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Imagining Village Life in Zambian Fiction

Introduction

The dualism between the urban and the rural space, and between the systems of social relationships obtaining in each sphere, has proved to be an enduring source of inspiration to African fictional writers since the inception of the genre. Indeed, the point could reasonably be made that modern sub-Saharan African fiction begins as a critical reflection on the cultural gap between the city and the country, which most novelists have taken as the respective epitomes of the contrasting worlds of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’.¹ It seems to me, however, that many studies of the genre have failed to recognize the extent to which literary representations of the town and the village have changed over time.² Far from invariably seeing the former as the embodiment of all evils and the latter as the locus of an endangered pristine morality, African novelists have tended to respond to shifting social perceptions of the urban and the rural spaces. The main argument of this paper, then, is that African ideas about the city and the country – *and* their literary expressions – are historically contingent and rooted in specific socio-economic contexts.³

In my attempt to periodize Zambian literary images of the village, I will draw extensively upon James Ferguson’s seminal book on the Copperbelt and, especially, his notion of ‘cultural style’.⁴ Since, unlike Ferguson’s detractors,⁵ I believe that here lies the real novelty and major contribution of his work, it is appropriate to say a few words about this useful analytical tool and its relevance to Zambian literature.

Urban ‘Cultural Styles’

The category of ‘cultural style’ is introduced by Ferguson in an effort to make ethnographic sense of the social situation of the Copperbelt in the late 1980s, the time of his fieldwork in Zambia. Influenced by the Birmingham tradition of cultural studies, Ferguson uses the ‘term *cultural style* to refer to *practices that signify differences* between social categories.’⁶ In his understanding, a particular cultural style is less the ‘manifestation of a prior or given “identity”’ than a ‘performative competence’. After all, as Ferguson reminds us, ‘the doer may be constituted in the deed; the performance of difference is one of the ways that distinctive subjects and social types are themselves constructed and made

¹ A. Sobrero, ‘Le Immagini della Città nella Letteratura Africana’, in A. Piga (ed.), *Islam e Città nell’Africa a Sud del Sahara. Tra Sufismo e Fondamentalismo* (Naples: Liguori, 2001), p. 3.

² See, e.g., R.B. Gaidzanwa, *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* (Harare: The College Press, 1985), pp. 67-86; N. Nelson, ‘Representations of Men & Women, City & Town in Kenyan Novels of the 1970s and 1980s’, *African Languages and Cultures*, IX, 2 (1996), pp. 145-168; and J.R. Kurtz, *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel* (Trenton & Asmara: Africa World Press, 1998)

³ A similar point is made by S. Newell, ‘Introduction’, in *idem* (ed.), *Readings in African Popular Fiction* (London: The International African Institute, 2002), p. 7.

⁴ J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity. Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1999)

⁵ H. Macmillan, ‘The Historiography of Transition on the Zambian Copperbelt – Another View’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, XIX, 4 (1993), pp. 681-712; R. Palmer, ‘Land Tenure Insecurity on the Zambian Copperbelt, 1998: Anyone Going Back to the Land?’, *Social Dynamics*, XXVI, 2 (2000), pp. 154-170.

⁶ Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, p. 95.

to seem natural.’⁷ In the late 1980s, the main cultural clash in the towns of the Copperbelt involved what Ferguson calls a ‘localist’ and a ‘cosmopolitan’ style. While the localist cultural style – the modes of thought, the manners, the dress code of which it consisted – served to express an allegiance to the rural world, the cosmopolitan cultural package took the urban space as its sole frame of reference.

It is important to realize that Ferguson’s analysis goes beyond mere ethnography and is informed by a deep appreciation of the Zambian historical context. The fact that cultural styles cannot be divorced from current economic realities is brought out by his discussion of the reasons why cultural localism appeared to be gaining the upper hand over cosmopolitanism in the late 1980s. The key economic factor determining an upsurge of localism was the virtual impossibility of urban retirement in the depressed economic climate of the late 1980s-1990s. Unlike their immediate predecessors, present-day Copperbelt workers cannot

‘avoid contemplating one or another sort of rural future [...]. The continued relevance of rural retirement means that most mineworkers are obliged to consider some social nexus of relatives “back home” as an unavoidable part of their life’s social context.’⁸

