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Ecodramaturgy, Weather Changes and Animals Dialogue with the Ancestors in John Gwengwe's, play, *Nyama za M'nkhalango*

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Abstract:

The paper focusses on the mapping out of the contemporary environmental discourse in the Malawian play in Chichewa, John Gwengwe's *Nyama za M'nkhalango (Forest Animals)* (2002). The methods employed in examining the impact of humans on the environment in this play are ecodramaturgy, ecotheatre and the Anthropocene. Although the play involves animal characters only, the animals are used as stand-ins for humans and what the animals do and say mirror human society. Ecodramaturgy, ecotheatre and the Anthropocene are important theoretical tools in a research paper rooted in ecocriticism like this one because they do not only problematise the contemporary environmental challenges, but they also involve eco-activism for environmental sustainability. Due to their interdisciplinary convergence in ecology, geology and literature, they are important approaches in environmental humanities. A critical analysis of *Nyama za M'nkhalango (Forest Animals)* from these approaches shows that environmental catastrophes are largely caused by the affluent metaphorised by big animals while the marginalised and poor symbolised by the small animals are not listened to despite having locally bred tangible solutions to the environmental crises. The theatrical performances of the animals in the play show that as bipeds, humans are embodied animals and therefore non-human animals and human animals share performance art that call for environmental justice. Within the cultural milieu provided in *Nyama za M'nkhalango*, animals engage in eco-politics that require environmental leadership as part of the solutions to climate change.

Keywords: ecodramaturgy, ecotheatre, Anthropocene, ecocriticism, animals.

Introduction

Gwengwe's *Nyama za M'nkhalango* (1965 [2002]), set in Matsangano Forest and based on a mythical narrative performance of an environmental disaster, is an archetypal play (*Chisudzo*) in Chichewa that dramatises the non-human world of animals affected by that disaster. Gwengwe's other play in Chichewa, *Kathyali Psysipsyiti* (1972) depicts the theme of deception encapsulated by the protagonist's name, Kathyali, meaning deceiver. Chipinga's *Chisudzo, Atambwali Sametana* (1960), is a comedy mainly acted by two *atambwali* (accomplices in fraudulent plans), Saguza and Paguza, but no one gets the better of the other and they toil for nothing. At the end of the comedy, Saguza and Paguza are in the vulnerable position of economic woes. Steve Chimombo's *Wachiona Ndani* (1983), as Francis Moto (2001) observes "explores the themes of love, class and gender conflict, hypocrisy, exploitation, social and economic oppression, alienation and deceit" (95). With colonial psychic numbing the characters in the play regard *mzungu* (European) or *m'mwenye* (Indian) as the owner of wealth. Five productions of *zisudzo*, Mufunanji Magalasi's *Chamdothe* (2015), Smith Likongwe's *Khoswe Wapadenga* (2015) and *Zikani* (2015), Enoch S. Timpunza Mvula's *Mchira wa Buluzi* (2015), and Wisdom Nkhoma's *Mudzi wa Mfumumu Tandwe* (2015), deal with a woman's pangs of childlessness, socio-cultural, economic and gender based violence issues. One of the themes tackled in Nkhoma's *Mudzi wa Mfumumu Tandwe* (2015), however, is environmental degradation, as Mayi Chibwe, one of the characters, explains:

Ife tagwetsa fuwa limodzi ndipo dziko lapendekeka moopsa; tikachita masewera, dziko ligwa ndipo tigwera nalo limodzi kuphomphe. (We have removed one stone and the Earth has dangerously tilted; if we are not careful, the Earth systems will collapse and we shall collapse together into the chasm (96).

The metaphor of the Earth as standing on three stones and that human beings have removed one stone to dislocate ecosystems, is purely African, and thereby agreeing with scientists about the anthropogenic causes of environmental catastrophes.

