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The Post-colonial Storyteller: George Bwanika Seremba's *Come Good Rain*[1]

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George Bwanika Seremba's *Come Good Rain* examines Uganda's post-independence authoritarianism and institutional tyranny by unearthing the layers of memories that are constructed mirroring the Baganda children's folktale, Nsimb'egwire. Seremba, writing at a particular historical moment, interrogates concerns over authoritarianism and the kinds of hauntings that fold into the creation of a different dynamic dramatic expression. The play is structured to connect to the broader sense of post-colonial/post-independent concerns with communal survival, humaneness, power and decency and the enduring influence of orature. *Come Good Rain* begins with a brief recounting of Nsimb'egwire who, in contrast to her ugly stepsister, has breath-taking beauty and virtue. When her father, Mbaire, goes to war, the stepmother takes advantage of his absence, drags her to the wilderness, digs deep into an anthill, and half-buries her body. Condemned alive to solitary death, Nsimb'egwire stubbornly sings the song, '*Ani oyo ayita ku mutunda*?' (You who happen to pass by the [ant-hill]) to call for help and is finally rescued by her father. The anthill is occupied by a type of white ants, *entunda*, a delicacy of the Baganda. In Baganda folklore, when in season, *entunda* can only breed after short rains, hence, the layered meaning of the title, *Come Good Rain*. This is a symptomatic representation of the way dramatic folktales shape contemporary theatre. Nsimb'egwire's song becomes the central motif in Seremba's play, especially since her predicament mirror's his experiences. This is a symptomatic representation of the way dramatic folktales shape contemporary theatre. While incorporating the theatricality of the narrative, and representing the

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intersection of multiple traditions, Western and African, Seremba uses the story to reshape his thinking and attitudes about history and place. Throughout the play, various characters symbolising key players in the post-independent period who appear on stage enable Seremba to memorialise the cyclic nature of the turbulent history. The inscription of the tortured girl, Nsimb'egwire, into the contemporary narrative discourse re-introduces the silencing paradigms into the contemporary performed text.

> GEORGE: [….] The AK 47s were now on rapid fire. There was lead all around me… sort of like popcorn. The AK 47s were quite clearly on rapid fire.
>
> (*Another stomach-churning barrage*.)
>
> I had landed in a shallow stream or marsh. I could smell the clay. Except for the head I had practically sunk. There was still one crucial bullet. The one I wouldn't see. The one that would end it all. The one that would enter through the back of my head.
>
> (*Shooting ends as suddenly as it had begun*.)
>
> It is quiet. Frighteningly quiet!
>
> (*Very quietly. Internal*.) Be still, George, still as a stone. What are they up to?… […] after the longest five minutes of my life, they turned and drove towards Kampala….
>
> Grant me enough strength to come out of the mash and save my body so my mother can see it. It's dark. [….] (45-46)

Besides the references to Idi Amin's regime (1971–1979), there are references to the second Uganda People's Congress government (1980–1986), euphemistically referred to as Obote 2, there are other references to the Colonial government, the first Uganda People's Congress government (1962–1972), and the current National Resistance government (1986 –) euphemistically referred to as Obote 1, suggesting the play's link between with dramatic setting and its historic post-colonial political culture.

Thus, through acts of storytelling, Seremba's play can be seen to be in dialogue with diverse post-colonial dramas which interfere with established genres of performances to appropriate and interpret them for multiple audiences. In the process, the political feature of the play, specifically about governance, religion, language, and ethnicity contribute to the performance of what I perceive and describe as post-independence idiomatic critical theatre. In studying Seremba, one notes that rather than Ugandan theatre being in opposition to western theatre, there has been a blending of the forms, styles, and aesthetics, articulating therein the current interface between various performance styles in order to create hybrid

dramas. This practice of blending produces a lot of characteristics of post-colonial theatre, a hybrid performance form able to explore the in-between moves and cultural concerns intrinsic in the development from the old indigenous theatrical performance forms to new theatrical performance forms, from the comparative safety of the professional indigenous orature to the uncertain territory of western cultural, political and economic performance spaces.

