polished" invite us to see and feel the texture of the bones.

Rubadiri's word choice and use in the poem is also aimed at highlighting the violence of the tide. For instance, the words "gurgles", "clatter" and "fling" show the ruthlessness and violence of the western tide in its encounter with Africa. The use of the possessive marker "my" in the line "Gurgles through my ribs" underlines the fact that the poet-persona is personally affected by this tide like everyone else in Africa. The deliberate conflation of Africa with the poet-persona here is an indication that his plight is the plight of Africa and vice versa. Rubadiri also emphasises the violence and roughness of the tide through the alliterative repetition of the /k/ sound in the expression "clutter into clusters." The viciousness of the tide is also clear in the second stanza where, in ways that remind us of a violent action drama or movie, we are told it "Tears through the heart sinews of Africa" and "Boils in [the persona's] marrow/ Dissolving bone and sinew." The actions vividly capture the brutal determination of the tide to leave nothing of value in Africa. The bodily images in the poem, that is ribs, bones, heart, sinews, blood and marrow emphasise the embodiment of the plight of Africa as a result of her encounter with western culture. In a Luncheon Speech at the Annual Meeting of the United Nations of Saturday, 11 April 1964, Rubadiri who was then ambassador to the United States and the United Nations, observed that explorers "like Henry Morton Stanley and David Livingstone [...] stomped through forests, across deserts, and in and out of swamps [in Africa]. In so doing, they unleashed forces—forces so complex that in the shortest period of history known to man they transformed a way of life of a most complex people" (Rubadiri, 1964, p.85). It is these very forces, referred to as a tide, that metaphorically do damage to African culture and personality in the poem.

Images associated with the cataclysmic nature of the tide highlighted in the first and second stanzas continue in the third stanza where the tide proceeds to tear the mooring of the spirit of Africa until it becomes blood red. It also goes on to wash “the soul of Africa.” References to the spirit and soul of the continent point to the fact that the washing is not only physical but also spiritual and ideological. The spiritual or religious connotations of the poem become more explicit in the last three lines of the poem where we hear that “The tide that from the west/ With blood washes Africa/ Once washed a wooden cross.” These lines provide a clear connection between the tide and Christianity which came with colonialism. Thus, in the context of the poem, Christianity and western culture ruthlessly disrupt African life and culture, rendering it limp and bloodied. There is another link here between this poem and “Stanley Meets Mutesa”. Record has it that when Stanley visited Mutesa’s court, the king requested him for arms and people who could make them, but instead, and ironically, the Buganda Kingdom received missionaries in 1877 who proceeded to change not only the spiritual but also cultural landscape of Africa (Brierley & Spear, 1988). In this poem the imagery, careful choice of descriptive words, and symbolism allow Rubadiri to highlight the deleterious effects of the colonial encounter on African personality and culture.

Another poem that may be said to allude to the brutality of colonialism in Africa is the popular “An African Thunderstorm,” the title poem of Rubadiri’s collection. But such a reading is allegorical; a literal reading of this poem situates it amongst those in which Rubadiri tackles African life and the environment. The poem is about a thunderstorm and its effects on a village in Africa. Evocative words, images, metaphors and similes combine to provide a lyrical description of the drama associated with a thunderstorm hitting the village. It begins with clouds coming with the wind from the west. The strong winds cause havoc in the village as trees bend, clothes are blown off bodies exposing mothers’ breasts, and delighted children run about happy to welcome the rain that finally falls accompanied by lightning and thunder.

