

Stories on Sapitwa: an overview of Lipenga's fiction

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Literary critics seem to ignore the short story form in Malawi and Ken Lipenga's work in particular. Yet Lipenga is the most innovative practitioner of this fictional form in Africa, if not elsewhere, if we consider how he has integrated oral traditional techniques and the modern short story. Reading *Waiting for a Turn*, Lipenga's collection of short stories, one can see how the ancient story-telling styles have been adopted to produce some of the most interesting experiments in the genre hitherto not or only half-attempted by other writers.¹ Critics can also be taken to task for generalising wherever they discuss the marriage between traditional story-telling techniques and modern fiction. They do not specify how and where particular authors have done so and wherein their achievements lie.² Yet Ken Lipenga makes such a conscious attempt and thereby reveals some of the successes and failures of similar endeavours.³ It is worth exploring how Lipenga incorporates the two traditions in his short stories. For the discussion to be fruitful it will be necessary to use some biographical information that reveals his exposure to both the oral and written traditions.

The student writer

In *Kulankhula*, an interview with Bernth Lindfors, Ken Lipenga stated that his writing instincts were manifest quite early in his primary school days. He and his teachers discovered that he was a good story-teller. In his final year he won a bed and mattress as a prize in a national radio story writing competition. In secondary school he won another prize in a national French story writing competition. While still a student, he won another prize in a British Council national competition, for 'Waiting for a Turn', the title story of his published collection.

Ken Lipenga was also associated with literary activities in his student days. In the same interview quoted above, he confessed that he had wanted to be a journalist since his secondary school days because it was 'an important profession'. He saw the journalist as playing 'a very similar role to that of the literary artist'. Perhaps it was this instinct

that made him part of the founding committee of publications and in later life of newspapers and magazines.

Lipenga was a diploma student at Soche Hill College, Blantyre. It was roughly the period when the student activities of the late sixties culminated in the formation of the Writers Workshop in the seventies. While at Soche Hill College he and his fellow students started *Reflection*, a college magazine.⁵ When his college merged with Chancellor College and both colleges moved to Zomba, Lipenga was an active participant in the by then fully-fledged Writers Workshop. A need for more criticism to be published from the workshop was so strongly felt that Lipenga and his colleagues started *The Muse*, a literary broadsheet described as 'an extension on the Writers Workshop'.⁶

It was during the heyday of the Writers Workshop in Zomba that both his publications and creative writing abilities also reached their peak. While editing *The Muse*, on one hand, he was also contributing to the workshop with his own materials. Those published after being worked on at the workshop included 'The Alefa Boomerang'⁷ and 'Mercy',⁸ both appearing in *Odi*. Poems like 'You Used to be Nagama'⁹ and 'Going to Sapitwa'¹⁰ appeared in various publications. Lipenga was versatile, if not prolific, in his student days.

Decolonising English departments

In *Kulankhula*, Lipenga says of 'Waiting for a Turn' (surely his best short story so far):

I feel good about it [because] of an attitude I have towards certain things — Mulanje Mountain, for instance. I happen to come from that particular part of the country, and I wanted to show my respect for it. So that's one story I feel good about.'¹¹

It is important to explore this statement at length because it encapsulates the essential aspects of the author and his short stories.

The author comes from Mulanje. The whole district and beyond are dominated by the mountain. He was born and grew up under the shadows of Sapitwa Peak, rich in myths and legends. His secondary school was a few kilometres from this awe-inspiring mountain. In other words, Lipenga's attitude toward the mountain and its past worked on his mind during his formative years. The author makes references in 'Waiting for a Turn' to how the narrator's grandmother used to tell him the stories surrounding Sapitwa, the highest point on the mountain.¹² As he mentions in the interview, he grew up respecting the mountain as a result.

It is not only in his short stories that Ken Lipenga shows his 'respect' or pays homage to the past and Mulanje Mountain in particular. 'Going to Sapitwa' referred to above, was written around the same period as 'Waiting for a Turn'. The poem and the short story are complimentary, interpreting each other. The poem explains some of the beliefs surrounding Sapitwa and the rituals that accompany anyone who wants to visit the peak and hopes to return safely. Another poem that illustrates Lipenga's attitude to the dilemmas of living in two traditions is 'You Used to be Nagama', also referred to above. A girl in the poem leaves the village as 'Nagama', she goes to a westernised urban centre and returns as 'Priscilla'. She has come back not only transformed in name and identity, but also in her whole outlook of the traditional life she left and still found upon her return. The persona of the poem deplores not only the transformation but the fact that he cannot relate to her any longer. Nagama was his childhood lover, but the Priscilla that comes back is a different person altogether.