The prospect of rural retirement and the adoption of a localist cultural style are closely related, for rural retirement necessitates the establishment of viable relationships with country-based relatives, upon whose support the success of one retired or retrenched worker’s rural future largely depends. The resources available to urban dwellers in the furtherance of this all-important aim are both material and cultural. In this regard, the regular payment of remittances to rural areas is not necessarily more significant than a townsman’s ‘speech, dress or body stance’ or his ‘comportment around elders or relations with women’.⁹ This, then, is the framework within which to place the current dominance of localism on the Copperbelt. Since they know they will be eventually forced to seek the support of their rural kin and allies, struggling urban workers tend to subscribe to modes of thought and action (or ‘signifying practices’) which are most likely to contribute to the creation of serviceable relationships with the latter.

Even though Ferguson himself does not attempt a full-blow history of cultural styles on the Copperbelt, and has much more to say about the contemporary situation than earlier periods, there are sufficient elements in his work to deduce that the tension between the two cultural styles – localism and cosmopolitanism – produced different outcomes in different historical phases and economic contexts.¹⁰ In particular, we might expect a localist, rural-centred cultural orientation to have been largely hegemonic in the 1940s and 1950s, when expectations of rural retirement were quite common.¹¹ Conversely, the 1960s and 1970s – when urban retirement became for the first time a distinctive economic possibility for an increasing number of town dwellers – are likely to have been cosmopolitan decades. This cosmopolitan phase was as brief as the economic boom which generated it, and the localist option resurfaced as a result of the economic collapse of the 1980s and the reduction in the opportunities for urban retirement which it brought in its wake.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁰ E.g., *ibid.*, p. 231.

¹¹ Which is not the same as saying that the period conforms neatly to ‘a “classic”, migrant labor phase’. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Reinforced by this brief theoretical excursion, it is time to return to Zambian fiction. In an environment characterized by an overall dearth of cultural practitioners, it is not unreasonable to expect artistic expressions to reflect prevailing urban cultural trends. If the argument is correct, then a survey of Zambian literature may well provide independent confirmation for the above periodization. It is to this survey that we now turn, beginning with the period comprised between the late 1940s and 1964, the year of Independence.

Zambian Fiction Before Independence

The first text I want to talk about is *Namusiya Kumikoti* (Namusiya at the Mines), Enoch Kaavu's novel in Ila.¹² Not only is *Namusiya* the first published Zambian novel, but it also illustrates many of the ideological traits and trademarks of the fictional literature of the period under consideration. In *Namusiya* – as in so much pre-Independence fiction – the idealization of rural life goes hand-in-hand with the vilification of the urban space. It is as if, in order effectively to celebrate the village, Zambian novelists writing in the 1950s and early 1960s needed its perceived opposite, the town. The plot of the book is fairly elementary. Its hero, Namusiya, travels from the country to the city – and back; Namusiya's is a journey of discovery, which results in his acquiring the experience sufficient to appraise the merits – or lack thereof – of the urban and the rural space.

Even though Nalubanda, the protagonist's birthplace, is portrayed by Kaavu as a veritable Arcady, teeming with people, cattle and game, the death of both of his parents forces Namusiya to contemplate the possibility of migrating to the mines. We are told in passing that none of Namusiya's surviving stepmothers was willing to take on the responsibility for his upkeep. But this germ of a critique is little more than a narrative ploy to get the hero into town and does not provide the occasion for a more nuanced and realistic treatment of village life, the blemishes of which are not elaborated upon and do not even come close to matching the pervasiveness of evil which Namusiya encounters in the city.

For despite his relative success at his new workplace, Namusiya is soon lured into world of vice and deceit which threatens his rural innocence and the very foundations of his identity. In Kaavu's narrative – like in the minds of many of his contemporaries¹³ – the image of town and the image of urban women are closely intertwined. It is the scandalous and unrestricted behaviour of the latter which epitomizes the ultimate immorality and impurity of the former. The greedy and untrustworthy women whom Namusiya stumbles across in town are the perfect antithesis of his generous and loving rural mother. The urban space and the women who inhabit it may be literally murderous: by the time Namusiya resolves to amend his 'bad ways', his health is greatly weakened by venereal diseases and by his having been involved in a series of entirely gratuitous street battles.