When one reads the poem allegorically, one begins to see the approaching

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storm from the west as the arrival of colonialists whose presence on the African landscape was as destructive as a thunderstorm. Like we saw with “The Tide that from the West Washes Africa to the Bone” above, the reference to the west and the water imagery in “An African Thunderstorm” can be used to advance the argument that the poem deals with the theme of the destructive nature of colonialism. In this way “An African Thunderstorm” and “The Tide that from the West Washes Africa to the Bone” complement each other. Such a reading of “An African Thunderstorm,” which is not far-fetched, would invest most aspects in the poem with symbolic value. For instance, the trees that bend to let the wind pass could represent African cultural values and resistance that fail to stand against the rough cultural and military might from the west. The excited children could be representative of uncritical people who only view the advance of colonial culture and institutions positively—a reminder of the naivety of some villagers of Umuofia or Umuaro in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, respectively—while the exposure of women’s nakedness by the wind could refer to the demystification and undermining of African traditions and values. The expression “pelting march of the storm” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.22) at the end of the poem could also well stand for the advance of the colonial armies and might through Africa. Rubadiri’s choice of words and images in this poem makes this allegorical reading of the poem possible. I return to this poem later for the literal reading, which I undertake under the theme of African life and the environment.

In his engagement with the theme of colonialism Rubadiri does so as a black man affected by the developments of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century in Africa. This racial consciousness is also clear in his engagement with the plight of black people both in Africa and beyond. Rubadiri treats the plight of fellow blacks in poems such as “A Negro Labourer in Liverpool”, “On Meeting a West Indian Boat-Train at Waterloo Station” and “Black Child”. In these poems, like in the others discussed above, an evocation of drama is an important aspect of style.

In “A Negro Labourer in Liverpool” we encounter the alienation and despondency of a black migrant worker in Liverpool, England. When the persona

passes the worker on the street, he is

slouching in dark backhouse pavement  
 head bowed  
 taut  
 haggard  
 and worn  
 a dark shadow  
 amidst dark shadows (Rubadiri, 2004, p.23).

Rubadiri evokes drama through reference to the act of passing and, as we see later, staring at, the labourer on the pavement and through description of the labourer's posture and appearance: "slouching [...] / head bowed / tout / haggard / and worn." The poet's choice of words in the extract above is meant to show the worker's hopelessness and despair, and Rubadiri does so successfully. The words "slouching," "haggard" and "worn" underline the worker's tiredness and despondency. The repetition of the word "dark" does not only create a sad mood but also emphasises the labourer's alienation as he stands out as a black man in Britain. The word is also an evocation of race just as it is an indication of squalor and poverty. Further, when the poet-protagonist stares at the labourer, perhaps out of pity or a sense of fellowship, he notices that on the man's "dark negro face / [there was] no sunny smile / no hope / or a longing for hope promised only." A sense of hopelessness and despair is emphasised here. The promise of a beautiful sunny future that the trip to Britain held for the labourer was false; a decoy that lured him to a life of misery.

The poet-persona goes on to say what else he saw on the black labourer's face in ways that resemble description of action in a drama:

the quick cowed dart of eyes  
 piercing through impassive crowds  
 searching longingly  
 for a face  
 that might flicker understanding (Rubadiri, 2004, p.23).

The cold, individualistic life of the west, a point we often encounter in negritude

poetry, is alluded to here as the crowds are said to be impassive. This leads to the defeated demeanour of the labourer who is said to have a cowed look as he desperately looks for someone who might show understanding or pity. The fact that the man came to London with high hopes which are never fulfilled is captured in the third and final stanza of the poem where we hear:

this is him  
 the Negro labourer in Liverpool  
 that from his motherland  
 with new hope  
 sought for an identity  
 grappled  
 to clutch the fire of manhood  
 in the land of the free (Rubadiri, 2004, p.23).

The labourer is a victim of the promise of migrant labour. We are reminded here of other African poems, such as Wole Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation," which highlight the plight of the African in the western metropolis. Upon migrating he realises that the "new hope" is empty and sour. What the poet refers to as the search "for an identity" could be a quest for achievement that would bring the worker's recognition among his peers at home. But in the end the land of the free that Britain promised to be turns out to be a land of entrapment for some people like him. The poet-persona's pity is clear in the poem through the conversational tone and demonstrative expression "This is him/ The Negro labourer in Liverpool." The message in this poem is relevant even today when the discourse on migration, refugees and asylum seekers has become even more strident in the western world.

