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Performing the Spirits



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IN ZAMBIA, PERFORMING *THE SPIRITS*

by

Thomas Riccio

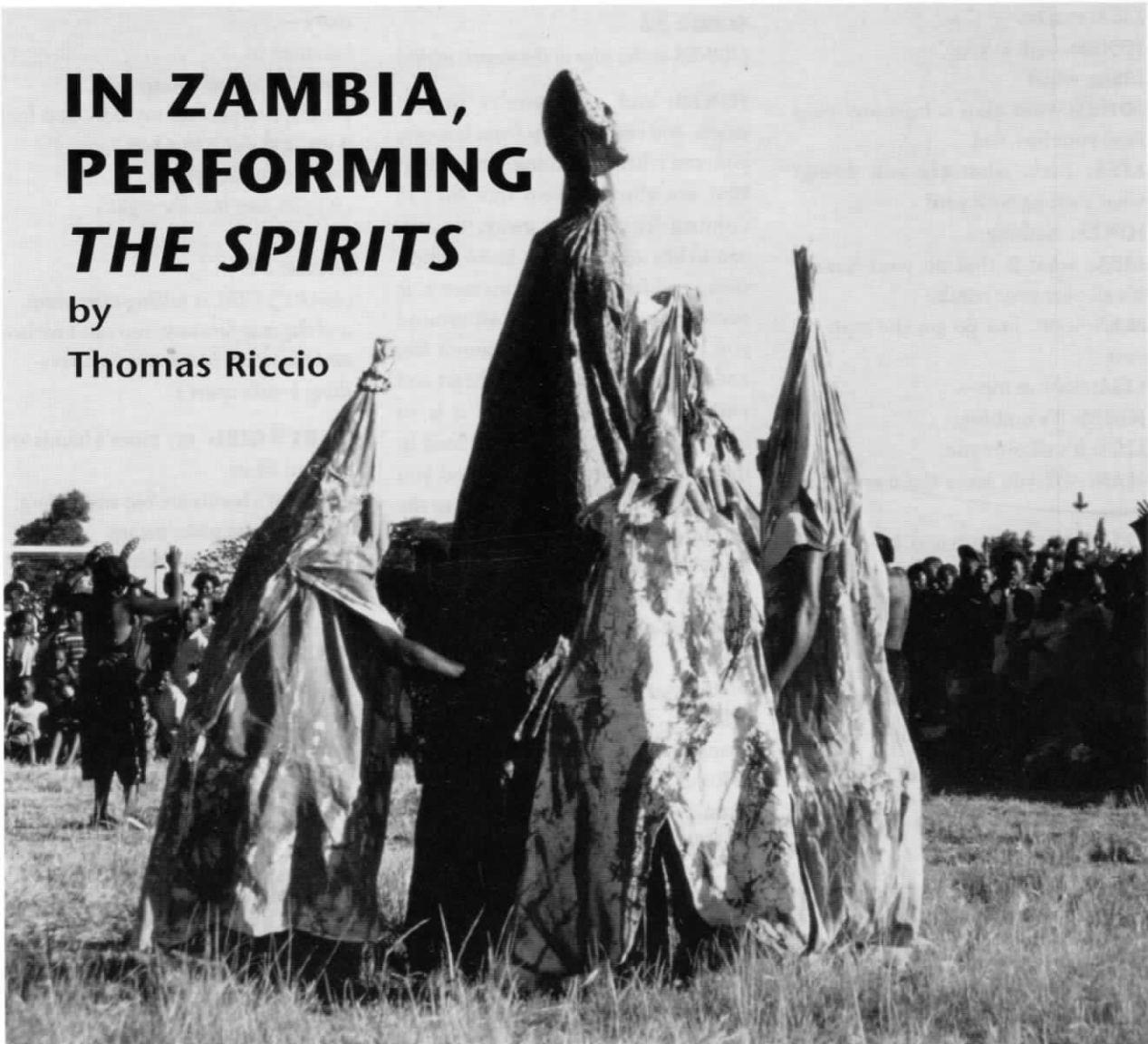


Photo 1: Nyambe (George Daka) is transformed from human diviner into creator by the Cone People.

Photo: Thomas Riccio

Shoeless and shirtless children run cheering excitedly alongside the vehicle as it bounces over ruts of red earth. Our white Toyota Land Cruiser drives across the circle of dry grass to a make-shift wooden stage-box surrounded by drums and puppets. Suddenly there is a cheer from the crowd. Our arrival signals the beginning of the performance to those waiting in the warm African sun.