It is against this backcloth that this paper explores how animals in *Nyama za M'nkhalango* reenact drought and its aftermath from the theoretical approaches of ecodramaturgy, ecotheatre and the Anthropocene that link nature with human culture. Aarons and May (2012) define the term "ecodramaturgy" as "theatre and performance making that puts ecological reciprocity and community at the centre of its theatrical and thematic intent" (4). This kind of dramatic

performance considers the interconnectedness of nature with human culture that transcends human knowledge and it is characterised by the performance of animals. Aarons and May (2012) further explain that “[e]codramaturgy, in conceiving of drama in relation to earth processes, stretches any notion of epic theatre to the far reaches of human attention” (4). What this implies is that ecodramaturgy flourishes in ecocriticism and performance summed up by the phrase “more-than-human” analogous to the “notion of epic theatre” to mean larger-than-life. The drought depicted in *Nyama za M’nkhalango* is a weather-related disaster which remakes the basic performance of Matsangano Forest as an active participant in the drama with animals in which many of them die. Houghton (2004) observes that “in the 1980s droughts accounted for more deaths in Africa than all other disasters” (5) and thus, the reenactment of the effects of drought on the land constitutes ecotheatre. May (2007) argues that “because theatre is both a living art form and a site wherein bodies, communities, politics, commerce, and imaginative possibilities intersect in a material way, ecocriticism in theatre will engage the debates occurring around us” (97). In the event of drought in *Nyama za M’nkhalango*, key debates hover around class marginalisation, environmental justice and food security.

In “Some Green Questions to Ask a Play,” May (2007) lists twelve questions that provide various points of departure in the analysis of an ecologically oriented play and here I focus only on questions one, two and eight, “(1) How does a performance engage or reflect (even as ‘wallpaper’) the environmental issues of its time and place? (2) What are the clues to the ecological conditions of the “world of the play”? How do those conditions intersect with representations of race, class, and gender? (8) How are animal or other nonhuman bodies deployed and used as rhetorical or metaphorical devices, and what is exposed when these are re literalised?” (105). As the title suggests, *Nyama za M’nkhalango (Forest Animals)*, the performance in the play takes place at a given time and the place is Matsangano Forest which is hit by drought caused by discrimination based on class between small animals and big animals. Metaphorically, the big animals are stand-ins for humans, who in a prefatory note Gwengwe explains that when electing people in different leadership positions in society those elected are the affluent though they have no practical wisdom about how to run things *okhawo omwe amaoneka opeza bwino ngakhale nzeru zenizeni zoyendetsera alibe*) (iv). Although speaking for animals is a challenge in ecodramaturgy, the representation of animals mirror the politics in human societies. Diamond (2014) sees that “[a]nimals in narratives and dramas have always been used metaphorically to represent human

characteristics, often in order to critique them at safe remove" (581) and this is what Gwengwe does in *Nyama za M'nkhalango*. According to Gültler (2022) the term "ecodramaturgy" "interrogates the extent to which the overall values in relation to nature and culture binary can be reconsidered and conveyed to the public through theatre and performance arts. [...] ecodramaturgy places great hope in theatrical performances, which have the potential to alter mindsets of nature-culture interactions and transform audience perceptions of ecological issues" (120). The interrogation of nature/culture in dramatic performances involves eco-activism in order to bring about mindset change in ecological thought.

According to Balcare (2022), the term "ecotheatre" refers to a "performance that includes thematic messages on environmental issues highlighting the relationship between human and nature or eco-narratives, also dramaturgy that can be viewed from the point of ecocriticism" (58). With the shift of emphasis from "Who We Are" to "Where We Are," ecotheatre and ecodramaturgy, like geocriticism, draws attention to space and place and how the human world impacts the nonhuman world. Love (2003) observes that "ecological thinking [...] requires us to take the nonhuman world as seriously as previous modes of criticism have taken the human realm of society and culture" (47). Taking the non-human world seriously includes place. In the same vein, Buell (2005) explicates that "the emergence of contemporary environmental criticism is in part the story of an evolution from imaging life-in-place as a deference to the claims (natural) environment toward an understanding of place-making as a culturally inflected process in which nature and culture must be seen as a mutuality rather than as separable domains" (67). The emphasis on place interconnects with the concept of the Greek term *oikos* which Howarth calls "nature, a place, 'our widest home'" (69) and this is the focus of ecodramaturgy and ecotheatre.