The theme of black consciousness, common in pioneer and negritude poetry, also emerges from the poem "Black Child," a poem with a message of inspiration to a black child to be determined and not to look down upon him/herself. In mood and theme one is reminded of the pioneer and negritude poets and their treatment of the theme of blackness, in particular Gladys Casely-Hayford's poem "Rejoice," which encourages black people to be proud of being black, and Bernard Dadié's "I Give You Thanks My God" (sometimes titled "I Thank You God"), which



turns aspects that are despised in Africans “into objects of praise and satisfaction” (Nwoga, 1967, p.238). In the poem “Black Child”, Rubadiri inspires the black child who must not look at his hopeless present but to a brighter future towards which his ambition, inward fire, will drive him/her. In the poem, Rubadiri uses avian imagery where in his hopeless state the child is like a bird with clipped wings. But this state of hopelessness is temporary as the poet-persona tells him/her:

Black child  
 I see your wings  
 Sprout and grow  
 I see the dull eyes  
 Catch fire and glow  
 And then you must fly (Rubadiri, 2004, p.31).

At the time of writing, probably in the 1960s, giving hope to black people who were emerging from racist colonial regimes was an important task and mark of commitment for an African writer (See Achebe, 1988b). But the poem’s message is relevant even today as blacks continue to be victims of racist ideologies that dampen the spirits of many. Rubadiri emphasises the idea of growth and freedom through the image of the sprouting wings and flight. The imagery here evokes drama that is consistent with the theme of the poem. The evocation of drama is also achieved through the choice of words such as “wings”, “sprout”, “grow”, “glow” and “fly” which, in line with the theme, are associated with positive developments. The composition of this poem, like the ones discussed earlier, evinces care and skill aimed at achieving the intended goal.

### **The Neo-colonial Circus and Postcolonial Disenchantment**

Rubadiri’s evocation of drama in his poetry is also observable in poems that tackle the subjects of neo-colonialism and postcolonial disillusionment. In the 1960s colonialism in many African countries gave way to independence following nationalist struggles. As I mentioned earlier, Rubadiri participated in these struggles in his home country Malawi. In some of his poems, Rubadiri comments on the postcolonial moment in Africa where the promise of independence has not brought the sun but years of misery for many Africans. Countries, such as

Malawi, fell into dictatorships while others were dogged by coups or scarred by civil wars. Worse still, the newly independent countries looked up to the former colonisers for financial support. In the poems “Yet another Song” and “Begging Aid” Rubadiri addresses the challenges and woes that befell post-independence Africa in ways that demonstrate his abilities to evoke action and drama.

The poem “Begging Aid” is a satirical critique of the behaviour of African leaders who rely on former colonisers for financial support. In the 1964 speech referred to above, Rubadiri was of the view that “African political independence must grapple with the monster of economic independence” (Rubadiri, 1964, p.88). In “Begging Aid”, African leaders, elders in the poem, who are respectable at home, become “Circus Lions/ Away from home,” that is in the capital cities of the west. The image of circus lions and the evocation of circus drama draw our attention to the embarrassing antics of African leaders as they beg for aid from western countries. The reference to guns in the poem is evocative of the conflicts that have characterised many countries in Africa, some of which are sponsored by the very people from who the leaders beg for aid. Further, in the second stanza of the poem Rubadiri indicates that African countries (“our homelands”) have become zoos for ageing lions (metonymically referred to as manes in the poem) as an allusion to lack of freedom and the dictatorial tendencies of the leaders.

The third stanza captures theatrical action, consistent with a circus, which underlines the humiliation of Africa through neo-colonialism where life is determined by owners of capital from the west. The stanza reads:

In the beggarhood  
Of a Circus  
That now is home,  
The whip of the Ringmaster  
Cracks with a snap  
That eats through  
The backs of our being (Rubadiri, 2004, p.37).