In my view, his drama has a dialogical exchange of performance and ideological ideas and influences that unquestionably contribute to the creation of a post-independence/post-colonial theatre as a recognisable form. This sense of influence is one of the outcomes of a specific approach to the way ideas and images are expressed and conceptualised in theatre. *Come Good Rain* is a profound example of a post-independence idiomatic critical theatre that signifies on the concept of *ebisoko* to create a sense of critical self-consciousness. While space does not allow an extended discussion of the Baganda (from Uganda) performance aesthetics, a discussion of *ebisoko* (pl., *ekisoko*, sing.) a complex concept that expresses the aesthetic notion of physical, verbal, and emotive nature of performance is important. They are expanded in the creation of new forms and performances which develop through a critical process that challenges existing compositions in order for the *abadongo* or travelling musicians to assert their stamp on the work, and significantly, in their discourse, to use as a means of challenging the political status quo. (See Okagbue and Kasule, 2021) The association of creativity and criticism, of the critical exploration of allusion and satire, has an interesting resonance with this essay as I compare Seremba's practice as a storyteller but a playwright and performer to that of the *abadongo* creators of the song, the most prolific indigenous performance form. To differing levels, and successes, as I shall show, Seremba engages in complex acts of artistic creativity, through which performance is entwined in order to originate broader and more nuanced discourses of the post-independence conditions.

In this context, the song as a performance form allows us to appreciate the intersection between artists and the audience, the past and the present, and the complex web of discourses embedded in the performance. The 'song' as a form in literary discourse and composition is most commonly associated with the Ugandan writer, Okot p'Bitek who, in writing *Song of Lawino*, used it as a means of negating Western literary traditions and celebrating African oral cultures. It has been open to other Ugandan dramatists such as Robert Serumaga, John Ruganda, and Byron Kawadwa, who have used it to infuse new themes, new voices and different sounds to theatre. Elsewhere in East Africa, the Kenyan writers Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii use dance and song in the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, not as 'decoration but as an integral part of the [play's] structure'. Since 'song-texts' exist 'because they share marked characteristics that traverse conventional genres,' African diasporic playwrights such as George Bwanika Seremba 'strategically and systematically employ their content, structure, themes, and style'. (Nabasuuta Mugambi, 2005: 423)

One way to engage with *Come Good Rain* and more generally the Baganda (Ugandan) aesthetic is to conceive the play as a song. It shows a significant relationship with the a*badongo* song creation and performance processes that put emphasis on individual creativity and professionalism, and aesthetic dexterity. Specifically, mirroring *ebisoko* aesthetics Seremba creates characters who are protagonists and witnesses, and whose unit of narration is typically a significant contemporary communal experience. Certainly, the concerns of politics, history and tradition are central in Seremba's *Come Good Rain*, a play written after the turmoil following the ousting from power of Idi Amin in 1979. The play is a specific example of the emergence of post-colonial theatre performances that are continuously in a complex dialogue with the disconcerting afterlife of colonialism. Seremba's multi-layered *Come Good Rain* (1993), which reflects on issues of intolerance of difference and their effect on people, is appreciated for its ability to signify on the song and the various pulses it carries continuously into the present. That the play becomes playful because of the devices he appropriates from indigenous forms is shown in one scene, the storytelling session that memorialises the protagonist, George's experience with Nalongo, the bartender, whose materialistic daughter dated one of Idi Amin's soldiers. To start the session, George asks the audience, 'Did you hear?… Yes…'. (Seremba, 28) Afterwards, Nalongo and the Soldier then relate the story.