The term "the Anthropocene" is used "to designate a new post-Holocene epoch marked by human-caused changes so vast that they are being considered a geomorphic force of planetary scale" (Adamson and Monani 2017:1). This means globally terrifying environmental catastrophes that thwart the normal functioning of ecosystems. Clark (2015) explains that the term "Anthropocene" "has rapidly become adopted in the humanities in a sense beyond the strictly geological. [...] it is used] for all the new contexts and demands – cultural, ethical, aesthetic, philosophical and political – of environmental issues that are truly planetary in scale, notably climate change, ocean acidification, effects of overpopulation, deforestation, soil erosion,

overfishing and the general and accelerating degradation of ecosystems” (2). Hurricanes, cyclones, floods and droughts have devastating effects on people, animals, plants and the land. Zalasiewicz *et.al.* (2011) use the term “the Anthropocene” “to denote the current interval of time on Earth in which many key processes are dominated by human influence” (835). Etymologically, the two words *anthropos* and *kainos* which make up *Anthropocene* are derived from Greek meaning “humankind” and “new” respectively, and therefore, “Anthropocene” means a new epoch in which the Earth processes are dominated by humankind in geological and environmental impacts (Corlett 2015:36). The Anthropocene is not just here with us instantaneously; it has primordial contexts in which humans modified the “natural ecosystems to gain advantage of gathering vegetative food sources they required or in aiding the hunt of animals they hunted” (Steffen *et.al.* 2011:846). These “modifications” had no global impacts until the advent of capitalism with its insatiable quest for growth culminating in the exploitation of minerals, oil, gas, rocks, coal, rivers, oceans, valleys, mountains, trees, land, animals, *inter alia*, and thereby disrupting ecosystems. Gwengwe’s play, *Nyama za M’nkhalango*, dramatises the inept environmental leadership of lion, elephant, and buffalo among other big animals, that results in drought. Yet, these big animals, metaphors of incompetent politicians, have no intellectual capacity to arrest the problem.

Pangs of the pigheadedness of the megafauna drought strikes

Nyama za M’nkhalango opens with Matsangano Forest complete with life and life sustaining resources. The ubiquity of mammals, birds, reptiles, rodents, amphibians, creepy-crawlies, trees that provide different kinds of sheds, grasses, thickets, epiphytes, fruits, mushrooms and fish in rivers flowing through the forest informs primordial bliss. Because Fulu (Tortoise) eats twigs and leaves using its sharp jaws to snip them, it has its own small garden of mushrooms and tender pasture. When big animals such as Mkango (Lion), Njovu (Elephant) and Njati (Buffalo) among others trample down Fulu’s garden, and they refuse to listen to Fulu’s plea to stop destroying its field, an ancestral curse brings about drought. Although the effects of this drought are dramatised by animals, people living around Matsangano Forest are equally affected. Led by Mbalangwe who speaks with Fulu in the opening scene of the play, they are a community of hunters who use bows, arrows and dogs in their hunting. By privileging the nonhuman world over the human world, Gwengwe’s *Nyama za M’nkhalango* fits into contemporary categorization of

theatre in terms of ecodramaturgy. According to Jurani (2019) “ecodramaturgy articulates the mutual being between everything that exists and its natural environment and reflects on multi-species collectives; it may lead to a new reflection on environmental history; it disintegrates established dramatic structures that continue to prioritise human conflict over more-than-human world conflicts; it advocates the topics of environmental justice, sustainability, and democracy” (226). *Nyama za M'nkhalango* shifts from human-animal conflict when Mbalangwe and his hunters hunt Kalulu in the opening scene to the animal-animal conflict. By destroying Fulu's garden without paying heed to the owner's complaints, the play plunges into themes of “environmental justice, sustainability, and democracy.”

Njovu's speech undermines democracy when he tells the other animals while standing under a big tree, *aka ndi kamwana kakang'ono, kakuchita mwano, ife tingokapha basi, bwanji muopa kanthumbidwa kotere?* (This is a young child, he is mischievous, let's kill him, why fear this malnourished child? (Gwengwe 7). When Mkango sides with Njovu, *tisalole mwana wotere kuti atilowetse m'chala ayi* (let's not allow a young child like this one underrate us (Gwengwe 7), it becomes clear that Elephant and Lion use their power to dominate the small and powerless animals. It is this power that silences Njati's (Buffalo's) reasonable question: *Kodi Fulu adalakwa chiyani poti munda wake uzionongeka chotere?* (What crime did Tortoise commit that his garden should be destroyed in this way? (Gwengwe 7). Middeke and Riedelsheimer (2022) observe that there is a clear correlation of the ways humans affect the nonhuman world with wealth and power, that is, with capitalist ways of life and through power structures embedded in the notion of social class” (10). Both Njovu and Mkango talk the same language of power when referring to Fulu: *aka ndi kamwana kakang'ono* (this is a young child) and *tisalole mwana wotere kuti atilowetse m'chala ayi* (let's not allow a young child like this one underrate us). Although Birimankhwe and Insa agree that they must apologise to Fulu, Mkango in his fury addresses Fulu:

Fulu ndiwe mwana wopusa kwabasi, bwanji uvutitsa ife mafumu? Kodi pali Njovupa ndi a Njati, n'kukhala masewera? Ife tapita ngati uli ndi mawu unene pomwe pano. (Fulu, you're a foolish child, why trouble us rulers? Is the way Njovu and Njati appear not awesome? We are leaving this place but if you have anything to say, say it right now) (Gwengwe 8).