We are in Kitwe, the heart of Zambia's "Copperbelt," home of the world's most productive copper, zinc, and tin mines until the bottom fell out of international metals in the early 1980s. The Land Cruiser pulls up behind our stage-box to provide both backdrop and a backstage for our performance. Timothy Mugala, Lenard Milimo, and Jerry Jmualo are drumming near the stage and nod happily. At the center of the circle is Peter Piri presenting an impromptu, sometimes bawdy, crowd-pleasing warm-up drawn

from the scores of dances in his multi-tribe repertoire.

As we jump out of the Land Cruiser, hundreds of wide-eyed children, like curious but cautious bees, gather around us. Micke Renlund, our Finnish producer, and I are probably the only *musungus* (white men) many of the children have seen. Some children venture to touch my arms, giggling at the novelty of my strangeness. In black Africa, white skin is a symbol of what is feared and what is aspired to, of what is hated and what is envied. Our white skin represents all that has historically terrorized black Africa, yet conversely is now looked to as a hope of survival.

Our stage manager, Light Musonda, a small, smiling man with a Buddha-like disposition, greets us with a traditional bow of his head and touching of his heart and opens his ever-present notebook. We have learned that presenting an hour-and-a-half performance in a found

outdoor space in Zambia has to have military-like organization. Delays and complications are seemingly inevitable and nothing ever works according to plan. Be prepared for the worst, hope for the best, refuse to get upset, accept and appreciate the potential of the ever fluctuating givens, and most importantly, improvise. That is how Africa itself works—and survives.

Light explains that everything is ready to go. Joshua Muyambo, one of our puppet makers, is on “circle patrol,” wearing his policeman’s cap and carrying his large stick which he seldom uses. His job is to organize and maintain our performance circle. Two local men have been hired to help him. Instead of sticks they have long cardboard tubing to make sure they do not take their jobs too seriously. Establishing and maintaining the circle is essential. Much of our audience will never have seen a theatrical performance without a known established structure and will be uncertain about the extent of their participation, especially in the tribal dances where participation is fine—to an extent. Furthermore, after the show begins, the audience may increase by up to three thousand people, with those in the back pressing forward to see better. We had learned a hard lesson at Kaunda Square, a compound in Lusaka where we became helpless in a sea of a few thousand people. Small children were stepped on and people started shoving, pushing, crying, and screaming. Maintaining the circle was an issue of public safety.

We were in Kitwe to perform *Imipashi* (“the spirits,” in Bemba), a performance created by the first national theatre project in Zambia. The work evolved from the Litooma Project, a three-month program of workshops, performance development, and touring which brought together performers from disparate and sometimes rival tribes. The performance that evolved is an allegory inspired by a well-known Lozi myth, tracing the journey of the Zambian people from creation to the corruption of present day nationhood. The idea for the Litooma Project originated in Finland in August 1993 at the Tampere International Theatre Festival where I gave a lecture on my work which was attended by Micke Renlund. A man of boundless idealism, generosity, and energy, Micke is a professional actor working for the FVS (Finnish Volunteer Service, the equivalent to the Peace Corps) in the Department of Cultural Services, a Zambian government agency. During his three years in Zambia, he had developed the National Theatre Resource Project, essentially a one-man operation. In Zambia, where eating regularly is often a struggle, culture is a very low or non-existent priority.

Micke and I developed a project outline. The dilemma of how to bridge the distance between popular theatre and traditional tribal performance was prominent

in our discussions. Other issues included actor training, the development of a theatre style unique to and expressive of culturally rich Zambia, and application of traditional tribal performance as a viable contemporary expression. It would be a project emphasizing the identification and realization of a black African self. The unique identity and point-of-view of Zambia exists in the margins, pushed there by the overwhelming juggernaut of Western culture. Now it is a vantage threatened with absorption before it can participate in the dialogue of world cultures. The Zambian sense of self (like that of other indigenous people) is stricken with self-doubt, the result of generations of colonial scarring. Performance has been since the origin of humanity, a pro-active means, a technology by which to revisit, reaffirm, and reimagine self, community, and culture.

Micke decided to first offer the project to the arts division of the University of Zambia where The Center for the Arts offered a few courses. Like other universities worldwide, the University of Zambia was cutting funding for the arts. While the Center’s director, the hard working and dedicated Mapopa Mtonga, was out of the country, the administration converted their black box theatre into a print shop and the Center’s existence was under threat. The University’s administration, influenced by Christian fundamentalism, saw the Center as espousing anti-Christian and heathen tribal beliefs. We hoped that so much foreign money and attention focused on the Center would make the government and university suddenly reconsider the Center’s value.