> George: [….] The daughter was dating a soldier. The soldier had money and she wanted him to take her shopping.
> The daughter got her wish.
> NALONGO: The soldier said she'd bugged him too much so he drove her to Namanve Forest.
> SOLDIER: You said you wanted to shop. Let's go.
> NALONGO: It was already dark, so he flashed a torch and led her deeper into the forest. They arrived and there they were, piles of dead bodies all over, newly unloaded, some only dead for a matter of hours. She had her pick from handbags to shoes, watches and necklaces. He forced her to load the trunk with valuables and he dropped her home.
> GEORGE: At least she's alive…
> NALONGO: But, she's joined the living dead.
> GEORGE: (*To audience*.) We all kept quiet except for one gentleman who stood up and said:
> CUSTOMER: Today it's me. Tomorrow it's you! They can't go on killing us [….] When my turn comes I'll tell them you can take my body but not my spirit. (29)

Seremba's use of dramatic monologue is critical in a theatre that seeks to take control of understanding and the power of telling the truth. As the poet-

storyteller, Seremba constructs his version of place and space, troubled memories of ghosts and voices from the past.

> [I will] Tell my story, my country's story, tragic and triumphant as the little girl in the myth. Tell our history together with the myths and legends, as many as one can indeed explore in a single work of art. Sing the songs and get into the puns and riddles. I said to myself, "They don't have to be translatable. People will know their purpose and function [….] (Seremba, 1993: 11)

Through his imagination, all these voices inhabit the play as he constructs a subterranean history of Uganda.

> Painful memories were dredged out of my subconscious. Each bullet, each pause, each gun had to be expressed differently. Each bullet had to sting and hurt, enter the body, leave or stay the same way it did, together with all the shrapnel, on the night of the10thof December 1980. It had to be a one man show, with a musician along to accompany me, through the tears and raptures, as I relived the horror on my therapeutic voyage. (10 – 11)

Seremba's use of the stream of consciousness allows the inside and outside, victim and survivor to be merged and connected within the narrative, creating an uncomfortable space so the audience is involved in the process of making meaning and responding to an Africa that has changed. For instance, at the point when the Second Soldier who he refers to as the 'noble savage' refuses to participate in the shooting, emphatically stating, 'No, I'm not shooting, but you can use my gun' (44), George reflects on the living dead.

> George: (*Internal*.) Oh, Robert Serumaga, what would you have done…? Give me strength to go through this. (44)

Like performances in indigenous contexts that involve enhanced relationships between the performer and the audience, Seremba's play plays with the boundaries of playing written scripts on stage and not only invites the audience to imagine the George's experiences but also encourages them to engage with and understand the performed message in a specific way. Therefore, like performances in indigenous contexts that involve enhanced relationships between the performer and the audience, *Come Good Rain* plays with the boundaries of playing written scripts on stage and encouraging audiences to engage with and understand the performed message in a specific way. George's monologue is the

core of the poignant scene in which he re-enacts the moment when Seremba faced the soldiers in the forest:

> FIRST SOLDIER: Escort me.
>
> GEORGE: Excuse me, could you please not shoot me through the back? I would prefer to look at you while you shoot. (*Takes a few short backwards steps.*) Is this okay?
>
> [….]
> (*To soldiers*.) Please give me a minute or two to say my last words. Now that you have come to power through the ballot box and not the barrel of a gun, even if I had committed a treasonable offence you should at least have taken me to a prison or a court of law. I know it's too late for me to live but whoever will continue to live in your country will find it hard to forgive, let alone forget. I am ready.
> (*To audience*) So were they…
> [….]
> (*To audience*.) The first bullet had hit the right leg. I was down on my knees… I actually squatted. Before I knew it the left arm was grazed. (42)

The re-imagination and re-examination of post-independent narratives to accommodate people's lived experiences, here embodied in George, parallels once again post-independence theatre's desire to express the silences of communities. *Come Good Rain*, moves seamlessly between the death traps of the military ogres, tyrants, and peaceful family spaces. It shows how theatre can be dialogical, assembling combinations of images (and ideas) that may affect the spectator in complex unsettling ways.

After the periods of conflict and war, many values promoted in the folk narratives and traditional performance were re-examined in the context of 'immediate' individual experiences with issues such as gender, violence and ethnicity addressed. Certainly, reading *Come Good Rain*, one realises that although previously African traditional narratives and myths formed African cultures imaginary, in Seremba view, indigenous paradigms present dissident thematic moments which create complex questions for us. To 'talk' in complex ways about post-liberation politics, the play intersects Western and African performance and literary traditions – a 'poor theatre' aesthetic, poetry and song, and the interior monologue.