One reason for exploring Ken Lipenga's other writings is to demonstrate that he was conscious of his traditional past, and still experiences its force. Tradition loomed so strongly in his mind that he revealed it in several of his writings. However, this is only one influence on the author and the larger context of what was happening in the seventies too had an effect on his literary career.

Most African countries had gained their independence from colonial rule by the end of the sixties. The departments of English in these countries followed suit by re-examining their curricula which were often eurocentric. Some transformations took the physical forms of changing the names to 'Departments of Literature'. The most famous 'decolonisation' was at the University of Nairobi with Ngugi wa Thiong'o as the focal point. The seminal manifestation was 'The Abolition of the English Department'.¹³ This movement was instrumental in making African literature and research into African traditional literature central to departments of literature on the continent.

Significantly enough some of the expatriate lecturers from the University of Nairobi left Ngugi's Department and joined the Department of English at Chancellor College. In fact, Malawi's second Professor of English was one of these, and so too, were some of the senior lecturers. They formed more or less the second generation of expatriate lecturers after the first groups' contracts had expired. Not to make the same mistake as the University of Nairobi, the Chancellor College English curriculum went under rapid and immediate transformation too. African literature became the centre of the department. With it came research into Malawian oral literature. For the first time, not only African but also Malawian oral literature became the subject of formal instruction in

the University. For the first time one could embark on academic research into traditional, indigenous literary forms.

Ken Lipenga joined the University when the afrocentric changes were sweeping the Department of English at Chancellor College. He was caught up in it and contributed to it too. (Due to the prevailing political climate and for other reasons the name remained the Department of English, not Literature. For some inexplicable reason it still is labelled such.) That Ken Lipenga was caught up in it came out in the *Kulankhula* interview:

In Malawi we began to emphasize our own traditions, for instance, our oral literature... Our own culture produced beautiful songs and stories, but during the colonial period these things were looked down upon and forgotten. Now it is our responsibility to dig them up... [We] should carry out research in local oral literature for the sake of our own people, our own culture.¹⁴

Although Ken Lipenga calls this 'cultural nationalism', it is part of the 'decolonising' process that was going on in Africa on the political and intellectual planes. As part of his own personal 'decolonisation' and contribution toward research into oral literature, he turned to his own culture and his own people. These happened to be the people and culture of Mulanje, more specifically the folklore centred on Sapitwa.

Oral performance stories

I argued in 'Shreds and Tatters', my previous review article on *Waiting for a Turn*, that Ken Lipenga had used the oral story-telling techniques from his own people in some of his work.¹⁵ The relevant stories are those that are set in Kumbikumbi Village, as well as 'Waiting for a Turn', whose setting is not mentioned. 'Waiting for a Turn' belongs to this set of stories precisely because of the manner of rendition. 'Shreds and Tatters' demonstrated by stylistic analysis of the content that indeed the Kumbikumbi stories, except 'The Drunkard of Kumbikumbi', incorporate features which belong to both African and western literary traditions. The extension of the argument places Ken Lipenga in the modern western traditions, which that article had not actually done. Furthermore, since the publication of his collection, there have been developments in the author's professional life which need to be incorporated into a new reassessment. This is the essential purpose for a fresh appraisal of Ken Lipenga as a public figure and *Waiting for a Turn* as his literary product and mental landscape.

'Even now when I read ['Waiting for a Turn'] to my students, I feel good. I feel like performing it' [emphasis added],¹⁶ Ken Lipenga confessed in the *Kulankhula* interview. I had the opportunity to witness the première 'performance' of the same story at the Writers Workshop in the seventies. Lipenga has continued performing his stories after a break. He performed 'Tiger' at Malawi's first literary festival of 1996 to an international audience,¹⁷ much to the audience's enjoyment because not many people associated him with such activities after a long absence from the literary scene. However, performance has always been in his veins. In the interview above he traces it back to his primary school days: 'When I started telling stories orally, people listened...'¹⁸ This talent grew with him to adulthood when he started writing scripts. Although none of his plays has been published, he has several scripts to his name.