The persistent imagery of Fulu that comes from the language of Njovu and Mkango is that he is a bambi or toddler and that they cannot waste time listening to him. Yet, Njovu and Mkango, like the world's rich countries, have amassed wealth on the despoliation of the resources of the poor indigenous peoples and thereby seizing power for themselves. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz aptly posit that “[t]he Anthropocene is the sign of our power, but also of our impotence” (11). That impotence is a practical consequence that follows naturally from power, is demonstrated in Gwengwe's *Nyama za M'nkhalango* when Njovu and Mkango fail to offer solutions to the effects of drought that occurs as a result of an ancestral curse to the land. This is the moment when ritual drama begins with magical incantations from Fulu that foreground ritualised ecodramaturgy:

Pepani akuluakulu, mwadzikumbira nkondo nokha. Chaka chomwe chino mvula simuiona ayi, msipu simudzauona, madzi onse simudzaaona ayi. Ndipo mudzamwa thukuta lanu lomwe. Nthaka sidzabereka chilichonse, ambiri a inu mudzafa ndi ludzu, ndi dzuwa, ndiponso mudzamezedwa ndi nthaka. (I feel sorry for you my elders for digging your own graves. There'll be no rains this year, there'll be no pasture and no water. You'll drink your own sweat. The soil will produce nothing and most of you will die of thirsty and dehydration due to the scorching sun's heat and you'll be swallowed by the earth) (Gwengwe 8).

In this ritual performance or enactment, Fulu draws his power from invisible beings capable of causing what he has enchanted. This is the drama of existence in which nature and the ancestors are involved. This kind of dramatic performance requires sacrifice in order to placate the spirits of the ancestors. Finnegan's (2012) observation, “[h]ow far one can speak of indigenous drama in Africa is not an easy question. [...]. Though some writers have very positively affirmed the existence of native African drama [...], *it would perhaps be truer to say that in Africa, in contrast to Western Europe and Asia, drama is not typically a wide-spread or a developed form*” (485, italics mine), is equivocal. While Greek drama is Dionysian and Apollonian in origin, the origins of African drama are the rain-calling rituals and therapeutic performances involving the spirits of the ancestors. What Finnegan calls “certain dramatic and quasi-dramatic phenomena” (485) found in Africa are in fact forms of drama. Okpewho (1992) rightly suggests that in

“discussing African drama, it would be useful to draw a line between drama that is based in a ritual or religious environment or context and drama that has a broad popular appeal or setting” (261). Ritual drama involves myths, songs and dance, among other elements.

In Malawian folklore, Tortoise (*Kamba* or *Fulu*), is a trickster that symbolises cunning, shrewdness and wisdom despite his sluggishness. Fulu is also an inoffensive character and in *Nyama za M'nkhalango*, Kalulu is his friend. What Fulu prophesises comes to pass and for five there is no rain: *ndipo anthu ena adayatsa moto mpaka m'nkhalango monse mudayera* (and some people set fire and the whole forest was burnt down) (Gwengwe 8). Although the drama of the effects of drought is performed by animals, the drought has affected both humans and animals. As an agrarian and hunting community, the people set the dry forest on fire in order to kill animals for food. Lewis and Maslin explain that “[t]he first major impacts of early humans on their environment was probably the use of fire. Fossil charcoal captures these events from the Early Pleistocene Epoch” (173). Although the drought and the fire impact humans and animals at the local level, the consequences are distressing. The scarcity of food and water bring untold misery into the once delightful Matsangano Forest. This environmental condition does not please the ancestors since their spirits mediate between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Animals in Malawian drama are the incarnations of the spirits of the ancestors who should respond to the environmental problems facing creatures/creation (*zolengedwa/chilengedwe*). Animals are also metaphors and symbols of human attributes. Thus, “[e]codramaturgy, in conceiving of drama in relation to earth processes, stretches any notion of epic theatre to the far reaches of human attention” (Aarons and May, 4). The dramatisation of climate change, changes in weather patterns, cyclones, hurricanes, typhoons, tornadoes, floods and droughts, *inter alia*, in order to inform human communities of the effects of anthropogenic impacts on the environment would transcend “human attention” into the metaphysical realm.