On the surface, Seremba's works do not have much to do with the *abadongo* genre as such, and yet on closer examination, there are important ways in which his play undoubtedly resonates with the genre. When he borrows from the Baganda indigenous song narratives and *engero* (indigenous narratives), the aim is to (re-)construct his individual experiences in a post-Idi Amin liberation Uganda.

His approach is not to re-present the song and folklore but to make them function as a 're-placement'. Further, the aim is to deconstruct European and African dramatic frames which he inherits. In this way, the function of *abadongo* song form and *enfumo* (indigenous narratives that include songs) to Seremba's practice is to bridge the traditional and the contemporary, and Africa and diasporic experiences in a way that underscores the existence of old and new forms in the diasporic performance experience.

The appropriation of Kiganda oral texts means that song can speak to audiences beyond the borders of the land where it belongs. In an example of performance intertexts at work in *Come Good Rain*, at the beginning of the play, while a '*flute plays a haunting melody*,' George enters '*singing a song*' and starts telling his story '*with the infectiousness of a seasoned raconteur*' (15). The opening invokes the traditional song soloists or storytellers, who, through call-and-response, invites the musicians and the audience to join them in performance. This is followed by Nsimb'egwire's re-imagined song.

> GEORGE: (*Singing.*)
> *Abe mbuutu*
> *N'abe ngalabi*
> *Banange munkubire ngenda*
> *Mbaire yagenda nga alidda*
> *Aligenda okudda*
> *Nga luwedde okwaba*
> *Mbaire yagenda nga alidda*
> *Aligenda okudda*
> *Nga luwedde ngenze*.
> ['My friends play me the ceremonial drums
> Come bid me goodbye
> My father Mbaire went as though he would return
> By the time he does
> It will be too late
> My father Mbaire went as though he would return
> By the time he does
> I will be long gone.'] (15)

In one sense, as well as the style and form of the old song and folk tale, Seremba's play inevitably inherit the folktale character, Nsimb'egwire who is revealed to be complex. Indeed, the construction of the setting and plot of *Come Good Rain* suggests an intertextual parallel with Nsimb'egwire's story. Seremba reconfigures the traditional oral narrative style and aesthetics to dramatize his lived experience, which is a metaphorical mirror of the beautiful but terrorized Nsimb'egwire of the folktale. Like Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu and Robert Serumaga, Seremba wanted to deal with big themes like brutality, greed,

corruption, and institutional violence, setting the play in Buganda, and focusing on Namanve forest, and daring to visualise the communal graveyard of victims of armed government soldiers. In the play, history and folklore visually merge into the setting and as such, George (Seremba), metamorphosed into Nsimb'egwire, singing her song, appears no longer the fatal victim but a survivor.

Seremba's appropriation of the formulaic openings and endings from song and story forms presents the most evident fundamental connection between traditional narratives and their contemporary diasporic stage drama. He incorporates 'migratory' or 'transferable elements' (Mugambi, 1997: 211) into *Come Good Rain* to 'narrate and/or interpret' people's experience in the period between independence and post-liberation. These elements, from song to story and from song and story to drama are 'central to the form, content, style, or rhetorical aspects of the traditional story or folktale'. (Mugambi, 1994: 1) Thus, through the '*metatextuality* of song' Bwanika 'consciously experiment[s]' with style and form to 'not only introduce songs into their texts but also explicitly comment, within the texts, on the song's meaning and function' (Mugambi, 2005: 248). At the end of the play, using the closing signature of *abadongo*, he sings and performs:

> GEORGE: (*Singing*.)
> *Abe mbuutu*
> *N'abe ngalabi*
> *Banange munkubire ngenda*
> [….]
> ['My friends play me the ceremonial drums
> Come bid me goodbye] (16)