The idea and objectives for this first national project struck a cord with a wide array of funders: the USIS; the British Council; Finnish Development Aid; Swedish Economic Development Organization; Norwegian Overseas Development; the Embassy of the Netherlands; and the Finnish Volunteer Service. The Zambian Department of Cultural Services contributed nearly \$1000, the largest amount ever given to a single art project. The entire project was budgeted at \$28,000, an unprecedented amount for a performance in a country where the average wage is 40,000 to 80,000 Kwacha per month (\$35 to \$75).

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Why did a Finnish actor and an American director from Alaska—two white guys—propose to assist Zambian performance? There were familiar fears of being presumptuous, meddlesome outsiders, a more sophisticated and subtler new wave of cultural imperialists. But I feel a responsibility to respond and assist where I can. There is a need to do something meaningful and lasting. Being a white man with the advantage of education, opportunity, and resources is a power to be used, abused, or ignored.

The confluences of history, race, politics, economics, and cultures often find manifestation in performance. As a director, I organize an event using performance as technology to examine self and cultural-economic-political-social predicaments. It is work that asks the participants to take stock of themselves and their resources. It asks them to step out of the flow of modern time and space to regain a deeper and older resource. I begin with questions to provoke other questions in the search for a few answers. The work has no preimposed agenda; it manifests itself and I serve as provocateur and guide. If there is any predetermined goal it is this: to leave behind the awareness of methods, process, and possibility.

Imipashi was created in a three-week workshop and a six-week development and rehearsal period, followed by a four-week performance tour with logistical problems and challenges. For example, we had been promised a bus for this part of our tour, but when we went to the University of Zambia to get it, we were met by several machine gun totting military men. The government had fired all the faculty and shut down the University. Set back but undaunted, most of the cast traveled for five hours to Kitwe on commuter buses. The rest of the company and the props and costumes piled into the comical-

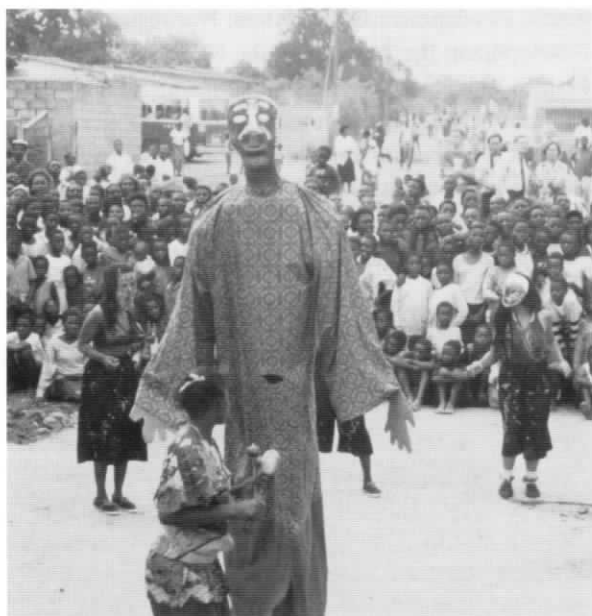


Photo 2: The Spirits dance in celebration of the transformation of Nyambe.

Photo: Thomas Riccio

ly overloaded Land Cruiser and drove to Kitwe on the major highway through Zambia. It is a road known for car-jackings, murders, drug-running, smuggling, and prostitution, which is so widespread the road is known as the “AIDS Highway.”

Our performance site was across the dusty street from the Kitwe market, the center of the town’s daily social and commercial activity. The open air market was a warren of narrow passages where vendors sell fruits, vegetables, oils, maize, dried fish, housewares, auto parts, and used clothing donated by first-world charitable organizations. It was the best place to draw an audience and Spirit Performers would certainly be sent there. I had first used Spirit Performers who dispersed into the community to attract an audience while working with the Zulus in South Africa. The idea, inspired by several different festivals and indigenous ceremonial events, served to announce our performance as an event similar to a festival or traditional ceremony, thus giving it a recognizable context.

With a nod, Light Musonda sends out the masked Spirits—the performance begins. Four groups (of two performers each) go to the market; two groups go to a housing area; two more to a nearby area of textile shops. They perform their repertory of sketches, songs, and comic routines and invite audiences to our performance circle.

While the Spirit Performers are out in the community, the performance goes on in the circle for those already gathered. The drummers begin and the circle comes to life.

The drummers, led by Peter Piri, included Tyford Bilma, Jerry Jmualé, Timothy Hugala, Lenard Milimo, and Fraxton Phiri. They had trained in their respective tribal drumming traditions since childhood. Using a variety of drums throughout the performance, their poly-rhythmic precision was tight, detailed, and transporting.