The Summit of animals on local drought

At the Earth Summit organised by the United Nations held in June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, First World and Third World countries had a philological controversy. Rolston III (2009) reports that “a First World country delegate suggested an earth charter, a short creed that ‘*should be framed and put in the room of every child of the world.*’ The retort from a Third World delegate: ‘*Not every child has a room, maybe not even a bed!*’” (201, italics mine). That the affluent and the

poor live in different worlds is reflected in this controversy. By now in *Nyama za M'nkhalango*, many animals have died of starvation and thirsty. A meeting is held chaired by Kalulu, Fulu's friend and his spokesperson, who tells the other animals: *Padzana, inu mudachita mtudzu osafuna kugonja pamaso pa Fulu* (Previously you were arrogant not willing to succumb to Fulu) (Gwengwe 10). Kalulu pleads with them to apologise to Fulu now that the community is suffering from the effects of the drought and many animals, small and big, have died. The responses from the big animals, symbolic of the affluent, shows that they do not have the welfare of the poor at heart:

BULU: *Pepani, ine ndiganiza kuti tigonje kwa Fulu basi.* (With due respect to our elders,

I am of the view that we should acquiesce ourselves to Fulu).

MKANGO: *Zopusa zimenezo!* (That is stupidity!)

NKHUMBA: *Inenso ndimati tigonje kwa Fulu.* (I am also of the view that we should acquiesce ourselves to Fulu).

CHIPEMBERE: *Zonsezi n'zopusa kwabasi. Iwe Kalulu ndikuthushula, choka pamaso*

panga msanga! (All this is stupidity really. You Kalulu, I'll burst you open, leave my presence now!)

NJATI: *Kalulu! Thawiratu msanga ungapeze tsoka!* (Kalulu! Run away quickly, or else you fall into trouble!

NJOVU: *Choka Kalulu ndingakukupsitirize!* (Leave Kalulu, or else I'll step my foot on you!)

MKANGO: *Choka, choka iwe. N'kulamula matsonga ali apawa? Mwana*

wachinkulirano! (You, leave, leave. Will you command these thorny claws here? A mischievous child!) (Gwengwe 10)

By befriending himself to Fulu on whom the guardian spirit is bestowed, Kalulu is not only wise and cunning in surviving the effects of the drought, but he is also alert to his enemies. In the Self and Other polarity where Kalulu is Self and Mkango (Lion), Chipembere (Rhino), Njati

(Buffalo) and Njovu (Elephant) are Other, the former is always “defensive” against the latter (Ashdown, 2012). Mkango, Chipembere, Njati, and Njovu are among the animals that constitute the greatest threat not only to humans but also to other animals, including Kalulu. It is worth noting that “the larger herbivores (elephants, buffalo and hippopotamus), large mammalian carnivores (lions, leopards, cheetahs, spotted hyenas and wild dogs), and crocodiles are traditionally seen as the animals representing the greatest threat to humans and responsible for the majority of human-wildlife conflicts” (FAO 2009:1). As an infanticidal animal, the lion is known for its cruelty as mercilessness and human-lion relationship is deleterious. Although the rhino is known for its docility, it a dangerous animal (Doeyens and van der Ryst 2014) and this is reflected in how Chipembere threatens Kalulu with death in *Nyama za M'nkhalango*. Njati is a herbivorous animal and Cornelis *et.al.* (2014), have observed that “[r]ainfall is the main biophysical factor limiting the distribution of African buffalo at a large geographical scale” (327). The drought dramatised in the play, *Nyama za M'nkhalango*, entails that there is no herbaceous forage for Njati to feed on and yet, he is averse to Kalulu's plea for them to reconsider their position. Njovu in the play influences the behaviours of the other animals because “the impact of elephants on habitat has a profound effect on the other species among which it lives” (Cumming, Du Toit and Stuart 1990: 2). The dominance of Njovu in *Nyama za M'nkhalango* informs his impact on the animals and so the summit ends without reaching a consensus on how to find a solution to the drought. Instead of focusing on community-based natural resources management, the four animals are stubborn to the suffering of others.