By placing key actions in the Namanve Forest, the killing field of Idi Amin and the second Ugandan People's Congress government soldiers, he not only matches the unbearable red ant-filled anthill of Nsimb'egwire but also engages with the discourse around post-colonial violence, liberation wars, and victimhood. In the first section of the play, Seremba manipulates the 'opening formulae' into a technique that allows him to create the space to reconstruct history. He demonstrates that he is interested in "'song-textualising" (Mugambi, 2005: 422) or 'deploying song' (Mugambi, 2005: 422) in dramatic texts to ' assert continuity with [his] oral or performance' tradition (Mugambi, 2005: 422). The memory of Nsimb'egwire is conveyed through Seremba and the embodied retelling of her experience. The juxtaposition of the Baganda folkloric and musical texts with the narrative of his lived experience suggests an ongoing dialogue with African performance forms and aesthetics within which texts critique and reconstruct the African political history and performance practices. Before the audience, he 'initiates a discourse that first centres on Nsimb'egwire and gradually

incorporates himself into the critique of society. The construction of an intersection of Nsimb'egwire and Seremba's stories shifts the discourse from children's to that of a nation as it transforms traditional children-specific 'genre into discursive spaces' for post-guerrilla war conflicts (and a narrative of victimhood). As he states in the 'Playwrights Note',

> [I]lluminated in bold and capital letters on the blackboard of my memory… [is] a story my mother told me as a child. The tale of a little girl who was abandoned by her stepmother to rot and die in the wilderness. Her only offense: beauty and virtue. That indeed was the first image that came to my mind the morning after the soldiers had their last laugh on me, in that discordant key called lead. I thought, 'Will the forest be my perpetual prison? Perhaps al I will do is sing like Nsimb'egwire, the little girl in the proverb. (11)

As I noted earlier in relation to *abadongo*, Seremba, similar to other post-colonial Ugandan playwrights, his approach to place and performance space shows that the local myths and places are no longer self-enclosed but have a profound relationship with an outside, an implication of a continuous interchange with the wider community even beyond the immediate nation state borders. Nsimb'egwire's song operates as a specific kind of aesthetic element within the play text that includes but is not limited to the original folktale or even Seremba's contemporary version. For some Baganda audiences, the song may function, in the way that a children's song can function, as the starting point for a children's game or storytelling. So, for audiences conversant with the Baganda indigenous folktales and/or storytelling styles, some of the aesthetic pleasure of the song text is found not in its place within the performance, but instead in its iconicity within the folktale canon.

> And she sang.
> *Ani oyo*
> *Ani oyo*
> *Ani oyo ayita ku mutunda*
> *Ku mutunda kuliko Nsimb'egwire*
> *Nsimb'egwire muwala wa Mbaire*
> [….]
> ['Who is that?
> You who happen to pass by the [ant-hill]
> Let it be known that it harbours Nsimb'egwire.
> Nsimb'egwire is Mbaire's daughter.

> (*The drums stop. More thunder and lightning. A tropical downpour is heard. It stops. Dawn: birds and other forest sounds. A determined tropical sun makes its way through the foliage. George opens his eyes. Slight pause*.)
> (*To himself*.) Am I in Heaven or Hell? (*Another pause*.) It must have taken about five long frightening minutes to come to terms with the discovery that I was still alive. [….] (17)

Curiously, Seremba variously uses Nsimb'egwire's song to mirror the opening formula of the storytelling sessions as shown above and engaging *abadongo*'s critical idiomatic (*ebisoko*) style re-creates it at other points in the play particularly as he lies wounded in the forest.

> GEORGE: [….] Will the forest be my perpetual prison? Perhaps all I can do is sing like Nsimb'egwire, the little girl in the proverb.
> (*Flute*.)
> Yes I feel a certain kinship with her. Understand her in a way I have never done. Her voice is clear as a bell.
> (*A female voice is heard singing the solitary lyrics*.)
> FEMALE VOICE: (*Singing*.)
> *Ani oyo*
> *Ani oyo ayita*
> *Ku mutunda…*
> GEORGE: (*Picks up story from where it stopped*.) She was not ready to quit yet.
> [….]
> FEMALE VOICE: (*Singing*.)
> *Ku mutunda*
> *Kuliko Nsmb'egwire*
> *Nsimb'egwire*
> *Muwala wa Mbaire…*
> GEORGE: She's finally been found. Half rotten and famished, they unearthed her and headed home. As for me, Obote has finally returned to – (48-49)

Here, the emphasis in the song is moved from the folkloric character Nsimb'egwire and her experience of life half-buried in an anthill to the contemporary victim, George, and his experience of living under the brutal Amin and Milton Obote governments. Citing, rewriting and signifying on Nsimb'egwire's story, *Come Good Rain* presents a vision of a theatre space as complex and layered, comprising of the past and present which resists singular interpretations.