When the drumming starts, George Daka does an invocation at the center of the circle. Using the well-known performance vernacular of a traditional healer and speaking like a diviner, he uses maize (corn meal, the staple food of Africa) to establish a sacred circle. With water and a tail switch he blesses and prepares the audience. He is helped by Martha Kamilo who dances and calls in support and in her own ecstasy. They are preparing the circle for the arrival of the Spirits.

As in the many initiations still very much a part of traditional Zambia, the circle is where the community observes and shares its mythology. In the circle, the magic of performance brings together the human and mythological to retell and reaffirm deep-seated values, order, and beliefs.

In the center of the circle George mimes lighting a fire. (When we perform at night he actually lights a fire.) When the fire is "lit" the Cone People emerge and rush into the circle spinning, dancing, and threatening to collide into the audience, sending children screaming and scattering excitedly.

The four Cone People represented the carnal directions and elements. They were made of wire and canvas and festooned with corn cobs and vividly painted. They were equally inspired by the Makishi tradition of masquerade dancers and by the corn field next to a rehearsal space. One late afternoon the performers were asked to develop an improvisation based on the Spirits of the corn field. After forty-five minutes in the tall stalks, about thirty performers emerged adorned with husks, stalks, leaves, and even earth. The shadows of the setting sun combined with their sounds and movement to create a very unearthly scene that sent the children watching the rehearsal running in screams of terror.

The Cones gather around the fire dancing with George, then spin out to play their drums. Their drumming calls the distant Spirits, who come running through the audience from every direction and into the circle where the sixteen masked performers dance with happy anarchy. They are followed by hundreds of people who have left their daily routines to see the performance.

The Spirits, like the Cones, were incarnations of ideas still very much alive in traditional Zambian beliefs; they are what motivate the actions of the "seen" world. The ideas and actions of the Spirits evolved through discussion, improvisation, and culling from existing dance motifs. Because of the tribal identification with animals in Zambian traditional cultures, each of the Spirits was associated with a specific animal. This association guided and shaped the actions, attitudes, and appearance (mask and totem puppet) of the Spirits and their subsequent characters. The animals were monkey, leopard, elephant, crocodile, snake, rat, lion, impala, hare, and tortoise.

The Cones, Spirits, and the sudden increase in audience numbers, built an excitement and set a tone for the performance. The coming together was not, however, for a traditional ritual performance. *Imipashi* would speak in a familiar performance language and in a mythological context to address contemporary issues—the modern world as seen from a traditional vantage. Within the circle, the story of Zambia would be played out.

Zambia, one of the world's largest per capita recipients of foreign aid, is heavily in debt to foreign banks, has a steadily climbing inflation rate and ever-declining currency value, making it one of the poorest countries on earth. With seventy-three tribal groups, Zambia has



Photo 3: Peter Muenga celebrates the tribal identities by dancing a Lenge tribe dance. *Photo: Thomas Riccio*

never fully realized the idea of united, Western-style nationhood. The wide diversity of customs, traditions, and languages lends the country its unique and vivid character, but there are also deep seated intertribal antagonisms, fueled by a long history of territorial conflict. Fortunately, the conflict between tribalism and nationhood has not led to the war and terrorism that has savaged places like Rwanda, Haiti, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Somalia, Angola, and the former Yugoslavia.

Corruption, disorganization, and mismanagement have burdened Zambia with a bloated and inefficient bureaucracy, horrendous or non-existent public services, high prices and taxes. In 1993 several ministers were convicted or implicated in drug trafficking and corruption scandals. Lusaka is a maze of potholed streets lined with cinder block walls topped with broken glass and razor wire. Guards and dogs, gates and window bars are everywhere. Lusaka is like an armed camp with only a thin line somehow preventing its total social breakdown.

The Spirits settle into a large circle around George singing a traditional song of appreciation from the Tonga tribe. Bowing to the ground, the Spirits sing as the Cones and Martha go to George with a twelve-foot-high puppet. Entering the puppet, George becomes Nyambe, the creator, a figure inspired by Lozi myth but similar to a number of Zambia's tribal origin myths. [Photo 1] Nyambe's presence brings order to the formerly disorderly Spirits and they dance in a circle around him in celebration. [Photo 2] Then Nyambe gives the animal-masked Spirits their tribal identities.

The ten representative tribes and the performers were Luvale (Martin Chisulo), Lozi (Meriam Inambao),



Photo 4: Nyambe bestows virtues on the tribes of Zambia.