The words “crack” and “snap,” and the expression “eat through” point to the ruthlessness and brutality of the ringmaster, the neo-colonialists. The whip

the ringmaster is wielding evokes institutions such as the World Bank and IMF that determine policies for African governments. One is reminded here of the structural adjustment programmes which brought, and continue to bring, misery to many Africans. Later in the poem the elders stretch their hands “In a prayer/ Of submission” and delicately perform the tightrope to the spectators, referred to as the Gate in the poem. “Begging Aid” demonstrates Rubadiri’s use of an extended metaphor where the antics of African leaders and their seeking aid from the west is compared to a circus performance. The extended metaphor of the circus also illustrates Rubadiri’s evocation and use of elements of drama in his poetry.

In “Yet another Song” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.50) Rubadiri evokes drama in his reference to the joy and excitement that he, like other Malawians in particular and Africans in general, felt following the success of the independence struggle and the end of colonial rule. In the poem he also laments the rise of dictators in the newly independent countries. The poet-persona says “In the early wake/ Of a colonial dusk/ I sang the song of fire.” The “colonial dusk” here refers to the end of colonialism, which is compared to the end of day. The song of fire on the other hand refers to the songs of happiness and celebration of independence in Africa. Later Rubadiri metaphorically compares the celebratory mood that gripped the continent to a religious fervour when he writes:

The church doors opened  
To the clang  
Of new anthems  
And colourful banners (Rubadiri, 2004, p.50).

The “new anthems” and “colourful banners” could well be reference to the new national anthems and new flags that emerged on the continent, perhaps in Malawi in particular, following independence. The religious metaphor lends a sense of seriousness to the subject matter in the poem. Writing in ways that make us imagine action in a play, the poet refers to his own role in the installation and consolidation of the powers of the new leaders in the fourth and fifth stanzas:

I knelt before the new totems  
I had helped to raise

---

Watered them  
With tears of ecstasy.

They grew  
Taller than life  
Grimacing and breathing fire (Rubadiri, 2004, p.50).

The use of the word “totem” is a deliberate subversive tactic that exposes the fact that the power of the oppressive leaders in Africa depends on the people who support them. The support of the poet-persona is seen in the act of watering the totems “with tears of ecstasy”. Rubadiri’s versatility is clear in the poem as religious imagery gives way to the agricultural metaphor contained in the idea of watering totems. Agricultural imagery continues in the next stanza where the totems (the leaders) become larger than life and deadly (“breathing fire”). When we get to the final stanza:

Today  
I sing yet another song,  
A song of exile (Rubadiri, 2004, p.50).

we realise that the deadly and monstrous totems have prevailed as the poet-persona is forced to sing another song, only this time it is a song of exile. Terseness, restraint and controlled rhythm combine to produce a sad and dejected mood in this poem. In expressing his sense of joy and happiness at the demise of colonialism in Malawi and his disillusionment with the new leaders that assumed power after the departure of the colonisers, Rubadiri does so in unison with fellow Malawian poets who were writing either from within or from outside Malawi during the dictatorial reign of Dr Kamuzu Banda.

There is an autobiographical aspect to “Yet another Song” as Rubadiri appears to be talking about his own experiences in Malawi, and expressing his postcolonial disillusionment. The poet’s restraint is clear in that he does not give in to the temptation of saying more in expressing his bitterness and frustration. As a young man, Rubadiri and Colin Cameron welcomed Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda at Chileka Airport when he arrived in Malawi on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1958. Rubadiri

went on to serve as Malawi's ambassador to the United Nations and the United States. It is this support of Banda that he refers to as watering "new totems/With tears of ecstasy" in the poem. But Rubadiri's support for Banda and the MCP was not to last long, for, as he puts it in the poem, the "new totems," "grew/ Taller than life/ Grimacing and breathing fire." In other words, they metamorphosed into oppressors and dictators. As the world knows today, Rubadiri disagreed with Dr Banda and he left his diplomatic post and went into exile in Uganda. It is there where he was to sing "[a] song of exile." The poem, therefore, underlines Rubadiri's disillusionment with people he supported and a sense of betrayal for those he believed had the welfare of Malawians at heart. In the end they turned out to be people bent on serving their own interests, and not those of others.