Having realized the vacuousness and artificiality of town relationships, Namusiya is eventually saved by his conversion to Christianity and, more importantly, by an ideological – and later physical – return to the village. Namusiya's newly rediscovered localist vocation is symbolized by his decision to shun inter-tribal marriage and search for a

¹² E.A. Kaavu, *Namusiya Kumikoti* (London: Longmans [with Joint Publications Bureau of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland], 1949). I employ an English translation of the text by Iredy Chubile.

¹³ See, e.g., J. Ferguson, 'The Country and the City on the Copperbelt', in *idem* and A. Gupta, *Culture, Power, Place. Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 140-141.

suitable Ila partner. With the return of Namusiya's family to Nalubanda, Kaavu achieves the ultimate aim of his novel: the demonstration of the moral superiority of village life over town life. Unsurprisingly, in the final chapter of the book, Namusiya warns his fellow villagers against the dangers of the city and vows never to leave the village again.

Kaavu's ideological stance is far from unique, for practically every novel of the period brings out in one way or another the hegemony of localism and related celebration of the village setting.¹⁴ While, for instance, the theme of rural altruism *versus* urban selfishness forms the backbone of Chipungu's allegorical novelette, *Uluse Lwalile Nkwale* (Pity Killed the Nkwale Bird),¹⁵ the depersonalising effects of the urban ethnic hotchpotch and the plight of abandoned rural women are dealt with in Masiye's veritable localist manifesto, *Tiyeni Kumudzi* (Let's Go to the Village).¹⁶

Zambian Fiction in the Early Post-Independence Era

For a more dispassionate, realistic treatment of village life, one has to wait until the late 1960s-1970s, the time in which, as has been suggested above, a town-centred, cosmopolitan cultural style became momentarily hegemonic as a result of an increase in the economic opportunities for urban retirement. The fact that more and more people felt more and more disconnected from their rural backgrounds had a significant impact on fictional representations of the countryside, and the best illustration of this new literary trend is undoubtedly Dominic Mulaisho's acclaimed English novel, *The Tongue of the Dumb*, first published in 1971 in the Heinemann African Writers Series.¹⁷ I should hasten to say that Mulaisho is one of Zambia's best writers. Unlike *Namusiya Kumikoti*, a didactic, heavily moralistic quest story, *The Tongue of the Dumb* is a complex, sophisticated novel. By comparing the two texts, I do not mean to imply any artistic equivalence; my sole purpose is to throw light on changing Zambian perceptions of the country.

The Tongue of the Dumb is set in chief Mpona's village, Eastern Province, in the late 1940s. Mulaisho's fictional village is, both literally and metaphorically, miles apart from Kaavu's localist Arcady. Far from being the cradle of a pristine morality, Mpona's is explicitly marked off as an economically impoverished and morally degraded space. For the constant threats of hunger – 'the real hunger', the 'hunger that gnaws at your stomach and then intestines until you can no longer feel them because they have become so light'¹⁸ – and environmental catastrophe are compounded by jealousy, factional disputes, violence and, especially, witchcraft, a deep-rooted belief in which seems to hold everyone in thrall.

¹⁴ This is why Kunene's charges of 'self-devaluation' and 'cultural captivity' appear both outdated and wide of the mark. Pre-Independence Zambian novelists do not 'ridicule their own traditions and cultural values'; rather, they idealize them as bulwarks against the perceived immorality of modernity and the urban space. (D.P. Kunene, 'African Vernacular Writing – An Essay on Self-Devaluation', *African Social Research*, 9 (1970), pp. 639-659 [the above quotation is to be found on p. 647]). For the 'cultural nationalist' nostalgia which pervades Zambian vernacular ethnography in the late colonial period, see G. Macola, 'Historical and Ethnographical Publications in the Vernaculars of Colonial Zambia: Missionary Contribution to the "Creation of Tribalism"', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXXIII, 4 (2003), pp. 358-360.

¹⁵ I.H. Chipungu, *Uluse Lwalile Nkwale* (London: Longmans [with Joint Publications Bureau of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland], 1956).

¹⁶ A.S. Masiye, *Tiyeni Kumudzi* (Macmillan [with Joint Publications Bureau of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland], 1951).