Photo: Thomas Riccio

When Nyambe gives each individual his or her tribal identity, that person performs that tribe's distinct dance. Fellow performers clap, drum, and sing in accompaniment—often with the audience joining in. [Photo 3]

These performances brought dances to parts of the country that otherwise had no direct experience with the tribe it represented. Seeing the dances of sometimes-rival tribes being sung and danced alongside one another demonstrated to our audience that the wealth of traditional Zambian culture was a co-habiting whole, rather than separate entities.

Tonga (Mary Manzole), Lala (Lenard Milimo), Bemba (Catherine Musonda), Tembuka (Joseph Malisau), Senga (Laiza Phiri), Ngoni (Tyford Bilma), Lenge (Peter Muenga), Chewa (Benne Banda), Whites (Falvia Ranzoni), and East Indian (Linda Enriquez-Meyers).

There were two white women participants—Italian-South African Falvia Ranzoni and Mexican-American Linda Enriquez-Meyers. They were seen as members of white tribes, complete with their own prejudices, values, and specific performance expressions. Racial issues arose and heightened awareness of gender issues developed into a greater respect accorded to all women during the course of the project. The presence of foreigners with very different cultural ways also forced the Zambians to see themselves as sharing a Zambian identity. They could not assume we whites knew something, but had to explain and demonstrate. In so doing, they identified and objectified the value of their knowledge. Having whites participate in their culture on their terms was also a significant sociological and psychological step towards cultural and personal empowerment, self-worth, and esteem. White participation was prominently noted and the work was described as “international” and “multi-racial” in newspaper, television, and radio reporting.

To address the subtle intertribal antagonisms, some performers were deliberately assigned to perform the tribal dance of a traditional rival. As an outsider, I could ask them to do things no insider would think of asking. There were some frictions at first but a sense of ensemble sharing and teaching evolved. Boundaries broke down, performers expanded their performance vocabulary while gaining insight and appreciation for other tribal ways. It became clear that traditional performance was a language accessible to all and not something limited to tribal identity.

Nyambe ascends to a large box, similar to the raised throne area of tribal chiefs. Stooped in thanks, the Spirits circle counter-clockwise and pass before Nyambe. Each picks up a totem puppet representing his or her tribal and animal identity. The totems are incorporated into the dance and song and become a part of their identity.

Zambian traditional cultures almost universally hold that each person possesses a soul which, after death, goes to Nyambe (Turner 51); this double can also be put into the service of evil.

Nyambe bestows traditional values on all the people of Zambia. [Photo 4] His gifts are Love, Happiness, Intelligence, Virility, Perception, Strength, Solidarity, Sensuality, Peace, and Respect. The Spirits cheer in happiness and thanks. A man and woman wearing contemporary street clothes enter the circle from the audience. They soon reveal themselves as the mythological figures of Kamunu and Mayandu, the first man and woman. They have seen Nyambe's gift-giving and feel deprived. Nyambe, says he wants to rest before returning the following day to bestow the rest of his gifts. Kamunu and Mayandu plead to be given a tribe and gifts too. Nyambe asks them to be patient. The Spirits bow as Nyambe exits followed by Martha (now playing Nasilele, the wife of Nyambe) and by Micke who, since Nyambe's appearance, has been playing the tenor saxophone, a novel and exotic anachronism.

Kamunu cries comically. Mayandu in contrast is cool and calculated, plotting vengeance. She convinces Kamunu that he too is capable of god-like abilities. [Photo 5] She dresses him in a large brightly-colored papier-mâché head piece with mirrors for eyes and a long cloth attached, and removes his pants. Ascending to the stage, Kamunu timidly tries to awaken the resting tribes. His henchman and prompter, Mayandu, shouts and prods the tribes into wakefulness.

KAMUNU: Do not be afraid or surprised. I am the messenger from your God. I have come to simplify what your God had presented. This for your understanding. I am Kamunu and she is my wife Mayandu. We are both sacred beings. My words for you are: You should practice hatred. You require money for happiness. You should do whatever you feel you should do. You should think only of yourselves and not your community.

(The tribes have been cheering Kamunu on excitedly but fall into silent remorse as Nyambe returns.)

NYAMBE: Who gave you the powers to be on my throne?

KAMUNU: I used my will power.

NYAMBE: You prove me a failure.

Nyambe is disappointed and will not give his remaining gifts to the tribes. He will leave them and go to the far side of the sun. Immediately, two Spiders enter and chase the tribes with a large spider's web.