### **The Theatrics in African Life and Environment**

The sense of the dramatic also features in Rubadiri's poems that recall traditional Africa while also reflecting the beauty of the African environment and its weather. In the poem "An African Vigil" (Rubadiri, 2004, p.19) Rubadiri writes about lovers who admire and acknowledge each other wordlessly through eye contact. The love relationship is a form of a vigil as the lovers wait for each other and meet around the same time each evening, when the woman goes to the waterhole to draw "the day's last pot of water." Depicted in the poem is a time and place where matters of love were handled furtively, a time when great care was needed to avoid a scandal. In this context expression of love precluded hugs and kisses in public. While depicting silent love in the poem, Rubadiri shows us the beauty of the landscape. I would also argue that the poem exhibits racial consciousness in its praise of black beauty. Like many other works by Rubadiri, the poem is a well-crafted piece, revealing good use of imagery and description. When the poem opens the poet-persona is walking to his rendezvous to meet his loved one. We read:

Evening drapes gold on distant hills  
 as slowly along the winding footpath  
 I walk to meet her  
 my dark lady (Rubadiri, 2004, p.19).

In the stanza above Rubadiri personifies the evening, which is said to drape “gold on distant hills.” In doing so he credits the setting sun for the beauty, emphasised by reference to gold, of the distant hills. Visual and kinaesthetic images (notice the word “drapes”) help us to see the beauty of the landscape. Kinaesthetic imagery also comes into play to enable us to imagine the poet-persona on his way to meet his lover whom he calls “My dark lady,” in reference to her blackness. The kinaesthetic imagery here, as elsewhere in the poem, helps to amplify the drama unfolding before the reader. The possessive marker “my” underlines the poet-protagonist’s love for the woman. Evocative images of country life also abound in the poem: “winding footpath,” “waterhole,” “pot” and “bushes” are all evocations of rural life.

Further, in the poem Rubadiri ensures that we are able to appreciate the beauty of the woman through the way he describes her as she slowly comes into view in the third stanza. Using kinaesthetic and visual imagery to create what emerges as a scene in a performance, Rubadiri invites us to see the woman approach:

first appears the top of her pot  
 then bare brown shoulders  
 a slender neck  
 fringed with round beads  
 of a fiery sunset glow,  
 a slow turn of dark eyes  
 and a lightening shadow of a smile (Rubadiri, 2004, p.19).

The careful observation here is evidence of the love the poet-persona has for the woman while the descriptions such as “bare brown shoulders/ A slender neck,” “dark eyes,” and “round beads/ Of a fiery sunset glow” present before us a beautiful and attractive black woman. Here, Rubadiri relies on the powers of descriptive writing and on the creative writing principle of “Show, don’t tell.” These aspects enable Rubadiri to exploit elements of drama to good effect in his poetry. The fourth and last stanza of the poem presents us with parallelism in “That is all she ever says/ That is all I wish to hear,” alliteration in “meet my”

and “time tomorrow” as well as a rhyme of “timelessly” and “understandingly.” These features demonstrate the care that went into writing this poem; care aimed at producing *poetry* and not *verse* or *worse*.

“Master of the African Night” is another poem that provides a glimpse of the dramatic in African life and the environment. The poem is about the lively beauty and terror of the night in Africa, praising the African lion whose roar at the end of the poem cements his dominance on the African landscape while providing an evocative description of a scene of drumming and dance at night. In the poem Rubadiri beautifully captures the rhythms of an African night in ways that echo negritude poetry, especially the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor. The poem begins with night falling and a picture of boys bringing in livestock from grazing, pots bubbling on cooking fires and well-fed babies going to sleep. I should be quick to mention that the idyllic picture that Rubadiri paints here is evocative of the essentialist tendencies in negritude verse and creates a rather idealistic picture of Africa. With the rising of a silver moon drumming is heard, urgently calling the villagers to the dancing grounds where we later witness vigorous and rhythmic dancing, clapping and ululation. Deep in the night the dancing stops and the people one by one leave the dancing arena for their houses before nature takes over. An owl hoots good night and Simba, the lion, master of the African night of the title, rules the night. Rubadiri’s characteristic use of vivid evocative images combine with controlled rhythm to enable us see the coming of night in the first stanza where we read:

The sun hangs low on the hilly west  
 Printing long, sharp shadows  
 On the darkening hill slopes.  
 Lone weary boys  
 With the trudge of heavy hooves  
 Of morning and drowsy cows  
 Villageward turn (Rubadiri, 2004, p.43).

The idea of the sun hanging low in the hilly west and “Printing long, sharp shadows,” in reference to lengthening shadows as the sun drops in the west, and the

mention of boys that return home with herds of cattle from the grazing grounds, create a clear and vivid image of the end of a day in a typical African village. These images blend with personification and similes to paint a picture of night falling in the second stanza where

Darkness swallows day  
 Heaven wakes  
 From the dark clouds  
 A silver moon stares  
 As from the bowels of shadowy huts (Rubadiri, 2004, p.43).

Like a malevolent creature the inanimate darkness is said to swallow day, while heaven is said to awaken, possibly through the stars that become brighter, and the silver moon that “stares/ As from the bowels of shadowy huts.” The shadowy huts refer to the clouds from which the moon emerges. Careful observation and a deep awareness of his African environment enables Rubadiri to vividly capture images of evening and the approaching night. Visual images give way to aural images in the third stanza where we hear, through onomatopoeia, “the boom-didi-boom of drums/ [...] Thudding and thumping urgently/ Filling the night with quivering agitation/ [and] Stirring blood” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.43). By the time we get to the fourth stanza the action in the drama is in full swing as we do not only hear the “jingling feet,” “clattering wave of clapping hands” and “screeching ululations,” but we also see “rhythm-filled muscles” of the dancers whose “Bodies twirl and writhe” as if possessed (Rubadiri, 2004, p.44). Here we also visualise “the swell and ebb of urging drums” whose rise and fall in sound Rubadiri compares to waves at sea. The poet uses evocative words (“jingling”, “clattering,” “screeching”, “twirl”, “writhe”) to paint images that enable us to imagine the dancers and to be emotionally drawn into the action.

As the night wears on and the dancers get exhausted, fires die and the night becomes chilly. When the dancers leave one by one, they are said to “dissolve into night,” an apt description of their disappearance into the darkness. It is at the point when quiet descends onto the night, occasionally broken by the hooting owl, that the personified majestic lion’s “angry, malicious, contemptuous roar/ Tears the



night like thunder/ Sending the drums to sleep” as he takes over “the inky darkness of night” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.44). Aural and visual images here vividly capture the suddenness of the roar and the pitch darkness described as “inky.” The violence and suddenness of the roar is well described as an act of tearing the night which is then further highlighted in the comparison to thunder. The choice of words here demonstrates Rubadiri’s mastery of the craft and his ability to communicate the desired effect to his readers.

The depiction of the African environment that we see in “Master of the African Night” is even more graphically and imaginatively handled in “The African Thunderstorm”, a poem that best illustrates Rubadiri’s evocation of drama through his poetic style, his choice of words and use of figures of speech. As aforementioned, the poem is about a thunderstorm and its effects on a village in Africa. The theme itself, the destructiveness of a thunderstorm, is simple, a familiar occurrence to anyone who has lived in tropical Africa. But the rendering has ensured a place for the poem in many anthologies; it can be said that it was this poem that singularly raised the profile of Rubadiri in the eyes of poetry critics. As is often the case in many of Rubadiri’s successful poems, this poem demonstrates the poet’s ability to write in a way that allows the reader to witness the drama unfolding before him or her. As the poem opens, kinaesthetic and visual images enable us to see the storm brewing:

From the west  
 clouds come hurrying with the wind  
 turning  
 sharply turning  
 here and there  
 like a plague of locusts  
 whirling  
 tossing up things on its tail  
 hurrying  
 like a mad man chasing nothing (Rubadiri, 2004, p.21).