I like acting and I would like to write more plays... I'm so interested in drama that I'm always in the theatre... Now I'm...doing a musical...using songs and mime and things like that. I think that's a very effective way of communicating which is what literature is about: communication.¹⁹

The mime mentioned above was performed in The Great Hall at Chancellor College. Lipenga himself has also acted extracts from Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* in Canada.²⁰ All these activities are in keeping with talents for and awareness of the theatrical possibilities for conveying his messages. The short story collection is his most visible work published so far.

Lipenga's Kumbikumbi stories have most of the characteristics of oral performance minus the indispensable element of an audience. This is because they are now found in the printed medium. This loss of face-to-face communication, with its possibilities for audience participation, does not detract from the qualities of the stories, however. Some of the oral texture, of course, is lost due to the medium and the fact that they are in English. What has been 'gained' on the other hand is a new literary audience. This has brought the stories outside the village confines or the Writers Workshop to the bookshops, for both national and international consumption.

The Western tradition

Ken Lipenga dramatises the universal themes common to both oral and written traditions, African and Western literature. In his dramatisation of themes, he adopts a strong ironic and satiric stance. He not only depicts characters in society caught in their daily rounds, but he also exposes their inner feelings, petty worries and trivial concerns,

clothing them with human characteristics only sketched in folk narratives. Perhaps the setting in some of the stories remains unrealised in 'Pass the Calabash', 'Sadaka', 'At the Graveyard', or even 'Waiting for a Turn'.²¹ However, this is due to the mode adopted. The first person doesn't provide detailed background, emphasis being on the delivery of the speaking voice. It is this first-person perspective that is one of the characteristics adopted from the new medium and the modern short story. Folk narratives do not use this mode.

One could mention other constraints of the new medium: written, printed, published in English, all conspiring to force the writer to conform to it. However, these are purely technical constraints. It is the 'literariness' that concerns us here. Having chosen to use the short story form, Lipenga had also to conform to its demands. For this, it is the western tradition he had to turn to for his model, since there are few, if any, precedents in his own indigenous forms. Ken Lipenga has been exposed to western traditions and confesses to being strongly influenced by them:

There are certain traditions of writing I've always found appealing, right from the beginning. The Russian tradition, for instance, before the revolution. I'm a very strong admirer of Chekov, Gogol and Tolstoy, particularly Chekov. I'm always reading and rereading his stories. I think he has to be one of the best short story writers that ever lived... I wouldn't be surprised if someone found traces of Chekov in my stories... I also find the Irish tradition very appealing... In some of my poems I've actually imitated certain masters and I'm not ashamed of that.²²

Here is a Malawian writer exposed to both his African indigenous and western literary traditions. The western tradition has formed his literary style and even, admittedly, his treatment of subject matter. In his hands, the short story form becomes a composite of both traditions.

The two traditions sometimes have equal pull on the writer. This is apparent when Lipenga adopts the symbolic mode and traverses a fantasy world of his own creation. The best examples are 'Waiting for a Turn', 'The Season of the Green Grass', and the unpublished 'Tiger'. In these stories we find characters living in the abode of the spirits or in semi-delirious states, talking dogs and men riding tigers. Lipenga points out:

Nightmarish fantasy is a favourite mode of mine. I've written quite a number of stories in that vein. I like something that starts off on the surface until it suddenly takes off into the realm of fantasy. In 'Waiting for a Turn' you move from the plains to the mountain, and then once you get to the mountain, you are on the symbolic landscape, and anything

is possible there... You see the same thing happening in the first story, 'The Season of the Green Grass', where everything looks normal at the beginning, and then suddenly you have the dogs behaving rather strangely and you begin to wonder whether they aren't there, perhaps, to represent something else. There is another story called 'Tiger' which has the same sort of element.²¹

Another observation to posit here is that fantasy belongs to both African and Western traditions. Instances of narratives where non-humans take on human forms, monsters marry young men and women or swallow entire villages, trees open up to harbour refugees, drums sing or talk, carvings come to life, abound. Similarly western literature has a long tradition whose prime examples are the Gothic, but they take on more subtle forms at the hand of the allegorical masters from Swift onwards.