One of the spider performers was on stilts, the small and agile Jerry Jmuale, of the matrilineal Chewa tribe. Initiated in the all-male Nyau secret cult when eight, the twenty-six year old had mastered fifteen of the thirty-three dances of the society and will be initiated progressively to even more complex dances as he grows older. Since he was not performing a Nyau dance in sacred context, he did not wear the mask that normally accompanies the dance, instead wearing a rubber gorilla mask with fake hair.

A three-foot-high Nyambe puppet enters accompanied by a large sun on top of a bamboo pole. They circle and exit slowly. The Spiders follow as Micke plays a mournful sax accompaniment.

[Photo 6] The Tribes also follow singing a Ngoni mourning song traditionally sung for battle dead.

The Ngoni had a highly developed warrior tradition in dance and song. The Chewa and Ngoni were bitter territorial rivals having fought many battles. The juxtaposition of the Nyau stilt dance and the Ngoni mourning song is one instance of how the performance commented on tribal antagonisms.

Isaiah Bukanga (Nsenga tribe) and Phanny Walubita (Lozi) played Kamunu and Mayandu. Both were seasoned members of popular the-

atre groups and, like other popular theatre actors, they were primarily self-trained. The movement began in Zambia in the late 1960s. A high rate of illiteracy, great poverty, and lack of electrification (meaning few radios and even fewer televisions), make popular theatre a major mode of communicating to Zambia's population. There are over a hundred groups. The style uses broad physical acting, no technical elements, few props and costumes. Generally the plays are didactic morality stories, on subjects such as child care or soil erosion, with intertwined social, political, and educational objectives using simple story lines and readily identifiable characters. The popular theatre movement chose not to incorporate the rich traditional performance heritage of tribal Zambia, in part because Zambia, like other multiracial African nations, wanted to distance itself from tribal politics and thinking. Popular theatre saw itself as an ideal, demonstrating a modern (i.e. Western) and pragmatic alternative to tribal ways.

One of the functions of the Litooma Project was to teach process so as to make the greatest long term impact. Provided with notebooks and pens, the participants were encouraged to keep their own records describing the exercises and process. Puppet making and performing and western music skills were taught. [Photo 7] But, importantly, it was a skills exchange. The participants offered their methods, shared their dances and experiences. Many realized the value of what they knew for the first time. In a sense, the work became a



Photo 5: Mayandu (Phanny Walubita) tries to convince her husband Kamunu that he has god-like qualities as the tribes look on.

Photo: Thomas Riccio



Photo 6: The Nyambe puppet (carried by Timothy Muga) travels to the far side of the sun.

Photo: Thomas Riccio

forum for the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and tribal cultures.

All of the performers spoke English, however some did not speak it well. Time for translation and cultural interpretation was incorporated into our rhythm of working. I would periodically step out of a discussion so the participants could freely talk among themselves in either Bemba or Nynya—the two most widely used languages. Responsibility for leading these sessions rotated to engender leadership responsibilities in all. With some leaders, underlying tribal antagonisms surfaced and we moved quickly to identify, discuss, and remedy them. Problems also arose from language and educational disparity and rural-versus-city differences.

One development method used was dividing the participants into “creative groups” to work on specific dances, scenes, or songs. The idea was that working without direction from outside, the group would develop creative independence and self-reliance. While the creative groups developed significant contributions that were worked into the production, they were sometimes paralyzed by antagonisms arising from feelings of educational or social superiority/inferiority or intertribal resentments and social hierarchies. We tried always to

discuss openly issues that involved the performance, personalities, organization, etc., with the goal of examining and resolving a given issue for the good of the project. An example is the dispute over the name of the production. Some participants wanted *imipashi*, the Bemba word for spirits, others wanted *mizumu*, the Nyanja word. They said I was the director and I must decide, which I refused to do. The heated discussion lasted for hours. In the end *imipashi* received the most votes because it did not have connotations of evil spirits.

My preference is always to develop work by consensus. From the beginning, I viewed my role as that of guide, organizer, teacher, and reluctantly, arbitrator. When I sensed the group or an individual was deferring to me rather than trusting themselves or one another I replied, “I’m not your *bwana*!” *Bwana* is the obsequious word for boss and carries with it a stinging colonial resonance. With repetition they came to understand its meaning and implications. Occasionally, I used a longer version that went, “I am not your *bwana*! I am working with you! You cannot depend on me because I will be going and you will have to do it yourselves for yourselves. Your success lives in how well you can work together. Everything you need is right here. It is in you and it is in this group.”