The swift movement of the clouds in the wind is here captured by the kinaesthetic images created by the appropriately chosen words “hurrying”, “turning/sharply,”

“whirling,” and “tossing,” as well as the expression “here and there.” The simile “like a plague of locust” enables us to visualise the dark and menacing nature of the clouds while the reference to the tail, which creates an animal metaphor, highlights the beastly appearance and frightening nature of the approaching clouds. The last line which compares the clouds to a mad man emphasises the disorderly and chaotic nature of their approach. By the time we get to the second stanza personification, animal metaphors and similes allow us to see the progression of the clouds. Here the clouds that are heavy-laden with water are aptly described as pregnant, and as they hang over hills they are said to “gather to perch on hills/ like dark sinister wings” of monstrous birds. Meanwhile an auditory image of the wind whistling furiously makes us imagine its speed. The havoc caused by the gusty winds is emphasised by the personified trees bending to let it pass and, in the third stanza, by the simile of the women’s clothes that wave like tattered flags before flying off to expose dangling breasts. The dramatic portrayal of the storm and its effects on human and non-human nature is a result of a keen eye and sharp ear for observation that the writer possesses. In contrast to the women who respond to the call of duty to protect their children and property, the children are delighted by the approaching storm and, using auditory images, the poet makes us hear their screams which, personified, “toss and turn” like mysterious creatures “in the din of whirling wind.”

In this poem short crisp lines, some of which contain only a word, enable Rubadiri to portray a sense of urgency. Words and expressions such as “turning/ sharply turning,” and “whirling,” and “dart about/ in and out/ madly” describe the rush and swift movements of the clouds and of the women. In the final four lines of the poem visual, auditory, olfactory and kinaesthetic images gather to take us to the climactic moment of the thunderstorm—the pouring rain. In this part of the poem

[...] jagged blinding flashes  
 rumble, tremble, and crack  
 amidst the smell of fired smoke  
 and the pelting march of the storm (Rubadiri, 2004, p.22).

The expression “jagged blinding flashes,” which is evocative of lightning, and “rumble, tremble, and crack,” which describes the fear-provoking thunder that accompanies the rain, enable us to imagine the danger associated with the storm. The internal rhyme in “rumble” and “tremble” and the harsh sound in “crack” also allow us to picture a noisy and fearsome environment where nature has taken control and humans have been reduced to cowering in their huts to wait for the storm to pass.

## Conclusion

The discussion above has shown that, in his poetry, Rubadiri evokes performance and drama in his engagement with a range of themes that were not only relevant at the time of writing but are also important in Africa today. These themes include love, colonisation and the resultant cultural dislocation in Africa, blackness, postcolonial disillusionment, and African way of life and the environment. Of course, these themes are not unique to Rubadiri. Many other African writers, poets and fiction writers, have dealt with them in their works. What is particular to Rubadiri is the manner in which these themes are handled in the poetry, that is, his poetic style, and the way in which they are embedded in a sense of the dramatic. Rubadiri uses crisp descriptive words and phrases, vivid images, and similes among other stylistic aspects to enhance the quality of his poetry. We can describe Rubadiri as a poet of images, a poet of the eye who also writes for the ear by evoking drama. The only images rare in Rubadiri’s poetry are gustatory ones. Perhaps the matters he engaged with spared him no time to imagine eating and festivities. Further, the poems that deal with colonialism and race reveal a restrained tone as opposed to a frontal assault on the matters of concern. Rubadiri’s evocation of the dramatic, his use of style and poetic technique, has not only made his poetry attractive to academics and poetry lovers, but has also ensured a secure place for Rubadiri in the annals of eminent poets on the African continent. An attempt at judging the quality of Rubadiri’s poetry writing then enables us to fully acknowledge the fact that the versified works he produced over the years cannot answer to any other name but that of poetry.

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