As I have discussed throughout the paper, the idea of a Ugandan (Baganda) audience making meaning from of idioms, proverbs, and symbols performed on stage is central Seremba's dramatic writing. He derived the play from his personal experience, and the title, *Come Good Rain* refers to the intervention of rain that prevented the soldiers from finalising their murderous act and saved his life. Allegorically, it refers to the performance of resistance and the rejuvenation of a community's life. *Come Good Rain* invites the audience to go to the scene of crime, as though telling them that the role of theatre today should be to reveal crimes against society and to identify the culprits, comparing the events to Nsimb'egwire's revelation of her experience in song. Interestingly, *Come Good Rain*'s revelation of crime resonates with similar events in Robert Serumaga's *Majangwa*, when the couple Majangwa and Nakirijja witness murderers dumping a body in the forest. In Seremba's *Come Good Rain*, we cannot avoid the past, since it literally surfaces into the present, revealed in the killing field of Namanve, or coming up through Nsimb'egwire's mythological song, '*Ani oyo akuba ku mutunda?*' (You who happen to pass by the [ant-hill]) that throughout the play he uses to interrupt the narrative. Curiously, the reminders that arise in the song are not of the Baganda mythological past that its title suggests but of post-colonial/post-independent troubles: vengeful political leaders, tyrannical regimes, annihilations, and institutional corruption. These political trajectories are some of the reasons to consider *Come Good Rain* a post-independent drama than draws on earlier dramatic works by Nuwa Sentongo, John Ruganda, and Wycliff Kiyingi. Nevertheless, *Come Good Rain* is a more blatantly political anti-Obote drama, drawing analogies between Milton Obote and Idi Amin regimes while still sharing with the other playwrights a critical perspective on the implosion of the political and social structures of the nation.

This article began with a discussion of indigenous *abadongo* and their relationship with politics and contemporary theatre performance as suggested by Mugambi and Zirimu and I wish to return to her views. I want to return to Mugambi because of her assertion that the 'systematic incorporation of song into a postcolonial text transforms it into a 'song text,' a genre that cuts across conventional Western genres of fiction, poetry and drama […] when strategically employed, song becomes a potent expressive and ideological force, a distinct language or a medium that subverts and relocates (or 're-idiomizes') the colonial language.' (2005: 422) Critically, using the song and other aspects of orature allows Seremba to engage with the with the troubled history of the country while recognising the complex dialogical relation of its past and present. Seremba's *Come Good Rain* invites the audience to return to the scenes of his botched assassination. Seremba is interested in history and *Come Good Rain* invites us to return to the scenes of Idi Amin and Milton Obote's crimes as if to remind us of our guilt and highlight it in performance comparing his foiled assassination with successful assassinations during those regimes. It echoes with John Ruganda's *The Floods* in which the assassinations are symbolised by the protagonist Kyeyune's

continuous stories to the bodies he has fished from Lake Victoria, such as the man 'military man. Dead. Three long nails in his neck. His belly ripped open and the intestines oozing out' (Ruganda, 1980: 11).

The play demonstrates Seremba's theory about how generations of the Baganda pass down memory through storytelling, music and song. Bwanika imagines himself not only into Nsimb'egwire's memory of her stepmother's behaviour but also his father's memory of the troubled times in the early years of Uganda's post-independent period. In the play, Seremba creates his own subjectivity so that he becomes the participant observer, witness, victim, and narrator. In this context, a sense of the stream of time and the performance of the individual and family autobiographical details is more poignant and engaging than knowledge scanned from historical accounts.

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