Ken Lipenga, then, in *Waiting for a Turn*, chooses to write realistic stories like 'The Road to Migowi' and even 'The Drunkard of Kumbikumbi'. These have not been the subject of the discussion here, emphasis being on the folkloric Kumbikumbi stories. Some stories remain on the realistic plane: 'Sadaka', 'Pass the Calabash' and 'At the Graveyard'.²⁴ Although they might touch on witchcraft, black magic and the like, we don't see the nefarious activities as such, they are only referred to. By contrast, in the fantasy stories, the reader actually moves between the two realms, much to his consternation. Consternation because the reassurance that he was in a stable world of everyday life characters and setting is removed from him before the end of the story. Sometimes he does not even return to reality. Why does Ken Lipenga resort to fantasy? This has a lot to do with the author's own psychology and how he views his society. This is a subject worth pursuing, but we won't here because it's beyond the scope of this study.

Writings on Sapatwa

Ken Lipenga is not the only author who has been fascinated by Mulanje Mountain and Sapatwa Peak. Other writers before him have been inspired by the same source. Jessie Monteath Currie, reputedly the first white woman to have set foot on the mountain, wrote an autobiographical account of her life on and around the mountain in the 1920s.²⁵ The book is significantly entitled *The Hill of Goodbye*, which is supposed to be the derivation of 'Mulanje' from the Chiyao 'Kulanga'. About 30 years later Laurens van der Post explored the mountain for different purposes altogether — he was sent by the colonial office.²⁶ Half of his travelogue, *Venture to the Interior*, is about his encounter with the mysterious mountain. Interestingly enough Malawians started writ-

ing on the mountain in the seventies, which is when Ken Lipenga's writings began to appear. He was followed by Felix Mnthali and his *When Sunset Comes to Sapitwa*, a collection of poems.²⁷ Although the link between the earlier expatriate writers and Ken Lipenga has yet to be established, it is not difficult to detect Lipenga's strong influence on Mnthali. For one thing, Felix Mnthali comes from the northern region. Mnthali's access to Mulanje and its folklore would be, at the most, that of an outsider, in spite of the title of the collection of his poetry. Neither the white writers before Lipenga nor the Malawian writers after him are insiders. Comparing their writings with those of Lipenga's, it is obvious that the indigene has a greater understanding and deeper rapport with the mountain, its peak, and the surrounding folklore.

Notes

1. Ken Lipenga. 1981. *Waiting for a Turn*. Limbe: Monfort Press.
2. Adrian Roscoe 1977. *Mother is Gold*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 77.
3. Steve Chimombo. 1989. 'Shreds and tatters: Lipenga's short stories', *Journal of Humanities*, 3, 109-27.
4. Bernth Lindfors (ed.). *Kulankhula: Interviews from Malawi and Lesotho*. All pages references are to the original manuscript and not the *Bayreuth African Studies*, 14, 1989 edition.
5. Bernth Lindfors, *Kulankhula*, p. 12.
6. Bernth Lindfors, *Kulankhula*, p. 12.
7. Ken Lipenga. 1974. 'The Alefa Boomerang', *Odi*, 1, 4, 6-8.
8. Ken Lipenga, 1977, 'Mercy', *Odi*, 2, 1, 32-6.
9. Ken Lipenga, 'You Used to be Nagama', *Daily Times*, 29 October 1982, p. 6.
10. Ken Lipenga. 1982. 'Going to Sapitwa', *Outlook*, p. 111. 'Ascending Mt Mulanje', unpublished, was discussed at the Writers Workshop on 16 October 1986.
11. Bernth Lindfors. *Kulankhula*, pp. 16-17.
12. Ken Lipenga. 'Waiting for a Turn', in *Waiting for a Turn*.
13. Ngugi wa Thiong'o. 1972. *Home-coming*. London: Heinemann.
14. Bernth Lindfors. *Kulankhula*, pp. 19-20.
15. Steve Chimombo. 'Shreds and Tatters'.
16. Bernth Lindfors. *Kulankhula*, p. 16.
17. This story, banned by the Censorship Board under the previous government, remains unpublished.
18. Bernth Lindfors. *Kulankhula*, p. 11.

19. Bernth Lindfors. *Kulankhula*, p. 19.
20. Personal communication.
21. All these stories appear in *Waiting for a Turn*.
22. Bernth Lindfors. *Kulankhula*, p. 18.
23. Bernth Lindfors. *Kulankhula*, p. 17.
24. These stories appear in the same collection.
25. Jessie M. Currie. 1920. *The Hill of Goodbye*. London: Routledge & Sons Ltd.
26. Laurens van der Post. 1952. *Venture to the Interior*. London: Hogarth Press.
27. Felix Mnthali. 1982. *When Sunset Comes to Sapitwa*. Lusaka: NECZAM.

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