With Nyambe’s departure from humanity, the tribes seek comfort from their “families” in the audience. Kamunu and Mayandu take advantage of their vulnerability to stir discord. Kamunu instigates the tribes into accusing one another of being responsible for the loss of Nyambe, stirring up tribal antagonisms and prejudices. The tribes finally do battle. They face off in two rows, marching to their deaths singing and dancing Bemba and Ngoni war songs. At the moment of their deaths Kasinja, a Nyau mask-spirit character, appears and dances over the dead tribes.

The appearance of Kasinja (Jerry Jmualé) evoked audience cheers with many running into the circle to give him money. It marked the first appearance of a traditionally recognizable spirit character and provided an important stabilizing effect. The action, characters, and ideas that had preceded this appearance were new and outside a traditional performance context (i.e., theatre). With the appearance of Kasinja, the narrative suddenly jumped into the context of mythological continuity. The inclusion of Kasinja, and other traditional performers later in the story, also added a sense of the sacred to the performance. Accordingly, I learned never to address the performers while they were wearing traditional masks and never to associate the mask with its performer. Dancers always took off their masks in private.

Mayandu and Kamunu, like sorcerers taking possession of souls, knock on the earth three times and sing to raise the dead. The Spirits give up their totems and in so doing become zombies fully under the control of Kamunu and Mayandu. Kamunu beats and abuses the totems as the zombies react as if they themselves were being abused.

With the tribes under his control, Kamunu, still thirsting for power, calls upon the spirit world. The Cone people enter thinking Nyambe has called them. They are transformed into Kamunu's mindless servants. Kamunu and Mayandu parade around the circle bestowing blessings on the audience, bringing together an absurd cross-breeding of political, tribal, and religious symbols and actions.

Kamunu toys with the zombie tribes and Cone people until he becomes bored, then sends them away. Mayandu admonishes Kamunu for being unnecessarily abusive and power hungry. Kamunu turns on his wife and knocks her down. He announces to the audience that he is their king and they have gathered to pay him homage. When the audience laughs he claims they laugh because they too are zombies. "Why don't you leave? See, you stay here watching me because you are in my control. You have no mind of your own, only what I tell you. You cannot think for yourself." Kamunu then summons the proof of his control of the modern world. First comes the Policeman (Lenard Milimo), who salutes Kamunu then patrols and admonishes the audience. The Teacher (Linda Meyers) demands that the audience recite familiar school lessons. The Doctor (Catherine Musonda) gives out condoms and takes temperatures. The Nun (Miriam Inambao) gives blessings. The Politician (Benne Banda) shouts "Vote for Me!" and makes preposterous campaign promises. The Businessman (Martin Chisulo) tries to make one-sided deals with the audience. Other characters include The Prostitute (Laiza Phiri), The Television Set (Peter Mulenga) spouting government statements, Money (Flavia Ranzoni) waving oversized bank notes, The Devil (Tyford Bilima) with beer and liquor bottles, The Chief (Joseph Malisau) declaiming the righteousness of tribal ways, and Mandrax (Micke), a controversial synthetic drug. Each has his or her own recognizable, archetypal performance language, and all are under Kamunu's control. With drumming and dancing throughout, the scene builds to the frantic chaos of modern Zambia and loses all narrative structure.

Kamunu continues his destructive work by turning the world upside down and inside out. At his command, right becomes left, come means go, jump means squat, and wrong means right. He calls men women and says that white performer Flavia is black. He orders them to leave by ordering them to stay.

This confusing world was full of slapstick with the recognizable communication and social breakdown, and

the chaotic uncertainty Zambians live with. The scene evolved through discussion and improvisation. George Daka (Nyambe) told me, "In Zambia, everything is tired but somehow we get to tomorrow." Communication posed tremendous complications and challenges. Photocopying machines were nonexistent. Only two phones were working on the campus of the University of Zambia. Transportation was a constant, complicated, and time-consuming nightmare. Some of the performers walked to rehearsals, a few rode bicycles, but the majority rode in the back of a pickup truck provided by the Swedish Development Agency. Fraxton Phiri, one of the drummers and Cone people, came to Micke and me one day sadly asking if we could help him. His father had just died and he wanted us to use the pickup to drive his father's casket to the cemetery because he could not afford transport. We did so, and gave him an advance on his wages so he could buy food for the customary gathering of the extended family. Fraxton was the sole support of nine people, earning an equivalent of \$52 dollars a month.