¹⁷ D. Mulaisho, *The Tongue of the Dumb* (London: Heinemann, 1971).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

The narrative revolves around the complicated machinations of Lubinda, one of the chief's councillors, whose lust, greediness and ambition match those of any urban character of pre-Independence fiction. In his desire to replace chief Mpona, Lubinda stops at nothing. Perceiving the resident Catholic teacher as a threat to his plans to discredit Mpona, Lubinda attempts repeatedly his life; the sufferings endured by the teacher result in the premature death of his wife. But it is Lubinda's treatment of Natombi, a lonely widow and the mother of Mwape, a dumb child, that most effectively illustrates what the narrator calls his 'unrelieved evil'.¹⁹ Rejected by Natombi, whom he covets, Lubinda goes out of his way to ensure that the innocent woman is accused of witchcraft. Ostracized and physically abused by easily swayed, hateful villagers, Natombi and Mwape are forced temporarily to flee Mpona's. Exception made for the tender relationship between Natombi and her unfortunate son, there is hardly any room for love or pure sentiments in Mulaisho's fictional village, whose inhabitants are seldom portrayed as obeying anything but the basest motives. Long-established hierarchical principles, too, collapse under the weight of Lubinda's immorality. When, towards the end of the novel, Lubinda succeeds in wresting temporarily the chieftainship from Mpona, the village is overrun by 'lunatic youths' who '[bear] the torch of terror against anyone who [opposes]' him.²⁰

Lubinda's final defeat does very little to rectify the impression of moral bankruptcy carefully conjured up by Mulaisho throughout the novel. Unlike Kaavu, who vilified the city the better to glorify the country, Mulaisho's cynical representation of village life stands, as it were, on its own two feet and is not balanced out by an opposite description of urban social relationships. And yet, though they are only two, both references to the city in *The Tongue of the Dumb* have a positive connotation. First of all, we are told by the narrator that, unlike village dwellers, the 'people of Lusaka' can afford to give since 'there is enough for everybody'.²¹ Secondly, and in keeping with this first statement, the only source of help available to Natombi at the peak of the famine is her cousin Yelesani, a miner in Mufulira. Sadly for Natombi, Yelesani's generosity is rendered pointless by the treachery of chief Mpona, who intercepts the letter containing the miner's £2 and uses them to his own advantage.²² What we see here is the kernel of the cosmopolitan discourse: while the village has become a frightening, alien space, the city is, if nothing else, at least the locus of wealth and opportunity. While it might be disingenuous to draw general conclusions from Mulaisho's admittedly atrophied representation of the town, it is hard to escape the impression that his overall condemnation of rural social relationships was attuned to the growing cosmopolitan outlook of his urban-based readers. After all, if villages were such idyllic places, why would growing numbers of people resolve to abandon them to take up permanent residence in town? Mulaisho's depiction of the country provides a much more effective answer to the question than did the romantic idealizations of his predecessors or their anachronistic epigones.²³

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-207.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 124-126.

²³ See, e.g., A.S. Masiye, *Before Dawn* (Lusaka: NECZAM, 1970), and M. Phiri's intelligent critical remarks in 'A General Survey of Creative Writing in Zambia', *Zango*, 6 (1979), pp. 40-41.

Contemporary Zambian Fiction

As shown by Ferguson, Zambian urban culture from the 1980s has been characterized by a return of the localist style. Once more, we shall look for the signs of this cultural-stylistic shift in Zambian literature. Before doing so, however, it must be pointed out that there are significant differences between what we might call the first and the second wave of Zambian urban localism. While the localist outlook of the 1950s was a natural reaction to prevailing patterns of migration and the frequency of rural retirement, the contemporary localist cultural style has been diluted by the experience of (roughly) two decades of cosmopolitanism and is essentially a last-ditch resource vis-à-vis the demise of social expectations of urban permanence. Even though the towns have betrayed the hopes of their long-term residents and rural retirement has become a marginally more viable economic option than ending one's days in a depressed urban environment, urban misgivings about the country – so vividly captured by Mulaisho more than thirty years ago – have not suddenly disappeared; if possible, they have even intensified, since retiring or retrenched workers can no longer afford to watch village life from a safe distance.

In light of these considerations, contemporary fictional representations of the village cannot be expected to revive the romantic ruralist imageries typical of the first phase of Zambian literary history. Instead, an altogether more dramatic perspective permeates the most interesting writings of present-day Zambian authors and, especially, the last book I want to talk about, Binwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope*.²⁴ The novel tells the moving story of the villager Nasula, a widow who, in her desperate search for money for her daughter's secondary schooling, travels to Lusaka with a bag of Mbala beans for sale. This, of course, is a familiar plot, but unlike Namusiya's, Nasula's itinerary does not amount to a journey of discovery resulting in the loss of rural innocence vis-à-vis the harsh reality of town life. For the peculiarity of the novel – and the new literary trend which it epitomizes – is that *both* the rural and the urban space bear the mark of degradation.