When Njovu, Njati, Mkango and Chipembere agree to inform the other animals to form groups and disperse in search of water, it becomes clear that the four are inept environmental leaders. If Nyalugwe (Leopard) is added to the four, these are the five megafauna that are symbolic of affluence (*opeza bwino*) according to Gwengwe's prefatory note cited above. This illustrates why, as Sean Cubitt (2023) observes “[s]truggles over naming epoch of climate change – Anthropocene? Capitalocene? – are symptomatic of the growing recognition that ecology and economy can no longer be separated: that indeed, they have always been implicated in one another” (19). Industrialization and overdevelopment play key roles in human-induced environmental challenges. Through human-animal interactions and reading *Nyama za M'nkhalango* through the lens of ecodramaturgy, ecotheatre and Anthropocene, this discussion

rediscovers humanity's past sense of place and nature and how that past links with the contemporary environmental challenges.

Elephant, Lion, Rhino, Buffalo, Leopard and Hippo as metaphors of wealth are more environmentally destructive for their resource wastefulness lifestyles than the other smaller animals including insects, fish, amphibians and reptiles among others. Just as they fail to provide solutions to the global problems of climate change, they have no intellectual prowess sufficient to solve their own problems. When Mkango, Chipembere, Njati and Njovu fall into the cracks in the earth's openings because of the dryness, the small animals help the big ones to come out:

Mkango udayesetsa kuti utuluke wokha, koma zidakatika mpaka nyama zina zidabwera kudzathandiza kuutulutsa. Patapita masiku ena, zinatha katulutsa Mkango ndi Chipembere, koma zidalephera katulutsa Njati ndi Njovu. (Mkango attempted to rescue himself, but he failed until other animals came to help him come out. After some days, the animals managed to rescue Mkango and Chipembere but they failed to rescue Njati and Njovu) (Gwengwe 13).

The small animals then invite Kalulu, known for his cleverness and cunning to help rescue Njovu and when he does, the big animals are ridiculed: *Onse adadziwa kuti ena aja adangokula misinkhu koma wanzeru ndi Kalulu* (Everybody knew that the big animals had merely conspicuous body sizes but it is only Kalulu who is wise) (Gwengwe 15). The animals' attention for leadership shifts to Kalulu, but Mkango, Chipembere, Njati and Njovu threaten Kalulu's life as famine and drought intensify. With many animals reported dying in *Nyama za M'nkhalango*, this is a tragic play which dramatises the bleakness of life both for humans and animals as those entrusted with leadership merely look on. Njovu sinks into the earth's cracks and the place turns into an anthill. Njovu, Njati, Chipembere and Mkango are undemocratic leaders and they have no recourse to environmental justice and consideration of the other animals on the basis of class, the drought that has hit the land appears really depressing.

As Mvuu (Hippo) and Ng'ona) come to join the other animals in lamenting the effects of the drought, Njovu, Mkango, Njati and Chipembere seem not to be moved. Instead Mkango tells Fisi (Hyena) to lead the other animals in singing in order to turn their attention from the drought thinking all will be well soon. Bulu (Donkey), Mbuzi (Goat), Nkhosa (Sheep), Nkhumba (Pig),

Galu (Dog), Nkhuku (Chicken) and Ng'ombe (Cow/Ox) resist tyranny and Mkango curses all these animals and drives them out of the forest. These curses reflect how the play is informed by myth, ritual and the cultural imagination that appeals to the people's experiences that embody relationships between the past and present conceptualised through indigenous roots as the basis of African drama. The curses also reflect a sense of mystery embedded in the play, *Nyama za M'nkhalango*. Animals are not only totemic but they are also the reincarnations of the ancestors. Fulu and Kalulu symbolic the animals' bondedness to their genealogies and to their land and through sacrifices they end the drought.

The smallness of body physique, Kalulu and Fulu think like a mountain

As a morality play, *Nyama za M'nkhalango* depicts powerful animals such as lion, elephant, rhino, buffalo, leopard, crocodile and hippo as symbols of affluence but intellectually inept. These big animals fail to relate well with other animals considerably small and symbolic of the marginalised poor in society but whose thinking is politically shrewd. Fulu and Kalulu represent small animals skilled in problem-solving and desirous of duping big animals. In his speech, Fulu undermines the leadership of the big animals:

FULU: *Ufumu umenewu ndikadalowa ndine, koma ine tsopano ndakalamba. Pafunika anyamata wo pepuka miyendo, monga Kalulu. Kalulu ndiye amene tsopano muyenera kumulandira kuti ndi mfumu yanu.* (I should have inherited this chieftaincy, but I am old. We need the youth who are light on their feet, like Kalulu. Kalulu is the one you should accord your respect as your new chief (Gwengwe 36).