Just getting the project started was no easy matter. Three weeks after our supposed starting date, many participants had not yet arrived. Having worked in Africa before, I knew the way to get things started was to start, although there were only four participants from various parts of Zambia when we had anticipated thirty-five. Dr. Mtonga, director of the Center for the Arts, suggested I use the University Dancers and generously paid their wages. While none of them had any theatre experience, they had a wealth of traditional dance knowledge. By the middle of week two we had twenty-three popular theatre performers and the twelve dancers. The interaction between the social-realist popular theatre artists and the traditional dance troop would set the tone for how the two formerly discrete styles of expression co-mingled. By the beginning of the third week we were ready to begin in earnest.

Performer's health was also a critical issue. Nearly every day people were absent because of a variety of ailments. Three group members were HIV positive, others suffered from recurring bouts of malaria, a variety of stomach ailments, malnutrition, tick bite fever, and even one case of cholera. One day I found Isaiah rubbing himself down with automobile brake fluid to dry out a severe skin rash—he said it was all he could afford. Living conditions invited illness. The majority of the local participants, like Jerry Jmuale, lived with their spouse and children in a shack with a dirt floor, drawing water from a community faucet and cooking outside on an open fire. Out-of-town participants were housed at the Finnish Volunteer Service dormitory which, for them, was like a luxury hotel and caused some envy. For many, the daily meal we provided was their only meal. I often



Photo 7: A mask workshop in the Finnish Volunteer Service compound, Lusaka.

bought oranges to augment their diet.

Our workshops began at the Chickwakwa Theatre, an outdoor amphitheater in ruin. The heat of the Zambian sun soon sapped our energy and Micke secured a cavernous geodesic dome. Donated by the US government, it had seen better days, but provided a clean and secure space, although its acoustics made for wild reverberating echoes, especially during drumming sessions.

There were also money problems. Bribery and corruption are part of the culture in this economically desperate country. A bottle of vodka secured my visa in three hours instead of “in a few weeks.” Because of recent revelations of corruption, the International Monetary Fund was forcing the government to clean its financial house, so disbursement forms needed several signatures and it could take weeks to get funds. At times, participants went hungry waiting for payments. Money issues began to negatively affect working attitudes, trust in the project and in me. Experience told the performers that those seeing the money before them were taking their time because they were taking their cut. The situation had to change. With the blessing of Mapopa Mtonga, we decided to take over direct control of our funds. Micke became production manager and stored boxes of money in a closet of his house.

Not satisfied with earthly power, Kamunu demands Mayandu assist him in calling the unborn so he can control the future. The land of the unborn appears. The spirit mask, Kasinja, returns bringing with him two other Nyau spirit masks carrying large colorful branches festooned with ribbons and small infant puppets—the unborn children.

These characters (Timothy Mugala and Fraxton Phiri) both wore St. Peter masks and are an example of how the Nyau performance tradition incorporates Christian characters.

Nyambe also reappears bringing with him a spokesman for the unborn (Martin Chisulo) who tells Kamunu, in an impassioned speech, that he cannot have the future. He confronts the audience and elicits traditional responses to his call to action. He directs the two St. Peter characters to symbolically whip and strip Kamunu. Dancing in celebration, Kasinja carries off Kamunu's head-piece and costume. The future leaves Kamunu standing by himself in his polka dot boxer shorts, pleading for the audience's assistance.

Photo: Thomas Riccio

With the defeat of Kamunu, the Spirits return (sans masks) and, by regaining their totem puppets, take possession of their souls again. Kasinja joins them circling Kamunu and Mayandu who stand trial, are judged, and chased away. Grandly, Nyambe returns with wife Nasilele holding his sun symbol aloft as Micke plays a joyful sax. The entire company returns to end the performance with a traditional Tumbuka circle dance of celebration, often joined by audience members.

With hundreds of children under foot, it was forty-five minutes before we were able to pack and leave the site. Several of the performers left immediately to catch buses for our afternoon performance in Ndola, an hour away. There we performed to nearly four thousand people outside a soccer stadium in a notoriously dangerous crime area. Everywhere we performed, the audiences were eager for what we presented. Much like the idea of Zambia, a nation of many sometimes-uneasy cultures, it was a new thing. The performance was a living demonstration of how past and present, the tribal and western ways, co-mingled. It was a performance structured by their thinking and expressed by their people.

Imipashi was an examination, a celebration, and ultimately, the reimagining of their nation-community, with its parts combining to create a new, greater, and stronger whole. *Imipashi* was an initiation, returning to a sacred history to witness and participate with the gods and mythical ancestors, and to pass from one consciousness into a new consciousness—a trans-historical, multi-cultural consciousness full of challenge and the hope of transcendence.

SOURCES

Turner, Victor W. *The Lozi Peoples of Northwest Rhodesia*. London: International African Institute, 1952.