The sombre tone of *A Cowrie of Hope* is set by Sinyangwe's description of Nasula's initial trip to Mangano, the neighbouring farm of her late husband's estranged relatives. Upon reaching the once prosperous area,

'the story of the misery of the nineties lay before her [...] as it seemed it always was in Swelimi, her own village: badly devastated crops, scorched land, a loud, stringent air of lifelessness. [...] There was dilapidation and unkemptness everywhere her eyes settled [...]; the May air, brittle with the tension of woe and suffering, held a stillness that smelt of death. The dogs were bones, the chickens so few they seemed not to exist, and there was not a single goat, pig, duck or guinea fowl in sight. No cattle, no sheep, no pigeons.'²⁵

The moral aridity which Nasula repeatedly comes up against is a direct consequence of the economic predicament of the rural areas. The connection between the material and the moral poverty of Mbala district is sometimes quite explicit, as in the following passages.

The nineties 'were the years of each person for himself and hope only under the shadow of the gods. No one wanted to give because no one had anything to spare.' 'They were the years of money first or else no friendship.'²⁶

²⁴ B. Sinyangwe, *A Cowrie of Hope* (Oxford: Heinemann, 2000). A 'new ambivalence and pessimism about self and society' in recent Zambian fiction has been noted by Ferguson himself in 'Country and the City', p. 146.

²⁵ Sinyangwe, *Cowrie of Hope*, pp. 19-21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 30.

AIDS – the ‘new disease of the world [which] decided to sit down on a stool by the riverside and fish people like *cisense*’ – is but the most tangible proof of the cruelty of a ‘world turned upon itself’.²⁷

When Nasula finally makes her way to the city, the burden of her suffering and the overall hostility of the world around her do not abate. If Lusaka immediately strikes her as a ‘place of madness’, Kamwala market is a terrifying ‘mound inhabited by a huge, hungry tribes of termites in search of a livelihood’.²⁸ The theft of her beans – on which all her hopes depend and which she will only retrieve after overcoming a long series of tribulations – impresses upon Nasula the worthlessness of the ‘people of the city’, whom ‘money has roasted into living corpses’²⁹. Later on in the novel – as she ponders over the predicament of urban women who show ‘their flesh around and let men do the most terrible things to them. Bad things worthy of a dog’ – she vows to kill herself if her daughter ‘disobeyed her and fled away from the village to the town’.³⁰

Sinyangwe’s representation of town life – a recension of earlier literary variations on the theme of urban greediness and anonymity – becomes significant when collated with his equally dispiriting portrayal of the country. The widespread pessimism by which the book is informed (and which its happy ending only partly disguises) is best captured in the following passage, taken from a lengthy dialogue between Nasula and her town-based friend Nalukwi.

‘These are bad years, Nasula,’ Nalukwi said reminiscently, her voice low and plaintive. ‘There is bitterness in the taste of life everywhere and in everything in the land. In the city and in the village alike, the sun seems to be shining on nothing. It’s a curse on us and on the land.’³¹

What *A Cowrie of Hope* forcefully suggests is that a stage in Zambian popular culture has been reached in which the tag of moral superiority can no longer be easily attributed either to the urban or to the rural space as a whole. Both spheres of social relationships are perceived as fundamentally deficient and unappealing.

Morality still exists in Sinyangwe’s worldview, but it is now the exclusive attribute of those *individuals* who, like Nasula, have managed to escape the overall collapse of formerly accepted norms of social conduct. And at the level of the character types constructed within the text, Sinyangwe’s adherence to an essentially localist discourse cannot be doubted. It is obviously not coincidental that all of the positive characters encountered by Nasula in town share a rural background (as the kind marketer from Solwezi district) or subscribe to some of the basic tenets of the localist cultural style (as the Head of the Lusaka Police Station, who treats Nasula with the respect traditionally accorded to rural elders). However degraded and impoverished – this seems to be Sinyangwe’s liminal creed – the village, unlike the city, still has the potential for nurturing some exceptional individuals who keep the flag of human dignity flying against all odds. It is not much, but it is all that present-day, reluctant localists have to get by.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 115.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

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