Tortoise's undermining of the leadership of Lion, Elephant, Buffalo and Rhino is rooted in the big animals' elitism and the consequent alienation from their subjects. The big animals have been seen in *Nyama za M'nkhalango* spending most of their time talking rather than being engaged in action and the small animals that symbolise the peasants are neglected. The big animals are only interested in power and like "African governments hesitate to spend scarce resources in solving environmental problems, which are actually connected to the government's policies of remaining in power" (Korvenoja 1993:148). It is only at the most critical moments when their ineptness leads to their downfall that African governments relinquish power. In *Nyama za M'nkhalango* this is reflected by the consent of Lion, Elephant, Buffalo, Rhino and Hippo to

the leadership of Hare because Kalulu and Fulu promise to provide water. Promising the electorate maize, fertiliser and water when voted into power is common in Malawian politics where economic and environmental problems remain entangled. When Mvuu (Hippo) consents to the leadership of Kalulu (Hare), *Ife tonse tamvana kuti timvere Kalulu malingana akatipatsa madzi* (We have all agreed to listen to Kalulu so long as he gives us water) (Gwengwe 36), it becomes clear that the big animals have failed to solve the environmental problem at hand, drought.

It is worth noting, as Nelson (2003) observes that “environmental activism exhibits a neocolonial character in Africa” (65) and *Nyama za M’nkhalango* represents this when Kalulu demands that he wants to speak while standing at the back of Njovu so that everybody sees him, *Ndikufuna kuyankhula ndili pa msana pa njovu kuti anthu andione* (Gwengwe 37). Thus, Kalulu wants the treatment accorded to the colonial district commissioner by the natives. When Elephant, Hippo, Buffalo and Rhino in their confederacy consent to Hare and Tortoise to ride on Elephant’s and Buffalo’s backs respectively, it is clear that impotence is the corollary of power.

Like the coloniser who introduced diseases hitherto unknown to Africa, Kalulu inflicts the animals with small pox (*nthomba*) (Gwengwe 39), another environmental problem. In his speech, Kalulu tells the animals:

Mizimu ya makolo anga yakwiya chifukwa cha zimene mudachitira ine ndi Fulu. Inu mudaononga munda wa Fulu, ndiponso mumanyoza ine. Zimene mwazionazi, zachitika ndi mizimu ya makolo a ife awiri ndipo ifuna kuti mulangidwe. (The spirits of my ancestors are angry because of what you did to Fulu and to me. You destroyed Fulu’s garden and you despised me. What you have witnessed springs from the spirits of our ancestors so that you are punished) (Gwengwe 39-40).

Inflicting drought and skin diseases to their enemies as Fulu and Kalulu do in *Nyama za M’nkhalango* is in tandem with the origins of African drama, “a combination of religious or magical ritual, rhythmic dances and the song. These ceremonies were based on what anthropologists call Sympathetic Magic” (“Drama and the African” 3). Various kinds of pestilences such as small pox, chicken pox, epilepsy and leprosy were known to have been caused due to the anger of the spirits of the ancestors for breaking societal taboos. Similarly, droughts and floods were also known to have been caused because people had not been faithful to their

taboos. The dramatisation of these involved imitation, invocation and ritual sacrifice intended to placate the spirits of the ancestors and this illustrates why Kalulu tells the other animals, *Imani tikonze nsembe kuti tikondweretse nayo azimu ndipo matendawa achoka mofulumira* (Wait, let's prepare sacrifices with which to appease the spirits and you'll soon be cured of the diseases) (Gwengwe 40). Just like the current dilemma with COVID-19 of "being alone-together," people were isolated from their communities until plagues ended. The major placatory dramatic performances were dominated by locally brewed beer and this is what Kalulu does in *Nyama za M'nkhalango*. By blending contemporary politics and global environmental problems with African myth-making, Gwengwe recognises that "[t]he development of African drama cannot purely be from African roots. It must be grafted in Western drama. It must borrow from, be inspired by, shoot from European dramatic art forms, and be tainted by exotic influences" ("Drama and the African" 7). The Dionysian and Apollonian Greek ritual drama, while in the African context, ritual drama is rooted in ancestral spirits through which the dead are involved in the drama of the living. Ritual, dance and song are central to the African dramatic performances. After Kalulu has poured libations and made sacrifices of flour to the spirits at the ancestral shrine, there is singing:

Soloist: <i>Mvula kalole mvula!</i>	Rain, let's see rain!
All: <i>Kalole!</i>	Let's see!
Soloist: <i>Kantambo aka ndi ako</i>	Between this rainy cloud and that,
<i>Kanya mvula ndikati?</i>	Which one produces rain?
All: <i>Kalole!</i>	Let's see!

This theatrical performance ends with heavy rains as if the heavens have been opened and it pours: *Asadamwazikane, chimvula chamatalala chinagwa, ndipo kunagwa chimdima choopsa. Mvula inagwa masiku asanu ndi atatu, usana ndi usiku* (Before the characters dispersed, there was heavy rain with hailstorms, and darkness hovered over the land. It rained for eight days, day and night) (Gwengwe 45). As all bodies of water fill up to the brim and overflowing, life returns to Matsangano Forest.

As Kalulu takes up the responsibility of leadership of Matsangano Forest because he has provided a solution to the problem of drought, it becomes clear that Njovu, Mvuu, Njati,

Chipembere and Lion have failed. Kalulu promises that as a leader, he will sleep with his eyes open lest the big animals deliberately step on him: *Ndikadzagona nditatseka maso ati, adzandiponda*. (If ever I sleep with my eyes closed, they say they'll step on me) (Gwengwe). The metaphor of sleeping with eyes open means being always alert; seeing and observing situations as they are on the ground and being urgent in providing solutions to the citizenry constitute good leadership as opposed to the sluggishness of the big animals who have failed their citizens as leaders. Although dramatised only by animals and rooted in mythopoeia, Gwengwe's *Nyama za M'nkhalango* points to the observation that "[h]uman activity profoundly affects the environment, from Earth's major biogeochemical cycles to the evolution of life. [...]. Human action also affects non-human life" (Lewis and Maslin 2015:172). The destruction of Fulu's garden and the pigheadedness of the big animals that culminate in drought in Matsangano Forest in which many lives are lost, can be comparable to the contemporary anthropogenic global environmental crises.

Gwengwe's play, *Nyama za M'nkhalango*, suggests that Africa cannot rely on solutions provided by the big economies symbolised by Elephant, Lion, Hippo, Rhino and Buffalo in the form of donations and pledges of money and power in order to curb environmental degradation. The big animals, like the affluent, are politically inept while real solutions to the problems are with the marginalised symbolised by Fulu (Tortoise) and Kalulu (Hare/Rabbit). In their article, "The Anthropocene: How the stories we tell Matter" (2016), Veland and Lynch rightly observe that:

The Anthropocene story-lines so far presented rest on the assumption that there can be a unified grand narrative of human-environment relations in an appropriately defined anthropogenic stratal layer. This narrative, however, unwittingly constrains the solutions we are prepared to admit (3).

Indeed, there is no grand narrative to the environmental crises and that local communities and the voices of the marginalised are crucially important. The tendency of pretending to know more than the citizenry demonstrated by the affluent and politicians does not help solve societal problems but rather aggravate them as demonstrated by the actions of Njovu, Lion, Rhino, Hippo and Buffalo in *Nyama za M'nkhalango*. The title of the article cited above, "the stories we tell matter" and this is the time to tell real stories about human-human relations and human-

environment relations. Unless these relations are free from both hypocrisy and the simulacra regimes of capitalism, exploitation and marginalisation remain environmental dangers.

Conclusion

Gwengwe's play, *Nyama za M'nkhalango*, is an example of an eco-dramaturgy in which the playwright depicts the animal in humans portraying drought caused by proud of those in power and affluence. Just as Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* depicts how proud leads to the damnation of the tragic hero, John Faustus, *Nyama za M'nkhalango* celebrates the loss of power due to proud by the big animals. The drought in the local environment of Matsangano Forest reflects the eco-dramaturgical concern of "where we are" and at the end this place receives healing. Water is the basic element of all forms of life and the greater percentage of protoplasm consists of water. Empowering communities to solve their own problems is one step in the right direction towards development.

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